The Experience of Individual Contributors in Fortune 500 Corporate Cultures: A Narrative Inquiry of Identity Construction and Sensemaking of Organizational Discourse

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Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to Robert, my dearest love and best friend. Thank you for sharing this journey with me.
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Abstract

Rapid economic, technological, and cultural transformations over the past 30 years have caused a transformation from the traditional, bureaucratic, work-for-life company into a postmodern organization whose defining features are flexibility, decentralization, and unstable environments. These changes have radically redefined what it means to be a member of a workplace culture. This study explored the influence of dominant cultural messaging, defined as corporate discourse, on identity development through sensemaking in corporate cultures. The experiences of group individual contributors employed by large corporations across the finance, technology, and insurance sectors were explored through an analysis of their personal narratives. The study employed critical theory and critical sensemaking as theoretical lenses through which to explore the findings. This research contributes to the body of knowledge on the intersection between work and personal identity in contemporary society. Themes that emerged included the importance of meaningful work, a mutually beneficial relationship with one’s employer, an appreciation for clear rules of engagement, and an ability to adapt to frequent change and use experience as a tool for growth. Conclusions of the study point to directions for future research and key implications for practice in corporate organizations.

Keywords: corporate culture, corporate colonization, critical sensemaking, critical theory, discourse, formative contexts and organizational rules, individual contributor, organizational culture, sensemaking, social contract
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Chapter 1: Introduction

The American conception of work and what it means to be an employee has changed radically over the past several years. Far gone are the days when one’s entire career was spent with a single employer. In our current culture of lay-offs, outsourcing, and downsizing, any anticipation of a gold watch after half a century of service is nostalgic at best. Karnes (2009) reflects on the movement away from a traditional progression from school to job, marriage, family, college, and retirement: “At all levels of this progression it was expected you would follow, and government, schools, businesses, and society gave you the opportunity to do that. It is just not the case today; not even close” (p. 191). According to Kamenetz (2012), today’s U.S. worker has been in her current job less than five years. She states, “Shorter job tenure is associated with a new era of insecurity, volatility, and risk” (p.74). Reenvisioned models for long-term career maintenance have replaced traditional work-for-life mindsets for many contemporary workers.

The concept of the protean career orientation (Supeli & Creed, 2016) identifies a growing trend towards self-directed career growth in the face of globalization and advancing technologies that have redefined the ways that work is done. Contemporary careers now span not only multiple employers but often multiple geographic locations and even occupations in what is known as boundaryless career orientation (Rogrigues, Guest, & Budjanovcanin, 2015). Societal shifts in the nature of work has also created a class of workers known as precarians who live in constant stress from employment uncertainty and economic instability (Standing, 2012).

The nature of work and what it means to be “one who works” has changed radically over the past century. Industrialization, technology, and diversification of the U.S. workforce has changed the fundamental meaning of work. Agreements between employers and employees
reflect unpredictable, frequently changing organizational landscapes in which long-term job
security is largely nonexistent.

This chapter begins with an overview of the research on societal change in the context of
work and the evolving nature of what it means to be an employee to provide context and
background to the study. The rationale and significance of the study is discussed next, drawing
connections to the benefits of the work. The problem statement, purpose statement, and research
questions are presented to focus and ground the study. Finally, the theoretical framework that
serves as a lens for the study is introduced and explained.

**Context and Background**

The employer-employee relationship has evolved continuously since the dawn of the
industrial age. As an agrarian society prior to industrialization, most work was performed
individually or by families working together. As society became more industrialized at the turn
of the 20th century, the need for long term employees who could manage complex tasks and
tools became critical (Miller & Miller, 2012). However, rapid economic, technological, and
cultural transformations over the past 30 years have caused a transformation from the traditional,
bureaucratic, work-for-life company into organizations whose defining features are flexibility,
decentralization, and unstable environments, often described as postmodern. Postmodernism has
been defined as a view of the world in which influences of group affiliation, power, and language
determine one’s place in society (Creswell, 2012). Boggs and Pollard (2001) discuss the
evolution of the postmodern landscape as the result of cultural changes embedded in economic
describes the concept of postmodernism as “the condition of knowledge in the most highly
developed societies” (p. 71). In so far as societal changes have influenced the nature of work, so
the changing nature of work has radically redefined the relationship of the individual to his or her employer. Some researchers, such as Deeming (2013), also caution that beyond individuals and organizations, society as a whole could be put at risk by the destabilizing effects of such change.

The relationship between individuals and employers in the context of organizations has been a recurring theme in the literature. This study focused specifically on the impact of long-term immersion in corporate work environments. Corporate culture may be defined as a workplace culture in a corporate culture, heavily intertwined with the values and goals of leadership (Schein, 2009). What are the influences of such environments on individuals and how do these influences affect identity development through sensemaking?

The concept of corporate colonization is introduced into the literature by Deetz (1992) as a colonization of the lifeworld implying an implicit, unbalanced power relationship between levels of the organizational hierarchy. Since then, the concept of corporate colonization has appeared numerous times in the literature as a research lens across diverse disciplines, including organizational studies, communications, discourse analysis, and even critical studies of cyberspace and the agricultural industry. Alvesson and Deetz (2006), Croall (2013), and Denker and Dougherty (2013) note a number of troubling themes that arise in a society where employment is insecure and work/personal lives are increasingly intertwined (Haar, Russo, Suñe, & Ollier-Malaterre, 2014; Shanafelt et al., 2015). Key among these are hegemonic practices that may flourish in less stable work environments and organizations’ increased entrée into the private lives of employees. For example, it may be common for employers and employees to expect that work should regularly be brought home and emails checked on the weekends (Edley, 2001). Simultaneously, frequent organizational change common to corporate cultures often means the sudden and unexpected severance of the individual from her employer.
Hatch and Cunliffe (2012) observe the existence of hegemony when dominant cultural values and practices support the most powerful members of a culture. To what extent is it the case that immersion in corporate cultures influences an individual’s identity? More specifically, to what extent is it the case that proximity and level of access to organizational power structures influence individual sensemaking? Is corporate colonization a driver of sensemaking processes? Morgan (1997) offers one explanation, amongst others, of corporate cultures as prisons that entrap employees in a sad and boundaryless existence. This interpretation may paint a bleak picture, but also offers avenues for exploration and vetting. An area of research for further exploration is the impact, over time, of corporate colonization on individuals’ sense of self within the organization. Mumby (2014) asks, “In what ways are organizations implicated in broader questions of democracy?” (p. 110).

Individuals create and maintain identities over time within their work environments. Weick’s seminal (1995) concept of sensemaking describes a continuous process in which the individual constructs and maintains her identity in response to organizational events and culture. This sensemaking process is ongoing and ever-evolving and is fundamental to the individual’s organizational life. The individual’s self-perception influences her actions that, in turn, influence others’ perceptions of her, which then serve to inform her identity (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005).

Individuals gain an understanding of unexpected events by extracting key organizational cues to build a plausible case that is then interpreted as reality (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014). Sensemaking, therefore, is a subjective exercise in comprehension of events (p. 58). Simultaneously, issues of power are always prevalent in an organization and affect all organizational members. The dominant organizational discourse dictates organizational rules;
who has access to information (and is therefore empowered); who can make decisions and how they should be followed. Mumby (2011) observes that the existence and influence of power can be easily identified in some contexts, but this is not always so. Mills and Helms Mills (2012) discuss how certain ideas gain traction and acceptance within organizations based on their positioning as generally accepted knowledge (p. 145).

Finally, it is the reality that contemporary employees must cope in increasingly unstable environments where frequent change is the norm. Rafferty and Griffin (2006) noted that environments of frequent change lowered individuals’ sense of satisfaction and security and increased thoughts of leaving the organization (p. 1159). Change in organizations is often regarded by employees as a loss, because what was previously predictable becomes unpredictable (Bailey & Raelin, 2015).

**Theoretical Frameworks**

General concepts from critical theory and critical sensemaking models guided this study from a theoretical perspective and provide contextual value in the analysis of findings. The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the influence of the discourses of corporate cultures on six to nine individual contributors’ (ICs’) identities through the process of sensemaking. Specifically, the study explored the experiences of a group of seven male and female ICs (non-managers), working for a Fortune 500 company (or its equivalent in yearly revenues) for at least five years. Corporate discourse was defined as structured texts embodied in the practice of talking, writing, and interacting within cultures that are heavily intertwined with the values and goals of leadership. The intent of this study was to surface, through the analysis of personal narratives, the influence of discourse on the sense that individuals embedded within corporate cultures made of themselves through the stories they told.
Each of the following theoretical frameworks addresses the formation of one’s self-concept in relation to dominant power structures during times of change, which makes them useful lenses for viewing the research questions that underpin this study. Further, the context provided through the lenses of these frameworks was used to surface and address any potential bias in the form of tension between researcher and participant. This tension will reveal the engagement of the researcher in a “double hermeneutic as the researcher strives to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them” (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009, loc 86 of 5289).

**Critical Theory**

The history of critical theory is deeply rooted in the social and political contexts surrounding the two world wars of the 20th century. Critical theory may be defined as one which takes a critical view of society and adopts an ideological focus, typically associated with an emphasis on the analytical importance of sociohistorical context, an emancipatory agenda, and reflexivity (Chandler & Munday, 2011). Theorists of the day could not understand why Marxism had failed to serve as a catalyst for societal transformation in response to deep societal problems such as the emergence of fascism and Nazism. In 1922, a group of scholars came together to form an organization, the Frankfurt School, dedicated to understanding and solving for this unexpected societal response. Key members of the Frankfurt School as it has evolved have included Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Theodor Adorno, and Jurgen Habermas.

Critical theory is not based on the major tenets underlying traditional theories, such as the existence of one objective reality, an emphasis on science and rationality, or as value-neutral. Traditional theorists tend to view knowledge as “simply a mirror of reality. This point is firmly refused by critical theory” (Corradetti, 2011, #H2). He describes the critically-based perspective
as driven by its “core issues that involve the critique of modernities and of capitalist society, the
definition of social emancipation and the perceived pathologies of society” (#H4). Rather than
being traditional in nature, critical theory considers itself to be emancipatory. Critical theory,
therefore, rejects the notion of a single, objective reality. It recognizes the ever-present influence
of societal context on reality as experienced by its members. Joll (2010) discusses the construct
of knowledge from a critical perspective as the product of a specific time and place. Issues of
power and domination permeate all elements of culture and society and there is always a threat
that reason, as subjective, may be hijacked by the ideologies of powerful members of society to
serve their own ends. In contrast to the often hypertheoretical and apolitical discourse of
postmodern theory, critical theory seeks a connection with empirical analyses of the
contemporary world and social movements which are attempting to transform society in
progressive ways (Kellner, 1990, p. 12).

Critical theory has evolved throughout the 20th century to focus on a broader set of
concerns such as feminist studies and queer theory, but what all critical theorists have in
common is a deep commitment to studying society through the nontraditional, emancipatory lens
(Thorsby, 2013). Frankfurt School theorists such as Habermas, Marcuse, and Horkheimer were
apprehensive that overt emphasis on technology and science would lead to totalitarian regimes
by encouraging manipulation of human beings resulting in the destruction of culture and
personality” (Sudarsen, 1998, p. 258). Horkheimer was deeply concerned with the shift in
society from a reliance on objective to subjective reasoning. He asserted that society was in
crisis due to an atmosphere of cultural relativism in which a lack of objective reasoning was the
unquestioned norm. As a result, moral problems (such as oppressive political movements)
existed only in the subjective domain and therefore were not subject to societal calls to action.
Horkheimer asserted that capitalism serves to “reduce individuals to the status of mere functionaries of economic mechanism” (Held, 2013, p. 44).

Jurgen Habermas, a longstanding and more contemporary member of the Frankfurt School, focused his thinking primarily on the role of communication and discourse in society. He asserted that society had a dual nature, which he described as composed of both a technical-rational system and a discursive-rational lifeworld. A conflict between these two worlds was always playing out as the technical-rational nature of systems (societal institutions) continually attempted to assert control and dominance over the lifeworld of people and discourse. This colonization of the lifeworld (Deetz, 1992) was a constant threat to society. Habermas (1984) discusses the acquisition and use of knowledge as key to the establishment of rationality.

Habermas developed the theory of communicative action as a means of promoting an emancipatory agenda through discourse. Communicative action is based on the creation of validity claims between participants engaged in a discourse. Individuals pursue goals only if they are deemed appropriate by the collective (Bohman & Rehg, 2007). The goal of the exchange is to achieve mutual understanding. A key idea underlying Habermas’s theory is that participants always have the ability to decide whether they wish to revise previously unchallenged interpretations or to refine their understanding through the process of discourse in an environment free of the influences of power (Ekstrom & Sigurdsson, 2002).

Herbert Marcuse cautioned against falling prey to a society that seeks to dominate the masses by lulling them into a false sense of satisfaction with the status quo. He asserted that participation in advanced society comes at the cost of personal freedom and the advancement of only a powerful few; the individual is enslaved by the sway of mass production and distribution (1964, p. 10).
Similarly, Adorno was highly skeptical of popular culture as it represented a means of social control. “In actuality the culture industry is important as a moment of the spirit which dominates today. Whoever ignores its influence out of skepticism for what it stuffs into people would be naïve” (Adorno, 1975, p. 16).

Horkheimer, Habermas, Marcuse, and Adorno introduced several key constructs: the role of subjective reason in perception and decision making, the recognition of power structures as oppressive and manipulative, and the potential for distortion of discourse in the service of those in power (Thorsby, 2013). The Frankfurt School theorists also introduced key constructs which may be applied to contemporary, critical studies of individual identity and corporate colonization. These include the role of subjective reason in perception and decision making, the recognition of power structures as oppressive and manipulative, and the potential for the distortion of discourse in the service of those in power. There is a recognition of the ever-present influence of societal context on reality as experienced by its members. “Critical theory helps in exposing situations of domination, disempowerment, and undemocratic practices associated with corporate culture in the management of organizations” (Ogbor, 2001, p. 591). Issues of power and domination permeate all elements of culture and society and there is always a threat that reason, as subjective, may be hijacked by the ideologies of powerful members of society to serve their own ends. Willmott (1993) describes corporate cultures as primarily concerned with winning over employees to achieve their own ends through mental manipulation (p. 516).

Critical theory began appearing as a framework in organizational studies in the second half of the 20th century at the same time that postmodernism was also emerging as a lens through which to view contemporary society and organization. These two theoretical schools are complementary in the sense that they do not support traditional management models.
However, critical theory emphasizes a “radical stance on contemporary society” (Alvesson & Deetz, 2006, p. 256). In contrast, postmodernism emphasizes the possibilities of consciousness and change through “resistance and alternative readings,” (p. 259). The use of a critical theoretical framework is appropriate for this study because it emphasizes the importance of surfacing issues of power and equity in organizational life. The influence of less secure employment on individuals in contemporary society is worth exploring through a critical lens (Standing, 2012).

**Critical Sensemaking**

The construct of organizational sensemaking was first proposed by Karl Weick in his seminal book *The Social Psychology of Organizing* (1979). Sensemaking may be defined as the way in which individuals in organizations collectively construct reality to make sense of events. Weick posited that individuals do not necessarily understand events until after those events have taken place. The act of retrospective sensemaking allows individuals to collectively assign meanings to events and hence, imbue their actions with rationality and purpose that reduces ambiguity and confusion (Mumby, 2013).

Weick continued to explore and refine the construct of organizational sensemaking over the years. As the construct evolved, it began to differentiate itself from the previously synonymous concept of interpretation. Weick conceptualized sensemaking as taking place only in the absence of a shared frame of reference for understanding an event. Sensemaking did not spring from shared understandings of the world so much as it served to create frames of reference that would in turn make collective interpretation possible. As Czarniawska (2005) summarizes, “Where there is no frame or at least no obvious connection presents itself, one has to be created—and that is sensemaking” (p. 271). She further describes sensemaking as “a
metaorganizing: the organizing of organizing, by means of organizing the narrative about organizing” (Czarniawska, 2014, p. 33).

Weick (1995) posited that organizational sensemaking among individuals is triggered by a shock, such as an organizational event, that makes it impossible for members to continue to make sense of things as they previously had. Further, sensemaking is intertwined with individuals’ identities, as the process of sensemaking serves to influence one’s self-concept and vice versa. “It is clear that the stakes in sensemaking are high when issues of identity are involved. When people face an unsettling difference, that difference often translates into questions such as who are we, what are we doing, what matters, and why does it matter?” (Weick et al., 2005, p. 416). Individuals exist at different levels of access to the dominant organizational discourse that underpin the implementation of organizational change; they make sense of themselves in relation to their organizational contexts (Weick, 1995) that are fraught with ambiguity and predicated on the impermanent nature of associations (Weick, 2015, p. 22).

One criticism of sensemaking is that it does not directly address the influence of power and organizational context on individual enactment. The concept of influential disparities among organizational actors is not accounted for (Helms Mills et al., 2010). In recent years, Weick has recognized the influence of power on individuals’ sensemaking processes and the extent to which their voices are heard (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2015).

Critical sensemaking as a theoretical framework has emerged in the last 20 years through the seminal research of Jean Helms Mills, Amy Thurlow, and Albert Mills as a contemporaneous hybrid model that brings together insights from critical theory and sensemaking. Specifically, critical sensemaking considers the influences of power, position, and language in organizational life. A critical sensemaking framework emphasizes the process by which organizational
identities developed through sensemaking as it occurs in contexts of power imbalances (Thurlow & Mills, 2009, p. 460).

In addition to Weick’s (1995) properties of sensemaking, critical sensemaking incorporates concepts from Unger’s (1987) formative contexts and Mills and Murgatroyd’s (1991) organizational rules. Formative contexts can be described as the societal filters through which individuals comprehend their worlds and shape decision-making processes.

Organizational rules are rooted in formative contexts and define socially desirable behaviors in the organization. Approaching sensemaking processes as inseparable from societal and organization rules allows for an investigation of power structures within organizations (Thurlow & Mills, 2009). Critical sensemaking explores discourse as critical to understanding the means by which actors make sense of their organizational cultures and rules. “The notion of discourse, the empowering of certain ideas through their appearance as ‘knowledge’ helps to explain how certain rules become accepted by those involved” (Helms Mills & Mills, 2017, p. 65). Viewing through the lens of critical sensemaking will surface the influence of organizational discursive practices on individuals with varying levels of access to the dominant organizational discourse (Helms et al., 2000). “Critical sensemaking provides a framework for understanding how individuals make sense of their environments at a local level while acknowledging power relations in the broader societal context” (Helms Mills et al., 2010, p. 190).

Critically oriented theories are distinct from traditional, positivist-leaning views of culture. Positivist theories assume that there is one generally accepted reality that can be observed and measured in a completely objective, unbiased manner. “The primary goal of positivistic theory is an explanation that (ultimately) leads to prediction and control of
phenomena” (Pontorotto, 2005, p. 128). An example of this viewpoint includes Deetz’s (1992) investigation of the colonization of the lifeworld through corporate colonization as a potential threat to society. Critical theories, such as critical theory and critical sensemaking, offer a unique opportunity to explore and interrogate contemporary organizational cultures in a way distinct from more normative theoretical perspectives.

Critical theory-based research seeks to instill new truths as a result of identifying power imbalances. This paradigm is employed by researchers who are intent on bringing about social change through their research findings and strive to “conceptualize reality and events within power relations to help emancipate oppressed groups” (Pontorotto, 2005, p. 130).

**Statement of the Problem**

Rapid economic, technological, and cultural transformations over the past 30 years have caused a transformation from the traditional, bureaucratic, work-for-life company into a postmodern organization whose defining features are flexibility, decentralization, and unstable environments (Boggs & Pollard, 2001). These changes have radically redefined the relationships of the individual to the employer and reshaped conceptions of the workplace (Ogbor, 2001; Gunn, 2011; Standing, 2012). As the workplace has become a central focus for many individuals, some researchers have questioned the influence of dominant discourses within corporate cultures on individuals’ identities (Alvesson & Deetz, 2006; Combes, 2002).

The contemporary workplace has evolved with the prevalence of advanced collaboration technologies into one that is often solely remote. Those workers who are not part of a management team but contribute to overall company goals through project work are known as *individual contributors* (ICs) (Urban Dictionary, n.d.). It is not uncommon for workers seeking a change to make the move from traditional, management-focused roles into this newer class of
ICs (Daily MBA, 2018). Further, corporate restructuring often pushes those who have served in traditional management roles into the IC tranche (Pundhir, 2015).

An accompanying shift towards IC roles that don’t include the same performance expectations as for managers has been noted (Denker, 2014). At the same time, the experience of this growing population of contributors may also tend towards isolation and stagnation. A survey of over 1,000 ICs conducted by Development Dimensions International found that 51% of their respondents felt stagnant in their jobs (Bissell-Powell, 2009). This study explored, at a deeply personal level, the influence of the discourses of corporate cultures on an individuals’ and particularly an ICs’ identity through sensemaking.

**Research Purpose**

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the influence of the discourses of corporate cultures on ICs’ identities through the process of sensemaking. Specifically, the study explored the experiences of a group of seven male and female ICs (non-managers), working for a Fortune 500 company (or its equivalent in yearly revenues) for at least five years. Corporate discourse was defined as structured texts embodied in the practice of talking, writing, and interacting within cultures that are heavily intertwined with the values and goals of leadership. The intent of this study was to surface, through the analysis of personal narratives, the influence of discourse on the sense that individuals embedded within corporate cultures made of themselves through the stories they told.

**Research Question**

The proposed study sought to answer the key question underlying the research problem via an approach of narrative inquiry that surfaces and addresses, as the research unfolds, underlying cultural assumptions as well as those of the researcher regarding the influence of
corporate cultures on individual identity via sensemaking. The research question was as follows: How does exposure to discourse in corporate cultures influence the identity of ICs through sensemaking?

**Positionality Statement**

Maxwell (2012) advises openly surfacing one’s bias in the context of the research, becoming acutely aware of it, and using it as a frame for conducting the research. There is no way to completely divest oneself of bias, therefore it is critical to bring researcher bias into the open and to work in tandem with it as openly and objectively as possible. By working to surface and confront positionality with participants, a researcher is in a better position to remain cognizant of the potential impact of such bias on the study results.

As the practice of self-examination is a key factor in determining the ultimate value of one’s work, I was eager for the opportunity to examine and partner with my “other” (Briscoe, 2005). Parsons (2008) refers to one’s “cultural historical domain” (p. 1130) particularly as related to parental upbringing in reinforcing key messages in the home. Every researcher views her problem through a particular paradigm, as her positionality is ever-present and will always influence her perspectives. A reflexive researcher can never be an entirely independent entity from the research (Corlett & Mavin, 2017). By recognizing, and then working to confront my own positionality with participants, I felt that I was in a good position to conduct research largely free of researcher and respondent bias. I conducted my research in the context of theoretical frameworks which served as guardrails.

As Butin (2010) notes, “Believing that you don’t have or need a theory is a theory in and of itself” (p. 58). By taking steps to ensure that participants were fully informed as to the
purpose of the study and their option to quit at any time, I ensured greater ease and authenticity throughout the process.

Finally, by taking strict measures to protect participants’ identities and the research data, both myself and my participants felt confident that the research was conducted in the most ethical and respectful manner possible. My greatest concern regarding management of personal bias was related to my own experience as an IC in a corporate culture. There are definite advantages as well as drawbacks to being “one of the family” in such an organization, such as comparatively good compensation, benefits, and other perks a large and well-established employer may be able to offer. However, I was aware of my ambivalence regarding the industry as a whole and the corporate culture of which I had been a part of for over ten years. I have witnessed multiple efforts at downsizing and cost-cutting in my organization and have said painful goodbyes to numerous talented colleagues whose employment was summarily terminated. I have spoken with many others who have shared similar stories of giving years of service to a corporation only to be let go for seemingly no reason at all. I eventually experienced the effects of such reorganization in my own life after being affected by a significant reduction in force by a corporate employer.

As a firsthand witness to the effects of downsizing and reorganizations in my organization, I wondered to what extent individual identities are influenced by long term immersion in corporate cultures. How do ICs make sense of who they are within such a context? Further, I wondered how an IC’s exposure to dominant corporate discourses influences her adaptation to the culture and facilitates her personal evolution within that context.

In the simplest terms, a research paradigm is an assumptive lens through which the researcher views, filters, and interprets the research problem. The particular lens I used reflected
my own positionality and as such, assumptions regarding the best means of answering a particular research question. Given the positional stance relative to the research problem, the study took a fundamentally critical approach to exploring the research questions. Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) radical humanist paradigm was appropriate for this study because it aligned with the goals of critical, qualitative research at the individual level of analysis. The radical humanist paradigm is concerned with enacting societal change through the critical analysis of dominant social discourses which marginalize individuals and keep them from achieving their true potential. I was aware that critical theories reflect a realist ontology, and that there is high potential for bias in the interpretation (and assumption) of power relationships. The inclusion of critical theory and its influence on my selected paradigm was meant to provide context within which to challenge assumptions regarding the influences of power. To what extent does a power-laden context potentially affect sensemaking and what will the results reveal about the assumptions that underpin a critical approach?

I was aware of a number of ethical and logistical issues that must be addressed regarding the research process itself. As I planned to conduct a qualitative study with participants from organizations similar to my own, I took measures to protect their anonymity. The true identity of the organization and any potentially identifying geographic information were masked. All interviews were conducted offsite. Any focus groups were to be conducted in virtual classrooms using an anonymous log in and text chat functionality. Survey data collected did not include any personally identifying information. Individuals who agreed to participate were required to give written permission for their interview data to be transcribed. All raw data and transcripts were maintained in a locked, offsite location and destroyed after an appropriate period of time following the conclusion of the study. The participant consent form reiterated the purpose of the
study and stipulated that participants may opt out at any time with no negative consequences. Interview data was analyzed using a rigorous theme analysis approach, including cross-validation by key informants. Surveys were piloted and revised to ensure validity.

**Rationale for the Proposed Research**

The rationale for this study was an interest in expanding research on the influence of dominant organizational discourse on ICs’ sensemaking to better understand how identities are constructed and maintained in corporate cultures. Mills and Helms Mills (2017) note the role of organizational discourse in setting certain expectations and “rules of action” for organizational members (p. 65). Critical sensemaking emphasizes that all sensemaking is enacted within social contexts influenced by power and discourse (Helms Mills et al., 2010, p.190). How does the level of one’s access to, and participation in, the creation of such discourse influence sensemaking of one’s organizational identity within unpredictable, frequently changing environments? The study provides a rationale and suggestions for employers who may wish to create programs that assist individuals with proactively seeking ongoing personal and professional development to weather the storms of revolutionary and evolutionary organizational change (Burke, 2013).

The findings of this research are valuable at both the individual and organizational levels. Studying the experiences of individuals through their stories of sensemaking will add richness to the current literature on identity development in corporate cultures. Organizations may potentially benefit from the findings of the research through the inclusion of key insights into manager training and development curricula which will help ICs excel in corporate cultures. It is in the organization’s best interest to honor authenticity and diverse voices which well-developed and confident employees bring to their work. Abrahams (2017) emphasizes the need for staff
development programs to develop competencies specific to the success of ICs, such as collaboration and networking skills. In their own time, these individuals may become excellent managers as needed, provided they are given access to professional development opportunities (Zenger, 2014). To this end, organizations must strive to increase their awareness of potential influences of the dominant organizational discourse on individuals who must adapt to rapid organizational change in order to survive on the organizational playing field. Some educational institutions, including Harvard University, have already begun offering employee training specifically geared toward staff who wish to pursue careers as ICs. “Losing them (ICs) because there isn’t a clear place for them to go . . . won’t get your organization very far” (Hein, 2014).

One’s identity is developed and maintained within the cultural context in accordance with a prescribed set of organizational rules and against a backdrop of frequent change. Given these factors shaping the experience of the individual within contemporary corporate cultures, there is a need to more fully examine the intersection of organizational identity, dominant organizational discourse, and response to organizational change. There is a need to understand the influence of corporate cultures on individuals’ conceptualization of themselves as organizational players in frequently changing organizational contexts. Gioia, Patvardhan, Hamilton, and Corley (2013) question a body of empirical work which has defined organizational identity as primarily stable in favor of identity that is dynamic in response to organizational variables. While many organizations now offer their employees many “helpful” personal services and opportunities for flexible work, employees are also subject to termination at any time by the same “helpful” employer. Thorsby (2013) raises the issue of the extent to which corporate cultures may lead individuals into morally flawed environments. How are individuals’ personal identities influenced over time by their professional affiliations in contemporary organizational
environments? How do individuals’ self-perceptions evolve as a result of long-term immersion in a culture of corporate hegemony? (Ogbor, 2001). It is critical for organizations to gain a better understanding of areas for personal and professional development that will strengthen individuals’ skills and coping mechanisms for living in a postmodern, rapidly changing economic environment. As Deetz (2008) points out, “I think that we are all moving into an increasingly interdependent future together and that no person, group, or interest should be advantaged in the determination of that future” (p. 388).

The rationale underlying this study was its usefulness as a tool for exploring the ways in which individual contributors make sense of who they are within corporate cultures. Specifically, the study explored the influence of exposure to dominant corporate discourses, which was the central phenomenon of this study. This study has added to the scholarly dialogue by providing greater clarity on the process by which individual contributors, within the collective of corporate culture, are influenced by the discourse in their environment as they engage in sensemaking. The results of this study have implications for practice as well as theory and research.

**Directions for Future Research**

This study contributes to the extant body of critically influenced literature on the intersection between work and personal identity in contemporary society. Results may inform contemporary theories on how individuals come to define themselves within corporate cultures. Specifically, the research provided insights into the influence of dominant discourses on individuals’ identity development through sensemaking. The results of this study also point to areas for future research on the effects of power and dominant discourse on individuals within corporate cultures.
The embedding of corporate culture through discourses of the organization as family warrants further investigation. Many organizations offer attractive benefits and rewards to individuals as extras earned solely by virtue of their status as employees (Kirby & Krone, 2002). Discourses of family membership abound in corporate cultures serving the purpose of building a sense of security and belonging through the enforcement of dominant cultural beliefs (Rosen, 1985). Further research could surface the extent to which such discourses help or hinder individuals to grow and develop as independent professionals. For example, future studies could probe for the tipping point beyond which an individual’s exposure to organizational discourses of family-belonging may limit his/her ability to assess levels of satisfaction with the work itself or correctly ascertain when seeking outside opportunities may offer greater professional development.

The participants in this study exhibited resilience in the face of organizational change. The ability to adapt to changes in leadership, strategy, and technology was a trait shared by all. To what extent was this resilience fostered either directly or indirectly by the participants’ organizations? Further research into the concept of resilience in corporate cultures could clarify how organizations may build and encourage resilience to sustain employees through periods of change. Further, what are the consequences for ICs in long term relationships with their organizations when they make sense of who they are primarily in the context of their status as organizational members? How can ICs be best prepared to manage the effects of downsizing or corporate restructuring?

The role of resistance in organizations as expressed in opposition to dominant ideologies (Mumby, 2004) is an area for further research. While the findings of this study did not reveal explicit resistance by participants to organizational rules or in response to periods of
organizational change, organizational actors may hold varying interpretations of dominant ideologies held in place by the embedding of organizational discourses (Hardy & Phillips, 2004). To this end, it is a fair assumption that not all organizational members will agree with all organizational rules or respond in the same ways to discursive practices. Within corporate cultures, where the mark of success may be agreement and alignment with top-down messaging, how is resistance expressed and managed in balance with individuals’ professional aspirations? Specifically, to what extent do individuals tend to submerge or abandon resistance in the pursuit of advancement?

There is an opportunity to replicate the study with different populations and compare the results. For example, the study could explore the influence of the central phenomenon on women or persons representing specific racial or ethnic groups. Another avenue of exploration along these lines would be to replicate the study with participants from other fields where ICs make up part of the workforce, such as education, healthcare, or the military.

In summary, the results of the study raised a number of areas for future research into the mechanisms by which discourses are embedded in organizational cultures and assimilated by ICs. Further future research is needed to explore the developmental effects on ICs of assimilating dominant discourses, such as those of organization-as-family. Additionally, future research may address the means by which resilience may be developed and maintained in corporate cultures during times of organizational change. The results of the study indicated that the characteristic of resilience was described frequently as an essential element in ICs’ successful adaptation to change. Further research could also explore how long-term ICs make sense of and manage radical change, such as downsizing and reductions in force. The question of how ICs may experience or enact resistance to organizational rules is an area for further exploration.
Future research could also replicate this study with a focus on different populations or professions.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The results of the study have a number of critical, practical implications that may inform corporate practice and policy. There are multiple areas in which companies can leverage the power of corporate discourses, in the spirit of continuous improvement, to achieve measurable, mutual benefits at both the IC and organizational levels.

Without exception, participants emphasized the value that opportunities for development played in their lives as they continued to evolve their understanding of who they were over time. The ability to take advantage of continuing education was a key driver of employee retention. Organizations who implement development programs send a clear cultural message of respect and commitment to their employees, especially to ICs who may feel less integral to the organization than those on the leadership or management track.

Organizations may use the findings of this study as a rationale for designing employee development programs that offer enhanced options for educational advancement, such as advanced degrees and professional certifications. Tuition reimbursement programs to help employees defray educational costs were identified by this study as a key motivator and a driver of retention. In addition to formal education, personal development offerings would provide options for ICs who wish to grow their skillsets on practical topics that would contribute to their overall, holistic development. To this end, organizations that aren’t already doing so might consider subscribing to vendor-driven solutions that offer just-in-time, online or recorded webinar training. This option would be especially useful as a means of providing employees with technology upskilling.
A critical finding of this study was that employees in corporate cultures must continually adapt to evolving technologies to be successful in their roles. This need to keep pace emerged as both a key stressor and motivator for the participants. The extent to which they were able to adapt to evolving technologies had a direct influence on their perceptions of themselves as successful members of the organization. Organizations must recognize that the successful use of technology is critical to both individual and organizational success. They must commit to supporting both by instituting and maintaining in-house technology training and even peer-to-peer support programs that all users may access as needed.

Another key theme of the study was that successful ICs in frequently changing environments value teamwork and actively seek out opportunities for collaboration on the job. They know that such partnerships lead to more successful outcomes, and they also appreciate the sense of belonging and good fit that comes with being part of a cohesive team microculture. To this end, ICs might also benefit from peer-to-peer advising and training on the job, particularly in the area of technology. Organizations might promote a culture of belonging and inclusion through the implementation of peer-based onboarding and development programs, particularly in the area of technology training. The findings of this study suggest that ICs know they need to add to the company’s bottom line while also keeping their skills up to date and remaining competitive in the workforce. They want to see themselves as confident and as a value-add within the collective.

In addition to providing assistance on job-based topics, a peer-to-peer model could be leveraged to create communities of practice for ICs in corporate cultures. By participating in such peer-driven communities of practice, ICs may gain greater insight into the influences of corporate culture on their self-perceptions, life choices, and professional trajectories over time.
They may be encouraged to reflect upon the importance of proactively seeking development opportunities to continue enhancing their skillsets which may in turn increase their ability to navigate their careers during times of organizational change.

In addition to emphasizing the importance of employee development through training and collaboration opportunities, organizations must consider the impacts of corporate messaging and discourse on ICs. Strategic cascades and other forms of organizational communication have the potential, if employed thoughtfully, to be useful tools in promoting and reinforcing important messaging around organizational mission and goals. These communications might be in the form of quarterly business updates, town hall meetings, or company-sponsored events. Periodic communications via digital channels might be leveraged. Organizations might evaluate their communication strategies and reflect on ways that these discursive practices may be leveraged to influence the culture most productively.

ICs are independent and self-directed members of the organization, but the findings of this study suggest they need to feel they have a clear view of company mission and goals which provide a framework for the behavioral and performance expectations they leverage to make sense of themselves in the workplace. Further, a regular communication strategy during times of change can facilitate acceptance by providing organizational members with clear messages about future developments and any expectations of specific departments or teams. The results of this study revealed that participants were able to adapt to organizational expectations without undue difficulty provided the messaging was clear and inclusive.

Finally, the study revealed high levels of satisfaction in organizations that showed a strong commitment to diversity and inclusion. Acceptance of openly gay employees was a key driver of satisfaction and retention. Moreover, the results of the study indicated that the
atmosphere of acceptance created in organizations with a commitment to diversity and inclusion contributes to an overall sense of safety and equity for all organizational members. Organizations might consider the many positive impacts that the implementation of diversity and inclusion messaging and programming. A culture that is inclusive of all and that communicates fairness and solidarity creates a healthy space for ICs to develop themselves and contribute value within the collective.

These implications all underscore the importance of creating supportive, transparent cultures that provide ICs with a clear view into the corporate mission, an understanding of how success is defined, and that demonstrate a commitment to employee development and community-building. Supporting the dissemination of healthy discourses, such as those of belonging, commitment to development, and respect for the individual through various organizational means, will help to create cultures in which ICs can see themselves as safe, valued, and able to meet the demands of their work. Organizations must recognize that long-term ICs expect a mutually beneficial relationship that considers a range of personal and professional development needs and provides the tools and resources needed to get the job done in a professional and collaborative manner.

**Definitions of Key Terminology**

Key terms used throughout the study are defined below. Terms are defined in the service of ensuring readers’ consistent understanding of the language framing this study.

**corporate culture**: A workplace culture in a corporate environment heavily influenced by values and goals of leadership (Schein, 2009).

**corporate colonization**: A colonization of the lifeworld implying an implicit, unbalanced power relationship between levels of the organizational hierarchy (Deetz, 1992).
critical sensemaking: A theoretical framework has emerged as a contemporaneous hybrid model that brings together insights from critical theory and sensemaking. Specifically, critical sensemaking considers the influences of power, position, and language in organizational life (Helms Mills et al., 2010).

critical theory: Any theory which takes a critical view of society and adopts an ideological focus, typically associated with an emphasis on the analytical importance of sociohistorical context, an emancipatory agenda, and reflexivity (Chandler & Munday, 2011).

discourse: Discourses are language-dependent means of disseminating cultural values and expectations (Grant & Hardy, 2004). Over time, discourse as a construct has matured to include an emphasis on both spoken and written texts, as well as the nature of discursive interactions and the social contexts within which the discourse is situated (Grant, Keenoy, & Oswick, 2001, p. 7).

formative contexts and organizational rules: Formative contexts (Unger, 1987) are the unspoken, shared rules with govern societal behaviors. These contexts are of a macro nature, including for example, economic and political influences. From formative contexts spring organizational rules (Mills & Murgatroyd, 1991). Organizational rules may manifest as organizational attitudes, and policies and procedures.

individual contributor: The individual contributor (IC) is a non-management member of a business team that actually contributes to the goals and mission of the company. An IC typically talks normally, unlike management ablaze with buzz words or phrases, such as synergy, low hanging fruit, things of that nature, and so on (Urban Dictionary, n.d.).
**organizational culture:** A culture is composed of multiple key elements that include stability, training, work relationships, organizational values, and management and hierarchical structures (Daft, 2015).

**sensemaking:** Weick’s (1995) concept of sensemaking describes a continuous process in which the individual constructs and maintains her identity in response to organizational events and culture.

**social contract:** Edwards and Karau (2007) define a social contract as “the set of norms, assumptions, and beliefs that society conceives as fair and appropriate for parties involved in employment relationships” (p. 67).

**Chapter One Summary**

The nature of work and the employer-employee relationship have changed dramatically in the last century. The mutual expectation of long-term employment is no longer a given. In so far as societal changes have influenced the nature of work, so the changing nature of work has radically redefined the relationship of the individual to his or her employer. Oppressive structures and hegemonic practices have been described as a defining part of many workplaces. Researchers have noted a number of troubling themes related to issues that arise in a society where employment is insecure and work/personal lives are increasingly intertwined. As individuals create and maintain organizational identities over time and are constantly exposed to dominant organizational discourses that dictate organizational rules. Contemporary employees must also cope in increasingly unstable environments where frequent change is the norm.

It is important to better understand how immersion in corporate cultures influences individuals’ identity over time. Specifically, how does exposure to dominant discourse in corporate cultures influence identity as an artifact of sensemaking. The purpose of this narrative
study was to explore the influence of the discourses of corporate cultures on six to nine ICs’ identities through the process of sensemaking. Specifically, the study explored the experiences of a group of seven male and female ICs (non-managers) working for a Fortune 500 company (or its equivalent in yearly revenues) for at least five years. Corporate discourse was defined as structured texts embodied in the practice of talking, writing, and interacting within cultures that are heavily intertwined with the values and goals of leadership. The intent of this study was to surface through the analysis of personal narratives the influence of discourse on the sense that individuals embedded within corporate cultures made of themselves through the stories they told.

This study explored the ways in which identity evolves over time as a result of long-term immersion in contemporary corporate cultures. Specifically, this study explored the impact of exposure to dominant discourse on individual contributors’ identity development through sensemaking. The study sought to answer the key question underlying the research problem: “How does exposure to discourse in corporate cultures influence ICs’ identity through sensemaking?”

The study as described in this chapter was framed by a review of the literature that explores the central phenomenon. The literature review spans key themes surrounding the central phenomenon—how corporate professionals in unpredictable environments of frequent change use sensemaking to construct organizational discourse.
Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

This literature review explores extant literature on how exposure to dominant discourse in the context of often unpredictable and frequently changing organizations, particularly corporations, influences corporate professionals’ identity construction through sensemaking. The theoretical frameworks guiding this study are critical theory and critical sensemaking. Critical theory offers a unique view into an examination of individual identity development in contemporary organizational culture. Based on the assumption that there is no such thing as an objective reality or a value-free interpretation, the influences of power, domination, and hierarchy can be fully explored as they affect the individual. Critical sensemaking has emerged as a contemporaneous hybrid model that brings together insights from critical theory and Weick’s (1995) sensemaking model. Specifically, critical sensemaking considers the influences of power, position, and language in organizational life.

Key themes explored in this review include the following: (a) work and organizational membership from the industrial to the postmodern era, (b) organizational discourse, (c) organizational culture, and (d) organizational identity and sensemaking in the workplace. This review will synthesize these key themes, reveal the interconnections among them and surface any gaps in the related literature. The review will conclude with suggestions for further research and provide a rationale for the specific research question.

Work and Organizational Membership: Industrial to Postmodern Era

The nature of work has changed radically over the past century. Industrialization, technology, and diversification of the U.S. workforce has changed the fundamental meaning of work. Agreements between employers and employees reflect unpredictable, frequently changing organizational landscapes in which long-term job security is largely nonexistent. Prior to the
industrial age, most work was performed by self-employed individuals in contexts such as agriculture or cottage industries. The concept of working for someone else was largely unheard of prior to the dawn of the industrial age whose factory, production-based model necessitated the introduction of those whose work was primarily to manage and exert control over others (Mumby, 2013).

The Evolving Nature of Work

As society became increasingly mechanized between the 19th and 20th centuries, theories and systems related to controlling workers and increasing their productivity were being developed to keep pace with the increasing need for large scale coordination of effort. Frederick Winslow Taylor, an engineer and organizational theorist in the early part of the 20th century, devised the principles of scientific management that became the standard for governing employer-employee relations. Taylor’s principles emphasized a complete separation of duties between managers and employees in which managers made all decisions related to work processes and employees’ sole responsibility was to do the work itself. In addition, employee output was to be carefully monitored in the service of ensuring maximum production. He believed the application of his principles in the workplace would counteract what he termed the influence of “systematic soldiering” (Mumby, 2013, p. 63), defined by Taylor as a process through which workers created implicit agreements to maintain static output levels that would satisfy minimum requirements without risking greater output demands from management. Workers’ roles were subdivided in the service of ensuring a consistent means of production, simultaneously ensuring that, like machine parts, workers could be easily replaced. Morgan (1997) notes that Taylor’s management philosophy “effectively ‘splits’ the worker, advocating the separation of hand and brain” (p. 25). Moreover, Katz and Kahn (1978) observed that the
scientific management model does not consider the interactions between organizations and their environments. Buraway (1979) notes, “The labor process, therefore, must be understood in terms of the specific combinations of force and consent that elicit cooperation in the pursuit of profit” (p. 30). Taylor’s principles of scientific management were widely adopted in the first part of the 20th century despite strong sentiment from many that these principles served to dehumanize workers by turning them into veritable automatons (Mumby, 2013). Scientific management provided the model upon which the work world of the industrial age was built. Although Taylor’s model has gone out of vogue because of the demands of an increasingly complex, technology-driven, interconnected society, his influence can still be seen today in some service-driven contexts, such as fast food restaurants.

The history of industrialization in the Western world can be grouped into three phases. The first phase was centered on the factory and repetitive labor on simple machines by unskilled laborers. The second phase, while still largely factory-based, involved more complex operations requiring higher levels of coordination and specialization. As Hatch (2013) observed, this growing operational complexity was “reflected in substantial increases in the ranks of managers and administrative staff . . . and were accompanied by improvements in transportation and communication, freer trade, and growing public interest in the consumable products of industrial manufacturing” (p. 79). This second phase of industrialization was influenced and driven by the principles of scientific management mentioned previously. The hallmark of the third phase of industrialization, also commonly referred to as the postmodern era, was increased specialization and competition for consumer attention in an environment where production exceeded demand.

As the postmodern industrial culture has evolved to keep pace with an increasingly complex, interconnected world, so the nature of work itself has continued to evolve. The
influence of changing demographics in the workforce (such as gender, age, and ethnicity) has contributed more complexity to perceptions of what constitutes satisfactory or adequate employment (Lyons, Ng, & Schweitzer, 2014). Within the postmodern environment, societal unpredictability has created a class of workers known as precariats who live in constant stress from employment uncertainty and economic instability. This population has significant needs for personal and professional development to survive in an unstable world. The precarian existence rests on shaky ground as it is not predicated on membership to a common community of practitioners from which to draw support (Standing, 2012, p. 590). Inkson et al. (2012) point out that the previously taken for granted beliefs regarding stable employment were threatened by the “new fashions—‘market forces’, globalization, outsourcing, and organizational restructuring” (p. 325).

Related to the new precarian reality, the concept of boundarylessness has been discussed in depth with respect to the contemporary workplace. Boundarylessness is a by-product of postmodern organizations due to the increasingly fluid nature of boundaries between employers and organizations. In our current culture of frequent corporate reorganizations, downsizing, and increased mobility, it is no longer the norm for an individual to spend an entire career with one employer. The extent to which a career can be boundaryless has been debated in the literature, because all systems, whether individual or organizational, need boundaries with their external environments. Further, the definition of a career boundary may consider a variety of contexts inseparable from the individual, such as past employment history, personal situation, preferred occupation, and so on (Rodrigues & Guest, 2010). Regardless of the disagreement on the existence of a truly boundaryless career, there are significant implications of increasing career fluidity on agreements regarding the nature and extent of organization-employee relationships.
Social Contracts

A key tenet of organization-employee relationships since the rise of the U.S. industrial workforce to the current day has concerned the responsibilities of employers to employees. This mutual responsibility must be clearly defined for the relationship to be successful and productive. The concept of the social contract evolved to ensure such well-defined employer/employee relationships.

Social contracts have evolved since the industrial age. Edwards and Karau (2007) define a social contract as “the set of norms, assumptions, and beliefs that society conceives as fair and appropriate for parties involved in employment relationships” (p. 67). Social contracts serve the purpose of establishing appropriate social parameters by encouraging or restricting certain behaviors (Rousseau & Rousseau, 2016). From its earliest inception, the social contract was often just a handshake to seal the deal. “Twenty years ago, the social contract in America and most western countries was clear. . . . Corporate social responsibility in this contract was fairly simple to understand” (Karnes, 2009, p. 191). The social contract of Frederick Taylor’s era, for example, implies a simple and direct relationship between the organization and the employee. In more recent years, the old-fashioned handshake has given way to a largely faceless, indiscriminate entity: the corporation. As the United States has moved from an industrial to a post-industrial nation, the implicit agreements between employers and employees have changed radically. In our increasingly digital culture, this set of norms and assumptions has broadened to include an individuals’ right to privacy (Martin, 2016).

The changing nature of many work environments from a traditional office space to some remote location miles or even continents away from coworkers has further reduced the
bargaining power of the individual (Buren & Greenwood, 2008). The social contract has extended to include implicit expectations regarding transparency of personal information available to employers through processes of cybervetting (Berkelaar, 2014).

Employers and employees today face many challenges navigating mutual contracts considering rapid societal change. Society has evolved into a technology-based, globalized workforce, which has necessitated new views on loyalty and commitment. Miller and Miller (2012) describe the increasing number of Generation Y individuals engaged in the work force as long-term, temporary employees. Their findings indicate that “in the upper echelons, any stigma on temporary jobs—and on the people who choose them—is almost laughably dated” (p. 4). There are implications regarding the relationship of the individual to her work output. Malone, Laubacher, and Johns (2011) contrasted the hyper specialization of current day knowledge work to industrial era factory work that separated the workers from their overall product through the breakdown of work into distributed tasks.

Bishop (2008) explores the reframe of the social contract in U.S. society by examining the moral responsibilities of organizations to their employees. “The purpose of applying social contract arguments to the issues of corporate rights and responsibilities is to determine if the existence of for-profit corporations is consistent with the fundamental principles of a just society” (p. 209). Buren and Greenwood (2008) discuss the diminishment of employee voice in contemporary work environments which is attributable to several factors, most notably the changing nature of work, the changing needs and preferences of employers, and the deterioration of policy to protect employees from unfair business practices (p. 209).

From a corporate perspective, the social contract in contemporary society may be modeled on the concept of corporate social responsibility (CSR). Cheng, Ioanno, and Serafeim
(2014) describe CSR as a model for promoting the integration of environmental and social issues into operational goals and strategies that extend to interactions with stakeholders. The CSR pyramid (1979) reframes the concept of social contracting to represent the various responsibilities of the corporation and its stakeholders to the community, providing a holistic picture of the multiple dimensions involved in the sustainment of truly socially responsible institutions (Bennett, 2011, p. 349). The pyramid’s base is economic responsibility; the next level up is legal responsibility, then ethical responsibility.

Philanthropic responsibility sits at the top of the CSR pyramid. Further research on corporate-level social contracting (Krstović, Bakić, & Kostić, 2012) explored the role of business in society and the concept of corporate citizenship. The researchers took the view that good corporate citizenship was a shared partnership among various players (including capital owners, society, and stakeholders) resulting in positive outcomes for all through cooperation. “Since companies nowadays are regarded as socioeconomic systems where stakeholders are partners in creating value, the role of business is to enhance value, but in a socially responsible manner” (p. 70).

Alvesson, Blom, and Sveningsson (2017) discuss the growing needs for managers in contemporary organizations to have critical leadership skills in addition to other administrative competencies. They describe leaders as those in the position to determine meaning and reality for workers (p. 12). Kamenetz (2012) cites changing cultural norms regarding the workplace as a major reason for shorter employee tenure either by termination or voluntary resignation. Changes in critical skill sets have caused many employers to seek candidates who have depth as well as breadth—a “T-shaped person”—to bring into the workplace (p. 76). The development of this new, more flexible employee is critical in a work environment that is constantly changing.
because of updated technologies and the influx of an increasing number of Generation Y workers who are setting new standards for such flexibility.

A movement towards establishing a “tour of duty” model of employment is encouraged by Hoffman, Casnocha, and Yeh (2013). This model is predicated on an agreement between employer and employee that performance is to be a driver of retention, and it encourages a focus on developing “lifetime employability” as opposed to “lifetime employment” (p. 5). Miller and Miller (2012) discuss a decreasing emphasis on traditional succession paths in an organization, and more focus on retaining and developing employees who can think flexibly and are interested in “project-based careers” that utilize an individual’s competencies on different projects within an organization (p. 62). Employers will need to understand the changing development needs of employees as the project-based approach to work assignments gains traction in the workplace. They assert that, in this changing environment, the rise of the flexible, project-based “supertemp” will permeate much of the contemporary workforce. Rodrigues, Guest, and Budjanovcanin (2015) assert the increasing importance of personal goals, values, and life situations in employees’ construction of career boundaries through lean teams, cost-saving measures, and rapid change. Such environments are more attractive when offered as temporary stops in the individual’s career trajectory (p. 52).

The impact of soon-to-be retiring baby boomers on workforce knowledge transfer is noted in the literature. Hokanson, Sosa-Fey, and Vinaja (2010) contend that the increase in baby boomer retirements over the next several years will necessitate studied approaches to retaining and developing Generation X and Y employees to avoid potential “threats to business continuity” (p. 139). Her research showed the efficacy of implementing knowledge management strategies to prepare younger workers for knowledge gaps left by more tenured workers as they
move into retirement. Younger workers should be attracted by the organization and later
groomed for leadership (p.140). Prentice (2011) conducted a qualitative study on the nature of
“employee burnout in the highly demanding environment of brokerage-based financial services
firms” (p. 5). The study revealed six emergent themes: workload and stress, independence,
perception of supervisor, community, job satisfaction, and outliers that correlated with three
distinct dimensions of burnout—cynicism, exhaustion, and negative self-evaluation. The
findings indicated that, overall, managers had more positive perceptions of their work and felt
more control over their environments than did non-managers.

Changes to the meaning of work and the definition of employment have caused a major
shift in the perception of what it means to be a part of a corporate culture. Organizational
cultures have become more difficult to navigate while simultaneously becoming increasingly
demanding of employees’ time and mindshare. Powerful undercurrents that shape organizational
members’ organizational expectations and employee behaviors are in constant motion through
mechanisms of discourse and culture.

Organizational Discourse

An individual’s personal understanding of what it means to be part of an organization
may be understood as framed in the context of organizational discourses. Discourse may be
understood as sets of practices which include the production, transmission, and consumption of
both explicit and implied rules in organizations which serve to reinforce a dominant perception
of normative behavior. The embedding of discourse through various texts and discursive
practices is only possible in the context of a particular culture which serves as the foundation
from which discourses are created and sustained. In a world where the dominant view of
organization studies has been based on exploring concepts of organizing in and of itself, Putnam
and Fairhurst (2015) emphasize the need for contemporary studies “to focus on analyzing
tensions, contradictions, and paradoxes as discursive features” (p. 384).

The Nature of Discourse

Discourse may be compared to certain forms of rhetoric. Classical rhetoric is primarily
focused on the persuasive power of a speaker, while contemporary rhetoric “examines a range of
communication situations, including organizational socialization in which intentions are not tied
to one person or decision-maker” (Cheney, Christensen, Conrad, & Lair, 2004, p. 82). The role
of discourse in the organization has been described in the literature as falling into two groups—
one rooted in the enactment of dominant ideologies and the other as a dialectical process
(Mumby, 2004). The former view of organizational discourse focuses on power and control
issues that dominate organizational reality via dominant ideologies with organizational members
exerting varying levels of resistance. The latter focuses on how organizational members exhibit
agency through a dialectic process that seeks to negotiate issues of power and control. Every
discourse has its own set of rules regarding participation with respect to these practices (Hardy &

Discourse includes an emphasis on both spoken and written texts as well as the nature of
discursive interactions and embedded social context (Grant et al., 2001). Van Dijk (2014) states,
“Language use, text and talk are at the same time linguistic, cognitive, and sociocultural and
political acts” (p. 30). These multiple levels of discourse are in operation simultaneously and
have significant impact on the individual. Alvesson and Karreman (2011) emphasize that
language creates reality and that there is often a “disconnect between talk and practice” in
organizational settings (p. 1124).
The potential influence of such texts on discourse is directly related to the author’s level of access to various kinds of power which gains them “discursive legitimacy” (Hardy & Phillips, 2004, p. 299). However, it is also the case that many actors at one time may hold different forms of power, thereby opening the door for competing discourses and, in turn, resistance in which the consumption of dominant texts may be subject to multiple interpretations. Seidl, Sanderson, and Roberts (2013) discourses that may be understood as either “small d” or “Big D” in nature. The former is text-focused and linguistically oriented at a local scale. The latter type of discourse, with its roots in a Foucauldian interpretation, is derived from social reality and can be understood as “expressions of power/knowledge relations” (p. 1129). The point here is that discourse is larger than language itself. Although language does in large part constitute discourse, Big D discourse in turn creates reality. They point out the close relationship between discourse and social or psychological realities expressed as “discourse determination” and identify multiple levels of discourse spanning local to the organizational to the societal (p. 1133).

A recognition of discourse at both micro and macro levels is necessary “as a way of getting beyond the problems of inflated discourse on discourse” (p. 1142). Mumby (2011) refers to “various D/discourses” which make up the individual or organizational reality and point to the social construction (vs. purely linguistics) of discourse (p. 1159). Mumby (2015) further calls for “careful attention to the evolving ways in which communication processes and power relations intersect to construct identities” (p. 35). Power circulates through discourse, where power works as a “productive network, which runs through the whole social body” (Foucault, 1980, p. 119). Deetz (2014) discusses discourse as the means of both creating and sustaining ideologies. Ideologies themselves provide the mechanism for recognizing and understanding various discourses. Ideologies, such as the imperative for career success, are embedded through
socialization that begins in childhood (p. 359). Organizational discourse is socialized through various discursive tactics that include “language games, stories, narratives, rituals, rhetoric, texts, dialogue, drama, conversations, and sensemaking” (Grant, Oswick, Hardy, Putnam, & Phillips, 2004, p. 8). These tactics serve a critical purpose in legitimizing identities. For example, Castello, Barbera and Vaara (2016) cited several discursive tactics employed to explain professional failures in their study of Silicon Valley entrepreneurs.

**Discourse and Power**

Power is viewed as more complex than the representation of dominant ideologies or hegemony alone but also as the collective action of organizational members “engaged in more or less complex organized games” (Clegg, 1989, p. 20). Contemporary workplace dilemmas situated in power dynamics, such as workplace bullying, have been studied through a discursive lens (Johnson, 2015). Mumby and Clair (1997) discuss the competitive nature of organizations with respect to the establishment and support of particular discourses. They discuss the existence of organizations as “symbolic structures shot through with competing interests, struggles, and contradictions” (p. 187). Identities are key to understanding processes of organization (Brown, 2015), and the relationships among power, discourse, and the workplace are deeply intertwined in environments where corporate values are disseminated into members’ personal lives (Deetz & Mumby, 1990). These disseminated values serve to “normalize” certain “material arrangements” that represent the distribution of power and influence in the workplace, such as office architecture, recruitment and selection process, and rewards and compensation (Alvesson and Deetz, 2006, p. 255).

A particularly effective use of power occurs when organizational decision makers can exert a broad influence over those without any decision-making authority. Individuals
incorporate the influence of organizational power dynamics into their own identities (Mumby & Clair, 1997). Denker and Dougherty (2013) point out that corporations shape norms, which in turn shape behaviors, resulting in a dominant discourse that exerts control over employees’ emotions to minimize or silence conflict. And (Chia, 2000) describes organizational discourse as restrictive of vision by its own construction. “Discourse may be understood as organization” (p. 515). Key elements of organizational life often act as genres that serve to embed and justify dominant workplace ideologies (Swales & Rogers, 1995; Seidl et al., 2013).

Discourse may exist at various levels of influence in the sense that a discourse may be influential in creation of a shared social reality, or may exist primarily at a local, social level not necessarily connected to larger decision-making authority. The former type of discourse is “muscular” as opposed to the “fragile” local-level discourses that may coexist (Alvesson, 2004, p. 324). The authors question the level of coupling that exists between discourse and meaning in the organization, speculating that the coupling between the two becomes tighter at higher levels in the organization where the manipulation of language becomes ever more critical in securing professional advancement.

Dominant stories provide a framework within which individuals assign specific meanings to concepts which then become central to stories at a more local level, thus perpetuating and further reinforcing values inherent in the dominant organizational discourse “so that they are given specific associative connotations in the total linguistic context of the organization” (Näslund & Pemer, 2012, p. 106). Deetz (1992) points out the appropriation of messaging in contemporary society through the commercialization of language and education in the service of corporate goals. Individual realities are constructed in the context of everyday interactions governed by discursive practices that become familiar and predictable (Combs, 2002). Dominant
organizational stories evolve over time and influence the adoption of various courses of action (Hendy, 2014).

**Organizational Culture**

The embedding of discourse through various texts and discursive practices is only possible in the context of a particular culture which serves as the foundation from which discourses are created and sustained. Geertz (1973) states, “We are, in sum, incomplete or unfinished animals who complete or finish ourselves through culture; and not through culture in general but through highly particular forms of it” (p. 49). Similarly, Alvesson (2004) defines culture as composed of specific forms that communicate meaning, including not only language but other devices such as metaphors, narratives, and organizational practices (Alvesson & Sveningsson, 2015, p. 12). Given this composition of culture, should an organization be viewed as a culture itself or is a culture something that an organization has? This line of inquiry explores the “root metaphor” definition of culture: “Culture as a root metaphor promotes a view of organizations as expressive forms, manifestations of human consciousness” (Smircich, 1983, pp. 347–348). Smircich (1983) emphasizes a variety of perspectives on culture drawn from an anthropological perspective: cognitive, symbolic, structural, and psychodynamic. These perspectives consider culture as shared knowledge, shared meaning, and the expressions of the unconscious mind (p. 348). Making meaning may only be done in the context of a culture, which offers a framework for understanding and acting within an organization. Watkins (2013) describes culture as “an organization’s immune system” (p. 3). Jablin and Putnam (2000) discuss “the organizational culture metaphor” as an artifact in and of itself due to an inherent human bias towards defined relationships, categories, and contexts and a hesitation to accept ambiguity as a cultural reality (p. 292).
Cultures consist of social constructions that serve to reward and reinforce certain behaviors. They exist independent of the organization’s members. “Thus, culture provides a premade and socially shared, enacted environment to which the individual must accommodate in order to fit and, in certain cases, to survive” (Cooke & Rousseau, 1988, p. 248). Individuals are expected to concede to cultural norms or be punished. Schein (2014) asserts that norms are the foundation for growing organizational culture. New organizational members are encouraged to adopt group values. Ideas that gain the greatest traction in an organization are those that are supported by a leader in the form of organizational vision or mission. Once introduced, these ideas are reinforced over time through strategies including stories and rituals.

Elements of culture fostered and supported at a broader level in the organization serve to underpin and organize activity at more local levels. Organizational cultures are composed of both dominant and subcultures, with organizations tending to differentiate amongst cultures around issues of roles and hierarchy. The concept of subcultures allows for the identification and fixing of social hierarchies within which individuals reside (Oyserman, 2017). Cooke and Rousseau (1988) emphasize that cultures may be understood as having both direction (content, norms, values) as well as intensity, which is the amount of influence a culture has on its members. Cultural intensity is defined by the “degree of consensus amongst members . . . [and] the strength of the connections amongst expectations, rewards, and behaviors” (p. 250).

The assumptions that have helped a culture meet its adaptation needs most successfully are those that are to new members “as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems” (Schein, 1984, p. 3). Individuals come to understand and make decisions on how to act based on their own internal schema of an organization and its expectations. Assumptions are surfaced as either proactive or retroactive manifestations of cultural values that
in turn constitute culture (Hatch, 1993). Casey (1999) describes the construct of “psychic accommodation” in which the individual aligns herself with the organizational culture’s values and expectations (p. 164). She notes that individuals keep anxiety at bay by aligning themselves with the familiarity and structure of the corporate culture (p. 174). Ahern, Daminelli, and Fracassi (2015) point out the negative impact of increasing levels of cultural distance on levels of trust in cross-border mergers.

Cultures strive both to integrate internally as well as to adapt to external circumstances. External adaptation is concerned with the group’s ability to survive in its environment, while internal integration is concerned with the way a group manages itself in the service of survival as a unit. Katz and Kahn’s monograph *The Social Psychology of Organizations* (1978) describes organizational adaptation from an open-systems theory perspective as “repeated cycles of input, transformation, output and renewal input which comprise the organizational pattern” (p. 356). When an organizational culture is weakened, such as during periods of frequent changes in leadership, subcultures manifest that work to further inhibit the development of a single organizational culture. These subcultures are born because of inconsistent messaging, values, and rewards throughout the organization (p.270).

Competing views of culture define it as that which either creates order and unity for its members through unified problem solving or as underscored by ambiguity and fragmentation. Schein’s (2010) formal definition of culture is as follows:

The culture of a group can now be defined as a pattern of shared basic assumptions learned by a group as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration, which has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be
taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. (p. 18)

Burke (2013) describes culture, then, as a kind of blueprint for understanding how to navigate and interact in the organization (p. 257)

Schein notes the primal striving of a group is always toward integration. Certain elements of culture may be fiercely protected while others are discarded over time to ensure continued success of the culture (Schein, 1999). Schein’s model may be considered to come from what Martin (1985) describes as an integrationist perspective. This perspective is defined as one that “focuses on those manifestations of a culture that have mutually consistent interpretations. An integration portrait of a culture sees consensus (although not necessarily unanimity) throughout an organization” (p. 94).

However, the notion of culture as an integrated whole is but one lens through which the construct has been studied. Some researchers view culture as driven not by consensus, but by conflict and ambiguity. Martin (1985) discussed the concepts of differentiated and fragmented cultures as counterpoint to the integrationist perspective adopted by researchers such as Schein, particularly in management studies. Differentiated cultures do not tend towards overall group consensus as a key unifying factor. Rather, conflicts exist and are managed through the existence of multiple subcultures. Relational inconsistency is the norm, in contrast to the integrationist emphasis on consistency. Further, the existence of ambiguity is ignored from an integrationist perspective, while in a differentiated culture, ambiguity exists in between its various subcultures. Martin describes a differentiated culture as consisting of many subcultures that provide clarity against an ambiguous background (1985, p. 94). The very existence of multiple meanings and uncertainty are the foundation of a culture viewed from the fragmentation

**Culture and Change**

Whether one views culture as unified or inherently divided, it never stays the same. External environments are always changing and this in turn is a root cause of organizational change. In particular, rapid changes may occur that threaten an organization’s security (Kotter, 2014) and necessitate strategic renewal to ensure adaptation (Kotter, 2014b). Drucker (1994) points out in his “theory of the business” that an organization’s ability to recognize changing external conditions and make subsequent changes to its business model is necessary for survival. Organizations should not rely on earlier successes as sole predictor of future successes. They must respond to changing external factors or they will not survive. Kotter and Heskett (2008) discuss companies who have been highly successful in the past as particularly susceptible to developing unhealthy cultures over time.

Change may be either continuous, occurring slowly and consistently over time, or episodic. Episodic changes are triggered by a misalignment between the external environment and the organization. Culture change may be triggered by any of five sources: the environment, performance, characteristics of leadership, structure, and strategy (Weick & Quinn, 1999). Various levels of organizational change are also referred to as either evolutionary (transactional) or revolutionary (transformational) in nature (Burke, 2013). Revolutionary change “calls attention to the clear need for a dramatic modification of mission and strategy,” while evolutionary change is usually an “improvement measure” of some sort (p. 23). Organizational
change is understood as a means of ensuring improved organizational performance (Carter, Armenakis, Field, & Mossholder, 2013).

Van de Ven and Pool’s (1995) classic meta-analysis of change summarized four theories of change and development in organizations: life cycle, teleological, dialectical, and evolutionary. Each theory emphasizes different drivers at various organizational levels. Lifecycle theory assumes that organizations experience a natural life cycle during which they are born, grow, and die out. Teleological theories assume the driving force of the organization is collaborative effort in which the group sets and works together towards goals. Dialectical theories of organization are driven by “opposition and conflict.” Evolutionary theories of organization assume “competitive survival” is the key driving mechanism for growth and development (p. 519).

The key to successful cultural change is to identify behaviors that will lead to a desired change, assess reactions to it, and adjust or realign them in keeping with the goals of a change initiative (Burke, 2013). Gagliardi (1986) discusses the key conditions necessary for producing change: Old and new organizational values must not be in conflict; organizational members must experience success with new competencies and share emotional recognition of it; and leaders must “promote the mythical interpretation of success” going forward (p. 131).

Thurlow and Helms Mills’ (2015) case study on organizational change in the higher education sector revealed that when extracted cues from the environment and organizational direction are in alignment, change initiatives are more likely to succeed. Weick emphasizes that organizations “can only change in the direction of the dominant story” (2012a, p. 143). Change is a process that is “enacted, maintained, constrained and made sense of through language” (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009, p. 476).
**Corporate Colonization**

Deetz describes a colonization of the lifeworld in corporate settings, implying an implicit, unbalanced power relationship between levels of the organizational hierarchy that results in the marginalization of the individual. He termed this imbalanced state—corporate colonization—in *The Corporate Colonization of Democracy* (1992). Deetz was concerned with the potential for organizational communication to be co-opted to express and confirm the interests of some over others through processes of socialization.

Alvesson and Deetz (2006) assert that an understanding of ideologies is central to understanding ways in which individuals understand and enact their realities. The critique of ideologies surfaces power imbalances and explains the marginalization of certain parties. Per the authors, the critique of ideologies “shows how specific interests fail to be realized owing partly to the inability of people to understand or act on these interests” (p. 260). Techniques of legitimization and naturalization of stories are employed to justify and embed certain interpretations of events into the social reality. Key themes surfaced in the context of the authors’ ideology critique include a recognition of hegemony in the workplace. Deetz and Eger (2014) note the subtle reinforcement of ideologies via the embedding of discourses through popular culture (p. 359).

Gunn (2010) explored the experiences of displaced workers using narrative methodology to uncover hegemonic cultures. The researcher interviewed sixty hospital employees and conducted in-depth content analysis of local newspapers to explore the discourse surrounding massive layoffs. Discursive mechanisms of control, including silence, false information, and discursive deflection were discovered as a means of controlling and managing information and discussion surrounding impending layoffs of many low-wage workers. The control of
communication was used to draw attention away from the situation and minimize the perceived impact of the layoffs on the community. Silence was found to be equally as effective as language in the promotion of discourses (p. 33).

Willmott’s (1993) critique of corporate culture emphasized the co-opting of employee consciousness via expectations of unquestioning devotion to organizational values in exchange for the illusion of “practical autonomy” (p. 517). Deetz and Mumby (1990) question the reasons that individuals participate in systems of domination. How is continued participation fostered, and why are such systems of domination not immediately recognizable as such? Further, to what extent do discourses inherent in technology and communication systems marginalize or represent various groups? Hardy and Thomas (2014) discuss the use discourse and power relations in organizations to create strategy.

The impact of corporate colonization on individuals is profound, affecting their personal relationships even at the household level, which is noted by Denker and Dougherty (2013). The researchers explored the extent to which couples incorporated corporate discourses into their relationships with each other and found that corporate discourses were transferable to family life. The couples tended to view their own personal circumstances as better than average, to express an overall optimism about their lives, and to decrease conflict with each other in the context of making family decisions. They note, “Household scripts are often narrowed, emotions are often devalued or only performed when acceptable, and conflict is often silenced” (p. 247).

Corporate norms and expectations become part of couples’ lives and corporate practices infiltrate their lifeworlds. In a study on managerial identities, Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) found organizational discourse, role expectations, and narrative self-identity tightly interwoven with individuals’ identity work (p. 1163). Smircich (1983) questions “the extent to which the
The term ‘corporate culture’ refers to anything more than an ideology cultivated by management for the purpose of control and legitimization of activity” (p. 346). Casey (1999) notes in her study on the impact of organizational entrée into employees’ lives that “the displacement of anger and dissension and the management of ambivalence by the individual enable and enact corporate practices of compliance, identification, and control” (p. 159).

Deetz (1992) notes the influence of corporate contexts in the lives of individuals from birth throughout early childhood and formative years. Combs (2002) discusses the uses of corporate rhetoric promoted by organizational leaders to embed self-serving values within lower segments of the organizational hierarchy. The researcher notes the influence of corporate colonization on individuals’ adoption of corporate ideologies. For corporate colonization to be successful, there must be stories put into place that reflect managerialist values. These stories must then be spread throughout the organization and accepted as plausible and true by their various audiences. Ihlen (2015) discusses the use of rhetorical strategies in corporations to promote stories of sustainability despite scientific evidence to the contrary. These organizational stories gain meaning as they are relayed in the context of competition among various ideologies that, in turn, create multiple discourses.

Kirby (2006) explored the potential invasiveness of the work environments in employees’ lives. The results of her study indicated that organizations may consciously model attributes of family life. She explored the decreasing distance between P/F (personal/family) and W/I (work/institutional) lives of individuals because of the burgeoning array of services available from employers in the form of benefits, perks, and services meant to increase efficiency and productivity on the job. Kirby and Krone (2002) dive more deeply into the impact of employee assistance programs. Their qualitative research explored the attitudes of employees to usage of
family benefits policies, most notably maternity and paternity leave policies. The researchers used structuration theory as a theoretical framework to gain an understanding of the dynamics surrounding employees’ decisions whether or not to take advantage of work-family benefits. They found that, although the policies were condoned at an official level, employees themselves often felt hesitant to take advantage of these helping opportunities despite the relief from stress and boost to productivity they might offer.

Casey (1999) questions the extent to which corporate access to employees’ personal lives is empowering or meaningful, despite superficial rewards. Metaphors of team and family abound, but to what end? The author notes that “a deeper look at the new organizational cultural practices of team and family reveals complex discordant and unintended outcomes from their installation” (p. 156). Maertz and Boyar (2010) explored individuals’ ability to manage work and personal life responsibilities and their associated tensions. They wished to explore the impact of discrete episodes on individuals’ levels of stress because of work-family conflicts contrasted with an alternate and commonly used approach to studying work-family conflict by measuring general levels of stress. Kirby, Rinfogiate, Anderson, Lahman, and Lietzenmayer (2016) analyzed images of working mothers as portrayed in popular culture. They concluded that, although working and motherhood could be viewed as complementary to each other, it is a societal imperative that working mothers should successfully juggle both responsibilities and be active problem solvers who do not need help.

Hoffman and Cowan (2010) conducted a study using a structuration theory perspective to explore work-life balance issues as revealed in the ways that employees asked for accommodations. The researchers asserted that an examination of work-life balance issues from an organizational communication perspective was particularly revealing in that this perspective
provides great insight into how individuals are influenced by views of both the organization and society. It was hypothesized that the work-life balance between individuals and organizations has become an increasingly complex situation. The researchers administered an online questionnaire to 96 employees selected via convenience sampling. The researchers conducted a theme analysis of the narrative data to distill several key rules and resources that employees used in their respective organizations to manage and maintain work-life balance. The study revealed key areas of opportunity for individuals to leverage communicative behaviors in achieving optimal work-life balance.

**Organizational Identity and Sensemaking in the Workplace**

Organizational environments have become increasingly fluid and demanding in the context of globalization and technological advances that allow for greater work-based access and productivity (Edley, 2001). This may result in higher potential for ambiguity between one’s personal and professional identities. A critical area of interest in the literature is the extent to which identity evolves over time because of long-term immersion in contemporary, often complex organizational cultures (Kirby, 2006).

**Identity and Organizational Context**

The concept of the individual at work and the impact of power structures has also become an increasingly salient topic in understanding the concept of individual identity in organizations. Brown (2015) introduces the emergent concept of identity as how an individual comes to attach meaning to herself and understand who she is in the world through the lens of her relationships with others. Identities may be researched through multiple lens, such as “the extent to which identities are (a) chosen by or ascribed to individuals; (b) generally stable, evolutionally adaptive, or fluid; (c) unified and coherent or fragmented and possibly contradictory; (d)
motivated (or not) by a need for positive meaning; and (e) framed (or not) by a desire for authenticity (p. 25).” Organizational narratives are critical as providers of context for the production of personal narratives (Vaara, Sonenshein, & Boje, 2016).

Garcia and Hardy (2007) examined individual and organizational identity construction within a university setting, exploring the construct of resistance as expressed through discourse. They discovered that resistance was often expressed through narratives of victimhood. Watson and Watson (2012) used a pub as their location of study to explore the process of identity work at the individual social level through stories and narratives. They found that “narratives are used here by individuals who take from (and contribute back to) the other two levels to shape the continuously emergent notion of ‘who they are,’ for both themselves and others” (p. 688).

Sutherland, Howard, and Markauskaite’s (2010) study of pre-teacher development researched the construct of personal identity development as expressed through voice. Voice was viewed as a product of self-image and as a tool for reiteration and repeated reflection on one’s identity. An individual’s professional identity is in and of itself a constantly evolving creation through experience. The researchers asserted that the individual actively constructs and reconstructs her identity as a reflection of who she wants to become.

Hardy, Lawrence, and Grant’s (2005) study examined the creation of collective identity through conversation. Their findings show that conversation underpins discourse and that collaboration among organizational members is key to that process of creation. Various forms of conversation are employed to aid in the process of collaboration, such as “construction of key issues” as private or common, and “styles of talk” which may be assertive or cooperative (pp. 65–66). The relationship between language and discourse and their influence on the act of organizing has been explored by Taylor and Robichaud (2004) who note that texts and
conversations inform each other in the context of organizing. Continuously changing environments use stories to instill and carry meaning in line with the dominant organizational discourse as discussed in Combs (2002). He notes that narratives are not only verbal stories but may also serve as templates for organizing experience. An organization’s history and prior experience are also key to understanding how the identities of individual actors are shaped, in concert with ways in which actors engage with each other and the social reality.

Collinson (2003) explored how power is wielded and experienced by individuals in organizations through the creation of dramaturgical, resistant, and conformist identities. Society has evolved from one of “ascription to achievement” (p. 530) in which identity is earned as opposed to conferred through class or religion. Narratives may be analyzed through multiple lenses, including realist, interpretivist, and a critical, post-structuralist lens that considers issues of power and domination in the construction of narrative realities (Vaara et al., 2016). Johnson, Chang, and Yang (2010) explored identity in the contemporary workplace through the lens of organizational commitment. Their study defined three levels of identity as expressed in the workplace: individual, relational, and collective. Although individuals’ self-concepts may contain multiple affective and cognitive beliefs, “akin to a storage bin” (p. 229), there is one identity that tends to be dominant. A group’s identity is shaped by group norms and beliefs, while the relational identity type is informed primarily by dyadic relationships. An individual identity is one in which individual uniqueness and specialness is most valued.

Tanis and Beukeboom (2011) hypothesized that the extent to which individuals identify with their organizations is of equal importance and potential benefit to individuals as well as their organizations. Their survey findings supported the assumption that OI is constructed in a two-way fashion with individuals being influenced by their organizations as well as capable of
designing their own beliefs and identities independently within the organization. Further, the development of OI is not necessarily stable and is affected by several external variables. This relationship between image and identity is the result of a strong influence of the external environment. Image is synonymous with corporate identity that is created in response to external demands. One’s image, depending on how successfully it received in the external environment, influences one’s identity as a member of the organization.

Dutton and Dukerich (1991) studied the impact of identity and image on organizational adaptation and found that both identity and image are critical factors in how individuals interpret and act on issues. Two key findings from the research were the simultaneous influences of identity on processes of interpretation of organizational issues and of image on processes of evaluating and justifying organizational responses. The overlap between organizational and family identities in family-owned firms who engaged in non-financial initiatives was explored by Zellweger, Nason, Nordqvist, and Brush (2013). They framed their study around organizational identity theory and concluded that the fit between family and organizational identities was critical in order to ensure approval of non-family stakeholders. This broader support served as a means of further securing the organization’s corporate reputation.

The concept of corporate versus organizational identity is also discussed in Hatch and Cunliffe (2012). The authors note that corporate identity is driven by management and focuses on reinforcing appropriate branding. Organizational identity is concerned, at a more fundamental level, with what organizational members “perceive, feel and think about their organizations” (p. 357). Gilpin and Miller (2013) examined how individuals’ identities are constructed within complex organizational cultures. They sought to bring together multiple perspectives on identity development through the lens of complexity theory, including social and
organization theory, structuration, network science, and organizational communication. They proposed a model to explain how identity is constructed and identified. Implications for future research include the need for deeper analysis of the construction of identities in complex environments through avenues, such as social networking, in which emergent forms of communication work to shape identity construction and identification processes for individuals in contemporary organizational contexts. The process of developing one’s identity is one of struggle and iteration, a continual creation of the self in the service of answering the question, “‘Who am I?’ (or ‘who are we?’) and ‘what do I (we) stand for’?” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1164). Weick (2012b) contends that it is critical to understand how organizational members attempt to impose order and stability on impermanence, which is a natural state in organizations (p. 3).

Kreiner and Sheep’s (2006) qualitative study of Episcopalian priests explored the challenges of maintaining one’s individual identity over the course of one’s career. They state, “Individuals make occupational and organizational decisions with long-term implications that bind them to a given identity, barring dramatic changes such as retirement or career switching. In this sense, the maintenance of a particular identity type is a conscious choice” (p. 1052). Aronson and Smith (2010) explored the intrapersonal tensions created when managers strove to exercise the responsibilities of their job and profession while balancing professional and personal identities. The study revealed the poignancy and centrality of the struggle to maintain one’s personal identity in a professional context. The researchers concluded that “simultaneously ‘playing the game’ and seeking to disrupt it, they (subjects) strove to protect their senses of self amid the resulting entanglement of compliance and resistance” (p. 444). Building on earlier findings Kreiner, Hollensbe, Sheep, Smith, and Kataria (2015) explored the concept of identity
as evolving between states of being and becoming oneself in alignment with changing organizational environments. This mode of identity work that is inclusive of both characteristics and processes has been termed “identity elasticity.”

Dutton, Roberts, and Bednar (2010) explored how the workplace may play a role in building positive identities. The researchers explored four separate pathways of positive identity-building, each relying on differing degrees of social support for positive identity construction. Koerner (2014) discusses the exhibition of courage in the workplace as a form of identity work for individuals.

**Karl Weick’s Sensemaking Model**

Sensemaking may be defined as the way in which individuals in organizations collectively construct reality to make sense of events. The construct of organizational sensemaking was introduced by Karl Weick in his 1979 work *The Social Psychology of Organizing*. He posited that individuals do not necessarily understand events until after those events have taken place. Weick’s (1995) evolved concept of sensemaking describes a continuous process in which the individual constructs and keeps her identity in response to organizational events and culture. As the construct evolved, sensemaking became far more than an act of interpretation. He conceptualized sensemaking as taking place only in the absence of a shared frame of reference for understanding an event. Sensemaking did not spring from shared understandings of the world so much as it served to create frames of reference that would make collective interpretation possible. “Sensemaking is composed of seven key properties: it is grounded in identity construction; it is retrospective; it is enactive of the environment; it is social in nature; it is an ongoing process; it is driven by extracted cues; and it is driven more by plausibility than accuracy” (Weick, 1995, p. 17). The act of retrospective sensemaking allows
individuals to collectively assign meanings to events and hence, imbue their actions with rationality and purpose that reduces ambiguity and confusion (Mumby, 2013). What is most plausible is what the individual settles upon as truth in the moment. “The concept of sensemaking suggests that plausibility rather than accuracy is the ongoing standard that guides learning” (Sutcliffe & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 419).

The concept of plausibility in sensemaking has been explored as the product of the interrelationships among the larger social reality, organizational reality, and one’s subjective experiences and expectations (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009). Meaning must be drawn from multiple sources to be considered legitimate or actionable. Meanings that are accepted as legitimate or plausible are the drivers of organizational change. Sensemaking and meaning attribution are highly influenced by individual histories and elements of the past that have been identified as meaningful (p. 462). In this way, organizations iterate and evolve through a continual reworking of meaning through the filter of plausibility. Tomkins and Eatough (2014) discuss plausibility as an element of sensemaking that is most fluid from individual to individual. This fluidity is what causes inconsistent sensemaking among groups. Unexpected events may challenge notions of plausibility, but it is plausibility that guides sensemaking over estimations of accuracy.

Thurlow’s (2009) study explored the process of identity construction in the context of sensemaking, particularly the influence of one’s identity on the other elements of sensemaking. Identity construction was based on sensemaking through extracted environmental cues, including influences of power that served to aid individuals in building their identities based on interpretations of events that seemed most plausible in context. While it may occur because of major events, sensemaking takes place in organizational contexts in which minor events are far
more common. Sandberg and Tsoukas (2015) identified five key elements critical to the sensemaking process: specific episodes, ambiguous events, specific processes, specific outcomes, and situational factors. According to Weber and Glynn (2006), institutionalization may influence sensemaking as much as sensemaking may influence institutionalization. Maitlis and Christianson (2014) discuss sensemaking beyond the individual to include sensemaking as a means of enacting larger, organizational processes including change and learning. Sensemaking is described in Brown, Colville, and Pye (2014) as “both maintaining and (potentially) disrupting ongoing processes of organizing (p. 271).

Weick’s (2012a) evolving work emphasized the interconnectedness of sensemaking, organizing, and storytelling. He cites key elements needed to connect the two in the process of sensemaking. These elements include sense, organizing, story, identities, actions, making sense, giving sense, narrative rationality, plot, and character. “Actions, contemporary stories, embodied reactions, imagination, presumptions of logic, faith, and creative assembly of antenarratives into plausible narrative rationality, all can broaden, multiply, and update the number of cues with which we are willing to become acquainted” (p. 150). Sensemaking in organizations has been identified in the literature as the product of narrative, storytelling, and interpersonal relationships. Sensemaking occurs in stages and is dependent on the focus of one’s attention in the process.

Cunliffe and Coupland (2012) note four key elements of sensemaking derived from their study of the use of embodied narratives: sensemaking as embedded in narrative approaches, as a temporal process, as composed of multiple narratives, and as understood as a mind/body experience. “Sense and organizing emerge when a story begins to come together, identities begin to make sense . . . [and] we can connect plot and character” (p. 81). Storytelling is a
vehicle for legitimizing one’s actions. Sensemaking is the lens through which legitimacy is established and order is conferred upon reality (Maclean, Harvey, & Chia, 2012). Taylor and Robichaud (2004) discuss the role of conversation as the launch pad from which the act of organizing occurs. Jorgenson (2016) explored the use of narrative sensemaking strategies between academic couples to manage tensions associated with career stress and disappointments.

Maitlis and Sonenshein’s (2010) study examined the effects of shared sensemaking. Their theoretical study reviewed the literature on sensemaking in the context of Weick’s seminal work. They analyzed two emergent themes of shared meaning and emotion in the process of sensemaking. Directions for future research included the need to pursue a deeper understanding of the political implications of sensemaking as well as the role of the body in the sensemaking process. Brown, Stacey, and Nandhakumar researched the construct of shared meanings. Their results showed that groups may adopt a “basic shared storyline” (2008, p. 2052), but it is refined at the individual level in the service of identity preservation. Their study used a narratological approach to analyze sensemaking processes on a project team. They wanted to understand how individuals’ sensemaking process occurs in the context of identity construction. They conducted an interpretive, longitudinal study that gathered thick description through observations and interview data. They were particularly interested in finding out why group members sometimes make different sense of a mutually shared experience. Their results add to the scholarly dialogue on sensemaking by helping to “explain how organized activities emerge from dissensus, ambiguity, and disagreement” (p. 1057).

The importance of considering multiple interpretations of crisis situations was explored by Wolbers and Boersma (2013) who studied emergency response operations in the asbestos industry. They concluded that multiple interpretations of events, while important to consider in
developing a coordinated response to crisis, were often lacking. They assert that shared sensemaking is essential to identifying problems in the response operation (p. 197). Balogun, Bartunek, and Do (2015) conducted a longitudinal, narrative study of sensemaking and strategic change in organizations that revealed the strong influence of local environments on leaders’ sensemaking, which, in turn, led to differing interpretations and responses to organizational change initiatives.

Critical Perspectives on Sensemaking

Weick’s sensemaking model was the basis for the work of A. J. Mills (2008) who proposed a theoretical framework as a hybrid model combining insights from critical theory and sensemaking. While Weick’s model is critical in providing a framework to understand organizational life, the critical sensemaking approach takes a deeper dive into what makes organizations tick (Helms Mills & Mills, 2009). This hybrid model, called critical sensemaking, considers the multiple influences of power, position, and language in organizational life (Helms Mills et al., 2010). The critical sensemaking approach is a fusion of both sensemaking and organizational rules (Mills & Murgatroyd, 1991). Key elements of critical sensemaking build upon Weick’s (1995) construct of sensemaking and emphasize the criticality of formative contexts (Unger, 1987), organizational rules (Mills & Murgatroyd, 1991), and attention to discourse (Foucault, 1979).

Helms Mills et al. (2010) conducted a theoretical study which reviewed Weick’s conceptualization of sensemaking and made suggestions for future research. In addition to conducting a review of empirical studies on sensemaking, they proposed their own “critical sensemaking method” based on a gap analysis of Weick’s original conception of sensemaking. They further suggested that the critical sensemaking methodology could be a useful tool in
exploring constructs of gendering and discrimination in organizations. They identified constructs of plausibility and identity construction as key levers in determining a dominant voice in the context of a sensemaking incident. The research thus widened the range of potential topics of exploration through the lens of sensemaking. The researchers describe the critical sensemaking framework as follows:

A very complex combination of variables including social psychological properties, discourse, organizational rules and the formative context in which organizations exist and offers an analysis of how these forces combine to allow individuals to make sense of their environments and take action on a day-to-day basis. Critical sensemaking is an attempt to fuse poststructural and sociopsychological factors to help explain the role of agency in organizing. (p. 191)

Scholars have critiqued Weick’s sensemaking model as it relates to organizational contexts. A critical sensemaking approach to the study of identity work by Tomkins and Eatough (2014) define identity as fundamental to “personhood” and must be explored in light of plausibility, context, and agency (p. 3). The findings confirm the critical sensemaking emphasis on elements of the context surrounding the sensemaking process itself that have been ignored by Weick (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2015). Sandberg and Tsoukas (2015) have commented on Weick’s sensemaking model and concurred that it is does not emphasize social contexts in which sensemaking takes place, but instead highlights subjectivity in the attribution of meaning.

Conversely, the critical sensemaking approach offers a lens to see beyond discourse at a local level and explore its influence in a larger social context. There are interrelationships amongst organizational rules (Mills & Murgatroyd, 1991), formative contexts, (Unger, 1987), and sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Helms Mills and Mills (2017) discuss Foucault’s
conceptualization of discursive practices as underpinned by organizational rules that influence members’ ways of thinking and translate into accepted rules for behavior. They observe that “the empowering of certain ideas through their appearance as ‘knowledge,’ helps to explain how certain rules become accepted by those involved” (p. 65). The existence of dominant organizational stories and storytelling on individuals’ sensemaking processes is recognized by Weick (2012b) in a review of the interconnections among sensemaking, organizing, and storytelling and how these three elements offer a broad lens through which to understand action in organizations (p. 142).

Rosen’s (1985) classic ethnographic study of an advertising agency surfaced the interplay between organizational symbols and power dynamics in the enactment of social drama that serves as the means of transmission for dominant cultural messages. The study sought to highlight various means by which the “recreation of the bureaucratic form” was used to enforce dominant cultural beliefs and serve as a means of control (p. 33). Company breakfasts offered a platform from which such messaging could be simultaneously transmitted and reinforced via general acceptance in a public forum. These breakfasts were often fraught with dramatic announcements and revelations by leaders, demonstrating a reliance on “social drama” to enforce rules and exert control (p. 48).

Critical sensemaking recognizes and explores the concept of organizational resistance as natural to organizational life. It has been explored through a critical sensemaking lens by Mills and Helms Mills (2012). Theirs was a long-term study of four airlines that focused on varieties of organizational resistance. Their research shows that resistance may be understood as both a struggle against specific power holders as well as a distributed manifestation, the product of shifting alignments that serve both to keep powerful members in place but also provide
opportunities for others to challenge those in power. Hilde and Mills’ (2015) study found that individuals with a greater awareness of organizational discourses in use were more likely to express resistance (p. 187).

Thurlow and Helms Mills (2009) studied the influence of organizational talk during times of change. Their critical sensemaking approach explored the extent to which such talk affects individual identity construction. They describe talk as an “enactment of a sensemaking process . . . [that] addressed the unequal balance of power on the sensemaking process” (p. 460). The critical sensemaking methodology employed by the researchers allowed for a deep investigation into the influence of formative contexts (Unger, 1987), and the unspoken, shared rules that govern societal behaviors. These contexts are of a macro nature, including for example, economic and political influences. The underlying influences of both formative contexts (Unger, 1987) and organizational rules (Mills & Murgatroyd, 1991) serve to influence both plausibility and the cues that individuals choose to extract as meaningful, leading to variations in sensemaking by individuals (p. 464) and subsequent narratives of change across departments.

Change is comprehended and made sense of through language in use. Language, therefore, does not merely serve to describe change or direct attention. Rather, change language may be understood as a discourse in and of itself. The researchers note that such a recognition underscores the importance of shared language over change practices in promoting positive responses to organizational change (p. 476). Rowlinson et al. (2014) describe the use of organizational stories as persuasive devices by leadership to promote change. “Organizational members are more likely to recognize themselves as belonging to a beloved institution and play a role in the enactment of change” (p. 559).
Helms Mills and Mills (2017) emphasize the critical impact of discourse on the process of individuals’ sensemaking in organizational life using “discursive practices” that have become so embedded in the cultural life of the organization that “they are no longer a set of ideas as much as a way of thinking and believing. They are received knowledge” (p. 145). According to Foucauldian thought, discourses are how power is constituted and, further, serve to mold individual identity to the extent that subjectivity itself is merely “an outcome of discursive practices” (p. 145). Discourse may serve as the means by which organizational experiences are either “privileged or marginalized” (Mumby & Stohl, 1991, p. 313). Similarly, the influence of “privileged voices” is discussed by Thurlow (2009, p. 261) in a study of the public relations industry from a critical sensemaking perspective. Strategies of legitimization may be used by those in power to enhance the plausibility of desired organizational outcomes through shared sensemaking.

Helms Mills et al. (2010) offer a summation of the critical sensemaking approach as it incorporates apprehension of context and identity construction in making sense of events and environments: “Sensemaking describes a process of identity construction whereby individuals project their identities onto an environment and see it reflected. Through this process, they come to understand what is meaningful in their own identities. Critical sensemaking shifts focus to how organizational power and dominant assumptions privilege some identities over others and create them as meaningful for individuals” (p. 188).

**Conclusion**

This literature review was an exploration of the experience and impact on individuals of long-term immersion in corporate cultures. Four subtopics were identified and explored in-depth through a review of contemporary research: (a) work and organizational membership from
the industrial to postmodern era, (b) organizational discourse, (c) organizational culture, and (d) organizational identity and sensemaking in the workplace. The review provided a rationale for pursuing the research question that framed this study: “How does exposure to discourse in corporate cultures influence the identity of ICs through sensemaking?” This review concludes with a summary of the key themes explored and their critical intersection.

**Summary of Key Themes**

As society has matured from the industrial age into our contemporary postmodern culture, history has shown that the nature of work and the meaning of employment have changed radically. Social contracts serve to define a “the set of norms, assumptions, and beliefs that society conceives as fair and appropriate for parties involved in employment relationships” (Edwards & Karau, 2007, p. 67). Rousseau and Rousseau (2016) define social contracts as the means by which appropriate social parameters are established via encouragement or restriction of certain behaviors. In an increasingly technologized, global, interconnected culture, both employer and employees face challenges regarding the meaning of work and the structure of employer-employee relationships. Along with decreasing job security and tenure has come increasing employee mobility, choice, and risk for both organizations and employees. The nature of the contract between organizations and workers has become fluid and oftentimes ambiguous due to the influx of a broader range of demographic variables influencing the workforce. Research has explored the ever-changing nature of work and organizational membership, offering directions for future research and development within organizations in the service of fostering positive relationships and bringing clarity to social and psychological contracts.
Organizational discourse and corporate cultures have been explored in the literature from many perspectives. Researchers have explored and elaborated on key ideas regarding both constructs. Discourse exists within social contexts and is composed of various practices and corresponding rules. It is also used as a tool within organizations and society at large to influence and garner power.

Discourse has been explored in the literature as a form of rhetoric (Cheney et al., 2004) and as a means of enacting dominant ideologies or dialectical processes (Mumby, 2004). Discourse may be understood as a set of rules that govern behaviors (Hardy & Phillips, 2004; 2014). These may be composed of either written or spoken texts (Van Dijk, 2014), but central to the concept of any type of discourse is its language-dependent nature (Alvesson & Karreman, 2011). Discourse may be described as large or small in scope, global or local, or muscular vs. fragile (Seidl et al., 2013; Mumby, 2011; Alvesson, 2004). Discourses are supported by dominant ideologies (Deetz & Eger, 2014) and sustained through various linguistic devices (Grant et al., 2001). Organizational actors have varying levels of access to dominant discourses (Hardy & Phillips, 2004) and there may be competition among, and resistance to, various organizational discourses.

Dominant stories evolve over time (Hendy, 2014) and come to represent organizational reality as they reinforce organizational values (Näslund & Pemer, 2012; Ihlen, 2015). Rowlinson et al. (2014) describe the use of organizational stories as persuasive devices used by leadership to promote change. Weick (2012b) recognizes the influence of dominant organizational stories and storytelling on individuals’ sensemaking via the use of discursive practices that become familiar and predictable (Combs, 2002).
As with organizational discourse, current perspectives vary on the nature of organizational systems as culture. These include views of culture as based on sameness or integration, as well as difference and fragmentation. Organizations are entities that exist within a context of constant change that must be managed to survive. Effective problem solving is the goal of organizations in the fight to survive change. This is only possible when an organization’s members can align themselves with the dominant organizational values.

Organizations may be viewed as “expressive forms” (Smircich, 1983) that are the product of embedded discourses. Discourses are filtered and disseminated through a variety of discursive devices (Alvesson, 2015). As social constructions (Cooke & Rousseau, 1988), organizational cultures are based on shared values (Hatch, 1993). There are competing views of what constitutes culture. Schein (2010; 2014) describes culture as born out of shared rules for survival and defined by agreement and integration. Cultures have also been described as differentiated or fragmented (Martin, 1985; Piaget, 2013) in which consensus is not a prerequisite for a culture to exist. Disagreement among members as well as subcultures may exist within the dominant culture (Oyserman, 2017).

Despite differing definitions of what defines a culture, there is consensus that cultures are frequently changing entities that must adapt in order to survive (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Kotter, 2014; Drucker, 1994). Cultural change may be sudden or gradual, revolutionary, or evolutionary (Burke, 2013). Cultural change and development may be enacted in the context of multiple cultural approaches: life cycle, teleological, dialectical, and evolutionary (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995).

Contemporary corporate cultures have been described as colonizing (Deetz, 1992; 2014; Alvesson and Deetz, 2006) and driven by corporate rhetoric (Combs, 2002). The concept of
corporate colonization has been used to describe organizations in which dominant organizational discourses serve to marginalize employees through both subtle and explicit means and to give greater voice to those with greater power. Gunn (2010) and Casey (1999) discuss techniques used to control communication and thus promote selected dominant discourse within organizations. The control of communication and rhetorical strategies (Ihlen, 2015), in particular the use of silence, was explored by Denker and Dougherty (2013).

Kirby (2006) and Kirby and Krones’s (2002) case studies on work-life balance revealed a tendency for organizational members to silence their own needs regarding earned benefits, such as leave time. Kirby (2006) concluded that organizations may consciously model attributes of family life through a provision of numerous helpful benefits, perks, and services that served simultaneously to increase efficiency and productivity on the job. Casey (1999) questions the extent to which corporate access to employees’ personal lives is empowering or meaningful despite superficial rewards.

Alvesson and Deetz (2006) discuss the role of dominant, cultural ideologies in the construction of individuals’ realities. A critique of such ideologies may surface power imbalances and explain the mechanics of marginalization. Deetz and Eger (2014) note the subtle reinforcement of ideologies via the embedding of discourses through popular culture (p. 359).

The place of personal identity in organizational culture has been a major focus of research in the literature. Questions regarding the stability of the individual’s personal identity over time and within work groups has been of interest to researchers in a variety of fields including education, management, healthcare, and the service professions. The analysis of the literature revealed several key areas for further research. With respect to the effects of professional culture on personal identity development, several areas were noted as themes across
the literature. Individuals define themselves by their personal and professional identities within contemporary organizational environments, and may follow unspoken but shared, socially constructed rules (Hoffman & Cowan, 2010). Personal identities are influenced over time by professional affiliations and perceptions of self may be affected by discourses that emerge out of long-term immersion in organizational environments.

Organizational members need a means by which to collectively make sense of events if they are to keep balance and stability in a world of constantly shifting information. The literature reveals the extent to which narrative and storytelling can be used to understand how groups work collectively to construct realities which make sense of new or unfamiliar events and situations. Storytelling allows for narrative to be created which shed light on the construction of shared understandings (Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2015).

The process of identity construction as influenced by organizational membership has been explored extensively (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006; Watson & Watson, 2012; Brown, 2015; Hardy et al, 2005). Narratives (Vaara et al., 2016) and voice (Sutherland et al., 2010) are tools commonly used to challenge and express resistance (Garcia & Hardy, 2007; Collinson, 2003). Texts, stories, and conversations are critical tools for communicating culture (Taylor & Robichaud, 2004; Combs, 2002). The influences of organizational commitment and adaptability have been frequently explored in the literature (Johnson et al., 2010; Tanis & Beukeboom, 2011; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991).

Current trends in research on sensemaking show that the construct of sensemaking continues to be of considerable interest to researchers across a variety of disciplines. Research that explores sensemaking through a narrative lens is gaining in popularity among scholars. The ability to gain access to individual sensemaking via narrative and storytelling (Culiffe &
Coupland, 2012) allows a researcher entrance into rich worlds of individual experiences as they unfold in real time, thereby contributing to a deeper understanding of the act of sensemaking in actual practice.

Critical perspectives on sensemaking evolved out of researchers’ desire to examine the impacts of power, discourse, and the larger social context on sensemaking. Researchers (Mills & Helms Mills, 2012; Mumby & Stohl, 1991) have asked to what extent are discursive practices influential in the sensemaking process, and to what extent are some voices privileged (and heard more loudly) above others? A methodology for examining these elements in combination gave rise to the critical sensemaking model. The model is based on Weick’s (1995) sensemaking model but with enhancements. It places more of an emphasis on the sensemaking components of plausibility and identity construction (Tomkins & Eatough, 2014; Weick et al., 2005; Thurlow & Helms Mills, 2009; Thurlow, 2009) and examines how individual agency is influenced through the intersection of organizational rules, formative contexts, and sensemaking. Researchers who employ a critical sensemaking methodology focus on the effects of unequal distributions of power and agency inherent in organizations and society, and the role of resistance (Mills & Helms Mills, 2012).
Chapter 3: Methodology and Research Design

Rapid economic, technological, and cultural transformations over the past 30 years have caused a transformation from the traditional, bureaucratic, work-for-life company into a postmodern organization whose defining features are flexibility, decentralization, and unstable environments (Boggs & Pollard, 2001). These changes have radically redefined the relationships of the individual to her or his employer and reshaped conceptions of the workplace (Ogbor, 2001; Gunn, 2011; Standing, 2012). As the workplace has become a central focus for many individuals, some have questioned the influence of dominant discourses within corporate cultures on individuals’ identities (Alvesson & Deetz, 2006; Combes, 2002).

With the prevalence of advanced collaboration technologies, the contemporary workplace has evolved into one that is often remote. Individuals’ success in the workplace may hinge on the ability to manage the demands of a remote environment, which are not necessarily related to acquiring traditional management skills in order to move up in an organization (Folkman, 2014; Payscale, 2018). This class of workers, who are not part of a management team but who contribute to overall company goals through project work, are known as individual contributors (ICs) (Urban Dictionary, n.d.). It is not uncommon for workers, seeking a change, to make the move from traditional, management-focused roles into this newer class of ICs (The Daily MBA, 2018). Further, corporate restructuring often pushes those who have served in traditional management roles into the IC tranche (Pundhir, 2015).

An accompanying shift towards IC roles that don’t include the same performance expectations as for managers has been noted (Denker, 2014). At the same time, the experience of this growing population of contributors may also tend toward isolation and, especially stagnation. A survey of over 1,000 ICs conducted by Development Dimensions International
found that 51% of their respondents felt stagnant in their jobs (Bissell-Powell, 2009). There is an opportunity to explore, at a deeply personal level, the influence of the discourses of corporate cultures on individuals, and particularly ICs’ identity through sensemaking.

The purpose of this narrative study was to explore the influence of the discourses of corporate cultures on seven ICs’ identities through the process of sensemaking. Specifically, the study explored the experiences of a group of seven male and female ICs (non-managers), working for a Fortune 500 company (or its equivalent in yearly revenues) for at least five years. Corporate discourse was defined as structured texts embodied in the practice of talking, writing, and interacting within cultures that are heavily intertwined with the values and goals of leadership. The intent of this study was to surface, through the analysis of personal narratives, the influence of discourse on the sense that individuals embedded within corporate cultures made of themselves through the stories they told. The research question is as follows: “How does exposure to discourse in corporate cultures influence the identity of ICs through sensemaking?”

Qualitative Research Justification

Creswell (2012) states, “Qualitative research begins with assumptions and the use of interpretive/theoretical frameworks that inform the study of research problems addressing the meaning individuals or groups assign to a social or human problem” (p. 44). Qualitative research is the most appropriate approach for addressing the research question because the purpose of the study is to explore an experience as it is lived and understood by participants. Creswell (2012) points out that a key characteristic of qualitative research is its “emergent” quality (p. 47). The design of a qualitative research project may shift as a study progresses and new questions or better data collection methods present themselves. The study design and
questions may change after engagement with participants has begun and initial data have been collected.

**Paradigm**

Burrell and Morgan (1979) also identify two distinct paradigms which may form the basis of critical theory-based research. These are the radical structuralist and the radical humanist paradigms. Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) radical humanist paradigm is appropriate for this study because it aligns with the goals of critical, qualitative research at the individual level of analysis. The radical humanist paradigm is concerned with enacting societal change through critical analysis of dominant social discourses which marginalize individuals and keep them from achieving their true potential. Both the radical humanist paradigm and critical theory are appropriate for fully exploring the specified research questions through a qualitative lens.

Critical theories reflect a realist ontology in which there is high potential for bias in the interpretation (and assumption) of power relationships. The inclusion of critical theory and the selection of a critical paradigm is meant to provide context within which the researcher may challenge assumptions regarding the influences of power. To what extent does a power-laden context potentially affect sensemaking and what will the results reveal about the assumptions that underpin a critical approach?

**Role of the Researcher**

The radical humanist paradigm aligned with the researcher’s fundamental beliefs concerning the role of the researcher as a “key instrument” (Creswell, 2012, p. 45) whose overarching research goal is advocacy (Panzerotti, 2005). Prichard, Jones and Stablein (2004) point out the importance of recognizing researcher context in the practice of qualitative research. “Reflection on the institutional, geographical, and academic context in which research takes
place is a crucial feature of research practice and developing this ‘between the lines’ knowledge is crucial to the task of doing successful research” (p. 231). The role of the researcher was to interact personally with participants throughout the study, collect data from participants using a variety of collection methods, and to design all of the research instruments. The researcher’s positionality and role in the research process was made transparent to all participants prior to the study.

**Narrative Inquiry**

“The linguistic turn in the social sciences has drawn attention to the way language shapes or constructs actors’ first-order interpretations and actions and thus its role in shaping social practices and social reality” (Heracleous, 2004, p. 231). Narratives and stories form the basis for understanding one’s experiences as well as a springboard for collective social action (Combs, 2002). Broadfoot, Deetz, and Anderson (2004) emphasize the way in which numerous discourses intersect in the creation of “the public consciousness of any given historical period and society” (p. 34).

This study took an approach of narrative inquiry, which is a form of qualitative research. Narrative inquiry specifically explores the meaning of stories told by individuals about their lives within their lived contexts. Chase (2011) defines narrative inquiry as a specific form of discourse that occurs as the meaning of an individual’s experience unfolds through her telling and ordering the events of the story. Narratives allow both participants and researchers to draw connections in the content. Narrative researchers may focus specifically on the content of the stories told and pay particular attention to ways in which the participant’s local context affects the unfolding and interpretation of events. Researchers may also explore their own stories in relation to the stories they collect, leveraging the research relationship to expose their own
positionality (p. 421). Narrative inquiry demands an ontological and epistemological self-examination on the part of the researcher that is committed to valuing relationship in and of itself as a means of generating and comprehending the stories we tell (Caine, Estefan, & Clandinin, 2013).

Burrell and Morgan’s (1979) radical humanist paradigm, which underpins this study and its choice of methodology, is appropriate for this because it aligns with the goals of critical, qualitative research at the individual level of analysis, which narrative inquiry examines. The radical humanist paradigm is concerned with enacting societal change through critical analyses of dominant social discourses that marginalize individuals and keep them from achieving their true potential. Narrative inquiry allows the researcher to engage with the results of her study in the interest of social change through the power of collective stories (Chase, 2011).

Each interview was audio-recorded on two separate devices to ensure the audio was captured. Interviews were transcribed directly, and IRB approval was obtained in writing from Northeastern University before any contact was made with participants or any data were collected. The data were coded by hand without the aid of computer software. The transcribed interviews were reviewed and notated as a first step in grasping the overall story and recording initial impressions and questions. Next, the data were broken into codes and themes that described the chronological progress of each story. After a chronology was established, the data were classified into “codes and themes which identified story elements, epiphanies, and contextual information” (Creswell, 2012, p. 190). Data were interpreted across participant stories to identify larger meanings and themes. Finally, a narrative and/or visual representation focusing on “processes, theories, and unique and general features of the life” was constructed (Creswell, 2012, p. 190).
Participants, Recruitment, and Access

Participants were adult professionals who are full-time employees within a corporate setting. Adult professionals were defined for the purpose of this study as having attained at least an undergraduate college degree and as acting in the capacity of IC. Full-time employment was defined for the purpose of this study as employment of 40 hours per week within the same Fortune 500 company (or its equivalent in yearly revenues) for at least five years. All participants spoke English proficiently to engage in in-depth interviews that elicited thick, descriptive data.

The study adopted a “purposeful sampling” approach (Creswell, 2012), which included specifying who and how many participated in the study, as well as the sampling strategy used. There were seven participants in total. The sampling strategy included criterion and snowball or chain sampling (Creswell, 2012) for purposes of practicality and because the research was local in nature.

Participants were self-selectors who opted to reply to a Call for Participants posted on LinkedIn. Access was also attained through professional contacts, as in snowballing (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009). There was no single location of study. A targeted recruitment via CfP was posted to the LinkedIn professional presence website. The CfP gave a brief explanation of the purpose of the study, participant criteria, compensation, and contact information. The CfP stated the criteria and included the statement “Selection for the study is not guaranteed but will be determined during a brief 5–10-minute intake call.” During the intake call, potential participants were provided with a brief overview of the project and then asked criteria-based
questions (self-recording the participants’ answers). After determining that an individual would be an adequate candidate in accordance with the sampling parameters, the participant was notified that she or he had been selected. Choice of participants was made based on similarities among participant organizations, job roles, and level of tenure. This study did not consider male vs. female narratives, specifically, or racial or ethnic criteria.

**Informed Consent**

Participants received a detailed oral explanation of the scope of the project and the role of research participants during the intake call. Participants received the unsigned consent form prior to the interview. At the start of the interview, the form was reviewed with the potential participant and any questions were answered. The participants were asked to confirm their consent verbally, and the recording of the session began.

**Data Collection**

A research approach with the goal of collecting rich personal data is appropriate to the purpose of a narrative study. Probing for experiences and feelings regarding very personal situations or opinions is often the goal of a narrative study and its particular data collection methods. Data collection in a narrative study involves working directly with participants throughout the study. Tomkins and Eatough (2014) emphasize the interviewer’s obligation to “facilitate participants’ sensemaking and storytelling, rather than steer them through preset topics” (p. 9). Smith and Osborn (2004) caution against adopting an “exclusionary” attitude to the collection of data, and encourage additional methods to gather rich, autobiographical data from participants (p. 50). Data may also be collected from study participants through written or recorded journals, document analysis, or visual media. This study took a three-pronged approach to the collection of data in the spirit of capturing the “larger meaning of the story” that included
content, context, and the relationship between researcher and participant (Creswell, 2012, p. 189). Data were collected in the form of a semi-structured, 60–90-minute interview. Notes were kept throughout the research which included observations on the process and commentary on positionality, challenges to assumptions, surprises, and epiphanies.

**Collection Procedures**

Qualitative interview data were captured virtually via online meeting-room software. After the initial intake call (5–10 minutes), each participant was interviewed. The first part of the interview, which lasted approximately 30–45 minutes, focused on the participant’s life history and experiences in relation to the research topic. The second part of the interview, which lasted approximately 30–45 minutes, allowed participants to reflect upon the meaning of the experiences. Each participant was asked to complete both interviews within a 3–7-day period. The transcripts and initial data codes/interpretations from both the first and second interview were emailed to a secure email address provided by the participant within one month after the second interview. The participants were given one week to review the information and provide any feedback about the validity or make requests for alterations. Finally, the study was conducted in a spirit of advocacy. The results were written up with the intent to expand the body of scholarly knowledge surrounding the research question and to promote greater understanding of individuals’ experience in the specified research context.

**Data Storage and Management**

The electronic recordings of the interviews and all other electronic documents were saved to a university iCloud storage account. All files were password-protected. Hard copy forms of data such as participant transcripts and researcher journals were digitally archived by copying/scanning files to the university iCloud storage account. The only other person who
would be granted access to original files and actual names was the doctoral adviser / principal investigator.

After the thesis project was complete, any hard-copy materials containing confidential interviewee information were destroyed, and any electronic documents saved on the iCloud account were deleted. All remaining electronic data stored will be destroyed five years following the completion of the study.

Data Analysis

This study took an approach of narrative inquiry, which is a form of qualitative research. Narrative inquiry specifically explores the meaning of stories told by individuals about their lives within their lived contexts. Chase (2011) defines narrative inquiry as a specific form of discourse that occurs as the meaning of an individual’s experience unfolds through her telling and ordering the events of the story. Narratives allow both participants and researchers to draw connections in the content. Narrative researchers may focus specifically on the content of the stories told and pay particular attention to ways in which the participant’s local context affects the unfolding and interpretation of events. Researchers may also explore their own stories in relation to the stories they collect, leveraging the research relationship to expose their own positionality (p. 421).

Each interview was audio-recorded on a desktop computer to ensure the audio was captured. Interviews were transcribed directly. IRB approval was obtained, in writing, from Northeastern University before any contact was made with participants or data collected. The data were all hand-coded. The transcribed interviews were reviewed and notated as a first step in grasping the overall story and recording initial impressions and questions. Next, the data were broken into codes and themes that described the chronological progress of each story. After a
chronology was established, the data were classified into codes and themes that identified story elements, epiphanies, and contextual information” (Creswell, 2012, p. 190). Data were then interpreted across participant stories to identify larger meanings and themes. Finally, a narrative and/or visual representation focusing on “processes, theories, and unique and general features of the life” was created (Creswell, 2012, p. 190).

**Trustworthiness, Quality, and Verification**

Creswell (2012) outlines a number of validation strategies which may be used in qualitative research to ensure trustworthiness of the findings. These strategies include prolonged engagement and persistent observation, triangulation of data, peer review or debriefing, negative case analysis, clarification of researcher bias, member checking, collection of rich description, and external audits. The proposed study included the following three methods of validating the data to ensure trustworthiness and quality: clarification of researcher bias, member checking, and peer review of data.

**Clarification of Researcher Bias**

Maxwell (2012) advises openly surfacing one’s bias in the context of the research, becoming acutely aware of it, and using it as a frame for conducting the research. There is no way to completely divest oneself of bias, therefore it is critical to bring researcher bias into the open and to work in tandem with it as openly and objectively as possible. By working to surface and confront positionality with participants, efforts were made to mitigate the potential impact of such bias on the study results. Additional threats to internal validity resulting from familiarity and respondent bias were minimized through open discussion with participants to surface their existence and mitigate potential impact on the study.
Member Checks and Peer Review of Data

Participants were engaged in the process of validating the research data in the spirit of ensuring accurate representation of participants’ experiences and understandings. Creswell (2012) discusses the process of “taking data, analyses, interpretations, and conclusions back to the participants so that they can judge the accuracy and credibility of the account” (p.252). Participants were given an adequate amount of time (one to two weeks) to review interview transcripts and request adjustments as necessary in order to maintain a standard of accuracy and authenticity throughout the analysis of data. “Stakeholder checks enhance the credibility of findings by allowing participants and other people who may have specific interests in the evaluation to comment on or assess the research findings, interpretations, and conclusion” (Thomas, 2006, p. 244).

An ongoing cycle of peer review throughout the research process was undertaken. The principal investigator was called upon throughout the course of the research study to engage as a sounding board. An additional resource was a community of practice (CoP) composed of peers in the doctoral program at Northeastern University. This CoP was a resource for sharing ideas and discussing challenges throughout the data collection and analysis process.

Protection of Human Subjects

In alignment with IRB requirements and laws governing human subjects research, appropriate measures were taken throughout the implementation of the study to mitigate any potential risks to participants, and to maintain confidentiality. Participants were informed that if they felt uncomfortable replying to any of the questions that were asked, they were free to decline from answering. They were also informed that they were free to withdraw from the
study at any time. Every effort possible was made to protect participant confidentiality, and no other risks (financial, social, physical) arose based on participation in this study.

Any information that was obtained in connection with this study and identified the participants is confidential and to be disclosed only with the participant’s expressed request/permission or as required by law. No names were associated with any interview information. Any information that could be used to identify a participant was altered to protect their confidentiality. The recording of the interview was not labeled with the participant’s name, but a pseudonym. All data files were encrypted and password-protected. The data were used for a doctoral thesis project, and may potentially be used for future journal articles, books, presentations, or research. Even in these potential instances, confidentiality will be kept for all participants. Information regarding confidentiality was shared with all participants prior to the interview process, both in the consent form and verbally.

Limitations

There were several limitations to this study. As the participant pool was narrowly defined (male or female ICs from Fortune 500 or equivalent companies with 5+ years of experience in their role) there is limited generalizability of the results of this study to other populations. Non-corporate sites were excluded from the study, as was anyone who was in a management role. Participants were college-educated and nonimmigrants. All exhibited a high comfort level with technology and social media as a means of communicating. Of the seven participants, three were from the high-tech sector and three were from the financial sector. Four were employed in roles related to curriculum development and training-delivery within their organizations. The participants were all self-selectors responding to a CfP posted on LinkedIn or referred via email through snowballing. This stated, all of them shared the same characteristic of
being hand-raisers for the study. Further, the participants all had lengthy tenure at their organizations of employment, which could be seen as an indicator of their satisfaction with their employment, leading to some of the themes in the study of a sense of belonging, of being compensated as valuable contributors, of having space to grow personally and professionally, and of a sense of safety within a structured community where the rules are clear. Researcher positionality (as a corporate employee) must be considered in the interpretation of participants’ experiences as restoried and analyzed. Finally, although not an intentional inclusion criterion, all of the participants were White, and so the responses were all from the dominant majority within their work organizations.

**Summary and Conclusions**

Societal change in the last century has had a significant impact on the nature of work and what it means to be a worker. Rapid economic, technological, and cultural transformations over the past 30 years have caused a transformation from the traditional, bureaucratic, work for life company into a postmodern organization whose defining features are flexibility, decentralization, and unstable environments (Boggs & Pollard, 2001). These changes have radically redefined the relationships of the individual to her or his employer and reshaped conceptions of the workplace (Ogbor, 2001; Gunn, 2011; Standing, 2012). As the workplace has become a central focus for many individuals, some have questioned the influence of dominant discourses on individuals’ identities (Alvesson & Deetz, 2006; Combes, 2002). There is an opportunity to explore, at a deeply personal level, the influence of the discourses of corporate cultures on ICs’ identities through sensemaking.

Given these factors shaping the experience of the individual within contemporary corporate cultures, there is a need to examine more fully the influences of corporate cultures and
dominant discourses on identity development. The purpose of this narrative study was to explore
the influence of the discourses of corporate cultures on six to nine ICs’ identities through the
process of sensemaking. Specifically, the study explored the experiences of a group of seven
male and female ICs (non-managers), working for a Fortune 500 company (or its equivalent in
yearly revenues) for at least five years. Corporate discourse was defined as structured texts
embodied in the practice of talking, writing, and interacting within cultures that are heavily
intertwined with the values and goals of leadership. The intent of this study was to surface,
through the analysis of personal narratives, the influence of discourse on the sense that
individuals embedded within corporate cultures made of themselves through the stories they told.
The findings of this research will be valuable at both the individual and organizational levels. In
developing employees over the long term, it is in the organization’s best interest to honor the
authenticity and diverse voices which well-developed and confident employees bring to their
work. To this end, organizations must strive to increase awareness of the impact of power and
influence of the dominant organizational discourse on individuals who must adapt to rapid
organizational change in order to survive on the organizational playing field.
Chapter 4: Findings

This purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to explore the influence of the discourse of corporate cultures on the identities of seven ICs through the process of sensemaking. The nature of work and what it means to be one who works has changed radically over the past century. Industrialization, technology, and diversification of the U.S. workforce has changed the fundamental meaning of work. Agreements between employers and employees reflect unpredictable, frequently changing organizational landscapes in which long-term job security is largely nonexistent. This study explores what it means to be one who works in a context of rapid technological and societal change.

The participant group was composed of male and female ICs who have worked for a Fortune 500 company (or its equivalent in yearly revenues) for at least five years. Corporate discourses are manifested through processes of talking, writing, and interacting within cultures that express the values and goals of leadership. The study sought to answer the primary research question through the methodological tradition of narrative inquiry to surface and analyze underlying cultural assumptions.

A methodological approach of narrative inquiry was used to analyze the personal narratives of the participants to surface the influence of discourse on the sense that individuals embedded within corporate cultures make of themselves. The research question guiding the study was: How does exposure to discourse in corporate cultures influence the identity of ICs through sensemaking?

Description of the Data

The data collection consists of transcripts from the seven participants in the study. All the study participants were adult, full-time ICs employed by a Fortune 500 company (or its
equivalent in yearly revenues) for at least five years. Adult professionals were defined for this study as being over the age of 18 and having attained at least an undergraduate college degree. In their professional role they are acting in the capacity of IC. Full-time employment was defined as employment of 40 hours per week within the same corporate, for-profit business organization setting for at least five years. ICs were defined for this study as workers who contribute to company goals through project work that is independent of a managerial component. All participants spoke English proficiently and were able to engage in in-depth interviews. Table 1 presents demographic data on the participants.

Table 1

**Participant Demographic Data**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Individual Contributor</th>
<th>Race</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>7 years</td>
<td>White, West Coast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selena</td>
<td>24 years</td>
<td>White, East Coast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>7.5 years</td>
<td>White, Midwest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>22 years</td>
<td>White, East Coast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>13 years</td>
<td>White, Midwest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret</td>
<td>17 years</td>
<td>White, East Coast</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connor</td>
<td>9 years</td>
<td>White, East Coast</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The Data Analysis

A semi-structured interview protocol was used to collect rich, descriptive data from the seven participants. The protocol included interviewee background questions and a set of three specific questions with drill-down probes designed to get deeply into the participants’ experiences and perceptions of long-term immersion in corporate cultures. This general
inductive approach to the research is used to discover patterns among data sets to identify common themes across them. Hypothesis testing is not a function of the general inductive approach. Rather, emergent themes are surfaced from the data itself that allow for tentative explanations as to the nature of a given phenomenon.

Critical sensemaking was used as the theoretical framework underpinning the study’s primary research question and interview protocol. This framework considers the influences of power, position, and language in organizational life, and also considers the societal filters through which individuals see the world and the organizational rules that define socially desirable behaviors in context. Table 2 presents the interview questions.

Table 2

**Interview Protocol Questions**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question #1</th>
<th>Interview Protocol Questions</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| What are some of the key messages that you have received about what it means to be a member of your workplace culture? | Probe: What do you think are the guiding beliefs and values of your workplace culture?  
Probe: What do other people in your workplace believe about the culture?  
Probe: What does success look like in your workplace culture? |
| Question #2                                                                 | How have you adapted to your workplace culture?                                                                                                                                                                               |
| How have you adapted to your workplace culture? | Probe: What does “adaptation” mean to you?  
Probe: Have any of your major life choices been influenced by your workplace?  
Probe: What have you enjoyed the most about being an employee with your company? |
| Question #3                                                                 | How might you complete this sentence based on the stories you have shared today? It is OK if nothing occurs to you, just feel free to respond with whatever comes to mind.  
“I used to think _____, but now I think _____ because _____” |
a holistic introduction to each participant prior to a discussion of individual and cross-theme analysis of the overall study findings.

**Sam’s Story**

Sam is an instructional designer for a large commercial bank on the West Coast. He has been employed by the company for over seven years and works remotely from home. He works as an IC, spending the bulk of his time meeting virtually with his business partners who are learning consultants and project sponsors to analyze training needs to support new business initiatives. After conducting needs assessments, Sam designs and develops the recommended learning solution and sees it through to implementation and evaluation. He works on small, virtual project teams on projects that last an average of six months. After a project is finished, the team disbands, and members are reassigned to new work.

Sam rarely works with the same team repeatedly, so he is always meeting and creating relationships with new business partners. Sam has a cohort of other instructional designers who he meets with regularly in the context of all-hands meetings, professional development opportunities, and business-sponsored events. Sam feels that the company goes out of its way to be as inclusive as possible. “They try to form a corporate culture despite the fact that all of the employees in my group and in the company are very geographically diverse. . . . We’re all over.” Sam states that he is always working across time zones, including with international business partners.

Sam has enjoyed the opportunity to work from home for the past seven years. His organization has an established remote culture in place, and he appreciates working in an environment that supports him as a remote employee. He feels very supported by the culture: “Once I was hired, I realized that I much liked the working conditions, the work flows, the
environment was very supportive. They do a good job of not putting too much stress on us. The

corporate culture is very, very supportive. . . . It’s kind of a win-win. So far, I have been

very content to stay here.”

Sam recounts key messages he has received about what it means to be a member of his workplace culture as including the importance of recognition and appreciation for employees. He says that he regularly receives recognition for his contributions during team meetings. He also believes that the culture promotes itself as one that is safe and in which employees are listened to. He describes the culture as one where sharing and helpfulness are the norm. He and his team help each other out as needed, and the organization also fosters this “culture of sharing” through online forums and intranet sites that provide opportunities for employees to share best practices and engage in professional development opportunities.

Sam shared that his perspectives on his work environment are tempered by previous experience with other organizations. When asked what he thinks other believe about the workplace culture, he states he believes that his coworkers want to contribute to successful outcomes. They, like him, feel appreciated for the work they do. However, he tempers this statement by saying, “I have worked in a toxic environment. . . . They don’t realize how much worse it could be.” He stresses that people who have never known any other environment cannot compare experiences as he can. He muses that there is a “baseline level of contentment that people take for granted.”

To Sam, success is not about advancement up the corporate ladder anymore. He views a successful employee as one who is appreciated for doing excellent work and improving upon what has been done before. He describes having an “eye-opener moment” when he realized that success was not necessarily about money or advancement. In his current organization, Sam
notes, there is not as much of an emphasis on advancing to the next level or pay grade. People tend to stay where they are for longer periods of time, and conversations with managers are not about “how close or far away you are to your next promotion.”

Sam discusses his process of adaptation to his workplace culture as one of learning to find his fit. He describes his process of observing his coworkers and manager when he was new and taking the time blend in. “You have to reassure others you are like them,” he states. Sam strives to discern what is most valued by his culture, “finding out what an organization values, and finding ways to contribute to it.” He passionately believes that adaptation is the responsibility of the employee.

Sam reflects that his organization has allowed him to live the life he wants to live. He has been able to move to an area of the country he prefers, without having to worry about proximity to an office. He also notes that being able to live “stress-free” has been especially important to him. He expresses an appreciation for the talented people he works with, and the opportunities to learn new ways of approaching challenges in his job. He has enjoyed observing how his organization solves its challenges in unique ways. Fundamentally, Sam has enjoyed being able to learn, grow, and know that he is contributing in a meaningful way to the company’s success.

When asked about how his beliefs about his workplace culture may have shifted over time, Sam reflects that the biggest shift for him has been one of moving away from a focus on “climbing the ladder” as a means to happiness and towards the pursuit of a work environment in which he can focus on doing good work with a good company and being content. He further reflects that the process of maturation has helped him come to an understanding of what is
important to him and how he can best contribute. He concludes, “Now, it’s OK. I know where I fit in.”

**Selena’s Story**

Selena is a business analyst for an information technology company on the East Coast. The company has employed her for 25 years, the past 15 of which she has spent focusing on data analysis and project management:

So, my current role for the past few years is channel operations, business analyst. I have been in various roles like that over the past 15 years, focusing on different areas of responsibility for data analysis, project management. It’s a bit of a catch-all position where whatever needs to be done, the business analyst handles. So it’s kind of an all-encompassing role that does more than data analysis.

Over the years, her position has allowed her to work partially onsite and partially remotely. For the past couple of years, she has shifted toward working exclusively from home. The current company acquired Selena’s original company in 2010, and she has been part of several smaller transitions and acquisitions since then. She currently works in a business unit where the focus is wireless technology and where she has been for several years. The flexibility she is allowed and the changing nature of the work has been satisfying for her. She has been able to establish a good work-life balance as a remote employee and has been able to focus her attention on doing a job she enjoys while also raising a family. She believes that the frequent change and subsequent need to constantly adapt—which Selena says can manage effectively—she has been able to retain her position. “Between the acquisition and changes in the organization, it keeps me employed. . . . There is a need for people who can adapt data and information to the growing and changing needs of our business.”
Selena discusses key messages about what it means to be a member of her workplace culture by recounting her experience during a 2010 acquisition of her company. She states that the messaging was not initially positive. She and her coworkers felt that they had received a message loud and clear that the environment was now “corporate-focused . . . not employee-focused.” She describes feeling demoralized during the early days of the acquisition. The new leadership was extremely focused on “turning the company around” and everyone had their marching orders. It was a stressful time for Selena, who describes herself as someone who is not at all motivated by intimidation.

Eventually, a new leader, who had worked internally for many years and understood the previous culture, took the helm. Things settled down, and cultural messaging became more process-oriented, focused on partnerships and innovation. Selena has been far more comfortable in this environment where she can focus her attention on achieving measurable outcomes. She states that others in her organization seem to share a similar outlook, although because she now works completely remotely, she is not privy to as much internal chatter as she might otherwise be. Her business partner relationships are mostly based on phone calls and virtual meetings. She does recount a recent global sales summit in which she had the opportunity to interact directly with her peers. The general feeling she got was that most of them were optimistic about the direction the company is currently going in under the new leadership.

When asked what a successful employer might look like in her organization, Selena responds that a successful employee “looks like me. . . . Happy doing what I’m doing.” Being focused on collaboration and improving organizational effectiveness, while always keeping top of mind the imperative to compete and win over the competition, are the hallmarks of success in her organization. She also describes success as being determined by one’s ability to adapt to
change. She has had to learn to step back and “get beyond the anxiety of change.” She talks about making a concerted effort to work through stressful times by focusing on achieving results through cooperation as opposed to confrontation. She believes that it is up to her to be a standard bearer within her organization and make things work by depersonalizing situations and keeping her eyes on outcomes. She describes “painful clashes of cultures” through the various acquisitions she has been part of, but also realizes that there is no choice but to adapt and find effective ways to solve business problems. She believes that a lack of willingness to change is dangerous. “Those employees don’t survive,” Selena states adamantly.

Selena reflects on her continual need, particularly during stressful times, to remind herself of her key values and priorities as a means of adapting to a frequently changing environment. She recognizes that the work-life balance that she has been able to achieve has been possible because of remaining with her organization. She has been able to preserve time for her family, which is a key value for her. She also reflects on the enjoyment that she has derived over the years from her coworkers. “It’s really the people,” she muses. She has been able to achieve tangible business results doing work she enjoys because it is focused on “helping people make business decisions.” She can use her problem-solving skills to the benefit of her clients and the organization, and she takes a profound sense of pride in her abilities.

She reflects that over the years her worldview has shifted significantly. She says, “I used to think that other people were the problem, but now I think that I have to be part of the solution.” She describes a shift from viewing the world from her own perspective to seeing people and situations in her organization more holistically. She believes that as she has matured over the years within her organization she has learned to engage in a “continual reprioritization” of her life and that it has been a series of “small evolutions.” She concludes that she does not
think that she would have done anything differently than she has, and that she is happy with the choices she has made in her life.

**Melissa’s Story**

Melissa is employed with a large Midwestern bank in the corporate training department. She develops training programs for new associates, focusing on the application of adult learning principles to increase trainee engagement through experiential learning initiatives. She has been with the company for over seven years, balancing her time between working remotely and in the office. She has a great interest in working to promote the value of the training department across the broader organization, which she describes as “shifting the culture.” Her role has evolved significantly over the years because of ongoing opportunities for growth and development offered by management. Melissa states that these opportunities have been the primary reason that she has remained with her company for as long as she has. She describes starting out at her company in an operations role, taking escalation calls. She was encouraged to begin serving as a subject-matter expert for a training program, and from there she evolved into a career with the training department. She states, “The manager that I had knew where I wanted to go. It’s really been just a fabulous way to grow within an organization and develop myself.”

Asked what she considers to be key messages that she has received about what it means to be a member of her workplace culture, Melissa differentiates between the larger corporate and smaller team culture. She focuses most of her observations throughout the interview on the experience she has had within the team. She describes it as “cool” and full of “shared passion.” She states that diversity and inclusion are high priorities for the organization supported by several different initiatives. Different ideas and perspectives are recognized as valuable. A guiding value of the organization that Melissa indicates comes across consistently, and to which
she can strongly relate, is that the customer is “at the center” of everything at her company: “The consistent message that I feel is putting the customer at the center of everything we do. So, coming from the background that I do—having that customer-facing background, as well as now with the learning and development, it’s easy for me to take that experience that I have had and put it into the training.”

When asked what she thinks others believe about the organization’s key messages, Melissa believes that peoples’ perceptions are influenced by their department. Management can run the gamut from collaboration to micromanagement, and the broader, corporate culture elicits a different response from employees. She states, “It boils down to the area that you support,” and whether you can make time for personal connections. She further believes that peoples’ beliefs are dependent on the leadership in place across the organization.

Melissa describes a successful employee as one who can keep up with a fast pace and frequent change. Success is also measured by how effectively one communicates, especially across roles and functions. Being collaborative and a good team player are also highly valued attributes within the organization. Fundamentally, however, success is contingent on one’s ability to recognize the importance of work-life balance, to refresh and “take off the (work) hat” at the end of the day. This ability is also critical to adaptation. Melissa cites her personal resilience, evidence in a holistic approach to work and personal life, as key to her success in the company. She does not fear change as she knows it is a natural part of life. She says, “You have to give yourself permission to accept and embrace change.” Being able to roll with change, whether external, regulatory changes or internal team change, is critical. She also talks briefly about a job experience prior to joining her current company that was not positive. She believes
that this experience has both broadened her perspective and made her more appreciative of her current environment.

When asked how any of her major life choices may have been influenced by her tenure within the organization, she speaks emphatically of her decision to go back to school and earn an advanced degree with the full support of management. She says the decision to go back to school, something she originally never thought she would be able to do when she became a mother just out of college, has had a profound impact on her life: “Part of the decision to go back to school was because of the benefits offered by the company and the support that I got when I mentioned it to my managers. That was a huge piece of it. I do not know if I would have pursued [it]. . . . It definitely helped knowing I had some benefits I could tap into.”

Melissa enthusiastically shares some of the things she has enjoyed most about working at her company. The people she interacts with on a day-to-day basis, whether on her own team or across functions, have been important to her. She cites the value of building relationships in a matrixed organization. She also describes several communities of practice she has joined in which she can learn more about a variety of personal and professional development topics. These groups are organized by her company and employees are encouraged to participate. Overall, she feels that leadership has had a positive impact on the organization. When asked how her beliefs about herself in the context of her workplace culture have evolved over time, she talks about the opportunities that she has been able to create for herself. She used to believe that one’s career path was mostly laid out in a straight line, not deviating much over time. However, Melissa now believes that she is empowered to create her own path. Through the support of leadership, she has been able to grow and develop in ways she had not expected. She says she
went from thinking about her role as finite and self-limiting to realizing how many doors could be open to her. Hers has been a journey of discovery.

**Peter’s Story**

Peter is a program manager at a computer technology company on the East Coast. He began his career with the company 22 years ago when it was another well-known technology company. He started out in a technical role, was with the company through its merger with a major computer manufacturer and moved into a program management role in the talent development function. He is now responsible for creating learning plans for the employees in his division. His current project is to create and push out learning plans to all associates outside of sales and administration, a group which numbers in the thousands. Peter feels that his job can be very hectic given the scope of his responsibility, but he states pragmatically, “In my opinion, a big company is a big company is a big company.” He has moved into a different role every few years to keep his skills relevant.

Peter states that the primary reason he has remained where he is for so long is that, years ago when he was starting a family, he made the decision to remain an IC and abandon the path to executive work. He was concerned that the demands of an executive role would have a negative impact on his ability to be a good father to his children: “Even though home life is something that people always talk about, and they always talk about a good work-life balance, but in my opinion, that’s talk. Most companies, and certainly here, I didn’t really see that as a practice. It was a policy.”

Peter describes several key messages that are communicated consistently by the company. Primarily, the culture is one of hierarchy and command and control. Communications are executed in “strategic cascades” throughout the organization so that all employees, regardless
of rank, are delivered the same leadership messages. “Executive communication is taken very seriously here,” Peter states. The founder of the company is passionately involved with the everyday operations of the company, working in concert with his upper management. Communications include quarterly business updates, all-hands meetings, and email “blasts” from executive management sent at regular intervals throughout the year. Although Peter is not happy about the micromanagement that is often a part of the work, he expresses appreciation for the fact that the hands-on leadership is diligent about communicating the state of the business transparently. Other key values the company espouses include messaging about the company “being a family,” diversity and inclusion, and the importance of doing public-facing volunteer work as representatives of the company. Peter indicates that although he at times notices a difference between company policy and actual practices, most of the people he works with are satisfied with their employer: “People definitely participate, and the culture is one that, for the most part, people enjoy. Again, is it 100% satisfaction? Of course not. But there aren’t many places in the world that are. I think people embrace it, and it becomes part of their daily activities.”

In Peter’s world as an employee, success is all about the numbers and tangible results and doing what needs to be done to meet goals. He indicates that everyone at the company is stack-ranked, and that people know they need to adapt and do what is laid out to survive. He says, “Success is really about results, whether people like that or not. You not just here to occupy a seat.” When asked about how he has adapted to his workplace culture, Peter notes that the culture changes noticeably every time a new leader comes into the company. He also underscored the criticality of adaptation as the only way to meet company goals. Employees who cannot adapt 100% stand little chance of survival with the company. In response to being
asked what adaptation means to him specifically, Peter responds, “What do I need to do to make sure I get a paycheck every other Friday?” He says that he does not really believe in company loyalty anymore, because the company has grown bigger over the years.

Peter is uncertain as to the extent that any of his major life choices have been influenced by his membership over time in his workplace culture. He indicates that he is not sure how to answer because he has spent almost all his professional life at the company. He does indicate that his decision to further his education was influenced by his employer. He references a manager who encouraged him to pursue an advanced degree, which Peter did. He muses, “So, where would I be if I wasn’t here. . . . I can say that I probably would not have furthered my education.”

Despite the rigid structure and hectic pace of the job, Peter has enjoyed several aspects. First, he says, he has enjoyed working with his colleagues. Opportunities to travel with the company have also been enjoyable times. Most important, however, is his ability to provide a good life for his family. “Money is my motivator,” Peter quips.

When asked about beliefs that have evolved over time, Peter returns to discussing his decision to give up the executive career path to be a family-oriented person. He has no regrets about the decision and states emphatically that he would not change it. He then speaks about a shift in his thinking over the years as he gains increased tenure with the company. He has begun to wonder how much time he has left with the company given his age. He describes getting older and being an IC as “a dangerous combination.” While Peter does not wish to try and predict the future, he is a realist about his level of compensation and, simultaneously, his replaceability: “The long and short of it is, I make pretty good money. At some point in time, I am going to reach a level where it does not sense for them to continue to pay me at the level I’m
being paid. . . . As I move along in life, they could end up hiring two young people to do my job.”

**Thomas’s Story**

Thomas has been employed in the learning and development function of a large insurance company in the Midwest for 13 years. The first few years of his career with the company were spent as a claims adjuster and manager. For the past seven years, he has worked as an IC traveling throughout the country to conduct training sessions for newly hired associates. He assists the new hires with issues related to interpreting policies and using systems to implement their coverage decisions. In addition to training associates on the legal and technical side of policies and coverage decisions, Thomas also focuses his training on developing associates’ customer service skills.

Thomas states that he never intended to end up working in insurance, but a family member who worked in the industry encouraged him to apply. Soon after he joined the company, he found himself surprised by the generosity of the benefits package, “It just kind of shocked me how some of the benefits . . . [that] I thought were so good at my other carrier I found out were not so great. [This company] was much better.” He states that he believes the company truly strives to make their employees well-equipped to do their jobs. As a learning and development professional, Thomas has a bird’s eye view into how employees are well-prepared to meet the challenges of their work. In addition, he emphasizes the career development support that the company extends to its employees. He illustrates with an example: “If you say you want to go to Ireland and become a learning and development professional in Ireland, they will work with you to do that.”
Thomas is asked about the key messages he receives about what it means to be a member of his workplace culture. His immediate response, in a voice tinged with pride, references “four quality principles” that all employees must memorize and enact in their day-to-day interactions with customers and each other. The principles all underscore the importance of doing right by the customer and acting with integrity to offer them peace of mind. He emphasizes the company’s commitment to standing with the customer and focusing on the “human element” in all interactions. As an example, he talks about the practice of taking a more liberal approach to interpretation of policies when making coverage decisions, all in the name of standing on the side of the customer.

Thomas thinks that his coworkers generally feel as good as he does about working for the company, but he indicates that some who have never worked for anyone else do not know how good they have it where they are. When asked what others believe about the workplace, he says, “It depends on whether you started [here] or another company.” Overall, however, there is general agreement that within the environment, respect and collaboration are key values. He asserts that no lip service is paid to initiatives around diversity and inclusion. The diversity of teams and the wealth of knowledge and mindshare that such teams generate is honored. When asked to describe what a successful employee looks like, he emphasizes that a top priority would be to build customer confidence. The successful employee gives the customer what they need and is willing to go beyond the call of duty. The ideal employee is also hard-working, easy going, and understands both the details and the big picture. He describes success as “having the courage to be who you are,” and “not being afraid to push the boundaries.”

Thomas reflects on how he has adapted to his workplace culture over time and indicates that he believes it has had a profound impact on him. Seeing the quality principles enacted by
his coworkers has affected him. He feels the culture fosters a service orientation, and he states that he is totally “bought in” to the messaging. Over the years, he has come to appreciate more the value of the human connection in his work. He states that he has come to appreciate that these kinds of connections are what matter beyond anything else. Again, he asserts that his adaptation to the company’s culture has been one that has allowed him to evolve and, as such, he states proudly that he is “tuned in to the corporate mission.” Thomas’ ability to be open about his orientation within the company has been enormously liberating for him. “Little things, like, when I did role plays, I would never say, ‘my husband,’ or anything like that. When I realized that was totally OK, that was because of the company.”

Thomas states that over the years, what he has enjoyed the most about his work has been his ability to help others, be they customers or coworkers. He has also appreciated being able to find his niche, feel valued, and know that he is providing value through his work. Over the years, he feels he has grown and changed significantly. He states that he has moved from an individual mindset to more of a team orientation. He used to believe that he was an oddball of sorts, unlike others. Now, he says, he realizes that “we are all humans on the same journey.” He sees others outside of work in a different light, feeling more connected now to people in general. He is not sure how much of the influence is societal changes or changes in his mindset because of his workplace experience or a combination of both. He has been with the company through a number of changes, so it is hard to say. He does know that he is in the right place for the foreseeable future: “I kind of took the job as a stepping stone . . . how I felt in my job, and the stability, having a really decent income, I made different choices. So I’ve kind of decided I’m going to stay with this company to retirement and stay on that path. . . . I am in a place where I can really thrive for the next . . . however long I have until retirement.
Margaret’s Story

Margaret is a marketing professional with a large technology development firm on the East Coast. The company has employed her for the past 17 years. For the past five years, Margaret’s work has focused on crafting communications about key services the company provides, including web site content and other forms of client messaging, such as case studies and videos. She appears at public events to network and recruit potential speakers to partner with her company’s executives at future venues. “So, it’s really around messages and clients and just telling a story about the benefits that their companies have achieved from using the technology that we sell.”

Over the years, Margaret has worked in multiple locations for her company, both in the office and as a remote employee, depending on the company’s co-location needs. She notes that she has remained with her company for as long as she has because of the opportunities for growth and mobility across functions and groups. She has also appreciated her company’s commitment to training on tools and technologies and the opportunity to partner with a diverse group of coworkers from all over the world. For Margaret, learning and growth are critical, and she has been able to enjoy both things consistently over the years.

When asked about the key messages she has received about what it means to be a part of her culture, Margaret noted that primarily employees are told repeatedly through a variety of media and messaging that they should be proud of who they are. Company messaging alludes to how its employees are “changing the world” through their work and how the company promotes its presence and mission by advertising in public areas such as airports. “It’s everywhere!” she exclaims.
When asked about the guiding beliefs and values which underpin the organization, Margaret lists without hesitation several key attributes including “client first,” “integrity in relationships” and, most decidedly, an emphasis on constant innovation. She notes that the company also places significant importance on promoting a culture of diversity and inclusion, which she has appreciated. Overall, she feels that the people she works with agree with and uphold the company’s beliefs and values, particularly with respect to the importance of innovation and supporting a culture of inclusivity. She does recognize that, while integrity is a guiding value within the organization that is highly championed by most, “there are some” at higher levels who do not seem to uphold that value and there are few, if any, consequences for this. Margaret’s attitude is one of realism. No place is going to be perfect, a fact that she recognizes as part of the organizational package.

She feels that the company makes a good effort to promote relationship-building and work-life balance by hosting events that offer opportunities to socialize. Her department also has space in a WeWork office so that, even though she is a remote employee, she can connect with her coworkers in an office environment on a regular basis. “They have a lot of social things that are happening throughout the day. It could be a pizza party, something after work, because they try to get people to get together and have more personal, outside-work relationships.”

Although she asserts the company does an excellent job of encouraging socialization and maintaining a commitment to healthy work-life balance, there are rigid performance expectations. Margaret describes success in her organization as the ability to consistently meet numbers in the form of acquired leads, web site analytics, and so on. “It’s all about meeting the numbers for the quarter,” she states emphatically. She describes a successful person in her organization as one who is always looking at their numbers and making enhancements to
improve metrics. A successful person is one who is always “alert and aware” of how the group is doing as evidenced by these key metrics.

When asked about how she feels she has adapted to her workplace culture, Margaret notes a couple of areas in which her adaptation skills have been called upon over the years. Her company is committed to keeping up with evolving technologies, so Margaret has found herself in a constant state of having to learn new tools and applications to do her work. “You adapt by learning the new technology, because there’s always something coming out that is making our work better in some way.” In addition to adapting to new technologies, Margaret has been challenged to a greater degree by the changes to the work environment itself as time has progressed. Over the years, she has worked in a standard office, as a remote employee, and most recently, in a hybrid capacity in an open office space. She has moved more than once for work, either in response to a company relocation initiative, or to take advantage of the ability to live where she chose as a fully remote worker. Toward this end, Margaret defines the process of successful adaptation as being flexible and mostly “being open to change.” “It’s always changing!” she notes. She also feels that, as an IC, she has had to continually adapt to changes in leadership. The company has a practice of moving leaders into different roles across the organization to grow their skillsets and prepare them for greater responsibility. As a result, ICs need to continually adapt to new managers and consequent leadership styles.

Margaret believes that some of her critical life choices have been influenced by the need to adapt to remain with her organization. Certainly, she notes, the relocations she has made over the years were the product of company-driven initiatives. She also emphasizes the company’s commitment to diversity and inclusion as a major influence on her life. The company’s openness around issues of homosexuality has influenced her: “I think that because my company is kind of
pro-gay, because of that, I was more able to be open in the office. Because of that, they had a lot of executives who would come out and it just made it more comfortable and more acceptable. Whereas in some smaller companies I have been in, in the past, it just didn’t seem like you could do that. I think that was another big life choice, to be much more open about my orientation.”

When asked about what she has enjoyed the most about working for her company over the years, Margaret’s voice lights up as she describes her coworkers. She believes them to be “super smart, talented, and hard-working. “The quality of person at this company is very high,” she concludes. Teamwork is highly valued in the organization, and Margaret describes her cohort as being highly collaborative. She does note instances of working with team members on some projects who did not value collaboration as highly, but that in her work environment, going solo often slowed the overall work down and was not considered by most to be the best approach. “Members of this company help each other out. It’s part of who they are.”

Margaret’s enjoyment of her team culture’s attitudes, the company’s commitment to inclusivity, and opportunities to remain current with new technologies have provided her with a great deal of positive experience over the years. At the same time, she reflects directly on the evolution of her beliefs and assumptions about the organization. She states bluntly, “I used to think that the company was all about the employee. Now I think it’s all about financial results.” When speaking of the relocation initiatives that have impacted her department, she notes, “It made me realize that management was not as thoughtful about people as I would have thought.” She relates instances of coworkers having to make hard choices to keep their jobs during company change. People leave the company more frequently than before, and there are fewer people like herself who could boast longevity with the company. She believes that people will
continue to leave to find fulfillment elsewhere. She states, “When I came into the organization, I was more idealistic; it changes over time.”

**Connor’s Story**

Connor is a financial consultant with a New England-based investment firm. He primarily supports sales associates with backend information. He considers his role to be back office support. He spends a good deal of time researching information related to pricing and acquisitions to give the sales team critical information to support their process from a technical perspective, such as reviewing RFPs (request for proposals) from companies who are reviewing their 401k plans. When new 401k business is won, he also steps in to assist with implementing these plans. He has been with his company for nearly 10 years. He states that he has remained with the company primarily for the benefits, from compensation to healthcare to career growth opportunities. He has worked in the financial industry for over 20 years and believes that the company is “one of the top companies.” He believes that the company strives to do the right thing by the customer, such as by being more transparent about the cost of their solutions than other financial companies.

When asked about key messages he has received regarding what it means to be a member of his workplace culture, Connor states emphatically that a respectful workplace is a value the company strives to instill in its employees. He says, “The company won’t tolerate anything less.” He believes that the company is working hard to spread a consistent message about the criticality of a safe, respectful, inclusive workplace. He believes that most people in the organization understand the importance of this goal, and they also know they are held to a high standard of conduct both inside and outside of work. He describes the company’s “brand” as being a good one worth protecting. “One bad apple can wreck the barrel,” he states.
Connor describes a successful employee at the company as one who is a team player, good at what they do, competitive yet also willing to “extend the olive branch” to help others. Employees are goaled to specific metrics and incented for exhibiting these successful behaviors. For example, he describes ice cream sundae parties after successful projects. He talks about the company’s commitment to creating healthy, happy employees through various programs and incentives, which in his mind serves the clever dual purpose of keeping employees working efficiently and overall costs down. In response to this surfaced perception, Connor concedes, “All the small things add up. It’s a pretty good deal.”

Connor has worked to adapt to the company’s culture by being mindful of his behavior and how others might perceive him. He believes that associates are required to adopt a higher level of professionalism than may be required in other companies. He stresses that the company demands a willingness to adapt, always following strict rules and never forgetting the need for competitiveness and winning over the competition. Top of mind is always the need to protect the company’s reputation. To excel, Connor feels he needs to be constantly looking for better ways to do things, to “build a better mousetrap,” which he enjoys. He emphasizes that he and his team know they can never slow down and rest on their laurels because of constant messaging that “the competition isn’t just out there waiting for us to die.”

Connor feels that during his tenure with the company, his major life choices haven’t been influenced so much by his process of adaptation to the workplace culture; rather, he has adapted in large part by going with the flow. He notes that he has not always put as much thought as he now thinks he should have into his career trajectory with the company. He has been rolling with the changes and going with the flow, not pausing enough to consider where he wants to go. The company has been a generous employer who has, overall, provided well for his needs. So time
has gone by, and Connor has not initiated much change in his career: “You kind of, you get involved so much, you just kind of go along. . . . You aren’t where you want to be, but again, it’s not terrible, but at the same time, had you taken the bull by the horns or had a better plan, you might be even happier. So that’s what I sometimes think about.”

He recognizes that he has missed opportunities to stop and reflect on what he really wants to be doing with his life. As he has also derived a great deal of satisfaction from his work environment and its values of teamwork, commitment, and competitiveness. He is not particularly upset about potential, missed opportunities for growth, but he is aware that the onus is on him to chart his own course as time goes on.

Connor’s beliefs about what is important in life have changed over his years with the company. He states that he used to think that money was the most important thing, but that he has come to believe what is really the most valuable thing in life is the pursuit of what one is naturally good at and really makes one happy. He reflects on times in his career when managers helped him to discover his natural strengths and abilities. In hindsight, he expresses mild regret that he did not more actively pursue different avenues at the company that might have been more meaningful to him. His attitude now, despite overall satisfaction, is that one must follow one’s dreams wherever they might lead and not worry about the results. He remarks optimistically, “Focus on what you do well, and the money will follow.”

**Coding the Data**

The transcribed data were analyzed using Saldana’s values coding methodology (2016). In the values coding tradition, participant data are coded to reflect whether a statement represents a value, attitude, or belief. Each of these code types offers a semantically different lens through which to view data, although there may be considerable, natural overlap across the three
categories. Values represent what is important to an individual. Attitudes are the ways that he or she may feel about a particular thing or situation and is formulated as a means of responding affectively to perceived realities. Beliefs are the things that one believes to be true, based on all data inputs as well as one’s prior knowledge and disposition toward that upon which the belief is based (Saldana, 2016). Values, attitudes, and beliefs may be coded individually, but they may be further analyzed through a kaleidoscopic lens in which their interrelationships are revealed in the form of themes and patterns.

Each participant was assigned a pseudonym that was attached to his or her interview transcript file. All interviews were transcribed without the aid of an external transcriptionist. The interviews were then initially hand-coded using a linguistic notational system designed to capture each participant’s initials, question number, and type of data identified (value, attitude, or belief.) Saldana (2013) recommends initial coding as a method appropriate for qualitative research as it allows the researcher to “reflect deeply on the contents and nuances of your data and to begin taking ownership of them” (p. 100). In vivo coding and analytic memoing were used to capture nuances and surface the beginnings of patterns in the data while remaining alert to the presence of bias while making analytic decisions. This first-cycle coding approach allowed the organization of the interview data based on initial impressions while also pulling out rich, descriptive quotes and capturing questions and intuitions related to the data. Table 3 provides an example of the method used to code the data for the first cycle of analysis. Participant initials were matched to their corresponding interview question numbers, in vivo data snippet, and classification as a value, attitude, or belief.
Table 3

*Linguist Coding System*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Text</th>
<th>Participant Initial</th>
<th>Question #</th>
<th>Value/Attitude/Belief (V/A/B)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>You want to be able to get on board with change</td>
<td>T</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Attitude (A)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Then, the first-cycle-coded data for each participant by all questions were organized into a set of tables that allowed analyses of the data for all participants by each question. Key themes sorted by values, attitudes, and beliefs were identified for each of the key research questions. This arrangement of the data set the stage for a second round of Axial coding focused on revealing patterns in and across the data. The goal at this point was to “reorganize the data set” (Saldana, 2013, p. 218), and in so doing assemble dominant common themes across the data.

The values, attitudes, and beliefs of all participants for each question were collected and reviewed to remove any repetitive data. A set of emergent themes was identified for each interview question. Table 4 lists the emergent themes for each interview question.
Table 4

*Emergent Themes Grouped by Interview Question*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>What key messages have you received about what it means to be a member of your workplace culture?</th>
<th>How have you adapted to your workplace culture?</th>
<th>“I used to think __, but now I think ____ , because ____”</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Respectful environment</td>
<td>Growth opportunities</td>
<td>Time changes things</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaningful work</td>
<td>Good fit</td>
<td>Personal responsibility</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Follow the rules</td>
<td>Know how to “be”</td>
<td>Learn how it works</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Better here</td>
<td>Meet their needs</td>
<td>Contentment as an end goal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Safety and security</td>
<td>Embrace change</td>
<td>Realistic perspective</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections with others</td>
<td>Job satisfaction</td>
<td>Focus on self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-confidence</td>
<td>Value stability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Appreciation matters</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

After a set of emergent themes for each question was identified, the data were analyzed further to take a deeper look at interrelationships and patterns across the values, attitudes and beliefs that made up the themes for each interview question. Points of saturation were further funneled into a smaller group of overarching themes for each interview question. These groups were labeled as key cultural messages, adaptation to the environment, and evolving mindset.

**Overarching Theme #1: Key Cultural Messages**

The first overarching theme relates to key cultural messages that participants have received about what membership in their corporate cultures means to them and their coworkers. These key cultural messages are embedded within their cultures as guiding beliefs and valued shared and enacted in practice by organizational members. They are expressed through hierarchical communications, performance expectations, and the general reinforcement of certain behaviors identified as leading to successful outcomes. The reinforcement of these behaviors might come in the form of written or verbal communications, or as visual reinforcement through company branding and marketing campaigns. Table 5 displays the overarching themes for the
topic area and key cultural messages. These themes are derived from the values, attitudes and beliefs surfaced in participant responses to interview question #1.

Table 5

**Overarching Themes: Key Cultural Messages**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Attitudes</th>
<th>Beliefs</th>
<th>Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Safety and security</td>
<td>Good work</td>
<td>Respectful, safe</td>
<td>Follow the rules</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connections with others</td>
<td>Rules keep you safe</td>
<td>Important work</td>
<td>Meaningful work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaningful work</td>
<td>Better here</td>
<td>Follow the rules</td>
<td>Respectful, safe</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The overarching themes for key cultural messages include: follow the rules, meaningful work, and respectful and safe. Each of these themes is discussed in further detail.

**Follow the Rules**

All participants recognized a set of strong organizational rules in place that they must follow. Sam expresses feeling safe in his organizational culture, as he understood the rules he must follow to find his fit and thus focus his attention on doing excellent work in the absence of ambiguity about the norms. Selena recognizes that through leadership and superficial messaging might change over time in her organization, certain social expectations remained consistent and provided a sense of cohesion for her and coworkers. These expectations included the ability to remain patient and to “stick with it” through transitions. If one was able to follow these social guidelines, rewards were inevitable. Melissa cites “putting the customer at the center of everything we do” through collaboration and team-building as a foundational rule in her organization that everyone must actively embrace. Peter reflects that being very crisp on
company priorities and demonstrating the ability to meet preset goals were understood as keys to success in his organization.

Thomas recites the “four quality principles” of behavior and interaction as the guiding beliefs in his organization that all were expected to demonstrate without question. Margaret also emphasizes a need to always keep top of mind “who she worked for” and to act in accordance with company values at all times, whether with business partners or colleagues. Similarly, Connor understands that “complete and total compliance with the rules” and always working to protect the company reputation were key drivers of success within his organization.

Meaningful Work

All the study participants emphasized a belief in the personal and/or societal importance of their work, as communicated through cascaded leadership messaging, the media, or by management. Sam enjoys being recognized for his achievements and feeling appreciation in his current organization. This is a change for him from previous experience, where the focus was on “hanging you out to dry,” and over-competitiveness. Melissa cites the same feeling of gratitude for being supported by leadership in her efforts to develop and produce the best work she can. Selena and Peter both strive in competitive environments focused on “knocking out the competition.” They both receive clear messages about the need to be “number one” and win.

Thomas, Margaret, and Connor underscore the need to adhere to clearly laid out and frequently reinforced rules designed to protect and promote the company “brand.” Thomas refers to the “four quality principles” as guideposts, and Connor muses on the imperative to adopt higher standards of professionalism both inside and outside of work because “one bad apple can ruin the whole bunch.”
Safe, Respectful

The importance of recognizing and doing one’s part to uphold standards of professionalism, inclusivity, and collaboration was a key message received by all participants from their leadership. Sam, Melissa, Thomas, Margaret, and Connor all speak about the prevalence of diversity and inclusion initiatives within their organizations. Sam also described his environment as respectful, kind, and one in which “I don’t have to fight for my life every day.” Selena values the sense of cultural belonging she has developed over time within her organization. Like Sam, Melissa has a perspective on organizational environments informed by previous “toxic environments.” She appreciates the transparency in her current interactions with colleagues and stands by a personal policy of “no hidden agendas.”

Although Peter sometimes feels micromanaged in his command and control culture, he appreciates the clear and consistent “strategic cascades” from leadership which keep all employees apprised of the organization’s priorities and goals. Margaret and Thomas, both openly gay in the workplace, express a keen sense of affinity with their environments as open and accepting while recognizing that not all work environments might offer the same level of acceptance. Connor reflects on the fact that, while his company is admittedly more conservative than many others, the expectation of adherence to extremely exacting standards of conduct create an environment in which everyone understands the rules and adheres to a mandate of respectful behavior.

In Vivo Data: Key Cultural Messages

When data are coded according to values, attitudes, and beliefs, the next step is to categorize and reflect on its collective meaning, interaction, and interplay, working under the premise that the three constructs are part of an interconnected system (Saldana, 2016, p. 91).
In vivo data for each question were also collected and organized to support and further flesh out the overarching themes distilled from each of three interview questions. The in vivo data reflect participants’ specific values, attitudes, and beliefs in action. Table 6 shows in vivo data for interview question #1: “What key messages have you received about what it means to be a part of your workplace culture?”
## Table 6

**Representative In Vivo Data: Key Messages Received About Being Part of Workplace Culture**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Safety and Security</th>
<th>Connection with Others</th>
<th>Meaningful Work</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>They have managed to create a culture of support, I would say.</td>
<td>They are very generous with their time, they are very eager to volunteer or to help one another.</td>
<td>I say it's a top priority for people. They want to be respected for the work they do and their contributions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selena</td>
<td>Doing positive things for the company, which would in turn be positive for the employees.</td>
<td>That Global Sales Summit gave us the opportunity to share that enthusiasm.</td>
<td>The measure of success is the positive feedback I've received from not only my manager but my coworkers.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attitudes</th>
<th>Good Work</th>
<th>Rules Keep You Safe</th>
<th>Better Here</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>I was able to take advantage of opportunities and really transition.</td>
<td>I have no hidden agendas....Here's what we need to accomplish, let's get it done.</td>
<td>I have been in roles where people can take it (work) home with them, and it can eat at them.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>We can literally take days off and put them down that we were volunteering.</td>
<td>I think for the most part, people grasp it and participate simply because it makes them feel good.</td>
<td>Is it 100% satisfaction? Of course not...but there aren't many places in the world that are.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Beliefs</th>
<th>Respectful, Safe</th>
<th>Important Work</th>
<th>Follow the Rules</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>Our big belief in the training department right now is that we want to do what's right for our students.</td>
<td>I think our big goal is that we realized we are making a promise when we sell something to our customer.</td>
<td>We have four &quot;quality principles.&quot;</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret</td>
<td>Integrity in your relationships not only with clients but with each other [is important].</td>
<td>It's always about meeting the numbers for the quarter, whatever the numbers might be.</td>
<td>We look at every number now. That's the key thing.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connor</td>
<td>I would say that part of our culture is respect for workplace.</td>
<td>The brand of my company is a good one.</td>
<td>If you work for this company, you should act appropriately. . . . It's almost like a higher standard that we should act to.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Overarching Theme #2: Adaptation to the Environment

The second overarching theme relates to the participants’ process of adaptation to their organizational cultures over time. Participants responded to questions about how they personally defined the concept of adaptation, ways in which their major life choices were (or were not) influenced by their career decisions, and the things they have enjoyed most about being employed by their companies. The process of adaptation was unique to each participant based on different organizational circumstances but a number of similarities emerged. Table 7 displays the overarching themes for the topic area: adaptation to the environment. These themes are derived from the values, attitudes, and beliefs surfaced in participants’ responses to interview question #2.

Table 7

Overarching Themes: Adaptation to the Environment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question #2: How have you adapted to your workplace culture?</th>
<th>Adaptation to the Environment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Values</strong></td>
<td><strong>Attitudes</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Adaptation</td>
<td>Know how to “be”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Job satisfaction</td>
<td>Keep growing</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self confidence</td>
<td>Meet their needs</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The overarching themes for adaptation to the environment include growth opportunities, embrace change, and find your fit. Each of these themes is discussed in further detail.

Growth Opportunities

Opportunities for growth and development on both personal and professional levels was cited by all participants as a key factor in successfully adapting to the demands of their organizational cultures. Sam appreciates being able to go to his colleagues for help with skill-
building or growing his organizational acumen. He says he loves working with talented people and sharing best practices in his organization. He is relaxed, focused on producing excellent work, and is “no longer as concerned with the end game.” Selena describes her years with her organization as a series of “small evolutions” which have allowed her the space to adapt and stretch to changing conditions. She notes she derives great satisfaction from her work. She states, “I am very happy with the choices I have made and their end results.” Melissa and Peter have both been able to take advantage company benefits to further their educations, which neither are convinced they would have been able to do under other circumstances.

Melissa notes that she has developed into “the person she wants to be” with the support of the company. Thomas describes himself as “being empowered to make a difference” when creating and delivering content for his learners. He believes that this latitude has allowed him to stretch and grow with confidence over the years. He also believes that his organization’s accepting attitude toward his orientation has allowed him freedom to live authentically. Margaret emphasizes the need to be a constant learner, adapting to new tools and technologies that her organization adopts. She has appreciated the opportunity to keep abreast of technological trends and to be nimble using evolving technologies to produce her work and interface with colleagues. Connor recognizes that his organization promotes learning and growth as employees seek out opportunities. He references the concept of Kaizen that his company has adopted, emphasizing the organization’s commitment to fostering continuous employee improvement and commitment to “coming up with a better mousetrap.”

**Embrace Change**

Being able to maintain one’s sense of equanimity and perspective during organizational change was underscored by all participants as necessary to adapt over the long term. All the
participants expressed an ability to take change in stride, never personalizing it. Also, all participants mentioned the support of good teams or coworker relationships as critical to adaptation. Sam has a long history of working with organizations in his capacity as a learning professional, and that he loves “seeing how different organizations solve the same problem.” Selena adapts to organizational change by refusing to let herself give in to negative thinking and working to maintain a belief that things would improve. Melissa describes herself as “resilient” and believes that her resiliency is what has allowed her to adapt well to change in her organization. Thomas, like Melissa, recognizes his ability to respond to change positively. He reflects that one needs to continually reevaluate things and be able to “get on board” with change to be successful. Margaret takes a pragmatic approach to managing her reaction to her frequently changing environment, stating that “adaptation is a part of life you must accept.” She does not take change personally and is therefore able to take it in stride. Peter and Connor are pragmatic, noting that adaptation to organizational rules was an absolute requirement and not worth fighting.

Find your Fit

For all participants, a sense of knowing “how to be” in the organization was expressed. Sam expressed a strong belief that one’s success and satisfaction in an organization comes from having figured out how to fit in, gain the trust of coworkers, and be “one of us.” Similarly, Selena reflected on a turning point in her career when she realized that she needed to “turn her thinking around” and gain greater self-awareness and control in stressful situations. This shift in her thinking allowed her to develop a broader perspective on how to manage her frequently changing environment and focus on what was important to her in her life. Melissa’s ability to
work on her own development both personally and professionally has given her, like Selena, a broader, more informed perspective through which to view her organization’s culture.

Again, for Thomas and Margaret, the freedom they enjoy within their organizations to be open about their sexual orientation is enormously important in grounding them and creating a space for them to be truly authentic with themselves and others. “You couldn’t be openly gay in some other, smaller companies,” Margaret states. For Peter and Connor, as with the imperative to conform to a strict set of organizational rules, successful coexistence requires an adherence to clear behavioral norms. As with Margaret, Peter and Connor employ a pragmatic attitude towards their organizational culture and do not take the rules personally.

**In Vivo Data: Adaptation to the Environment**

As with the first interview question, in vivo data were also collected and organized to support and further flesh out the overarching themes distilled from the second interview question. Table 8 shows in vivo data for interview question #2: “How have you adapted to your workplace environment?”
**Table 8**

*Representative In Vivo Data: Adaptation to the Workplace Environment*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Values</th>
<th>Adaptation</th>
<th>Job Satisfaction</th>
<th>Self-Confidence</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>What I do for a living, it is what it is . . . You can do it in a lot of different companies, it’s the same basic job.</td>
<td>So for me it was about living where I wanted to live, not having a commute and those kinds of things.</td>
<td>I guess that’s the enjoyment source for me . . . hopefully contributing to that success in different ways.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selena</td>
<td>I found if I focused on data and facts . . . that helped me stay focused on the end game.</td>
<td>[I have] the ability to balance my work life, create positive relationships despite my lack of physical presence.</td>
<td>I guess it comes down to attitude. I want to get things done, and I want to do them the right way.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Attitudes**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Know How to “Be”</th>
<th>Keep Growing</th>
<th>Meet their Needs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>I was really able to shape and develop myself in the organization.</td>
<td>If you’re unable to adapt to change, you’re going to get stuck where you are.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Peter            | People do understand that this company is very metrics-driven, very numbers-driven. | Certainly, I had many, many opportunities to travel worldwide with the company. | They have to change and we as employees have to change. |

**Beliefs**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Growth Opportunities</th>
<th>Good Fit</th>
<th>Roll with Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>I think I have been able to step out and be more of who I am.</td>
<td>It’s hard to say what it is that the company has empowered me to, versus how much society has changed, as well.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Margaret          | [It’s about] being flexible and open to new things, to be open to learning, to new technology. | I think it’s being able to be open to change, really. | [It’s] the environment and the technology that we use every day. It’s always evolving. |

| Connor           | They are always trying something new vs. “This is just the way we do it.” | You keep on doing the same thing, and you’re not willing to move or change, you probably find yourself hungry. | Adaptation is a must . . . If you fight it, the next thing you know, you’re not going to have a job. |
Overarching Theme #3: Evolving Mindset

The final overarching theme relates to how participants’ perspectives of work and self have evolved over time. This evolution was framed in response to a single, open-ended question stated as, “I used to think ____ but now I think ____ because ____.” Participants shared insights into how beliefs and assumptions about the nature of work and of being a person-in-the-world have shifted over time in alignment with increasing experience and maturity. Table 9 displays the overarching themes for the topic area—evolving mindset. These themes are derived from the values, attitudes, and beliefs surfaced in participants’ responses to interview question #3.

Table 9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Overarching Themes: Evolving Mindset</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Values</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Value Stability</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus on self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appreciation Matters</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The overarching themes for evolving mindset include the following: time changes things, take charge of yourself, learn how it works, and get what you need. Each of these themes is discussed below in further detail.

**Time Changes Things**

All participants acknowledge that they have evolved over time as the result of increased personal insight and clarification of the personal and professional values that maturation brings.
Sam describes his evolution from being primarily concerned with climbing the corporate ladder to seeing the greater importance of having peace of mind and feeling content with one’s work. He says, “I don’t have to make the Dean’s list every day.” Likewise, Peter reflects on his shift away from pursuing an executive role to focusing on being a family-oriented person and remaining in an IC role, a decision he has never regretted. Selena emphasizes her need to remain self-aware and engage in continuous reprioritization of her values. Melissa and Thomas recognize that they have gained greater perspective and have become more broad-minded over time as they have evolved in the context of a nurturing work environment. Margaret reflects nostalgically on her shifting view of her company as one that focuses on the employee to one that is more metrics and results-driven. “I used to be more idealistic about the company’s image,” she states. Connor reflects on missed opportunities to pursue his true passions in the pursuit of money. He says, “I used to think making a lot of money was important. What’s really important is doing what you love to do.”

**Take Charge of Yourself**

Keeping sight of one’s primary needs and key motivators over time was expressed by all participants as critical to maintaining the personal and professional equilibrium necessary to thrive in a corporate environment. Sam talks about learning to recognize his value as he has matured, which has in turn allowed him to take a different tack in life to pursue what he believes will lead to true contentment. Selena and Connor have learned to pause and go within themselves more deeply to keep a pulse on their true values. Connor reflects, “At times, I didn’t hold myself accountable for my own growth.” Selena says, “I used to think that other people were the problem. Now, I think I have to be the solution.” Similarly, Thomas states that in the initial stages of his career, he used to think he was quite different, an “oddity.” Over the years,
he has come to the belief that he has more in common with others than he originally thought. “We are all humans on the same journey,” he muses. Melissa has also learned to honor her own needs as she has matured with her organization and gained self-confidence. She no longer feels resigned to a set career path, as she did when she was younger. Opportunities for growth and development within her organization have changed her thinking in this regard. Now, she believes “it is up to the individual to choose her path.” Peter and Margaret both express a pragmatic point of view regarding their organizational realities that is informed by years of observation and evolving insights. Margaret shares the disheartening realization after many years with the company that her impression of the company was marred because many of her coworkers had suffered because of multiple relocation initiatives. Peter shares that he worries sometimes about losing his job because of his age. He knows he is “replaceable,” but he must choose to keep going and try not to dwell on the thoughts that sometimes creep in. Both Margaret and Peter are pragmatic about what the future may hold for them, which allows them to be mentally ready for whatever their corporate futures may hold.

**Learn How it Works**

Learning to step back and review the organizational landscape from an objective perspective served to instill in participants a clear sense of the organization’s expectations and how to meet them successfully. Sam talks at length about being able to find his fit within his current organization, which has allowed him to focus on doing the excellent work he wants to do. “Now, it’s OK. I get where I fit in.” Selena has come to understand that she cannot control what happens in her external environment, and that she doesn’t need to be successful at work. Rather, she has learned to work within her sphere of influence and focuses on the satisfaction she derives “being part of the solution” at work. Like Melissa, Thomas has come to believe that he is a
working piece of an interconnected system, and he has developed strong, highly trusting relationships with his coworkers. These relationships have led to success for Thomas, and he expresses that he has no reason to think about leaving his company.

Although it took her some time to adjust to it, Melissa has become comfortable pursuing career goals with help from her managers. She believes that her organization fully supports her journey, and she is committed to continued self-development. Peter has a very pragmatic attitude with respect to his organization. He is very appreciative of the opportunities he has had to make a good income and benefit from the stability he feels in a large organization. He can succeed in his role despite some dissatisfaction with the hierarchy and issues of micromanagement because he believes it is still a good tradeoff for everything he has been able to enjoy in life. Similarly, Connor feels he has been able to succeed in his role over time because he is able to follow the rules and put group and team needs first despite sometimes putting his creativity and true passions on the back burner. Margaret expresses an understanding that company goals come first, and one needs to keep up with frequent technological and environmental changes to survive. Because she is keenly aware of this expectation, and because she has kept up the skills necessary to meet it, she has enjoyed a long tenure with her organization.

Get What You Need

All participants recognize that they have been able to leverage their environments to achieve personal and professional goals while balancing organizational needs and expectations. They all uniformly recognize that their organizations have served them well. Further, they agree from prior work experience that where they are now is a much better place. Sam can focus on doing work that he finds satisfying “without having to make the Dean’s list every day.” He
emphasizes that the reduced stress he feels in his current organization is of vital importance in his life. He feels he has found a good spot. Selena’s long 25-year tenure with her organization belies a sense of overall satisfaction with the organization. She notes that one of her key needs has been to have a flexible schedule that allows her to make her family a priority. She has also managed to work through frequent organizational change with the conviction that her organization always figures itself out and rewards those who “stick with it” through bumpy times. Peter’s preferred focus on family has been fostered by his ability to work as a well-compensated IC for over 20 years. Melissa and Thomas both express deep appreciation for the organization they work for. They believe that they are nurtured and allowed free rein to grow as people and professionals. Melissa states, “Supportive leadership has helped me grow in ways I didn’t expect,” while Thomas recognizes that he is the product of his team environment. Thomas and Margaret believe that they might well not have had an opportunity to be openly gay in other organizations. Connor admits that, at times, he has been complacent about his personal development because he feels his needs have been well met through compensation and other rewards offered by the organization while simultaneously being consumed by the need to perform at an extremely high level. Peter and Connor employ a pragmatic attitude towards their organizational culture and do not take the rules personally.

**In Vivo Data: Evolving Mindset**

Finally, in vivo data were also collected and organized to support and further flesh out the overarching themes distilled from the third and final interview question. Table 10 shows in vivo data for interview question #3: “I used to think ___, but now I think ___, because ______.”
Table 10

Representative *In Vivo* Data: “I used to think ____*, but now I think ____*, because____**”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Value Stability</th>
<th>Focus on Self</th>
<th>Appreciation Matters</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sam</td>
<td>Living stress-free.</td>
<td>It’s the greatest enjoyment of humans, that we get to share our experiences with each other and learn from one another.</td>
<td>Others accept my ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selena</td>
<td>My life has been one of small evolutions.</td>
<td>I value certain things over others as far as what’s important and what’s not.</td>
<td>I learned that I needed to turn around the way I thought.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Aim for Contentment</th>
<th>Realistic Perspective</th>
<th>Focus on the Important Things</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Melissa</td>
<td>You just start to see things differently, and maybe you see value in things you hadn’t before.</td>
<td>It’s harder to feel a connection to that broader, corporate culture.</td>
<td>. . . being able to have influence in my role, to think about things differently.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peter</td>
<td>It’s been what I’ve known for the past 20+ years and I’m not looking to change that direction.</td>
<td>I look around me and I say, ‘How many 55- to 60-year-old program managers do you see?</td>
<td>Financially, I would love to be in a different position than I am now, but I will never, ever be questioned by my children as to why I wasn’t around.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Time Changes Things</th>
<th>Take Personal Responsibility</th>
<th>Learn How it Works</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Thomas</td>
<td>I think a lot of my beliefs have changed.</td>
<td>I am in a place where I can really thrive for the next . . . however long I have until retirement.</td>
<td>Now I realize that we are all humans on the same journey.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Margaret</td>
<td>I think the whole co-location thing was a big reflection point, a change in how I viewed the company.</td>
<td>People would (have to) make choices to work closer to their home even though it may not have been a group that they were already working in.</td>
<td>I used to think that the company was all about the employee. . . . Now I think it’s all about financial results.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connor</td>
<td>I used to think money was important.</td>
<td>The ball is really in the associate’s court. . . . Try to have your manager help you map out a way to get there (next position).</td>
<td>Focus on what you do well and then the money will follow.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Next, a discussion of the research findings is presented which includes a summary table supported by detailed account of how the findings align to the experiences shared by participants as they made sense of themselves in relation to their corporate cultures.

**Findings**

The study findings were identified through an analysis of three overarching themes that emerged from an analysis of the participants’ interview data. These themes were related to key cultural messages that participants about membership in their organizations, their process of adaptation to these environments, and their evolving perceptions of themselves. The analysis surfaced five key findings for the study that provide rich insights into the ways these participants came to understand themselves within the context of corporate culture. Table 11 lists the research findings at a high level and then describes them in further detail. Key values, beliefs, and attitudes expressed by participants in keeping with Saldana’s (2016) values coding methodology are called out as they surfaced throughout the findings.
### Table 11

**Summary of Findings**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finding #</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finding #1</td>
<td>Participants found the work meaningful. Participants expressed a conviction that their work was important, either from an organizational messaging standpoint or because it was engaging and fulfilling for personal or societal reasons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding #2</td>
<td>Participants found that following the rules benefits everyone. Participants acknowledged that adherence to high personal and professional standards and following clear rules of engagement with colleagues and external stakeholders creates an environment conducive to success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding #3</td>
<td>Participants believed they enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship. Participants feel a sense of security in being able to enjoy the benefits of compensation, including access to an array of personal and professional development opportunities in exchange for loyalty and high performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding #4</td>
<td>Participants believed in the importance of being realistic and pragmatic. Participants have learned over time how to exist in alignment with organizational realities rooted in frequently changing environments and evolving technologies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding #5</td>
<td>Participants believed they were a work in progress. Participants recognize that they have evolved over time, which has influenced what they seek and value most as human beings who are also organizational members.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The research findings are discussed in the following section as they relate to the themed participant data collected in response to each interview question in the form of values, beliefs, and attitudes.

**Finding #1: Participants Found the Work Meaningful**

Participants express a conviction that their work is important, either from an organizational messaging standpoint or because it was engaging and fulfilling for personal or societal reasons. Sam and Melissa find great personal meaning in their work because they value the support of management to learn and grow. They express a belief that their ability to focus on producing the best work they can in a safe and nurturing environment has sustained them over time in their organizations.
Connor, Margaret, and Thomas receive frequent messages through organizational communications and the media that the work they do is meaningful at a societal level. They feel proud to be contributing to goals larger than themselves. Peter and Selena have been able to thrive in highly competitive corporate environments where an attitude of persistence, winning, and “knocking out the competition” is rewarded by leadership. They believe that the work they do has a direct impact on the company’s bottom line.

**Finding #2: Participants Found That Following the Rules Benefits Everyone**

Participants believe that adherence to high personal and professional standards and following clear rules of engagement with colleagues and external stakeholders creates an environment conducive to success. Margaret, Thomas, Connor, and Melissa believe that a commitment to diversity and inclusion fosters an environment of acceptance and safety in their organizations. For Margaret and Thomas, such an environment has allowed them the freedom to be open about their orientations in the workplace, a freedom they value highly. They emphasize that they have not been able to enjoy this freedom in other organizational contexts.

Connor expresses appreciation for his organization’s clear messaging on ethical and behavioral standards. Everyone in the organization must adhere to this same set of standards, which in turn creates a transparent and fair ecosystem for its employees. Likewise, Peter and Selena acknowledge that, while their work is often stressful, their organizations have done an excellent job of communicating key priorities and values. Their attitude is that, because they have a clear understanding of these expectations, they are in a better position to meet their goals and achieve successful outcomes. Sam, Melissa, Thomas, and Margaret all point to values and organizational norms around teamwork and collaboration. They know they cannot succeed without being able to work together in fast-paced environments that frequently change.
Finding #3: Participants Believed They Enjoy a Mutually Beneficial Relationship

Participants value the benefits of compensation, including access to an array of personal and professional development opportunities. They believe that opportunities for growth and development are a key reason they have remained with their employers and feel that they enjoy a mutually beneficial relationship with them. Melissa and Peter’s managers encouraged them to pursue their educations and acquire advanced degrees while working full time for their employers. Both have also been able to flex and take on different job roles over the years, broadening their skillsets and meeting new challenges. Participants emphasize that they have been able to develop themselves on the job in their organizations and they exhibit an attitude of dedication to continuous improvement.

All participants believe that they are well-compensated by their employers both monetarily and in the form of company benefits and that they value the many “little things” that make them feel appreciated. For example, Sam, Margaret, Selena, and Thomas have been able to live where they want to because they work in flexible environments that support remote employees. This mutually beneficial relationship allows participants to live out their key values, which include the ability to enjoy a good lifestyle and provide well for themselves and their families. In addition, they express a sense of cultural belonging. Their attitude is that learning how to be a “good fit” within one’s organization paves the way for satisfaction and success.

Finding #4: Participants Believe in the Importance of Being Realistic and Pragmatic

Participants have learned over time how to exist in alignment with organizational norms, adapt to frequently changing environments, and keep pace with evolving technologies. They believe they must learn to temper their anxiety about organizational change and ground themselves in the knowledge that “this is just how it is.” They believe that it is one’s best
interest to adapt and lean in to change. Connor and Peter have adapted to strict rules of engagement and demanding organizational priorities in their organizations. They have learned to adopt an attitude of acceptance and adherence that is simply the price of entry for ensuring success and longevity. They don’t personalize their relationships to their employers because they view these relationships as social contracts.

Thomas, Sam, and Melissa believe that not all employers promote security and engagement to the extent that they enjoy in their current organizations. They reflect that they have “been out there” and that many of their colleagues “don’t know how good they have it here.” In their current roles, they feel respected, appreciated for their contributions, and supported by leadership. To them, these are key values. Margaret and Selena have also adopted a pragmatic attitude towards work and the workplace. Both have been successfully employed by their companies for many years and have enjoyed the security and other benefits of their longevity. However, they have also witnessed a darker side of organizational life. Selena has adapted herself to frequent, stressful organizational change over the course of several acquisitions to keep her job. Margaret discusses the constant need to keep up with evolving technologies to meet job requirements. Margaret has also witnessed the pain many of her coworkers have experienced because of reorganizations that necessitated forced relocations or moves to new roles.

Finding #5: Participants Believed They Were a Work in Progress

Participants believe that they have evolved over time, which has influenced what they seek and value most as human beings who are also organizational members. For Selena, life has been a series of “small evolutions” in which she must continually reevaluate her priorities and values. She believes that this process of ongoing realignment has contributed to her adaptive
attitude regarding frequent organizational change. Margaret believes that her willingness and ability to adapt to innovative technologies and workspace configurations has helped her to adapt to a shifting organizational landscape. As a result, she has continued to evolve her skills over time, keeping pace with industry demands. Likewise, Melissa expresses a deep commitment to ongoing professional development, one of her most deeply held values. She believes that she is now a more broadminded, self-confident person who can see “doors opening” to her. Peter has also worked to develop himself, noting that he has moved into different roles in the organization every few years to keep his skills fresh and in demand.

Thomas reflects that he used to consider himself as an outsider, different from everyone else. Over time, he believes that he has come to recognize a deep connection between himself and others. Like Melissa, he values the opportunities he has had within his organization to develop, which has helped him to mature and broaden his view of the world. Sam and Connor have come to recognize that happiness and success is not all about money for them anymore. Sam’s attitude is that peace of mind and contentment in his work must take precedence over chasing promotions and scrambling up the corporate ladder. Connor expresses regret at not having evaluated his true values more deeply in the past and no longer believes that money is the most important thing in life. What really matters to him now is identifying and pursuing work that will make him genuinely happy.

**Summary**

The purpose of this narrative inquiry study was to explore the influence of the discourses of corporate cultures on seven ICs’ identities through the process of sensemaking. The research employed a methodological approach of narrative inquiry to analyze the personal narratives of
the participants. Critical theory and critical sensemaking are the theoretical frameworks underpinning the study’s primary research question and interview protocol.

The participants’ transcribed data were analyzed using Saldana’s values coding methodology, which seeks to analyze data through the lens of participants’ key values, attitudes, and beliefs. Findings from the analysis and multiple distillations of themes revealed three overarching themes: key cultural messages, adaptation to the environment, and evolving mindset. The overarching theme data were further analyzed and distilled to reveal the five key findings of this study: (a) participants found the work meaningful; (b) participants found that following the rules benefits everyone; (c) participants believed they enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship with their companies; (d) participants believed in the importance of being realistic and pragmatic over the long term; and (e) participants believed they were a work in progress. The purpose of this chapter was to allow the research data to speak clearly without the influence of external interpretation or theorizing. In allowing this space, the stage was set for a deeper examination of meanings and themes surfaced across the collective of the participants’ voices.

The next chapter reviews these collective findings through the lenses of the theoretical framework and review of the literature that underpin the study. The findings will be discussed in the context of alignment as well as disagreement with the current scholarly dialogue. To this end, implications for research and practice are identified and detailed relative to the findings.
Chapter 5: Recommendations and Conclusions

Rapid economic, technological, and cultural transformations over the past 30 years have caused a transformation from the traditional, bureaucratic, work-for-life company into a postmodern organization; its defining features are flexibility, decentralization, and unstable environments (Boggs and Pollard, 2001). These changes have radically redefined the relationships of the individual to her or his employer and reshaped conceptions of the workplace (Ogbor, 2001; Gunn, 2011; Standing, 2012). As the workplace has become a central focus for many individuals, some have questioned the influence of dominant discourses within corporate environments on individuals’ identities (Alvesson & Deetz, 2006; Combes, 2002). An accompanying shift towards IC roles “that allow more influence and accountability, without cumbersome titles or management duties” has been noted (Denker, 2014). This study explored the influence of the discourses of corporate cultures on individuals, and particularly the identity of ICs through sensemaking.

Summary of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore the influence of the discourses of corporate cultures on seven ICs’ identities through the process of sensemaking. The experiences of a group of seven male and female ICs (non-managers), working for a Fortune 500 company (or equivalent in yearly revenues) for at least five years were explored through an analysis of their personal narratives. Corporate discourse is defined as structured texts embodied in the practice of talking, writing, and interacting within cultures that are heavily intertwined with the values and goals of leadership. The research question that framed this study is as follows: How does exposure to discourse in corporate cultures influence the identity of ICs through sensemaking?
Summary of the Theoretical Framework

The study uses critical theory and critical sensemaking as a theoretical lens to explore the findings. Critical theory is deeply rooted in the social and political contexts surrounding the two world wars of the 20th century and takes a critical view of society with an ideological focus, typically associated with an emphasis on the analytical importance of sociohistorical context, an emancipatory agenda, and reflexivity (Chandler & Munday, 2011). Rather than being traditional in nature, critical theory considers itself to be emancipatory. Critical theory, therefore, rejects the notion of a single, objective reality and recognizes the ever-present influence of societal context on reality as experienced by its members. The construct of organizational sensemaking was first proposed by Karl Weick in his 1979 work *The Social Psychology of Organizing*. Sensemaking is defined as the way individuals in organizations collectively construct reality to make sense of events. Critical sensemaking as a theoretical framework has emerged in the last 20 years through the research of Helms Mills, Thurlow, and Mills as a contemporaneous hybrid model that brings together insights from critical theory and sensemaking. Specifically, critical sensemaking considers the influences of power, position, and language in organizational life. Given that this research sought to understand the impact of corporate discourse, this theoretical lens was appropriate to apply to this study.

Summary of the Literature Review

The review of the literature explored four primary topics that formed a conceptual framework for the research: work and organizational membership from the industrial to postmodern times, organizational discourse, organizational culture, and organizational identity and sensemaking in the workplace. As society has matured from the industrial age into contemporary postmodern culture, history has shown that the nature and meaning of work have
changed radically. Social contracts serve to define “the set of norms, assumptions, and beliefs that society conceives as fair and appropriate for parties involved in employment relationships” (Edwards & Karau, 2007, p. 67). In an increasingly technologized, global, interconnected culture, both employer and employees face challenges regarding the meaning of work and the structure of employer-employee relationships.

Discourse has been explored in the literature as a form of rhetoric (Cheney et al., 2004) and as a means of enacting dominant ideologies or dialectical processes (Mumby, 2004). A discourse is a set of rules which govern behaviors (Hardy & Phillips, 2004; 2014). These may be composed of either written or spoken texts (Van Dijk, 2014), but central to the concept of any type of discourse is its language-dependent nature (Alvesson & Karreman, 2011). The concept of corporate colonization has been used to describe organizations in which dominant organizational discourses serve to marginalize employees through both subtle and explicit means, and to give greater voice to those with greater power.

Current perspectives on the nature of organizational systems as culture vary. Schein (2010; 2014) describes culture as born out of shared rules for survival and defined by agreement and integration. Cultures described as differentiated or fragmented (Martin, 1985; Piaget, 2013) do not assume mutual agreement among members. Disagreement among members and subcultures may exist within the dominant culture (Oyserman, 2017). Despite differing definitions of what defines a culture, there is consensus that cultures are frequently changing entities that must adapt to survive (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Kotter, 2014; Drucker, 1994).

Individuals define themselves by their personal and professional identities within contemporary organizational environments, and may follow unspoken but shared, socially constructed rules (Hoffman & Cowan, 2010). Organizational environments have become
increasingly fluid and demanding in the context of globalization and technological advances that allow for greater work-based access and productivity (Edley, 2001) and that may result in higher potential for ambiguity between one’s personal and professional identities.

Weick’s (1995) concept of sensemaking describes a continuous process in which the individual constructs and maintains her identity in response to organizational events and culture. This process is ongoing and fundamental to the individual’s organizational life. The individual’s self-perception influences her actions that then influence others’ perceptions of her, which then serve to inform her identity (Weick et al., 2005, p.416). Critical perspectives on sensemaking evolved out of researchers’ desire to build upon Weick’s sensemaking model to examine the impacts of power, discourse, and the larger social context on sensemaking.

**Summary of the Methodology**

A narrative inquiry methodology was used to analyze the personal narratives of the participants to surface the influence of discourse on the sense they make of themselves within corporate cultures. The seven participants were adult, full-time ICs employed by a Fortune 500 company (or its equivalent in yearly revenues) for at least five years. All participants spoke English proficiently and were able to engage in in-depth interviews.

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured protocol to collect rich, descriptive data. This protocol included questions to elicit details on participants’ backgrounds as well as three specific questions that probed for details on their experience and perceptions of long-term immersion in corporate cultures. The interviews were then transcribed, and everyone’s story was retold as it unfolded along the trajectory of the interview. This process of *restorying* allowed for a holistic introduction to each participant prior to a discussion of individual and cross-group themes.
All participants received an explanation of the procedures and the protocol prior to the start of the interview and were assured that they could pause or stop the interview at any point. They were also encouraged to ask questions before, during, or after the interview as necessary. The third question on the protocol was designed to be purposefully thought-provoking. The question, “I used to think ___, but now I think _____, because_____” elicited many thoughtful responses. This final question provided participants an opportunity to delve more deeply into their evolving beliefs and assumptions. Further, it set the stage for them to engage in self-reflection on the evolution of their identities through a process of continuous sensemaking over time.

Interviews were transcribed using Saldana’s values coding methodology (2016). In the values coding tradition, participant data are coded to reflect whether it represents a value, attitude, or belief analysis or the overall study findings. In vivo coding and analytic memoing were employed to capture nuances and surface the beginnings of patterns in the data while remaining alert to the presence of bias. This first-cycle coding approach facilitated the organization of the interview data based on initial impressions while also pulling out rich, descriptive quotes and capturing her own questions and intuitions related to the data. A second cycle of Axial coding focused on revealing patterns in and across the data, which became the basis of the study findings.

**Summary of the Findings**

Findings were identified through an analysis of three overarching themes that emerged from an analysis of the participants’ interview data. These themes were related to key cultural messages participants had about membership in their organizations, their process of adaptation to these environments, and their evolving perceptions of themselves. The analysis surfaced five
key findings for the study that provide rich insights into the ways these participants came to understand themselves within the context of corporate culture. Table 12 lists these findings at a high level and then describes them in further detail.

Table 12

Summary of Findings

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Finding</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Finding #1</td>
<td>Participants found the work meaningful. Participants expressed a conviction that their work was important, either from an organizational messaging standpoint or because it was engaging and fulfilling for personal or societal reasons.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding #2</td>
<td>Participants found that following the rules benefits everyone. Participants acknowledged that adherence to high personal and professional standards and following clear rules of engagement with colleagues and external stakeholders creates an environment conducive to success.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding #3</td>
<td>Participants believed they enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship. Participants feel a sense of security in being able to enjoy the benefits of compensation, including access to an array of personal and professional development opportunities in exchange for loyalty and high performance.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding #4</td>
<td>Participants believed in the importance of being realistic and pragmatic. Participants have learned over time how to exist in alignment with organizational realities rooted in frequently changing environments and evolving technologies.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finding #5</td>
<td>Participants believed they were a work in progress. Participants recognize that they have evolved over time, which has influenced what they seek and value most as human beings who are also organizational members.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The findings indicate that the participants in this study came to identify as integral members of their workplace cultures through a process of personal and professional adaptation over time. The importance they attributed to their work, their willingness to accept rules and structure as a means of ensuring successful outcomes, and their recognition of a mutually beneficial relationship with their employers were all key drivers of satisfaction and retention. In addition, the participants’ ability to take an objective view of organizational reality and see
themselves as separate, evolving entities within their organizations provided them with a sense of strength and resilience, even during times of change.

Discussion of the Findings

The findings of the study are discussed in this section as they relate to the research question and central phenomenon underlying this study. Next, the theoretical frameworks that underpinned the study, critical theory and critical sensemaking, are discussed. Concepts central to these frameworks are reviewed and their alignments with the findings of the study are presented. Finally, the findings are discussed in relation to the four key themes identified in the review of the literature: work and organizational membership from the industrial to postmodern age, organizational discourse, organizational culture, and organizational identity and sensemaking in the workplace. Alignments and divergences are highlighted and set the stage for consideration of future research opportunities.

Discussion in Relation to the Research Question

The research question that framed this study was as follows: How does exposure to discourse in corporate cultures influence the identity of ICs through sensemaking? The central phenomena of the study concerned the influence of the discourses of corporate cultures on ICs as they made sense of themselves within their workplace environments. Discourses are language-dependent means of disseminating cultural values and expectations (Grant & Hardy, 2004). Over time, discourse as a construct has matured to include an emphasis on both spoken and written texts, as well as the nature of discursive interactions and the social contexts within which the discourse is situated (Grant, Keenoy, & Oswick, 2001, p. 7).

Weick’s (1995) concept of sensemaking describes a continuous process in which the individual constructs and maintains her identity in response to organizational events and culture
wherein discourse resides, and also in response to strategic, intentional messaging. The findings of the study point to several areas where the influence of the discourses of corporate cultures on participants was evident in their sensemaking.

The participants believed that their work was meaningful and that they were contributing value to their organizations. They made sense of themselves in the context of corporate messages of specialness and belonging that reinforced their belief in the importance and quality of their work. This belief, in turn, motivated them to remain within their organizations as confident contributors and to strive for ever higher levels of achievement through personal and professional development. Further, the participants made sense of themselves in the context of organizational rules that provided clear behavioral and performance guidelines for the collective. They understood that the perceptions of others, which in turn informed their perceptions of themselves, were driven by the mandate to integrate cultural messaging and conform to group norms.

Participants also believed that they enjoyed mutually beneficial relationships with their organizations that were solidified through corporate discourses of inclusion and reward for loyalty and performance. They felt good about themselves and could see the same level of satisfaction mirrored for them by other organizational members. This mirroring facilitated ongoing sensemaking for the participants; they saw themselves as members of a value-added, protected collective. At the same time, they were exposed to corporate discourses of organizational change to which adaptation was a key indicator of success. Participants made sense of themselves as agile and responsive to the churn that was a normal part of corporate life, seeing themselves as evolving in response to organizational shifts. This ability to adapt and persevere in the context of multiple demands and high expectations allowed them to make sense
of themselves as competent and confident, which served to increase their overall satisfaction with work and life.

In summary, exposure to corporate discourse influences the identity of ICs in multiple ways. They feel that their work is valuable; they realize success in the collective by conforming to organizational rules; they see themselves as situated in mutually beneficial relationships with their employers; and they are resilient and constantly evolving.

**Discussion in Relation to the Theoretical Framework: Critical Theory**

Critical theory views society through the lens of specific sociohistorical contexts and dominant ideologies with an emphasis on exposing opportunities for the emancipation of those who may be the victims of oppression and/or marginalization (Chandler & Munday, 2011). The following discussion is based on an examination of the study findings through the lens of critical theory and critical sensemaking to explore how long-term immersion in corporate cultures informed participants’ understanding of how their identities had developed through a process of continuous sensemaking in relation to dominant organizational discourse.

The findings of this study provide a real-world counterpoint to questions raised within the theoretical framework regarding oppression within corporate cultures and to what extent they actually do oppress their members. The results of the study indicate that the relationship between the participants and their organizations were based on the offer and acceptance of mutually realized benefits. Further, the results conclude that the presence of external needs and desires (financial needs, family obligations, lifestyle choices) of the participants serve to influence choices and behavior to a similar, if not greater, extent than organizational norms and drivers traditionally explored through a critical lens.
The Frankfurt School theorists assert that power structures are oppressive and manipulative in their use of discourse to manipulate others. Despite feeling stress around periodic shifts in leadership and organizational goals, the participants did not express a sense of being explicitly oppressed or manipulated. Actually, they were acutely conscious of the tradeoffs inherent in the context of their social contracts with their employers. They had learned to manage their lives in accordance with these agreements to reap the benefits of job security and monetary compensation. Through this lens one might argue that organizations themselves are emancipatory structures in that they may provide freedom from the stress of personal want.

The concern that an over-reliance on technology would lead to “manipulation of human beings resulting in the destruction of culture and personality” was expressed by the Frankfurt School theorists (Sudarsen, 1998, p. 258). A finding of this study that was common to all participants was that adaptation to evolving technologies was necessary for them to identify as successful members of their organizations. This reliance on technology served as a double-edged sword in that it was both a pain point and a positive challenge. Margaret summarized this dilemma when she stated, “I think that one of the things people want the most is to be able to grow. And sometimes that can be a difficult thing. The environment and the technology that we use every day . . . is always evolving.”

Discussion of Findings in Relation to the Theoretical Framework: Critical Sensemaking

Like critical theory, the critical sensemaking framework analyzes the influences of power, position, and language (expressed as dominant discourse) on individuals’ sensemaking in organizations. The findings of the study directly address the process of participants’ sensemaking in the presence of organizational discourse. As all were members of corporate organizations, power imbalances were part of their everyday experience. Participants’ view of
themselves evolved relative to how they had resolved their relationship to power in the organizational hierarchy. They identified themselves with characteristics such as pride, pragmatism, acceptance, and a growth-orientation. Peter asserted, “You’re here to provide direction and meet the goal of being number one. Is it 100 percent satisfaction? Of course not . . . but there aren’t many places in the world that are.”

Critical sensemaking incorporates key concepts form Unger’s (1987) formative contexts and Mills and Murgatroyd’s (1991) organizational rules. Formative contexts are the filters through which members of a society or culture view their worlds and that influence decision making. For the study participants, societal expectations of the educated, white-collar worker include gainful employment, a satisfactory income, the ability to provide well for one’s family, and afford a comfortable life. To attain these objectives, it is necessary to follow organizational rules that define socially acceptable behaviors to ensure continued organizational membership. Participants in this study saw themselves as existing within a framework of rules and expectations that, if met successfully, set the stage for a mutually beneficial relationship.

Discursive practices may also be used to embed and reinforce environmental culture at a local level (Helms Mill & Mills, 2017; Helms Mills et al., 2010). Participants discussed the existence of two, often disparate, realities within their organizations; a broader macro-culture and an internal microculture. The macro-culture was perceived as more formal, less personal, highly regimented and rules-driven. This broader culture drove the enforcement of the rules and the delivery of cascaded messaging concerning organizational goals. In contrast, their views of their local microcultures were softer. The discourse underlying local cultures was one of collaboration and safety, a space within which to ask for and receive support. Personal relationships with peers and direct management were an integral part of team life. It was within
these local environments that individuals found joy and sustenance in their work. Sam concluded, “They have managed to create a culture of support, I would say.”

In summary, there is a lack of sufficient evidence to support the assertion that the participants identified themselves as oppressed or victimized within their corporate cultures. On the contrary, participants recognized the mutually beneficial relationships they had negotiated with their organizations that made membership worthwhile. Reliance on evolving technologies, feared by some critical theorists as anathema to the individual, proved to be a potential cause of anxiety but also a driver of motivation and a way for participants to identify themselves as successful employees. Organizational rules and discursive practices to guide behavioral and performance expectations were key features of the corporate cultures in which the participants were located and provided the context within which they made sense of themselves as productive members of the organization. Compliance was an expectation of participants and was sometimes described as stressful or limiting. At the same time, participants viewed the rules as price of entry for organizational membership. Discourse served as a structuring mechanism for the participants and provided them with a way to makes sense of who they were within the larger, more formal organizational cultures of which they were a part, while simultaneously building a sense of self in the context of local, team cultures.

Discussion of the Findings in Relation to the Literature

The findings of the study are discussed in this section as they relate to themes from the review of the literature that formed the conceptual framework for this study. These themes are briefly reviewed and alignments with the findings of the study are presented. The four key themes from the literature are work and organizational membership from the industrial to postmodern age, organizational discourse, organizational culture, and organizational identity and
sensemaking in the workplace. The five key findings of the study are that (a) participants found the work meaningful; (b) participants found that following the rules benefits everyone; (c) participants believe they enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship with their companies; (d) participants believed in the importance of being realistic and pragmatic over the long term; and (e) participants believed they were a work in progress.

**Work and Organizational Membership: Industrial to Postmodern Era**

The nature of work has changed radically over the past century. Industrialization, technology, and diversification of the U.S. workforce has changed the fundamental meaning of work. Agreements between employers and employees reflect unpredictable, frequently changing organizational landscapes in which long-term job security is nonexistent. Social contracts have evolved since the industrial age. Edwards and Karau (2007) define a social contract as “the set of norms, assumptions, and beliefs that society conceives as fair and appropriate for parties involved in employment relationships” (p. 67).

The findings of the study align with the themes revealed in the literature regarding the nature of the employer-employee relationship. A key finding of the study was that participants believed following organizational rules benefitted them in the long term. Having a clear set of behavioral and performance guidelines in place ensured a predictable, stable environment that set the stage for success. Transparency between participants and their employers allowed them to make sense of themselves as valued contributors to broader organizational mission and goals. Further, participants were able to enjoy mutually beneficial relationships with their employers. In exchange for following rules and maintaining strict organizational standards, they enjoyed the rewards of continued employment with generous compensation and other benefits, such as opportunities for personal and professional development.
Organizational Discourse

An individual’s personal understanding of what it means to be part of an organization may be understood as framed in the context of organizational discourses. Discourse may be understood as sets of practices which include the production, transmission, and consumption of both explicit and implied rules in organizations which serve to reinforce a dominant perception of normative behavior. Discourse includes an emphasis on both spoken and written texts, as well as the nature of discursive interactions and embedded social context (Grant et al., 2001). Power circulates through discourse, where it works as a “productive network [that] runs through the whole social body” (Foucault, 1984, p. 119). Discourse may exist at various levels of influence within the organization and is essential to the creation of shared social realities.

Participants described their organizations as regularly transmitting information about rules, goals, mission, and performance objectives through both top-down and team-wide communications. The cultural expectation set by the frequent cascades of information was that all members of the organization would comply with this messaging. This culture of compliance around messaging was socialized as the most efficient and transparent means of ensuring organizational consistencies. The participants also reported receiving frequent and consistent messaging regarding societal or industrial importance of their organizations. They were told that the work they did was important, and they were encouraged to feel proud of themselves as employees. Company communications, slogans, and marketing campaigns served to imbue some participants with a sense of specialness and entrée into an exclusive club.

Organizational Culture

The embedding of discourse through various texts and discursive practices is only possible in the context of a culture which serves as the foundation from which discourses are
created and sustained. Cultures consist of social constructions that serve to reward and reinforce certain behaviors. They exist independent of the organization’s members. Cultures strive to integrate internally as well as to adapt to external circumstances. Competing views of culture define it as that which either creates order and unity for its members, through unified problem-solving, or as underscored by ambiguity and fragmentation. Whether one views culture as unified or inherently divided, it never stays the same. External environments are always changing and this in turn is a root cause of organizational change. Weick emphasizes that organizations “can only change in the direction of the dominant story” (2012a, p. 143).

The findings of the study reveal that participants were all members of very unified cultures in keeping with Schein’s (2010) definition of culture as an integrated whole. Participants reported that agreement and consensus were considered the signs of success and stability in their organizations. Cultural norms were embedded through the organizational rules that employees were expected to follow. Further, their organizations were frequently changing in response to shifts in external environments, such as in finance and technology. At these times, strategic cascades of information were employed to communicate consistent messaging regarding goals, mission, and expectations of employees. The previously discussed strategy of communicating organizational specialness was also employed to create a sense of employee pride and cohesion around company mission and goals.

Contemporary corporate cultures have been described as colonizing (Deetz, 1992; 2014; Alvesson & Deetz, 2016) and driven by “corporate rhetoric” (Combs, 2002). The concept of corporate colonization has been used to describe organizations in which dominant organizational discourses serve to marginalize employees through both subtle and explicit means and to give greater voice to those with greater power.
The findings of the study did not reveal any explicit feelings of colonization shared by the participants. Again, the mutually beneficial relationship that they enjoyed with their employers served to level the playing field to a satisfactory extent. Also, because they were able to find meaning in their work, these participants felt a sense of ownership and pride that served to allay feelings of being marginalized, at least within their local, team cultures. Further, the fact that all the participants had or were taking advantage of the opportunity to further their educations or gain professional certifications (paid for by their employers) gave them a sense of empowerment and control over their destinies.

**Organizational Identity and Sensemaking in the Workplace**

Organizational environments have become increasingly fluid and demanding in the context of globalization and technological advances that allow for greater work-based access and productivity (Edley, 2001). This may result in higher potential for ambiguity between one’s personal and professional identities. Individuals create and maintain identities over time within their work environments. Weick’s (1995) concept of sensemaking describes a continuous process in which the individual constructs and maintains her identity in response to organizational events and culture. This sensemaking process is ongoing, evolving, and fundamental to the individual’s organizational life. The individual’s self-perception influences her actions that in turn influence others’ perceptions of her, which then serve to inform her identity (Weick et al., 2005).

The findings of the study support the concept of increasing fluidity of the corporate work environments the participants were a part of. They recognized and expressed challenges inherent in maintaining a powerful sense of self, especially during times of change. Strict rules of conduct and high performance expectations could at times be draining or feel depersonalizing,
but they were understood as price of entry for membership in a culture that supported good work and provided satisfactory compensation. What all the participants in the study shared was the ability, learned over time and with experience, to adopt a pragmatic attitude in relation to their work. This allowed them to maintain a focus on themselves as being in context, but not a byproduct of it. The identities that they developed within their organizations, and especially within their local team cultures, were derived from the positive experience of the (mostly) meaningful work itself.

Further, the study found that the participants’ sense of being “works in progress,” constantly evolving against a backdrop of professional as well as personal goals, allowed them to maintain identities within a holistic context. Moreover, the relationships that participants forged with their team members and managers were collegial and supportive. They described a sense of camaraderie or professional respect for colleagues that allowed them to make sense of themselves as productive individuals in a dynamic context.

While sensemaking may be defined as the way in which individuals in organizations collectively construct reality to make sense of events, critical sensemaking shifts focus to how organizational power and dominant assumptions privilege some identities over others and create them as meaningful for individuals (Helms Mills et al., 2010, p. 188). Critical sensemaking considers the multiple influences of power, position, and language in organizational life (Helms Mills et al., 2010).

The findings of the study speak to the ways in which ICs assimilated messages regarding dominant assumptions and their enforcement as both knowledge and mandate within their organizations. The participants developed a pragmatic stance in relation to their broader organizational culture which was tempered by the more personal, collegial team cultures they
worked with day to day. They did not struggle with accepting the fact that there were issues of power and position that directly influenced the messaging they received. Again, this acceptance was an acknowledgement of the price of entry for organizational membership.

The influence of power disparities was evidenced by some participants who expressed concern about organizational changes with which they may not have felt positive about, such as reorganizations in which coworkers were lost. The possibility of losing one’s own position due to restructuring or age was a concern that was expressed. Uncertainty about the future coexisted with a satisfying present. The cognitive dissonance that the participants felt as they held two opposing, simultaneous truths was unsettling for them.

**Study Limitations**

As the participant pool was narrowly defined (male or female ICs from Fortune 500 or equivalent companies with five-plus years of experience in role) there is limited generalizability of the results of this study to other populations. Noncorporate sites were excluded from the study, as was anyone who was in a management role. Participants were all college-educated and nonimmigrants. All exhibited a high comfort level with technology and social media as a means of communicating. Of the seven participants, three were from the high-tech sector and three were from the financial sector. Four were employed in roles related to curriculum development and training delivery within their organizations. Finally, although not an intentional inclusion criterion, all of the participants were White, and so the responses were all from the dominant majority within their work organizations.

The participants were all self-selectors responding to a Call for Participants posted on LinkedIn or referred via email through snowballing. This stated, all of them shared the same characteristic of being hand-raisers for the study. Further, the participants all had lengthy tenure
at their organizations of employment which could be seen as an indicator of their satisfaction with their employment, leading to some of the themes in the study of a sense of belonging, of being compensated as valuable contributors, of having space to grow personally and professionally, and of a sense of safety within a structured community where the rules are clear. Finally, researcher positionality (as a corporate employee) must be considered in the interpretation of participants’ experiences as restoried and analyzed.

**Directions for Future Research and Recommendations for Practice**

The rationale underlying this study was its usefulness as a tool for exploring the ways in which ICs make sense of who they are within corporate cultures. Specifically, the study explored the influence of exposure to dominant corporate discourses, which was the central phenomenon of this study. This study has added to the scholarly dialogue by providing greater clarity on the process by which ICs, within the collective of corporate culture, are influenced by the discourse in their environment as they engage in sensemaking. The results of this study have implications for practice as well as theory and research.

**Directions for Future Research**

This study contributes to the extant body of critically influenced literature on the intersection between work and personal identity in contemporary society. Results may inform contemporary theories on how individuals come to define themselves within corporate cultures. Specifically, the research provided insights into the influence of dominant discourses on individuals’ identity development through sensemaking. The results of this study also point to areas for future research on the impacts of power and dominant discourse on individuals within corporate cultures.
The embedding of corporate culture through discourses of the organization as family warrants further investigation. Many organizations offer attractive benefits and rewards to individuals as extras earned solely by virtue of their status as employees (Kirby & Krone, 2002). Discourses of family membership abound in corporate cultures, serving the purpose of building a sense of security and belonging through the enforcement of dominant cultural beliefs (Rosen, 1985). Further research could surface the extent to which such discourses help or hinder individuals to grow and develop as independent professionals. For example, future studies could probe for the tipping point beyond which an individual’s exposure to organizational discourses of family belonging may limit his/her ability to assess levels of satisfaction with the work itself or correctly ascertain when seeking outside opportunities may offer greater professional development.

The participants in this study exhibited resilience in the face of organizational change. The ability to adapt to changes in leadership, strategy, and technology was a trait shared by all. To what extent was this resilience fostered, either directly or indirectly, by the participants’ organizations? Further research into the concept of resilience in corporate cultures could clarify how organizations may build and encourage resilience to sustain employees through periods of change. Further, what are the consequences for ICs in long term relationships with their organizations when they make sense of who they are primarily in the context of their status as organizational members? How can ICs be best prepared to manage the effects of downsizing or corporate restructuring?

The role of resistance in organizations as expressed in opposition to dominant ideologies (Mumby, 2004) is an area for further research. While the findings of this study did not reveal explicit resistance by participants to organizational rules or in response to periods of
organizational change, organizational actors may hold varying interpretations of dominant ideologies held in place by the embedding of organizational discourses (Hardy & Phillips, 2004). To this end, it is a fair assumption that not all organizational members will agree with all organizational rules or respond in the same ways to discursive practices. Within corporate cultures, where the mark of success may be agreement and alignment with top-down messaging, how is resistance expressed and managed in balance with individuals’ professional aspirations? Specifically, to what extent do individuals tend to submerge or abandon resistance in the pursuit of advancement?

There is an opportunity to replicate the study with different populations and compare the results. For example, the study could explore the influence of the central phenomenon on women or persons representing specific racial or ethnic groups. Another avenue of exploration along these lines would be to replicate the study with participants from other fields where ICs make up part of the workforce, such as education, healthcare, or the military.

In summary, the results of the study raised a number of areas for future research into the mechanisms by which discourses are embedded in organizational cultures and assimilated by ICs. Further future research is needed to explore the developmental effects on ICs of assimilating dominant discourses such as those of organization-as-family. Additionally, future research may address the means by which resilience may be developed and maintained in corporate cultures during times of organizational change. The results of the study indicated that the characteristic of resilience was described frequently as an essential element in ICs’ successful adaptation to change. Further research could also explore how long-term ICs make sense of and manage radical change such as downsizing and reductions in force. The question of how ICs may experience or enact resistance to organizational rules is an area for further exploration.
Future research could also replicate this study with a focus on different populations or professions.

**Recommendations for Practice**

The results of the study have a number of critical, practical implications that may inform corporate practice and policy. There are multiple areas in which companies can leverage the power of corporate discourses, in the spirit of continuous improvement, to achieve measurable, mutual benefits at both the IC and organizational levels.

Without exception, participants emphasized the value that opportunities for development played in their lives as they continued to evolve their understanding of who they were over time. The ability to take advantage of continuing education was a key driver of employee retention. Organizations who implement development programs send a clear cultural message of respect and commitment to their employees, especially to ICs who may feel less integral to the organization than those on the leadership or management track.

Organizations may use the findings of this study as a rationale for designing employee development programs that offer enhanced options for educational advancement, such as advanced degrees and professional certifications. Tuition reimbursement programs to help employees defray educational costs were identified by this study as a key motivator and a driver of retention. In addition to formal education, personal development offerings would provide options for ICs who wish to grow their skillsets on practical topics that would contribute to their overall, holistic development. To this end, organizations that aren’t already doing so might consider subscribing to vendor-driven solutions that offer just-in-time, online or recorded webinar training. This option would be especially useful as a means of providing employees with technology upskilling.
A critical finding of this study was that employees in corporate cultures must continually adapt to evolving technologies to be successful in their roles. This need to keep pace emerged as both a key stressor and motivator for the participants. The extent to which they were able to adapt to evolving technologies had a direct influence on their perceptions of themselves as successful members of the organization. Organizations must recognize that the successful use of technology is critical to both individual and organizational success. They must commit to supporting both by instituting and maintaining in-house technology training and even peer-to-peer support programs that all users may access as needed.

Another key theme of the study was that successful ICs in frequently changing environments value teamwork and actively seek out opportunities for collaboration on the job. They know that such partnerships lead to more successful outcomes, and they also appreciate the sense of belonging and good fit that comes with being part of a cohesive team microculture. To this end, ICs might also benefit from peer-to-peer advising and training on the job, particularly in the area of technology. Organizations might promote a culture of belonging and inclusion through the implementation of peer-based onboarding and development programs, particularly in the area of technology training. The findings of this study suggest that ICs know they need to add to the company’s bottom line while also keeping their skills up to date and remaining competitive in the workforce. They want to see themselves as confident and as a value-add within the collective.

In addition to providing assistance on job-based topics, a peer-to-peer model could be leveraged to create communities of practice for ICs in corporate cultures. By participating in such peer-driven communities of practice, ICs may gain greater insight into the influences of corporate culture on their self-perceptions, life choices, and professional trajectories over time.
They may be encouraged to reflect upon the importance of proactively seeking development opportunities to continue enhancing their skillsets which may in turn increase their ability to navigate their careers during times of organizational change.

In addition to emphasizing the importance of employee development through training and collaboration opportunities, organizations must consider the impacts of corporate messaging and discourse on ICs. Strategic cascades and other forms of organizational communication have the potential, if employed thoughtfully, to be useful tools in promoting and reinforcing important messaging around organizational mission and goals. These communications might be in the form of quarterly business updates, town hall meetings, or company-sponsored events. Periodic communications via digital channels might be leveraged. Organizations might evaluate their communication strategies and reflect on ways that these discursive practices may be leveraged to influence the culture most productively.

ICs are independent and self-directed members of the organization, but the findings of this study suggest they need to feel they have a clear view of company mission and goals which provide a framework for the behavioral and performance expectations they leverage to make sense of themselves in the workplace. Further, a regular communication strategy during times of change can facilitate acceptance by providing organizational members with clear messages about future developments and any expectations of specific departments or teams. The results of this study revealed that participants were able to adapt to organizational expectations without undue difficulty provided the messaging was clear and inclusive.

Finally, the study revealed high levels of satisfaction in organizations that showed a strong commitment to diversity and inclusion. Acceptance of openly gay employees was a key driver of satisfaction and retention. Moreover, the results of the study indicated that the
atmosphere of acceptance created in organizations with a commitment to diversity and inclusion contributes to an overall sense of safety and equity for all organizational members. Organizations might consider the many positive impacts that the implementation of diversity and inclusion messaging and programming. A culture that is inclusive of all and that communicates fairness and solidarity creates a healthy space for ICs to develop themselves and contribute value within the collective.

These implications all underscore the importance of creating supportive, transparent cultures that provide ICs with a clear view into the corporate mission, an understanding of how success is defined, and that demonstrate a commitment to employee development and community-building. Supporting the dissemination of healthy discourses, such as those of belonging, commitment to development, and respect for the individual through various organizational means, will help to create cultures in which ICs can see themselves as safe, valued, and able to meet the demands of their work. Organizations must recognize that long-term ICs expect a mutually beneficial relationship that considers a range of personal and professional development needs and provides the tools and resources needed to get the job done in a professional and collaborative manner.

Conclusion

Despite the limitations, this study yielded several key conclusions regarding the experience of ICs immersed in corporate cultures. These conclusions address the research question that framed this study: How does exposure to discourse in corporate cultures influence the identity of ICs through sensemaking?

The discussion that follows examines each conclusion as it relates to ICs’ identity development through sensemaking. These conclusions consider the central phenomenon of the
study, which was the influence of dominant discourses on the sensemaking of ICs in corporate cultures. The discussion is presented in the context of five key findings: (a) participants found the work meaningful; (b) participants found that following the rules benefits everyone; (c) participants believed they enjoyed a mutually beneficial relationship; (d) participants believed in the importance of being realistic and pragmatic; and (e) participants believed they were a work in progress.

An IC’s work must be meaningful. The value with which ICs imbue their contributions allows them to see themselves as successful employees who add value to their own lives as well as to the company’s bottom line. Bailey and Madden (2016) discuss the concept of self-transcendence as a defining feature of meaningful work in that “individuals tended to experience their work as meaningful when it mattered to others more than just to themselves” (p. 3). What this finding indicates with respect to the central phenomenon is that organizational messaging that expresses appreciation and confirms the value of work performed well further imbues members with a sense of purpose and specialness. Being able to take pride in one’s work also provides a protective barrier from power structures that might otherwise be accessible only via broader discourses of power disseminated through top-down, one-way messaging. Finding meaning in work facilitates the acceptance of organizational rules that might otherwise feel constraining. Independence and creativity expressed through meaningful work serves to strengthen ICs’ sense of who they are as organizational members within the context of the broader organization.

ICs work most effectively within corporate cultures that espouse a clear set of values and rules applicable to all, disseminated via discourses of compliance and regulation promoted through such means as company codes of conduct, mandatory training, and team goals.
Adherence to the rules allows them to make sense of themselves as members of the collective and identify with organizational mission and goals. They recognize that adherence to guidelines is a prerequisite to continued membership in the culture. Working in hierarchical structures is well-tolerated if the rules make sense and serve to protect and clarify ICs’ sense of self within the collective. They also understand that they are expected to embrace evolving tools and technologies to keep pace with organizational expectations expressed through discourses of high performance and competitiveness. These discourses are promoted through such practices as company branding, organizational messaging, and team competition. This expectation, if successfully executed upon, allows for a continued vision of oneself as a value-adding member of the organization. Not being able to keep up could mean limited opportunities for growth or worse, losing one’s identity as “I who am successful here.”

It is important to note that technology adoption is easier for ICs when they feel empowered to embrace technology instead of feeling it is being forced upon them. Cascio and Montealegre (2016) found that “feelings of oppression occur when technology leads to a lack of autonomy, competence, and relatedness” (p. 356). There is an implicit quid pro quo agreement between ICs and their organizations. Discourses of appreciation, belonging, and safety shape the relationship between the IC and the organization and positively influence the IC’s sense of worth. In exchange for faithfully following a clear set of performance guidelines, the security and benefits of membership in the organization are bestowed upon employees, and they are often generous. Organizations receive the benefit of loyalty and steady output from their employees in the service of meeting company goals. This sense of mutual gain requires both employer and employee to work together in the service of achieving satisfactory results (Valizade, Ogbonnaya, Tregaskis, & Forde, 2016).
ICs in corporate cultures are eager to take advantage of opportunities that will allow them to develop themselves as professionals. They take pride in their achievements and see themselves as increasing their value to their organizations. The opportunity to advance one’s education or earn advanced professional credentials is a key driver of retention for ICs. Offers of professional development may be viewed as a discursive practice which seeks to form a bond between ICs and their organizations. There is a recognition that one gives greatly, and in giving, comes reward in the form of material comfort and job security. Discourses of family belonging are communicated through top-down and organization-wide messaging that allows ICs to identify themselves as extended family members who are more deeply connected to company mission and goals. An emphasis on teamwork and collaboration, mostly possible at the local, team level, serve to create a safe, collegial environment in which ICs feel connected to their peers. This in turn allows them to make sense of themselves as members of a value-add collective. The workplace provides both a sense of community and a venue for activity, which are important social elements (Tangvald-Pedersen & Bongaardt, 2017).

Finally, if they are to survive in the long term within their organizations, successful ICs must learn to define who they are in relation to periods of downsizing, relocation, acquisitions, and changes in leadership. They must develop a resilient sense of self that allows them to coexist with discourses of impermanence and change, embedded through periods of restructuring and downsizing that underlie many corporate cultures. To this end, ICs must learn to identify as integral members of their organizations who are simultaneously independent from them. They realize they are not necessarily privy to information at higher levels of the organization, so they don’t always know when change is on the horizon. They know that change is inevitable, however, and they prepare mentally for it. While they may feel affection for and take pride in
their organizations, they do not over-identify with their work personas. They make time for themselves and the people and pursuits that drive them personally. With time and the maturity that life brings, they have established a holistic sense of who they are in the world beyond work.

The economic, technical, and cultural transformations that have shaped contemporary society have radically redefined the relationships of the individual to her or his employer and reshaped conceptions of the workplace. The rationale for this study was to expand the research on the influence of the central phenomenon of dominant organizational discourse on ICs’ sensemaking to better understand how they construct and maintain their identities in corporate cultures. This research contributes to the body of knowledge on the intersection between work and personal identity in contemporary society. These results of the study also have critical, practical implications. Through an examination of the influence of the central phenomenon of dominant discourses on individuals’ identity through sensemaking, recommendations for improving professional practice were presented for both organizations and their individual contributors.
References


