

ARE YOU BUYING WHAT THEY'RE SELLING?: ETHNOGRAPHICALLY  
EXPLORING ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTIFICATION THROUGH EMPLOYEES'  
EVERYDAY TALK

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## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to explore how employees' reflect organizational identification strategies in their everyday talk at a big-box retailer. Previous studies on organizational identification have mostly been organization-centric, focusing on the strategies organizations employ to induce employee identification. This study fills this gap by exploring the employee side of the identification process. Using ethnographic methods, the researcher conducted complete participant observation and textual analysis to understand how employees reflect, mock, and/or rebel against the organization's identification strategies in their narratives and rites.

This study used a three phase approach to gain a deeper understanding of how employees used everyday discourse to reflect their connection with an organization. In Phase I, complete participant observation and informant interviews were conducted during the 2011-2012 holiday season at a big-box retailer, Big Alpha. Data were coded using thematic analysis. The second phase consisted of textually analyzing organizational artifacts to determine how Big Alpha employed organizational identification strategies. In the last phase, participant observation and informant interview data were compared to the strategies found in Phase II to determine what identification strategies employees reflected in their everyday talk.

Findings indicate that employees enact specific identification strategies that reflect identification and disidentification. Additionally, employees utilized the tactic of espoused shared values, indicating their identification with their work group more than with Big Alpha. This study extends organizational identification theory by revealing specific five new tactics and one new strategy that employees use that connect them or disconnect them

from the organization. This study also extends research on temporary workers as findings indicated that seasonal, part-time, and college student workers may not perceive themselves as having “real jobs.” Finally, this study found that there may be a worker class system that influences the extent to which employees may or may not identify with the organization. These findings suggest practical implications and areas of future research.

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*Having a purpose in life, throw into your work such strength of mind and muscle as God has given you.*  
-Carlyle<sup>1</sup>

This dissertation represents the culmination of many hours of hard work, blood, sweat and tears, and pure determination, as the English writer Carlyle contended in the quotation above. Five years ago, I started on this journey, unsure of where it would lead. My journey, like a marathon, has been filled with many hills and valleys. Now, as the finish line is here, I have realized that with each turning point (or twist in the road), I have grown as a person, a teacher, and a researcher. Through it all, I could not have reached the finish line if it were not for a wonderful support system cheering me on.

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<sup>1</sup> Morris, A. S. (1948). *One thousand inspirational things*. Chicago, IL: Spencer Press, Inc.

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## **DEDICATION**

To my best friend and husband, Mark, my little fish, Freya, and to all of the employees at Big Alpha who unknowingly contributed to this project and opened their hearts to me. I am eternally grateful.

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## **CHAPTER ONE. INTRODUCTION**

In *Nickel and Dimed: On (Not) Getting By in America*, author Barbara Ehrenreich (2001) documented how she attempted to make a living working minimum wage for one year. Ehrenreich recounted her time working as a waitress in Florida, as a hotel maid and house cleaner in Maine, and as an associate at a Wal-Mart store in Minnesota. What she discovered was that these blue-collar jobs required many of the same skills as white-collar work: stamina, focus, memory, and quick learning. She also found that there were many hidden costs with the necessities in life such as shelter and food. For example, many low-income individuals cannot afford security deposits for apartments or often end up buying more expensive food due to lack of appliances and refrigeration.

Ten years later, many workers still struggle to get by in America. As evidence, the number of people in poverty is the highest it has been in the 52 years poverty statistics have been compiled. The poverty rate is 15.1 % overall, with 13 % of American women and 9.6 % of men who are poor (DeNavis-Walt, Proctor, & Smith, 2011). Beyond the official poverty statistics, full-time wage and salaried workers struggle as well, earning an average of \$669 per week, which is roughly \$35,000 per year. Women are more likely than men to be employed part-time with 26 % of all women salary and wage earners working part-time compared with 13 % of male salary and wage earners. Median income for part-time women workers was \$232 per week in 2010 whereas male part-time workers earned less, earning \$223 per week in 2010. Women are more likely to be paid by the hour, accounting for sixty-two percent of all salary and wage earners compared with only 56 % of men who are paid by the hour. The median income for female and male wage earners in 2010 was \$11.83 and \$13.76 per hour respectively (U.S. Department of Labor, 2011).

Not only are employees' salaries low, but with the weak national and international economy, many businesses are downsizing by laying off workers and cutting employee benefits. According to The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM), 63 % of HR professionals reported that their organization's employee benefits were negatively affected due to the current economic recession (Employee Benefits, 2011). Organizations are reducing employee perks such as pension plans, 401(k) contributions, bonuses, and cost-of-living increases in order to save money (Petrecca, 2009). Work-life benefits are usually used as a retention tool, but in the current economy, the fear of unemployment is enough to entice employees to remain in an organization, give up flexible work arrangements, or not request them for fear that they will appear less committed to the organization (Shin, 2009). Lazarus (2009), a writer for the *Los Angeles Times*, noted that many individuals are thankful to have a job despite enduring decreases in pay and benefits. Lazarus quoted one individual, a cab driver from Burbank, California, as saying "I'm only making half as much as I was making a year ago. [sic] But at least I have a job" (para. 23). Lazarus further explained that employees have a love-hate relationship with employers; they are grateful to organizations for employing them but feel angry that pay and work-life benefits are slowly decreasing.

Because of the depth of the present recession, "jobless recovery," and prolonged unemployment, individuals' connection with their organization may have changed. According to a 2009 U.S. Strategic Rewards Survey, of the companies surveyed, employees reported that their engagement levels dropped 9 % since the previous year (Miller, 2009). If employees are less engaged with the organization, they may experience less attachment with the organization. Identification is a process through which individuals

feel connected to an organization (Cheney, 1983b). Employee identification may be affected because of decreasing salaries, a diminishing workforce, an increase in unpaid hours, and limited work-life benefits. Employees also may feel alienated due to not having access to work-life benefits, or they may have negative feelings toward the organization because of low wages and longer hours. In a study of house organs, Cheney (1983a) found that fringe benefits such as dental coverage and cost-of-living adjustments induced employee identification. Additionally, the organization's and the employees' values may conflict, which may cause employees to disidentify with the organization. For example, in their study of the U.S. Forest Service's newsletter, DiSanza and Bullis (1999) found that employees reported that they had been humiliated, which conflicted with the company's value of putting people first, and they disidentified with the organization when their personal experiences contradicted the company's values indicated in the newsletter.

Due to the bleak economic picture of the labor force and the potential implication for employee identification, we need to reexamine identification, encompassing both the employees' and the organization's perspectives. This dissertation examines how employees' everyday talk mirrors organizational identification strategies, and it seeks to address the following question: How do employees' discussions around the "water cooler" reveal employees' identification to the organization and its values? This question is worthy of investigation because if employees reflect organizational identification, they will make decisions with the organization's best interests in mind and may work hard to ensure the organization maintains a positive image, no matter if they are "on the clock" or not. Or, employees may mock the organization's identification strategies, which may contribute to employees disassociating themselves from the organization and possibly ending their

employment. This study then has practical implications for both employees and organizations. In order to address the aforementioned question, I became a seasonal employee at a big-box retailer (e.g., Walmart, Target, Best Buy, Home Depot, Lowe's) during the 2011 holiday season. During my eight week tenure, I observed how employees communicatively enacted organizational identification and how employees' discourse did or did not mirror the organization's identification strategies.

The present study conceptualizes everyday talk through an organizational discourse lens. Organizational discourse is "the principal means by which organization members create a coherent social reality that frames their sense of who they are" (Mumby & Clair, 2011, p. 77). Through discourse, individuals construct their reality within the organization. Individuals use discourse to work out issues and make sense of their organizational experiences (Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001). According to Putnam and Fairhurst (2001), "language becomes a system or code in which organizational communities define their identities and relationships" (p. 83). Language, then, acts as a vehicle through which employees express their organizational identification. Organizational discourse encompasses many different types of communication phenomenon including narratives and rites (Mumby & Clair, 2011). Narratives include stories (Collinson, 1988; Helmer, 1993; Mumby, 1987), humor, and social talk (Mirivel & Tracy, 2005). Stories function to reinforce and create members' commitment, transmit organizational beliefs (Martin & Powers, 1983), socialize new members (Brown, 1985), control members' behaviors (Wilkins, 1983), legitimate power relations within the organization (Mumby, 1987), and transform the workspace into drama (Trujillo & Dionisopoulos, 1987). Brown (1990a) drew from these categories, collapsing these into three general categories: 1) identification

and bonding; 2) reducing uncertainty; and 3) management of meaning. This study focuses on Brown's first category, identification and bonding, exploring how narratives and rites reflect employees' organizational identification.

Research-to-date has focused on the function of narratives and rites, but few studies have explored how these forms of organizational discourse occur in natural settings. Although stories have been found to reinforce and create members' commitment, transmit organizational values (Martin & Powers, 1983), and Brown (1990a) acknowledges that stories may influence identification, we have yet to understand how narratives and rites may reflect organizational identification. This study contributes to the organizational discourse literature by focusing on narratives and rites *in vivo*, specifically examining how employees reflect or mock organizational identification strategies through their everyday talk.

### **Organizational Identification**

Organizational identification, based on Burke's (1950) theory of identification, is concerned with how individuals classify themselves according to the different social groups in which they belong (e.g., gender, ethnicity, age, class, occupation). Identification "provides a feeling of connection or consubstantiality (shared substance) between two otherwise separate individuals" (Gossett, 2002, p. 386). In an organizational setting, individuals feel a connection with the organization and may view themselves as part of the organization.

Over the past several decades, organizations have come to understand the positive rewards of inducing employees to identify with their organization. For instance, employees who identify with an organization make decisions with the organization's interests in mind

(Bullis & Tompkins, 1989; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). Highly identified employees will keep the organization in mind when deciding whether to ask for a raise, time off, or stay an extra few minutes to finish their work. Bullis and Tompkins found that highly identified employees reported working long hours in order to get the job done rather than trying to make money. Employees who identify with the organization also report higher employee satisfaction (Cheney, 1983b), and indicate higher commitment to the organization (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987). Employees who identify with an organization also report less turnover and increased productivity (Scott, Connaughton, Diaz-Saenz, Maguire, Ramirez, & Richardson, 1999). Identification is also a way for organizations to subtly control employees (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985).

Most of the identification research-to-date has focused on organizational identification strategies (Cheney, 1983b; DiSanza & Bullis, 1999; Gossett, 2002; Pratt, 2001), commitment (see Cheney & Tompkins, 1987; Mael & Ashforth, 1995; Sass & Canary, 1991), and/or issues related to reliability and validity of organizational identification scales (see Cheney, 1983b; Sass & Canary, 1991; Tompkins & Cheney, 1987). Because there are numerous benefits of having employees identify with the organization (e.g., job satisfaction, decision-making, employee motivation, organizational commitment), organizations utilize strategies to induce employee identification. Cheney (1983b) identified four strategies that organizations use: common ground technique, identification through antithesis, the transcendent “we”, and unifying symbols. In the common ground technique, the organization links itself with employees, demonstrating that they are alike in goals and values. For example, some organizations continually reinforce that the organization and employees have similar values and goals through training and

newsletters (Cheney, 1983b; DiSanza & Bullis, 1999). The second and third strategies, identification through antithesis and the use of the transcendent “we,” occur when organizations unify employees by showing the difference between insiders and outsiders and by using language such as “we” and “they.” Unifying symbols is the fourth strategy. Cheney (1983b) notes organizations use their names, trademarks, and logos to signify their goals and values.

Although organizations implement strategies to induce employees to highly identify, some organizations may spur individuals to experience alternative forms of identification. For instance, Gossett (2002) found that organizations may not want all employees to identify with the organization. She found that temporary workers, in particular, were not allowed access to organizational artifacts such as email or were not able to participate in the decision-making process. As such, temporary workers reported experiencing ambivalence toward the organization. Past research has explored alternative forms of identification such as dual identification (Pratt, 2001; Scott, 2007, 2009), disidentification (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001; Pratt, 2001), ambivalent identification, deidentification (Pratt, 2001), or schizo-identification (Dukerich, Kramer, & Parks, 1998; Scott, 2007; Scott, Corman, & Cheney, 1998).

Multiple or dual identification occurs when individuals identify with multiple targets (Scott, 2007) such as when individuals identify as employees and as mothers or fathers. Disidentification occurs when individuals define themselves as not having the same attributes as the organization. When employees disidentify with an organization, they maintain feelings of disconnect with the organization (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). Pratt (2001), in his study of Amway employees, found that employees disidentified with

Amway when they had infrequent interactions and negative relationships with their mentors. Another alternative form is ambivalent identification, which occurs when individuals are torn by conflicting emotions about the organization. When this happens, individuals either connect with the organization or move away from it and disconnect themselves. When there is a break in an individual's connection with the company, an individual may experience deidentification, the fourth form (Pratt, 2001). Unlike disidentification, participants did not display anger toward Amway (Pratt). The last alternate form of identification is schizo-identification. When employees experience schizo-identification, they identify and disidentify with the organization simultaneously. Employees will experience conflicting identities and will have to decide either to identify or disidentify with the organization (Dukerich et al., 1998).

While research has shown that organizations employ identification strategies and these strategies may spur employees to experience alternate forms of identification (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001; Kahn, 1990, Pratt, 2001; Scott, 2007, Scott et al., 1998), little is known about how these forms are communicatively enacted within an organization. Much of the literature on alternative forms is from a psychological perspective. Currently, we lack a thorough understanding of what communicative factors may influence how and if employees experience these alternative forms of organizational identification. One such way that organizational members may communicate their feelings about, or connection with, an organization is through organizational discourse. Employees' discourse about the organization through their everyday interactions may play a significant role in shaping employee identification, and in turn, alter employee identification.

## **Rationale**

Although substantial research has focused on the integral nature of organizational discourse (Brown, 1990a; Mumby & Clair, 2011; Trice & Beyer, 1984), and how organizations may utilize organizational identification strategies, little scholarship has concentrated on employee identification strategies and how employees may reflect organizational identification through narratives and rites. Therefore, we need to reexamine the concept of identification, encompassing both the organization and the employees' perspectives. The purpose of this ethnographic study is to explore employee identification strategies and the extent to which employees' organizational discourse may reflect organizational identification at a big-box retailer. Specifically, I focus on how employees used narratives and rites and how they imitated the organization's identification strategies. Exploring everyday talk and organizational identification contributes to the literature on organizational discourse and organizational identification in three ways.

First, this ethnographic study provides a more comprehensive picture of organizational identification. The organizational identification literature has heavily focused on how organizations utilize identification strategies and tactics, but we lack an understanding of how employees may reflect these strategies and tactics, either by taking them up as their own or mocking or rebelling against them. Past research has explored the employee side of identification (DiSanza & Bullis, 1999; Gossett, 2002; Pratt, 2001), but this research has yet to analyze how employees may reflect organizational identification strategies throughout their work day. Therefore, this study provides us with a deeper knowledge of how employees may or may not complete the identification process.

Additionally, this study provides us with a deeper understanding of how language, interaction, and identification are linked. Through exploring discourse as it unfolds naturally, we are able to examine how employees utilize language to reflect their connection with the organization. Several scholars have called for more empirical research to understand identification in natural settings (Ashforth, 1998; Chaput, Brummons, & Corren, 2011; Scott, 2007), however, few studies have answered these calls (e.g., Chaput et al., 2011; Gossett, 2002). Although Gossett (2002) employs ethnography to understand temporary workers, she does not observe temporary workers to understand how they use language, but rather uses ethnography to help her understand the temporary worker industry. Further, her participants knew of her researcher role and therefore, she did not employ a covert status; this may have influenced what information participants disclosed to her by participants' censoring what information they conveyed to her. In Chaput et al.'s ethnography, the researchers gathered data on Quebec Solidaire meetings, instead of focusing on interactions in a work setting. The current study focuses on employee interactions throughout the course of the work day. Chaput et al. state "Investigating OI [organizational identification] in interactions is important because it allows us to understand how OI unfolds through the interconnecting actions of difference agents (i.e., persons or things that make a difference in the way a given situation unfolds)" (p. 253). Through employing an ethnographic lens, I am better able to understand employees' language in vivo, rather than asking employees to recall their experiences. Studying language in a natural context allows me to better observe employees' true thoughts and feelings about the organization. Examining how language unfolds naturally also furthers

our knowledge of how language shapes and alters our experiences, primarily our connection with the organization.

Second, this study extends organizational identification theory by communicatively analyzing alternative forms of identification such as multiple identifications, disidentifications, and schizo-identification. Although some scholars have researched these forms (e.g., Conrad & Haynes, 2001; Dukerich et al., 1998; Pratt, 2001; Scott et al., 1998), little empirical research examines these concepts from a communicative framework (Scott, 2007). By examining identification through these alternate forms, we gain a more thorough understanding of how identification is simultaneously a process and product and begin to create a schema of alternative forms of identification grounded in everyday talk. In doing so, the opportunity to extend current conceptualizations of identification and alternate forms of identification may be realized.

Finally, this study explores many forms of organizational discourse (stories, small talk, humor, and rites) and how they may work together to influence identification. The current literature on organizational discourse has yet to uncover how specifically narratives (i.e., stories, humor, social talk) and rites may work together to reflect identification. Most of the research on organizational discourse focuses on one specific type of organizational discourse, rather than analyzing how multiple forms of discourse may collectively reflect employees' connection with the organization. For these reasons, this study aims to undercover how everyday talk may reflect, mock, make reference to, appropriate, or reify employees' identification with the organization to gather a deeper understanding of the role of organizational discourse in organizational identification. Employees will mock the organization in their narratives and stories or they will appropriate the organization's

identification strategies, changing them and making them their own. Studying organizational discourse allows scholars an opportunity to analyze employees' thoughts and beliefs about the organization.

The remainder of this dissertation is organized into four chapters. The second chapter explores the literature on organizational discourse and the role of discourse in relation to the organization, describes organizational identification, examining how employees may experience alternative forms of identification, and finally, poses research questions that undergird this study. Particular attention is given to how organizational discourse serves to reify organizational identification messages in everyday talk. The third chapter outlines the ethnographic methods as well as the data collection procedures I employed to answer the research questions. The fourth chapter discusses the findings of the research, and the last chapter addresses the theoretical and practical implications of this research study.

## **CHAPTER TWO. LITERATURE REVIEW**

This purpose of this ethnographic study is to explore how employees' everyday talk reflects organizational identification. This chapter brings together two areas of study: organizational discourse and organizational identification. Organizational discourse allows organizational members a way to create and structure their lives (Mumby & Clair, 2011). Through organizational discourse, or everyday talk, employees may create and reinforce identification and in turn, may influence if and how employees experience alternative identifications. The literature on identification has explored how individuals identify with the organization (Cheney, 1983a, 1983b; Gossett, 2002; Pratt, 2001), but research-to-date has yet to understand the behaviors and language employees use within the organization that coincide with the organization's values. Specifically, we have yet to understand how employees may or may not reflect an organization's values through organizational discourse, or everyday talk. This study focuses on employee's everyday talk and in doing so provides a foundation to examine the role of employee discourse in the propagation of organizational identification messages.

### **Organizational Discourse**

Organizational discourse is conceptualized as language used within organizations that is situated within everyday social behaviors. According to Fairhurst & Putnam (2004), organizational discourse "embodies cultural meanings that enable the social and the communicative" (p. 7). Discourse allows individuals to construct their reality within the organization, and it offers scholars a lens for learning and understanding organizational life (Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001; Putnam & Fairhurst, 2011). Organizational discourse is a way for us to understand the meaning, and level of connection, individuals have for and with

organizations. Trice and Beyer (1984) noted “In performing the activities of a rite or ceremonial, people make use of other cultural forms-certain customary language, gestures, ritualized behaviors, artifacts, other symbols, and settings-to heighten the expression of shared meanings appropriate to the occasion” (p. 654). For example, employees may participate in award ceremonies and use shared language during these ceremonies to express their connection or disconnection with the organization. Individuals’ everyday talk may reflect positive or negative associations individuals have with an organization. Organizations may also use discourse as a way to convey to employees organizational values and beliefs. Through organizational discourse, employees learn what the organization values are such as when award ceremonies focus on employees who have sold the most products. Language, then, is a system or code that defines individuals’ identities and relationships within the organization (Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001).

### **Types of Organizational Discourse**

Organizational discourse encompasses many different types of communication phenomenon including narratives, rituals, and rites. Although some research has explored rituals (see Anderson, 2009; Trice & Beyer, 1984), the present study will focus on the two types of organizational discourse that are most common in organizational life: narratives and rites. Additionally, rituals were excluded from the present study for two reasons: nine weeks is too short of a time frame to identify rituals and rites are primarily organization driven. Therefore, they better reflect organizational identification strategies than do rituals, which may be both organization-driven and employee-driven.

**Narratives.** Narratives have been extensively explored (see Boje, 2011; Boje, Luhman, & Baack, 1999; Brown, 1990a, 1990b; Coopman & Meidlinder, 2000, Gabriel,

2000; Hummel, 1991; Lucas & Buzzanell, 2004; Marra & Holmes, 2004, 2008; Mumby, 1987; Song & Ling, 2007; Trice & Beyer, 1984) and include stories, humor, sagas, myths, legends, folktales, and social talk. Some research has explored sagas, myths, legends, and folktales, but much of this research has been from a rhetorical perspective (see Chidester, 2009; Csapo-Sweet & Shields, 2000; Foley, 2010). Therefore, this study will explore the narratives that are the most common within employees' everyday talk and are most relevant to this study: stories, humor, small talk, and shop talk.

**Stories.** Stories are narratives that are based on truth, but usually are a combination of fact and fiction (Trice & Beyer, 1984). According to Boje (2011), stories are written or oral performances where two or more individuals are trying to make sense of past or future events. With this definition, stories do not have a beginning, middle, or an end. Boje notes "Stories are referenced with a nod of the head, or a brief 'You know the full story,' or with a code word or two: 'His way!'" (p. 122). Stories encompass those brief interactions where employees tell small stories to one another throughout the course of the work day. Although these stories are small in scale, compared to long drawn out stories with detailed characters and plots, these stories nonetheless may hold significance for the employees within the organization.

**Humor.** A second type of narrative is humor, which has been explored in several contexts including in a hotel kitchen (Lynch, 2009), in blue-collar work (Collinson, 1988) and in human service work (Tracy, Myers, & Scott, 2006). Something is humorous when it is illogical, irrational, fallacious, and/or inappropriate (Lynch, 2009). Humor is not just about blatant joking, but also incorporates instances where individuals make situations

“playful” or “light” (Martin, 2004). Individuals may also use inside jokes, where one would have to know the context in order to see the story as funny (Francis, 1994).

***Small talk.*** The third type of narrative, small talk, has been referred to as “phatic communion” which is “free, aimless, social intercourse” (Malinowski, 1923/1972, p. 149). Small talk is purposeless accounts of things that are obvious or are irrelevant occurrences or expressions of individuals’ preferences. In their study of the Nutrition Corporation, an organization that sells nutritional products, Mirivel and Tracy (2005) found that employees’ small talk before meetings were about upcoming dates, home repairs, family events, and states of health. Additionally, employees often directed small talk toward one person.

Shop talk, a form of small talk, is communication about workplace events, individuals, and issues (Mirivel and Tracy, 2005). Essentially, shop talk refers to discourse about work. Mirivel and Tracy state that shop talk “involves issues a workplace treats as serious; it is about routine problems of being in a particular industry or profession. Shop talk updates people regarding actions of visible organizational members” (p. 16). Often times, shop talk may seem like gossip as shop talk allows employees to understand how to function in the organization and learn about product and industry knowledge. For example, Whalen and Zimmerman (2005) studied an emergency call center and found that employees engaged in talk at work, where employees remarked (either amused or sarcastically) about radio transmissions to individuals in the field and bantered about other individuals and how they discharged their duties. In sum, shop talk encompasses discourse about work-related issues.

**Rites.** Rites are a second type of organizational discourse. These types of discourse are “relatively elaborate, dramatic, planned sets of activities that consolidate various forms of cultural expressions into one event, which is carried out through social interactions, usually for the benefit of an audience” (Trice & Beyer, 1984, p. 655). During a rite, individuals may use gestures, behaviors, cultural artifacts, and customary language to convey shared meanings. Rites encompass several different types including rites of passage, rites of degradation, rites of enhancement, rites of renewal, rites of conflict reduction, and rites of integration (Trice & Beyer). For purposes of this study, we will only be focusing on the rites that have manifest implications for individuals and not organizations as a whole; therefore, this study will only focus on rites of passage, rites of degradation, and rites of enhancement.

***Rites of passage.*** Rites of passage include shared events such as marriage, childbirth, sexual maturity, and death. During these events, individuals usually experience changes in roles and status, such as when someone marries and becomes a husband or wife or when a woman gives birth and becomes a mother. Within an organizational setting, individuals usually go through new hire training or orientation as a rite of passage. Once an individual passes orientation, he or she is then considered an employee and is no longer seen as an outsider. Some work has explored new hire training (see Rohlen, 1973; Van Maanen, 1973), but research-to-date has yet to specifically explore rites of passage within organizations and how this may influence employees connection to the organization.

***Rites of degradation.*** Rites of degradation are the most recognized and common type of rite and occur when individuals are publically humiliated or reprimanded such as when employees are fired or replaced. According to Trice and Beyer (1984), rites of

degradation occur in stages. First, an employee is pointed out for their bad behavior and performance. Other employees then start to associate the employee with failure. Members use language, termed “degradation talk” (Gephart, 1978, p. 575) and “chewing ass out” (Moch, 1980, p. 14), in this stage to display their frustration. Second, individuals are then discredited through more formal means such as through an objective report administered by someone outside the organization. The third and final stage happens when the individual is removed or fired from his or her job. Trice and Beyer note that rites of degradation happen infrequently and usually are only needed for high status or influential members. Although all three stages may occur when a high status or influential member is fired or removed from their position, more individuals may experience the first stage (when managers identify employees who are not performing well; Trice & Beyer).

***Rites of enhancement.*** The last type of rite, rites of enhancement, are events that praise and/or award employees for their work. Trice and Beyer (1984) cite the Mary Kay Cosmetic Company as an example of a company that employs rites of enhancement. Mary Kay awards its high performing employees jewelry, money, and cars (i.e., pink Cadillac). At a big-box retailer, types of rites may include awards for recognition of customer service, attendance, sales, and years of employment. The organization may formally or informally recognize employees for their service through an elaborate ceremony. For instance, in the May Kay company, award ceremonies are similar to Miss America pageants where participants dress in formal gowns (Trice & Beyer).

## **Functions of Organizational Discourse**

Narratives and rites are an essential part of organizational life. Previous studies have explored these two types of organizational discourse (Boje, 2011; Mirivel & Tracy, 2005; Trice & Beyer, 1984), examining how they help employees construct their reality and make sense of their environment. Employees use organizational discourse to convey their thoughts and beliefs about their relationship with the organization. Organizational discourse allows scholars a window into employees' connection with the organization. Through exploring the essence of these two types of organizational discourse, we can now examine how narratives and rites function within organizational life.

Organizational discourse functions in several ways. Previous research on organizational discourse has explored the positive functions of narratives and rites within an organization (Collinson, 1988; Helmer, 1993; Marra & Holmes, 2004; Mumby, 1987; Trice & Beyer, 1984). Narratives "often encode the preoccupations, the values, beliefs and attitudes of group members" (Marra & Holmes, p. 64). One type of narrative, stories, may function to reinforce and create members' commitment and transmit organizational beliefs (Martin & Powers, 1983). Other positive functions of stories include socializing new members (Brown, 1985) and transforming the workspace into drama (Trujillo & Dionisopoulos, 1987). In Brown's (1985) research on stories within a nursing home, Brown found that employees used stories to display their understanding and commitment to the organization. Trijillo and Dionisopoulos studied police talk and found that members enacted their masculinity through discursive practices; thus, individuals used stories to enact their identities. Some research has indicated negative functions of stories, which include controlling members' behaviors (Wilkins, 1983) and legitimatizing power relations

within the organization (Mumby, 1987). In her work on stories, Brown (1990a) compiled the aforementioned categories, collapsing these into three general categories: 1) identification and bonding; 2) reducing uncertainty; and 3) management of meaning.

**Functions of stories.** Brown (1990a) contended that stories act to bond individuals together and create identification through transmitting information. Processes such as “bitching together” (Trujillo, 1985) allow individuals to maintain social relations with other members in the organization, developing a kind of kinship among employees (LeGuin, 1981). Stories “reinforce the development of identity by providing points of association among insiders and points of dissociation of outsiders” (Brown, 1990a, p. 179). Individuals may use stories that convey their thoughts and feelings about the organization (Marra & Holmes, 2008), demonstrating how they are similar to or different from the organization. Stories may act as “social glue,” increasing solidarity among employees. In their study of a Maori organization in New Zealand, Marra and Holmes found that stories served to separate insiders of the organization from outsiders.

Along with identification and bonding, stories also serve to reduce uncertainty. Stories function to help employees understand written and unwritten rules of the organization. Employees understand how to act within the organization through concrete examples. Stories also help individuals identify appropriate coping strategies for dealing with issues that result in an organization (Brown, 1990a). If an individual disagrees with a manager, he or she may look to stories to help them resolve the issue.

Lastly, stories manage meaning for employees. According to Brown (1990a), individuals do not directly express their thoughts and perceptions about organizational activities. Rather, employees use stories to convey their beliefs about organizational

activities, values, goals, expectations, and traditions. For example, if an employee is unhappy with the organization, his or her stories may be negative. In addition to employees using stories to convey beliefs, organizations may use stories to control employee behavior. Ray (1986) contended that managers use stories to convey organizational values, which in turn, may create stronger member identification and that in turn may increase worker productivity. From this perspective, stories may serve to manage meaning for both employees and organizations, strengthening or diminishing employees' connection with the organization.

Stories and storytelling within the organization may also be a source of struggle and tension (Helmer, 1993, p. 35). In his study of a harness racetrack, Helmer (1993) concluded that members used stories to express who they were and position themselves in relation to others. Further, participants used stories to not only emphasize similarities, but point out differences between members. Members used labels to define differences between members, allowing them to further solidify their identities (Helmer). Therefore, storytelling served to produce and reproduce members' identities.

**Functions of humor.** Along with stories, humor serves many positive functions in the organization (Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001, 2011). Humor relieves tension, unites subcultures, and helps individuals make sense of the social world. For example, humor unites new and veteran employees, helping them accomplish tasks (Vinton, 1989). Humor also helps members to accept organizational values (Meyer, 1997) and lessens the distance among managers and subordinates (Duncan & Feisal, 1989). However, humor also can create stress, highlight differences, and divide subcultures (Collinson, 1988; Linstead, 1985). In his study of joking on the shop-floor, Collinson found that humor stressed the

differences between management and employees, creating an “us and them” perspective (p. 152). The literature on humor in the workplace shows that humor, regardless if it is positive or negative within an organization, serves to create an identity and reinforce group membership (Collinson). Lynch (2009), in his ethnographic study of humor in a hotel kitchen, found that kitchen antics helped participants negotiate their roles within the organization and define who they were as chefs. Employees may use humor as a way to establish their identities as insiders, demonstrating their connection with the organization.

**Functions of social talk.** Another type of narrative, social talk, which encompasses small talk and shop talk, has received less attention in the literature than stories and humor (Candlin, 2000; Coupland, 2003; Holmes, 2000). The existing research, however, has shown that small and shop talk are influential in building relationships so that employees feel comfortable working with each other (Mirivel & Tracy, 2005). Shop talk functioned to closely monitor others’ behaviors and their immediate environment. Through small talk and shop talk, employees “enacted their institutional identities and actively engaged in the culture that made their organization distinctive” (Mirivel & Tracy, p. 20). Social talk, then, may function to show others how individuals view themselves and others. Additionally, social talk works to “support, maintain, or challenge one’s own and others’ institutional identity” (p. 20). Narratives such as stories, humor, small talk, and shop talk function in several ways within the organization. Rites, another type of organizational discourse, also plays an essential role within organizational life.

**Functions of rites.** Several scholars have studied the numerous ways rites may function within the organization (Trice & Beyer, 1984). First, Trice and Beyer contend that rites of passage transition individuals into new social roles. For example, training and

inducting a new employee into an organization orients the individual to organizational policies and procedures. Rites of passage may also increase employee commitment (Trice & Beyer). Rites of degradation disband social identities such as when an individual is fired or reprimanded. This stage may negatively affect the employee targeted. Because rites of degradation are meant to dissolve individuals' social identities, it would make sense that the individual under attack would no longer feel committed to the organization, negatively affecting their identification. Rites of degradation then may spur individuals to experience alternative forms of identification such as disidentification. Unlike rites of degradation, rites of enhancement are more common and enhance employees' status and their social identities. Many organizations award honors (e.g., employee of the month, parking spots, trophies, cash) to their employees, trying to enhance employees' identities. No matter what one's level or influence within the organization, rites of enhancement may happen to any or all employees (Trice & Beyer). This type of rite may affect employees' level of identification as it may positively reinforce their connection to the organization. Because rites of enhancement are usually public acknowledgements for a job well done, employees may have positive associations with the organization, and in turn, increase their organizational identification. However, in her study of temporary employees, Gossett (2002) found that even though temporary workers were recognized for their work, few of them understood the reasons why they were recognized. Temporary workers also had limited contact with fellow temps, which weakened the value of the awards and incentive programs. Gossett's study illustrates that having personal connections to fellow employees affects the degree to which employees value rites of enhancement. It is not enough to recognize employees, but employees need to have personal connections established as well.

## **Summary**

Organizational discourse allows employees to construct and make sense of their reality (Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001). Through discourse, scholars are able to understand employees' identification with the organization as employees' discourse reflects their thoughts, values, and beliefs. Narratives and rites are two types of organizational discourse that may reflect employees' connection with the organization. Previous literature on narratives and rites demonstrate that these forms of organizational discourse are instrumental in helping individuals bond with the organization (Brown, 1990a). However, the previous literature takes a decidedly organizational centric stance that relegates the employee to a passive recipient of organizational messages.

Additionally, research-to-date has focused little on narratives and rites in natural settings. The present study fills this void by focusing on how employees' stories and rites reflect organizational identification in a natural setting. Analyzing narratives and rites *in vivo* affords us a realistic picture of how employees' language reflects, mocks, or reifies their relationship to the organization. We now turn our attention to the literature on organizational identification, detailing the ways in which employees connect with the organization as well as the positive outcomes of this connection.

## **Organizational Identification**

Organizational identification (Cheney, 1983a, 1983b) occurs when individuals' interests are joined or individuals are persuaded to believe their interests are joined. Individuals may perceive their interests to be consubstantial, or a "product or state of identification that leads an individual to see things from the 'perspective' of a target" (Cheney, 1983b, p. 146). Identification was originally conceptualized by Kenneth Burke

(1950). Burke (1950) noted identification, “is a word for the autonomous activity’s place in this wider context, a place with which the agent may be unconcerned” (p. 27). Burke argued that identification is rhetoric as “belonging” and a partially unconscious persuasive appeal (Cheney, 1983a). In 1983, George Cheney applied Burke’s concept of identification to organizations (Cheney, 1983a, 1983b). Cheney argued that Burke’s conceptualization of identification lends itself to being a methodological and conceptual tool for studying the rhetoric of organizations (Cheney, 1983).

Identification is a natural process whereby individuals may feel alienated or impoverished if they do not identify with the organization. Individuals strive to become identified with the organization they work for because it gives them personal meaning, and it enhances individuals’ status, possibly granting them greater respect and prestige within the organization (Cheney, 1983a). Additionally, identification allows individuals to better understand their experiences and organize their feelings and thoughts.

Organizational identification is a process and product (Cheney, 1983; Scott et al., 1998) where “the *process* of identification is conducted primarily with language, and the *product* of identification is expressed primarily with language” (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987, p. 11). The process includes the organization’s messages toward employees about its values and goals, which are expressed as desirable guidelines for employees to follow. If the process is successful, the individual embraces those guidelines, “doing ‘what’s best’ for the organization as a target” (Cheney, 1983b, p. 147). Although organizations may strongly encourage individuals to identify with their company, the individual must comply by enacting their identification, completing the process (Cheney, 1983b).

Identification is closely tied to commitment and attachment. Identification, unlike commitment, encompasses the overall process of identification with the process signifying how individuals identify with the organization and identification being the product of that process (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987, p. 8). Commitment, on the other hand, is different as commitment is more narrowly defined as something one has at a particular time.

Individuals may be committed to an organization and not identify with it such as when individuals regularly attend church, but do not agree with everything the pastor preaches. In contrast, individuals may strongly identify with an organization, but not be committed to it. Cheney and Tompkins provide many examples of this happening such as when a physician is committed to a profession, but does not strongly identify with the organization. At a big-box retailer, employees may identify with providing the best customer service, but may not identify with the retailer as an organization. Cheney and Tompkins state that this lack of identification may produce “mindlessness” when routinized (p. 9). If employees at big-box retailers lack identification, they may experience mindlessness and may not act with the organization’s interests in mind.

Identification is not a static or steady construct, but is always shifting and moving. Specific events may affect individuals’ relationships with the organization (Bullis & Bach, 1989). For example, an employee may be required to work overtime when he or she has to pick up their kids from daycare. This negative event may influence an employee’s perception of the organization and in turn may affect employee identification. Employees may then use narratives such as stories or social talk to convey their frustrations with the organization.

Cheney (1983b) acknowledges that language is a critical component of identification. Labels may manifest identification insofar that they may “become the foci for larger corporate identities” (p. 146) because labels carry values and interests. For example, many big-box retailers call employees associates or team members, denoting more equality among employees and managers. Through using the term associate or team member, big-box retailers are conveying that they see employees as equals rather than as subordinates (Safire, 2009).

### **Factors Affecting Organizational Identification**

Many factors affect the extent to which employees identify with an organization. One factor that may significantly affect organizational identification is decision-making. In a case study of a large industrial and high technology corporation, Cheney (1983a) found that the ability to make decisions affects employees’ identification level. Employees who were able to make decisions reported high levels of organizational identification. The inability to make decisions may induce employees to experience negative feelings about the organization. For instance, Gossett (2002) found that temporary workers felt disconnected from the organization because they were not permitted to make decisions. Employees, particularly part-time or seasonal workers, at a big-box retailer may not be permitted to make decisions and this may affect the extent to which they reflect organizational identification in their everyday discourse.

Trust and respect is a second factor that may affect employee identification. Schrodt (2002) found that employees who perceived a high level of trust and respect within an organization were more likely to strongly identify with an organization. Results also showed that employee teamwork, involvement, and morale positively affected employee

identification. Therefore, if an organization creates an atmosphere of trust and respect where employees are involved with the organization, employees are more apt to identify with the organization and reflect the organization's values.

A third factor affecting the extent to which employees identify with the organization is the concept of "access." Some workers within the organization may have more privileges than other workers. One type of worker, temporary workers, may be denied access to organizational artifacts such as email or access codes, and they may not be allowed to participate in organizational functions and access to work/life policies. For example, temporary workers may not be allowed to attend company functions such as Christmas parties. In a study of temporary workers, participants reported identification ranging from feeling completely alienated from the organization to not identifying at all with the organization (Gossett, 2002). Because big-box retailers employ a variety of workers (i.e., seasonal, part-time, full-time) and these workers may not all have the same type of access to benefits or other work/life policies, employees may not reflect the organization's identification strategies in their everyday discourse.

A fourth factor that may affect employee organizational identification is feedback. Cheney (1983a) found that feedback greatly affected how strongly a member identified with their organization. Specifically, if members were able to provide feedback and offer opinions, they were more likely to have high levels of identification to the organization (Cheney, 1983a; Gossett, 2002). Conversely, employees who were not allowed to provide feedback felt alienated and disconnected from the organization. Organizations, and more specifically big-box retailers, may or may not employ programs that allow employees to provide feedback to management. In this way, feedback may greatly influence, positively

or negatively, how employees reflect organizational identification in their narratives and rites.

A fifth factor that may affect organizational identification is role within the organization. Cheney (1983a) found that supervisors reported higher identification than non-supervisory employees as those closest to the “center” of the organization (p. 360) may strengthen their identification due to consistently communicating organizational policies, values, and goals. Within a big-box retail store, there are various types of employees (e.g., seasonal, part-time, overnight, full-time, team leads, store managers). Supervisors such as team leads and store managers may use everyday talk to convey organizational values whereas those not in supervisory roles (i.e., seasonal, part-time) may be less likely to reflect organizational values in their everyday talk. Research-to-date has yet to fully explore the influence of role on organizational identification.

Tenure at the organization is the last factor that may affect organizational identification. Cheney (1983a) found that employees “periodically reflect on their association with an organization, check to see how others feel, and sometimes express identification (or commitment, dedication, loyalty) as a motive (or rationalization) for long-term participation in the organization” (p. 355). Tenure, then, may be a factor in whether or not employees identify with the organization. If an employee is with the company for an extensive period of time, he or she may have had more opportunities to understand the organization’s values and this may influence what messages they convey within their organizational discourse (i.e., narratives and rites). Barker and Tompkins (1994) analyzed self-managing teams and found that tenured employees identified more with the team than did short-term employees.

The literature on identification has explored the factors that affect employee organizational identification (Cheney, 1983a; Gossett, 2002; Schrodt, 2002). We know that trust and respect, decision-making, “access,” feedback, role, and tenure all affect organizational identification, but scholars have yet to explore the connection between employees’ everyday talk and organizational identification. In order to examine organizational identification, this study examines how employees’ narratives and rites reflect the organization’s identification strategies. Although these factors may positively affect employees’ identification, spurring individuals to have high levels of identification, scholars have found that individuals may experience alternative types of identification.

### **Alternative Types of Organizational Identification**

Past research has documented several alternative types of identifications such as multiple identification (Scott, 2007; Scott et al., 1998), disidentification (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001; Pratt, 2001), ambivalent identification (Pratt, 2001; Pratt & Doucet, 2000), deidentification (Pratt, 2001), and schizo-identification (Dukerich et al., 1998).

**Multiple identifications.** Multiple identifications are hierarchical, one nested inside another. Burke (1959) originally acknowledged that individuals may have multiple targets of identifications. Individuals may have multiple associations with family, race, church, social class, and profession or they may identify with subgroups within the organization such as workgroup and department. Individuals bring certain aspects of themselves into the organization and leave out other aspects through the course of the work day (Kahn, 1990). For instance, employees may speak of their identity as mothers during lunch, but then only refer to their identities as employees in an afternoon meeting, or they may speak

briefly about their children at the beginning of the work day, but then they do not discuss them throughout the rest of the day.

Employees may also experience multiple identifications with different subgroups or departments within the organization (Scott, 2007; Scott et al., 1998). Employees who identify with a subgroup more than the organization as a whole may experience a different level of identification. Cheney (1983a) found that individuals varied in their level of identification depending on their department and position within the organization. In their case study of how individuals at a high-tech company manage their multiple identifications, Larson and Pepper (2003) found that employees used the strategies of comparison, logic, and support to manage their multiple identifications. The comparison strategy involved employees comparing and contrasting their identification options. Larson and Pepper found employees used three tactics under the comparison strategy: expression of benefits and problems, case in point, and reconciliation. Expression of benefits and problems referred to employees highlighting pitfalls and advantages of each identity while case in point was concerned with employees offering specific examples of benefits and problems of their multiple identities. The last tactic under the comparison strategy, reconciliation, dealt with employees making their old value systems congruent with the new one.

Under the logic strategy, employees used “reasoned” arguments to back choices in identification. Two tactics were reported by participants: logic of the market/customer and figurative logic. In the logic of the market/customer, participants reported justifying their choices through current conditions of the market or using figurative argument to justify their identity choices. Finally, with the support strategy, employees drew on perceived or

real support from others to justify their identifications. Participants reported either using direct support by offering specific groups or individuals, implied support, indicating others would agree, but not mentioning specific names, or using the assumed “we” (Larson & Pepper, 2003). This study suggests participants use a variety of strategies and tactics to determine which identifications are salient and in turn, which identification may affect their identification with the organization.

**Disidentification.** In addition to multiple identifications, employees may also experience disidentification. Disidentification occurs when individuals define themselves as not having the same attributes as the organization. Therefore, individuals maintain feelings of disconnect with the organization (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). For example, Pratt (2001) found that employees disidentified with Amway when they had infrequent interactions and negative relationships with their mentors. Additionally, employees experienced disidentification when their confidants were negative toward Amway. Employees also indicated that they felt manipulated and used; this contributed to them having a negative attitude and disidentifying with Amway (Pratt). Further, Elsbach and Bhattacharya note that individuals like to maintain relationships with individuals who have similar viewpoints. When we disagree with others, we either change our attitude or separate ourselves from those individuals. This may also be true of organizations where individuals have conflicting values from the organization (Elsbach & Bhattacharya). For example, employees at a big-box retailer may not agree with their organization’s work-life policies and may separate themselves because their beliefs and values differ from the big-box retailer.

**Ambivalent identification.** A third alternative form of identification that individuals may experience is ambivalent identification. Individuals who are ambivalent are torn by contradictory feelings and emotions about the organization and thus may move toward, against, or away from the organization (Pratt, 2001; Pratt & Doucet, 2000). Pratt found that several Amway employees indicated that they had moved toward the organization by renewing their membership, but they also moved away as they did not sell products. Ambivalent distributors would also hang out with coworkers who had positive identifications with Amway and others who disidentified with Amway. Conversely, participants “were of ‘two minds’ and expressed their ambivalence behaviorally; they often would sporadically become active in their distributing and then nearly stop altogether for an extended period of time” (p. 481).

**Deidentification.** Deidentification is the fourth form of identification. Deidentification happens when there is a break in identification (Pratt, 2001); Individuals may identify with the organization, but something occurs to make them lose interest or break their connection with the organization. Pratt found that employees who experienced deidentification either lost interest in the business (and thus lost interest in pursuing their dreams) or never identified with Amway. Deidentification differs from disidentification as participants do not convey resentment or anger toward Amway (Pratt). Pratt found that individuals who experienced deidentification were not motivated to sell products or ask distributors for advice. In reference to a participant who experienced deidentification, Pratt stated “While his reaction to his upline was slightly negative, it does not convey the deep sense of betrayal and anger that typified individuals who ultimately disidentified with Amway” (p. 478).

**Schizo-identification.** Finally, schizo-identification is the last form of identification. Schizo-identification occurs when an individual identifies and disidentifies simultaneously. When this happens, the individual will experience conflicting identities and will have to cognitively adjust, choosing either to identify or disidentify with the organization (Dukerich et al., 1998). Dukerich et al. state that schizo-identification may be a precursor to creative change or whistle-blowing. Employees may experience schizo-identification when organizations' values conflict with their own values. For example, when an organization does not allow women paid maternity leave, women may experience schizo-identification and may ultimately disidentify with the organization because of this dissonance between the organization's values and their own.

Extant research has suggested that alternative forms of identification do exist within the organization, but much of this literature has been from a psychological perspective rather than a communicative perspective (Scott, 2007). These alternative forms have been conceptualized cognitively, but have yet to be defined communicatively. Because few studies have focused on these alternative forms, we really do not have a thorough understanding of how these occur within an organization. We have yet to understand how these alternative forms are reflected in employees' communicative behaviors within the organization.

Organizational identification has a significant role in shaping the relationship between employees and the organization. No matter if employees experience high levels of identification or alternative forms of identification, there are many outcomes of individuals who experience organizational identification.

## **Organizational Outcomes**

Although Cheney (1983a) noted that identification is a natural process, organizations strive to induce employee identification because of the many positive organizational outcomes. Organizational identification has been linked to decision-making (Bullis & Tompkins, 1989), job satisfaction (Cheney, 1983a), and organizational commitment (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987). In their study of the U.S. Forest Service, Bullis and Tompkins found that employees who strongly identified with the U.S. Forest Service made decisions as if “the leader of the organization were standing behind them looking over their shoulders” (p. 300). Participants reported working long hours in order to get the job done. One participant noted, “anybody worth their salt in the Forest Service gets at least two years’ work done in one year”(p. 300). Identification also has been studied within self-managing teams (Barker, 1993; Barker & Tompkins, 1994). Barker and Tompkins (1993) found that employees indicated that they identified more with their work teams than with the organization as a whole. Research has also demonstrated that identification affects organizational culture (Schrodt, 2002) and employee interaction and motivation (Schrodt, 2002). In his study of a retail sales organization, Schrodt found that participants reported high levels of identification when the organization was a source of motivation for employees and when employees perceived the organization to have an atmosphere of respect and trust. Members who have high identification with their organization also reported higher levels of worker satisfaction (Lee & Johnson, 1991), and reduced turnover (Scott et al., 1998). Scott et al. (1998) found that agency, division, and state government identifications reduced individuals’ intent to leave. Findings indicated

highly identified individuals were less likely to leave the organization than employees who indicated low levels of identification.

Some research has focused on the effect low member identification has on the organization. Members who have low identification with the organization report communicative isolation (Kakabadse, 1986), inappropriate behaviors within the organization (Bullis, 1991), and negative feelings towards the organization (DiSanza & Bullis, 1999). In their study of the U.S. Forest Service's newsletter, DiSanza and Bullis found that employees experienced feelings of disidentification when the values in the newsletter did not match their own personal values.

Organizations may also use identification as a way to subtly control employees' behavior through concertive control (Barker, 1993; Barker & Tompkins, 1994; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). *Concertive control* is conceptualized as a form of control whereby the team influences other team members. According to Tompkins and Cheney, “[i]n the concertive organization, the explicit written rules and regulations are largely replaced by the common understanding of values, objectives, and means of achievement, along with a deep appreciation for the organization's mission” (p. 184). Employees may ensure that all members of the team comply with the rules; employees, rather than management, enforce rules and procedures. Cheney (1983a) found that highly-identified employees reported that they make on-the-job decisions with the organization in mind and reported that they do things to contribute to the success of the organization. Through concertive control, the organization is able to subtly and invisibly control its employees. In sum, research demonstrates that organizations may gain positive outcomes, and indirectly and invisibly control employee behavior through organizational identification.

### **Organizational Discourse as a Vehicle to Influence Identification**

Organizational discourse may affect employee's connection to the organization (Brown, 1990a). Discourse has been linked to identification generally such as it may influence employees' behaviors. Parallel to this research have been studies that sought to classify specific communication strategies that induce identification (Cheney, 1983a, 1983b; DiSanza & Bullis, 1999). When combined with organizational identification literature, a picture of how communication influences employee support of, participation in, and value premises are inextricably linked to the organization. Extant literature has explored how organizational artifacts such as newsletters, posters in the employee lounge, company websites, and training documents convey organizational values and beliefs. This research has explored how organizations utilize overt and/or subtle strategies to induce employee identification (Cheney, 1983a, 1983b; DiSanza & Bullis, 1999).

### **Organizational Identification Strategies**

Because of the positive outcomes of having strongly identified employees, organizations may use several strategies to induce or enhance employee identification (Cheney, 1983a, 1983b; DiSanza & Bullis, 1999). These include the common ground technique, identification through antithesis, use of the transcendent "we," and unifying symbols. DiSanza and Bullis found these four strategies in their work on the U.S. Forest Service and added four more categories: global recognition of individuals' contributions, bragging, recognition of individuals' contributions outside of the organization, and invitation.

**Common ground technique.** One strategy is the common ground technique. In this strategy, an organization explicitly states that it has the same interests as the individual,

or uses association to induce identification. Management might directly communicate to employees that the organization has the same values as they do. In his study of house organs, Cheney (1983b) found that this was the most important strategy as it appeared the most often and it appeared in a variety of documents (e.g., news, human interest, policy documents). In his study of R.J. Reynolds' ads, Boyd (2004) found that their ads explicitly affirmed values that they believed its audience also shared (e.g., "We all agree we must do something about underage smoking"; p. 59).

Under the common ground strategy, Cheney (1983b) found that organizations expressed concern for the individual, recognized individual contributions, espoused shared values, advocated company benefits, demonstrated that outsiders praised the organization, and offered employee testimonials demonstrating that other employees were loyal and committed to the company. Organizations expressed concern for the individual through emphasizing how employees had a role in the success of the company. Cheney (1983b) states, "The stress is on the people who *belong* to the organization rather than on the organization as a collection of people" (p. 150). The second strategy, recognizing individual contributions, is similar to the first strategy, but is more specific as house organs recognized individuals through creating clubs and displaying photographs and names of promoted employees. This second strategy then explicitly notes what employees contributed and publicly recognizes them for their accomplishments. Cheney found that house organs espoused shared values, the third common ground strategy, through explicitly stating that the organization and employees have the same values. The fourth common ground strategy, advocacy of benefits, is when the organization highlighted activities that helped employees attain goals. The fifth and sixth common ground tactics are praise by

outsiders and testimonials by employees. These two tactics, unlike the previous four, represent outsiders' and employees' perspectives rather than the company's perspective. Organizations reported how others felt about the organization, noting that since other organizations had a positive view of the company than so should the employees. Lastly, house organs included employee testimonials to demonstrate to employees how other employees felt about the organization.

**Identification through antithesis.** A second strategy is identification through antithesis where an organization and an individual unite against a common enemy. Organizations may use the term “outsiders” to indicate who is part of the organization and who is not. In Boyd’s (2004) study, results showed that RJ Reynolds’ advertising messages that appealed to readers’ shared values of democracy and freedom while at the same time uniting readers against shared enemies such as overregulation. Cheney (1983b) states, “Through such portrayals, corporations implicitly stress identification with ‘insider’ (i.e., members of the organization) as an effort toward achieving unity and collective acceptance of organizational values” (p. 148). In the house organs he analyzed, Cheney (!983b) found that organizations suggested identification with the organization was necessary in order to oppose outsider threats.

**Trancendent “we.”** The third and most subtle strategy that organizations may use to induce identification is the transcendent “we” (Burke, 1959; Cheney, 1983b). Organizations may use the pronouns “we” and “they” in organizational rhetoric to signify association and dissociation. This strategy takes for granted the aligned interests between the employee and organization, uniting them both (employees and organization) under the

transcendent “we” (Cheney, 1983b). Boyd (2004) found that RJ Reynolds employed the transcendent “we” throughout its ads such as “We all agree we must do something” (p. 60).

**Unifying symbols.** The last strategy that Cheney (1983b) found is unifying symbols. This strategy was not part of Burke’s original scheme, but Cheney (1983b) found that organizations used their name, logo, and trademark to convey values and goals of the organization. For example, State Farm considered their name to be a critical part of their identity as an organization: “What’s in a name? If the name is State Farm Insurance Companies, there’s a lot-a reputation for stability, competitive prices, quality products, prompt dependable service....It’s a name people know-and trust” (p. 155). In sum, organizations may use these four strategies in combination to intentionally and unintentionally induce employee identification.

**Additional strategies.** DiSanza and Bullis (1999) added four new tactics based on their research on the U.S. Forest Service’s newsletter: global recognition of individuals’ contributions, bragging, recognition of individuals’ contributions outside of the organization, and invitation. The newsletter recognized specific work groups; thus, DiSanza and Bullis termed this global recognition of individuals’ contribution. For example, “Law enforcement officers do an outstanding job of talking about their jobs” (p. 364). The second tactic, bragging, encompasses the organization discussing its accomplishments. DiSanza and Bullis cite an example of this tactic: “The forest service is well on its way to securing the required nonfederal matching funds” (p. 364). Recognition of individuals’ contributions outside of the organization occurred when the newsletter indicated employees were praised by groups outside of the U.S. Forest Service. Finally,

the newsletter utilized the invitation tactic when it invited members to join specific groups or contact members of the U.S. Forest Service (DiSanza & Bullis).

Although past research has shown that organizations induce employee identification through identification strategies, scholars have yet to explore how employees may mirror organizational identification strategies in their everyday talk; we know little of how employees may take up these strategies or mock or rebel against these strategies. This study addresses this gap by exploring employee-specific strategies, focusing on the connection between employees' everyday talk and organizational identification.

### **Research Questions**

The literature on organizational discourse acknowledges that narratives and rites may influence employee's identification, helping to bond the individual with the organization (Brown, 1990a). Likewise, the literature on identification has explored how organizations may use strategies and tactics to induce identification (Cheney, 1983b) and subtly control employee behavior (Barker, 1993; Barker & Tompkins, 1994; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). Although research has documented the factors that contribute to organizational identification (Cheney, 1983a; Gossett, 2002), alternative forms of identification (Dukerich et al., 1998; Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001; Pratt, 2001; Scott et al., 1998), and the outcomes of organizational identification (Barker; Lee & Johnson, 1991; Schrot, 2002; Scott et al., 1999), we have yet to understand how language, specifically organizational discourse, may reflect organizational identification strategies. Additionally, this analysis extends previous research on identification by focusing on the employee side of the identification process and analyzing how employees make take up these strategies as their own in their discourse, possibly reflecting alternative forms of identification.

Therefore, this study also extends our understanding of how employees communicatively enact alternative forms of identification.

The purpose of this ethnographic study is to explore how employees' everyday talk reflects organizational identification strategies at a big-box retailer in the upper Midwest. Analyzing employees' discourse allows us to more deeply explore employees' thoughts and behaviors about the organization. If employees mirror organizational identification strategies, they will likely make decisions with the organization in mind. They may possibly stay late (even after their shift is done) to help fellow team members, or they may help customers even if it is not specifically their assigned job. Employees may naturally and subconsciously act thus taking the organization into consideration. How employees mirror organizational identification in their everyday talk may affect the decision to leave the organization. In this investigation, I focus on how employees may mirror, mock, and/or reify the strategies that organizations use to induce employee identification by observing employees' narratives and rites. If employees mock the organization's values, this may affect employees' decision-making and ultimately result in the employee leaving the organization; employees then may reflect an alternative type of identification. Narratives and rites may provide a window into employees' connection with the organization. Thus, the following research questions undergird this study:

RQ1: How does employees' everyday talk communicate identification?

RQ2: How are alternative forms of identification reflected in employees' everyday talk?

RQ3: What are the organizational identification messages communicated by Big Alpha?

RQ4: How is organizational identification discourse reflected in employees' everyday talk?

## **CHAPTER THREE. METHODOLOGY**

This chapter outlines the methods I used to understand how employees reflected organizational identification strategies in their everyday talk. Using the ethnographic approach outlined by Frey, Botan, and Kreps (2000), Lindlof and Taylor (2006), and Denzin and Lincoln (2003), I conducted an ethnographic study as a seasonal employee during the 2011-2012 holiday season at a big-box retailer in a mid-size Midwestern city. This ethnographic study included three phases: Phase I consisted of participant observations, ethnographic interviews, and informant interviews; Phase II consisted of artifact analysis; and Phase III consisted of comparing the data from Phases I and II. In the following paragraphs, I first outline the research design. Second, I describe the site where the research was conducted. Next, I elaborate on each phase, articulating the method and data collection and data analysis procedures. Finally, I explain the bias of the researcher.

### **Research Design**

The present study utilized qualitative methods to understand how identification is communicatively enacted in organizations. Qualitative methods are useful when a researcher seeks “to preserve and analyze a situated form, content, and experience of social action, rather than subject it to mathematical or other formal transformations” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 18). Qualitative researchers believe in naturalism, or the idea that phenomena ought to be studied naturally; naturalism assumes that meanings and behaviors of individuals can only be understood if they are studied in situ (Lindlof & Taylor). Studying participants in-situ allowed me to better understand how employees communicatively enacted organizational identification strategies in their day-to-day activities and allowed me to analyze employees’ stories and rites in the organization.

Asking participants to recall how they use everyday language would not have yielded as accurate of information as observation since participants may not know or may not remember how they use everyday language. Additionally, they will lie or will skew their answers to conform to what they think I want to hear versus what they actually do. Therefore, I observed participants behavior to yield the most reliable and valid results.

More specifically, in order to explore how individuals may reflect organizational identification strategies in their everyday talk, I utilized ethnography, a type of qualitative research design. Gephart (1988) defines ethnography as:

the use of direct observation and extended field research to produce a thick, naturalistic description of a people and their culture. Ethnography seeks to uncover the symbols and categories members of the given culture use to interpret their world and ethnography thus preserves the integrity and inherent properties of cultural phenomena. (p. 16)

Ethnography allows researchers to construct a holistic picture of a cultural phenomenon. For example, Gossett (2002) observed temporary workers for eight weeks, understanding the terminology and communication issues that were unique to temporary workers. Because of her time in the field, she was able to shape her research questions to incorporate the terms she learned and address issues that she observed. Chaput et al. (2010) also employed an ethnographic study to capture how organizational identification contributed to a young political party's organizational substance in Quebec, Canada. Specifically, the researchers analyzed how different agents (e.g., documents, the organization's name, history) coproduced the organization's essence. Of central importance to this study is ethnography's ability to allow researchers an opportunity to

uncover employees' language and daily interactions so that they are better able to understand the organizational culture. Ethnographic methods also allowed me to understand how employees reflect organizational identification strategies in their everyday talk.

## **Site**

The site of this research was at a big-box retailer, Big Alpha (a pseudonym), in a mid-size metropolitan area (population around 150,000) in the upper Midwest. Big-box retailers, also known as superstores or supercenters, are large retail centers that are part of a chain. According to Vedder and Cox (2006), the largest big-box retailers in the United States include Wal-Mart, Kmart, Target, Best Buy, Costco, Home Depot, and Lowe's. Big-box retailers usually occupy more than 50,000 square feet, have high sales volumes rather than price markups, have windowless and single-story buildings, inhabit acres of parking spaces, and look the same no matter where they are located (Grantz and Mintz, 1998).

**Site selection.** On November 6, 2011, I applied online for four jobs at big-box retailers in a mid-size Midwestern city. The big-box retailers were selected based on the size of the stores (the bigger the store, the more employees the retailer employs), proximity to the researcher, and if the store was hiring for seasonal workers. I decided to apply for seasonal work because retail stores tend to hire individuals during the holiday season. I filled out the applications detailing my prior work experience. I revealed my education background, including my status as a Ph.D. student and Graduate Teaching Assistant in the Department of Communication. Of the jobs applied for, I received one call back. Within one hour of submitting my application online, I received a call from a human resources

representative at Big Alpha. I went into Big Alpha two days later for two interviews. The first interview was with a supervisor of customer services, Jan<sup>2</sup>. The interview lasted 15-20 minutes. The customer services supervisor, Jan, asked me, first and foremost, about my availability. Then she asked me questions such as “Tell me about a time when you had to work through a challenging situation?” and “Describe how you manage your time?” The second interview proceeded after the first interview in which the supervisor of security, Lisa, interviewed me. This interview took approximately 10-15 minutes. Lisa asked me similar questions and explained that it was alright if I used the same answers from Jan’s interview. After my second interview, Lisa offered me a job as a cashier. Although I was offered the job, they wanted to interview me one more time. On November 10, 2011, I went in for my third and final interview at the store; this interview lasted approximately 15-20 minutes. During this interview, Jennifer, the Human Resource manager, hired me as a sales floor associate instead of a cashier. Jennifer noted that I would be hired starting at \$7.75 per hour. Although I was offered the job, my job offer was not official until I passed a drug test. I completed a drug test the same day and received a call a few days later indicating that I had passed the drug test and that my orientation was scheduled for Saturday, November 19, 2011.

The Big Alpha store I worked at employs 250 associates. As of 2010, Big Alpha had approximately 1,800 stores in 49 states, each taking up more than 150,000 feet of square footage. Big Alpha is one of the four top general merchandisers in the United States. Big Alpha employs between 100,000 and 500,000 employees nationally and has annual net revenues of in excess of \$1 billion per year (Big Alpha website). The mission of

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<sup>2</sup> All participants have been given pseudonyms to protect the identity of the participants.

Big Alpha is to provide a positive consumer experience by delivering exceptional customer service, innovative products, and exceptional value. Big Alpha claims to be committed to the community, diversity, the environment, and great value. Overall, Big Alpha sells a range of products including sporting goods, clothing, household goods, personal care products, electronics, and groceries.<sup>3</sup> There are various types of work groups within Big Alpha, which include softlines (i.e., women's clothing, men's clothing, infant clothing, and jewelry), hardlines (households, toys, sporting goods, electronics, and appliances), market, cashiers and customer service, supervisors (individuals who oversee employees in their respective areas; may be full-time and benefited or may be part-time employees), and managers (individuals who are superior to supervisors and who are part of the executive leadership team; they are full-time benefited). Its hours of operation are from 8am until 11pm Monday through Friday, 8am-11pm on Saturday, and 12pm-10pm on Sunday. However, during the holiday season, Big Alpha's hours were extended until 12 am on weeknights (Big Alpha's website).

### **Procedures**

The present ethnographic study employed three phases to explore how employees' everyday talk reflected Big Alpha's organizational identification strategies. In Phase I, I conducted participant observations, ethnographic interviews, and informant interviews. Phase II utilized artifact analysis, and finally, in Phase III, I compared the findings in Phase I with the findings in Phase II. Such a move provided a more comprehensive picture of the organization's identification strategies as well as employees' language choices, which may reflect organizational identification strategies and alternative identifications with the

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<sup>3</sup> The exact financial details of Big Alpha have been changed to maintain anonymity.

organization. Additionally, each phase consisted of gathering and analyzing different types of data, allowing me to triangulate, or compare multiple forms of evidence (Johnson & Waterfield, 2004; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Triangulation of data may be helpful in corroborating or refuting findings. This triangulation aided me in analyzing employees' everyday talk from three different angles, strengthening the internal validity of the research (Johnson & Waterfield).

## **Phase I**

**Participant observation.** Participant observation refers to observing, recording, and experiencing events (Frey et al., 2000; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). According to Frey et al., a researcher can be a complete observer or a complete participant or a combination between participant and observer. A complete observer gathers data through observing others and not interacting with them in any capacity. Complete participants, on the other hand, immerse themselves into the setting and do not let others know they are being observed. Observer-participants try to fit into the setting and may have limited participation, but they primarily observe the cultural phenomenon. Participant-observers are completely involved in the setting, but participants know the intent of the researcher.

For this study, I choose to be a complete participant. Using complete participant observation provides several advantages. The first advantage is that complete participant observation allows researchers to observe individuals' actions, rather than relying on retrospective sensemaking (Weick, 1995). Previous studies have employed survey and/or interview methods to understand organizational identification (e.g., Cheney, 1983b, Schrottdt, 2002; Tompkins & Cheney, 1983), but fall short in observing how discourse naturally unfolds. Particularly, these methods cannot adequately capture how employees

utilize organizational discourse such as narratives and rites within their daily interactions because they ask participants to reflect on their experiences. Employees may forget how they interacted, may embellish or distort their actions, or may not fully understand how they use discourse to reflect organizational identification strategies. Complete participant observation allows the researcher a realistic picture of employee behavior and firsthand knowledge of the influence of discourse on organizational life, observing employees' experiences in situ, or in a natural context (Frey et al., 2000).

A second advantage of complete participant observation in the present study is that I was able to observe individuals as well as participate in the activities at Big Alpha. Studying individuals in situ becomes an embodied experience as researchers use their body as an “instrument” to gather data (Frey et al., 2000, p. 262). According to Frey et al., complete participants become completely involved in the setting and work in a covert manner, not disclosing to participants that they are being observed. The complete participant method minimizes the Hawthorne effect, or the idea that people change their behavior if they know they are being observed. As a complete participant, I engaged in covert data acquisition. Of course this methodological decision exposes several ethical issues. First, participants disclosed sensitive and private information to me. If they had known I was conducting research, they may not have been so forthcoming with their thoughts and concerns. I struggled with my participants disclosing such private information to me. Additionally, covert research also was challenging because I became good friends with many of my participants. Knowing that my participants did not know and would not know the intent of my employment at Big Alpha weighed heavily on me each day I worked. Throughout my employment and every day thereafter, I was and am very aware

of my covert status and the ethical implications of my research. To address these ethical challenges, I disclosed to only a few individuals the identity of my organization and used pseudonyms when discussing my co-workers and managers,

I became completely involved in the setting by coming to work on time at my scheduled times, working hard in my designated areas, taking my breaks when they were scheduled, and interacting with participants (other employees) and customers. As an employee, I made small talk with other participants in order to get to know them on a personal level. I also disclosed to participants that I was a graduate student. When several participants asked me about my degree, I stated that I was a Ph.D. student in communication, but I did not offer this information outright. Additionally, I interacted with employees and managers when I shopped at Big Alpha on my days off. These interactions further developed my role as an insider at Big Alpha. However, my complete participant role also may have been a potential disadvantage as I was not able to ask questions to participants outright, but instead, I observed their behaviors or asked them questions that were not overly intrusive or indicative of my covert status. If participants did not disclose to me their thoughts or feelings, I was unable to capture that data. Additionally, being a complete participant may have also limited my ability to be an impartial and unbiased researcher as I immersed myself into the organization.

The last advantage of participant observation is that the researcher can gain an in-depth look into organizational culture. Organizational discourse may be heavily influenced by the culture of the organization. If an organization has an open culture, for example, employees may be more apt to discuss sensitive issues. The researcher must take into consideration the systems of meaning, cultural practice, organizational texts, and narratives

that all comprise an organization's culture. According to Schein (1991), individuals' feelings about an organization cannot be fully understood unless one understands the organizational culture. These systems of meanings would be challenging, if not impossible, to capture using other qualitative methods such as formal interviews or focus groups as the researcher would only get a retrospective account of individuals' communicative behaviors. The researcher would not be able to fully understand the terminology, the cultural practices, or the organizational documents without an understanding of the organizational culture.

During my participant observations, I learned the language that was specific to Big Alpha. For example, when employees stock shelves, employees state that they are "working carts." Additionally, Big Alpha has specific terms for employees and customers.<sup>4</sup> I also learned what the company dress was, how to clock in, what is appropriate language to use when ordering products from the backroom, and how to use the walkie-talkie. If I had not conducted complete participant observations, I would not have gained a thorough knowledge of these cultural practices and this would have inhibited me from understanding participants' everyday experiences within Big Alpha.

**Ethnographic interviews.** Along with participant observations, I also conducted ethnographic interviews. Ethnographic interviews, also known as informal conversational interviews, are spontaneous informal interviews that occur while a researcher is in the field (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Throughout the course of the work day, a lull would happen in a conversation or I would become curious about a remark a participant had said. During these occurrences, I would ask questions to prompt the participants to further disclose

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<sup>4</sup> I will not be using the exact name that the organization uses to protect the identity of my research site.

information. Since participants were not aware of my researcher status, I would ask questions that were in line with what we were discussing and did not overtly deviate from the topic at hand. For example, I would ask “How long have you worked here?” and “Do you like working in this area?” These informal interviews allowed me to probe participants about their thoughts and feelings about management, explore why they behaved in a certain way, uncover the meaning behind their actions, and to gain insight into Big Alpha’s overall organization.

***Data collection.*** As a sales floor associate, my job duties included stocking the shelves with products, helping customers find products, running the till, handling and packing goods, scanning items, and providing friendly customer service. I worked part-time, roughly 20-25 hours per week and wore the big-box retailer’s uniform. My hours were very sporadic and varied depending on the day and the week. I worked primarily between the hours of 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 p.m. during the week and between 10:00 a.m. and 6:30 p.m. on the weekends. During my employment, I worked only one closing shift from 5:30 p.m. until midnight. Each shift lasted anywhere between four and a half hours to nine and half hours.

In order to study participants in their natural setting, I was a complete participant and did not disclose the nature of my employment or status as a researcher. I conducted covert research in order to adequately understand employees’ behaviors. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) note that one disadvantage of being a complete participant is that some individuals lose their ability to analytically reflect on their experiences because they have “gone native.” I ensured I remained critically reflective of my experiences through taking detailed, written and oral, descriptions of my interactions throughout each work day.

Further, since I was only at the site for nine weeks, the potential for “going native” was minimized.

I kept track of meetings, observations, and conversations through field notes. According to Anderson (1987), field notes are a “record of what was meaningful...the goal is not to record everything – that simply creates chaos – but to carefully note those critical moments when some meaning of the social action was revealed, however imperfectly, to the researcher” (pp. 257-258). Due to the nature of retail work, my breaks were scheduled by management. As a wage employee, I had to take a fifteen minute break for every four hours I worked, and if I worked more than five hours, I had to take an unpaid thirty minute break (e.g., lunch)<sup>5</sup>. Therefore, in an eight hour shift, I was required to take two 15 minute breaks and one 30 minute break. During my scheduled breaks each work day, I recorded scratch notes, or observational notes (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) about significant organizational events, meaningful conversations with employees, employee demographics, and organizational discourse (e.g., narratives, rites). Events were deemed significant and conversations were viewed as meaningful if they related to how employees perceived the organization or employees’ connection with the organization. Lindlof and Taylor (2002) state that events are significant if they represent a higher-level concept. Because fellow coworkers were not made aware of my researcher status, I took “headnotes,” or “mental logs” (Frey et al., 2000, p. 272), and then I wrote scratch notes on my phone in the break room or in my car. After each work day, I used a digital recorder to record any further comments I had on the events that occurred. Additionally, I kept a research diary where I recorded any personal frustrations, reactions, and other thoughts about working in the field.

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<sup>5</sup> This is a national law with which organizations must comply

After each week, I then transcribed all field notes and digital files verbatim, resulting in 102 double-spaced pages or 2154 lines of text.

To ensure validity and reliability, I created an audit trail, used thick description, and triangulated the data. First, field notes served as a paper trail of activities, events, and conversations. Other researchers may then follow the paper trail to look for bias or distortions that may have occurred due to the researcher being a participant in the organizational culture. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), field notes “objectify events that were situated, ambiguous, and fleeting” (p. 160). Although a researcher can rewrite field notes as many times as they want, they cannot replay actual events again. Thus field notes in some way become the event.

A second way I addressed reliability and validity issues is through clear and thick descriptions of how I came to my findings. According to Frey et al. (2000), ethnographers use detailed descriptions to illustrate that findings are not merely inferred, but rather they are based on observations, interviews, or focus groups. For example, when I described my research categories, I explained why I developed that category and provided many examples of where I found that category in the data. In this way, I demonstrated how the categories emerged out of the data.

The final way I addressed reliability and validity issues is through triangulation. Triangulation is when a researcher compares two or more forms of evidence (Johnson & Waterfield, 2004; Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). This study employed triangulation by combining participant observations, ethnographic and informant interviews, and artifact analysis. If findings are consistent across all data, reliability of the research will be increased (Johnson & Waterfield).

**Participants.** Participants were selected based on proximity or those individuals that I closely worked with; thus, all employees that I interacted with while on-the-job were participants. The employees who trained me, supervisors who I reported to, and fellow co-workers are examples of individuals who were participants in this study. However, individuals under the age of 18 were not included as participants. I determined if an individual was under 18 if he or she referenced being in high school. No employees were excluded from this study based on age. Additionally, participant demographics were assessed based on observation and what information participants disclosed to me. Overall, 54 participants were selected to participate, 20 participants were male and 34 participants were female. Participants ranged in age from 19 to 50<sup>6</sup>. All employees that I interacted with were selected as participants, regardless of whether an employee had worked at Big Alpha for one day or twenty years. Participants were not made aware that they were participating in this research study. All names of participants were changed, but characteristics of participants remained the same.

**Informant interviews.** After I conducted participant observations, I conducted two informant interviews to check my perceptions and seek clarification of terminology used within Big Alpha. Informants apprise the researcher “about key features and processes of the scene – what the significant customs and rituals are and how they are done, which people exercise the real power, and so forth” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 176). The purpose of these interviews was to understand how my experiences may have been different from or similar to full-time employees. These two informants provided me with rich data, verifying whether or not my experiences were typical of Big Alpha or if my

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<sup>6</sup> This is an estimate based on participant observations and what individuals disclosed to me.

experiences were because I was a seasonal employee. Additionally, the informant interviews allowed me to clarify any confusing issues regarding Big Alpha's management practices as well as understand any terminology of which I was unclear.

**Data collection.** I conducted two informant interviews with individuals who had previously worked at Big Alpha. I selected both participants through convenience sampling. One participant was a relative of mine and the other participant was a close acquaintance. Both interviews were conducted at the participants' homes and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes in length. Questions ranged from "When were you employed at Big Alpha?" to "Describe to me what your orientation was like?" to "Tell me what your last day at Big Alpha was like?" I digitally recorded each interview and then, after each interview, I transcribed them, resulting in 8 pages or 128 lines of double-spaced text.

**Participants.** Tracy, the first participant, had worked at Big Alpha from May 2000 until November 2001. Tracy started as an intern at a large Big Alpha store in a large metropolitan area in the Midwest. She then moved to an executive position after she graduated from college and worked at a small Big Alpha store in a small Midwestern city. Christina, the second participant, had also entered Big Alpha as an intern and worked for Big Alpha from May 1997 until April 2001. In April of 2001, Christina moved to a job at the corporate headquarters. Christina started out at a mid-size Big Alpha store in a mid-size Midwestern city and then, after graduating from college, trained as an executive manager at the same Big Alpha store I was employed with. She then progressed to opening up several Big Alpha stores in the Midwest.

**Data analysis for phase I.** Analysis of data consisted of grounded theory in which the researcher allowed theory to emerge from the data. Strauss and Corbin (1998) state

“Theory derived from data is more likely to resemble the ‘reality’ than is theory derived by putting together a series of concepts based on experience or solely through speculation (how one thinks things ought to work)” (p. 12). Grounded theory was developed through conducting a close textual analysis of field notes and informant interview data. Data were analyzed in three phases: open, axial, and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding allowed me to identify broad categories or topics that emerged from the data. First, I read through all of the data, marking central and significant phrases or units of meanings (e.g., sentences, clauses). I clustered these phrases or units of meanings into categories, or general topics or broad ideas. When a category emerged, I entered it in the codebook and then, using the constant comparative method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), compared it to existing categories. If it did not fit with the existing categories, a new category was entered in the codebook. The second phase consisted of me looking for higher-order, or axial codes. Axial coding is the process of relating categories to subcategories to further clarify and explain the phenomena that was uncovered during the open coding process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). During this phase, I analyzed how codes related to one another and condensed several codes to make up a larger category. For example, the category positive aspects of the job and the category of incentives were condensed to form the category formal forms of recognition. Third, I refined these axial codes through selective coding. In the selective coding process, I compared the codes to existing theory, exploring how these categories aligned with Cheney’s identification strategies (i.e., common ground technique, identification through antithesis, the transcendent “we”, and unifying symbols) and DiSanza and Bullis’ identification strategies (i.e., global recognition of individuals’ contributions, bragging, recognition of individuals’ contributions outside of the

organization, and invitation) as well as alternative identification strategies (i.e., disidentification, deidentification, etc.).

## Phase II

**Artifact analysis.** The second phase of the study consisted of artifact analysis. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), documents are important sources of information in the organization:

Documents in an organization indicate what the organization produces; how it certifies actions (e.g. license or deed); how it categorizes events or people (e.g. membership lists); how it codifies procedures or policies (e.g. manuals); and in what ways it informs or instructs the membership (e.g. newsletters and shareholder reports), explains past or future actions (e.g. memoranda), memorializes its own history or achievements (e.g. year-books), and tracks its own activities (e.g. minutes of meetings). (p. 117)

The current study analyzed organizational artifacts including training materials (see Table 1), two newsletters (published December and January), documented policies and procedures in the breakroom, and the company website. Through analyzing Big Alpha's artifacts, I was able to examine the organization's identification strategies (i.e., common ground technique, identification through antithesis, use of the transcendent "we"; unifying symbols, global recognition of individuals' contributions, bragging, recognition of individuals' contributions outside of the organization, and invitation; Cheney, 1983b; DiSanza & Bullis, 1999). Additionally, analyzing organizational artifacts allowed me to understand organizational values (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002) and what values Big Alpha communicated to its employees.

Table 1. List of Training Materials

Number	Pages	Type of Training Material	Description
1	12	Big Alpha Guide to Disabilities	Guide to describing helping customers with disabilities
2	4	Pay & Benefits	Brochure outlining Big Alpha's pay and benefits
3	8	Pharmacy Service Brochure	Brochure detailing Big Alpha's pharmacy policies
4	65	Business Conduct Guide	Handbook detailing Big Alpha's corporate ethics and integrity
5	61	Team Member Handbook	Handbook for non-exempt employees in the stores
6	n/a	Big Alpha website	Website explaining who Big Alpha is, their mission statement, their values, and their awards
7	4	Employee Resources	Brochure explaining team member resources for their well-being (e.g. social, health, career, financial, and community)
8	1	My Pay & Benefits	Sheet describing how to enroll in pay and benefits online
9	1	My Pay & Benefits	Sheet demonstrating how to view pay online
10	1	Information Protection Sheet	Sheet describing Big Alpha's information protection policy
11	1	Employee Rights and Responsibilities	Sheet detailing employees' rights under the Family and Medical Leave Act
12	1	Group Health Plan Notice of Privacy Practices	Sheet detailing how Big Alpha protects that privacy of health plan information
13	n/a	Employee discount card	Card that details employee number in order to obtain the employee discount
14	n/a	Nametag	Pin that denotes my name and status as a Big Alpha employee
15	n/a	Orientation videos on-site	Four segments (each around 5-7 minutes) detailing: 1) how to greet customers; 2) disadvantages of forming a union; 3) how to ensure safety; and 4) Big Alpha diversity

This analysis enabled me to compare the organization's values with the employee's organizational discourse, uncovering how employees may reflect these in their narratives and rites.

**Data collection.** To analyze the organization's identification strategies, I gathered all training materials, newsletters, and other house organs that were provided to me or to which I had access during the course of my employment; therefore, data for Phase II was collected simultaneously with data collection for Phase I. Training materials such as benefit brochures, company policies, and the employee handbook were all given to me in a packet during orientation. Along with this textual material, I analyzed organizational documents located in the break room and in the backroom. These documents consisted of two monthly newsletters (December 2011 and January 2012), benefit policies, types of recognition, scheduling policies, and compliance policies. Finally, I analyzed Big Alpha's website, exploring their company policies, careers, affiliates, and employee services.

Although I was hired as a seasonal worker, I had access to many of the same documents as full-time workers, with the exception of documents about specific benefits<sup>7</sup>. At my orientation, the human resource representative, Sarah, explained that seventy-five percent of all seasonal workers are hired on permanently. Additionally, my orientation packet had brochures generally explaining pay and benefits, even though I did not qualify to receive benefits. For these reasons, my access to organizational documents was similar to full-time hourly employees.

**Data analysis.** After participant observation and informant interview data were analyzed, the artifacts were analyzed using Cheney's organizational identification

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<sup>7</sup> As a seasonal and part-time employee, I was not qualified for benefits.

strategies (i.e., common ground technique, identification through antithesis, the transcendent “we”, and unifying symbols) as well as DiSanza and Bullis’ strategies (i.e., global recognition of individuals’ contributions, bragging, recognition of individuals’ contributions outside of the organization, and invitation) as a guide. If a phrase or unit of meaning was similar to one of these categories, it was grouped with that category. However, if a new category emerged from the artifact data, it was then entered into the codebook.

### **Phase III**

In order to assess how employees’ everyday talk reflected organizational identification strategies, I conducted a textual analysis of the participant observation data, looking for the organizational identification strategies I found in Phase II. First, I read through all of the data, looking for sentences or phrases that were consistent with the identification strategies I found in Phase II. The unit of analysis I used was a sentence or phrase. After I initially coded sentences and phrases for a strategy or tactic (i.e., common ground technique, identification through antithesis, transcendent “we,” unifying symbols, global recognition of individuals’ contributions, bragging, recognition of individuals outside the organization, and invitation), I then went through each sentence for the common ground strategy and coded it for a corresponding tactic (i.e., expressed concern for the individual, recognized individual contributions, espoused shared values, advocated company benefits and offered employee testimonials).

### **Researcher Bias**

Due to the nature of my participant ethnography, I have several biases that need to be acknowledged. First, I closely worked with my participants and became their coworker

and friend. Second, due to the nature of ethnography, I documented my observations rather than asking participants their thoughts and feelings. In order to minimize these biases, I implemented several strategies. LeCompte and Goetz (1982) note that disciplined subjectivity is a strategy that one can use to ensure the group's meanings are recognized as opposed to the researcher's. Disciplined subjectivity occurs when the researcher assumes an insider/outsider role in order to ensure that the interpretations are authentic rather than imposed by the researcher. I employed disciplined subjectivity by describing only employee's behaviors and thoughts that were made known to me through conversation. Instead of inferring participants' beliefs and values, I made note of observations. In my field notes, if I did make an inference, I marked it as such. After I transcribed my field notes, I reflected on them and combed through them to check my understandings. I clarified any confusing observations and inferences by using rich and descriptive detail to provide further support of my observations as well as conducted informant interviews to clarify any issues and check my perceptions.

Another strategy that reduces researcher bias is taking accurate and precise field notes (Frey et al., 2000). Field notes should be written after each fieldwork session, as close to immediately as possible. Additionally, field notes should be chronological and very detailed, including essential details about interactions and behaviors (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Field notes consisted of my daily activities such as when I started, how many hours I worked, who my supervisor and trainers were, who I worked with during my shift, and what functions I carried out throughout my day. Along with daily activities, I took notes of any narratives that I heard, whether I was a part of the conversation or overheard the conversation. I also detailed what types of language employees, supervisors,

and managers used (e.g., if they use the transcendent “we”). Rites are another type of event that I kept notes on; rites included daily meetings, group huddles, and chit-chat sessions.

Lastly, I noted any behavior and/or language that was relevant to this study such as if employees were distraught or if they were happy. Keeping detailed accounts of fieldwork allows others to check a researcher’s notes to look for places where bias may have occurred (Lindlof & Taylor).

### **Summary**

The present study utilized participant observation, informant interviews, and artifact analysis to understand how employees mirror organizational identification strategies in their everyday talk as well as exploring alternative identification strategies. Participant observation provided a rich and detailed method of observing employees in situ. Through participant observations and informal interviews, I was able to capture the lived experiences of employees to better understand how their everyday talk did or did not reflect Big Alpha’s organizational identification strategies. Additionally, I conducted informant interviews and examined organizational artifacts to further understand Big Alpha’s organizational discourse, exploring how Big Alpha utilized Cheney’s (1983b) and DiSanza and Bullis’ (1999) identification strategies in their organizational documents. During my time at Big Alpha, I kept mental and written notes of my experiences with employees, managers, and supervisors, as well as recorded my own personal thoughts and experiences. Through rich and thick descriptions, I gleaned a thorough understanding of organizational discourse within Big Alpha.

## **CHAPTER FOUR. RESULTS**

This study sought to understand how employees reflect organizational identification strategies in their everyday talk. The research questions that guide this study are:

RQ1: How does employees' everyday talk communicate identification?

RQ2: How are alternative forms of identification reflected in employees' everyday talk?

RQ3: What are the organizational identification messages communicated by Big Alpha?

RQ4: How is organizational identification discourse reflected in employees' everyday talk?

I answered these research questions using a three phase approach. In the first phase, I used the coding procedure developed for the grounded theory approach in which I used open, axial, and selective coding. In Phase II, using Cheney's (1983b) and DiSanza and Bullis' (1999) identification strategies and tactics (e.g., common ground technique, identification through antithesis, transcendent "we," unifying symbols, global recognition of individuals' contributions, bragging, recognition of individuals outside the organization, and invitation), I conducted a textual analysis of Big Alpha's organizational artifacts. Finally, in Phase III, I conducted a textual analysis of the participant observation data, looking for the organizational identification strategies and tactics I found in Phase II (i.e., common ground technique, offered employee testimonials, advocated company benefits, espoused shared values, invitation, recognition of individuals outside the organization, unifying symbols, transcendent "we," identification through antithesis, bragging, global recognition of individuals contributions, and recognition of individual contributions).

This chapter presents the results from Phase I, II, and III. Results from Phase I indicated that participants' everyday language encompassed moments of identification as well as moments of disidentification. Results indicate that participants' everyday talk

focused on three overall categories: employee identification strategies, management identification strategies, and organizational structure. Findings from Phase II show that organizational artifacts primarily used the common ground identification strategy. More specifically, organizational artifacts utilized the tactics of employee testimonials, advocated company benefits, and espoused shared values. Phase III found employees' everyday talk largely centered on the common ground technique where employees primarily utilized the tactics of espoused shared values, recognized individual contributions, and advocated company benefits.

### **Overview of Results from Phase I**

The results from Phase I of analysis provide answers to RQ1 and RQ2. Research question one asked: How does employees' everyday talk communicate identification? Overall, the results of this study found employees' everyday talk encompassed identification strategies unique to employees. In addition, the results also indicated strategies communicated by management; employees both created their own strategies and repeated management's identification strategies. Employee identification strategies centered around three categories: camaraderie, enactment of status, and us vs. them. Management identification strategies focused on positive reinforcement and enactment of their status as managers (i.e., customer-focused and sales-focused). Research question two asked: How are alternative forms of identification reflected in employees' everyday talk? Employees reflected disidentification throughout the general category of employee identification strategies. More specifically, findings indicated that employees' everyday talk reflected disidentification through the categories of camaraderie and enactment of status. An additional category that emerged from the data, but not directly related to

identification strategies, was organizational structure (e.g., task procedures, communication procedures, and conflicting messages). These structural aspects may have influenced how employees' used everyday talk to communicate identification and disidentification. The most prevalent category that emerged in the data was camaraderie ( $n = 32\ %$ )<sup>8</sup>, followed by organizational structure ( $n = 24\ %$ ), enactment of status-employee ( $n = 19\ %$ ), positive reinforcement ( $n = 17\ %$ ), us vs. them ( $n = 5\ %$ ), and enactment of status-management ( $n = 4\ %$ ). Of the 2150 lines of text, 2001 lines were coded for the aforementioned categories ( $n = 93\ %$ ) and 149 lines of text ( $n = 7\ %$ ) were coded for demographic characteristics. A summary of the categories are listed in Table 2.

### **Employee Identification Strategies**

Employee identification strategies encompassed ways in which employees communicated their identification with and commitment to Big Alpha. Although employees' everyday talk reflected their association with Big Alpha, they primarily reflected their identification with their coworkers, or work group. The results of this study suggest that employee identification strategies encompassed three categories in their everyday talk: camaraderie, enactment of status, and us vs. them.

**Camaraderie.** Camaraderie was the most prevalent category that emerged from participant observations ( $n = 32\ %$  of all lines coded). Camaraderie represented moments where employees bonded together through work tasks, shop talk, or about their availability. As such, employees' everyday talk conveyed their association with other employees by communicating their identification as Big Alpha employees. Camaraderie also encompassed instances when employees would gossip about other employees, bonding

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<sup>8</sup> Numbers are added to indicate a general level of proportion rather than a mathematical level of analysis.

them together through “bitch sessions” primarily about Big Alpha management. Within this category, three subcategories emerged from the data: collaboration, shop talk and availability.

Table 2. Summary of Categories from Phase I

Category	Overview of Category	Frequency (lines of data)	%
Camaraderie	Employees would help each other out and bond through self-disclosure of personal issues as well as aspects of the job (e.g. collaboration, shop talk, and availability).	638	32
Enactment of Status-Employee	Employees would enact ways that identified or disidentified them as part of Big Alpha	372	19
Us vs. Them	Employees communicate who they were vs. who they were not (e.g., status as work group members, comparison to competitors).	95	5
Positive Reinforcement	Employees and managers would use formal and informal ways of positively reinforcing employee behavior	336	17
Enactment of Status-Management	Management enacted organization-driven values	87	4
Organizational Structure	Traits of Big Alpha’s structure	473	24

**Collaboration.** One of the most prevalent subthemes under camaraderie was collaboration ( $n = 42\%$  of all lines coded), which encompassed moments when employees would help each other with work tasks. For example, even though I was hired as a sales floor associate, I was trained as a cashier too; this is true of every Big Alpha employee. In this way, we were able to cashier when the lanes were full and customers were waiting.

During the work day, customer service supervisors and managers would call for additional cashiers to assist. I wrote about one experience in my field notes:

After lunch, I continued to work carts<sup>9</sup>. After about a half hour, the customer service supervisor who is full-time and benefitted, Louise, called for help for the lanes. She said, ‘Who can come up and help us on the lanes?’ I said, ‘I can go up.’ She said, ‘Thanks. Who else can come up?’ Someone else responded that they were on their way. (685-687)

Another example of employees helping out other areas is when Derek, a full-time customer service supervisor, called for additional cashiers:

After break, I went back to the middle and continued working my cart. Then the supervisor, Derek, said, “I need one person to help at the lanes.” When I heard this, I was in the backroom. Since I was kind of far away, I didn’t respond. Then Nick, a manager, saw me and said, “Could you go to the front lanes to help out.” I said, “Yes, definitely. I wasn’t sure if they still needed help.” (696-699)

Additionally, employees communicated over the “walkie” when they went on break, left for the day, asked a question about a product, or needed help with a customer. I wrote, “Alyssa, a part-time seasonal employee who had worked at Big Alpha since October, went on break. As she was going on break, she said over the walkie, ‘This is Alyssa and I am going on my last 15’” (1108-1111). Another employee, Lucas, a part-time worker, also communicated over the walkie about being finished with his shift: “This is Lucas and I am done for the day” (1224-1225). This small talk illustrates that employees communicated with one another to ensure that coworkers knew of their whereabouts as well as to confirm

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<sup>9</sup> Exact term has been changed to protect the identity of the organization.

that their area was well-covered when they went on break or left for the day. Through collaboration, employees were demonstrating their concern and identification to the organization and its values of camaraderie and communication.

***Shop talk.*** Shop talk was another category under camaraderie ( $n = 39$  % of camaraderie lines). Shop talk refers to instances where employees would disclose to one another intimate and often private details about customers and others employees. As such, shop talk consisted of both positive ( $n = 15$  %) instances that reflected employees' identification to Big Alpha and negative ( $n = 24$  %) instances that distanced themselves from Big Alpha, but fused employees to their work group or other coworkers. First, positive functions of shop talk included employees discussing other customers or employees, bonding them to Big Alpha. For example, Jason, a young man in his early twenties who was a seasonal worker and only had been working at Big Alpha for a month, vented to me about a customer that was shopping on Black Friday. I wrote, "I saw Jason and went over to him to vent as I was annoyed by the customer. He told me how frustrating customers were as well. He said two ladies were fighting over a Leap Pad. He had gotten it from the back for a customer and then another customer was pulling it out of his hands. He said it was crazy, and he was very disgusted by it" (569-572). Another employee, Savannah, a part-time worker who has been working for Big Alpha for several years and was my trainer for one day, discussed how she handles customers who are looking at electronics:

I told Savannah several times how frustrating it is working in electronics since I know hardly anything. She said 'I just usually tell the customer what they want to hear. The cameras, with the exception of the really nice ones, are basically the

same. So I just pick one and tell them that that is probably the best. That is usually what they want to hear and they don't care if I tell them that they are similar, as they are. (578-582)

These examples illustrate that employees used shop talk to convey information that only insiders were privy to. For this reason, shop talk served to distinguish outsiders (customers) from insiders (employees), reflecting participants' identification as Big Alpha employees.

Another function of shop talk was to bond employees together as members of a work group. For instance, employees disclosed to me and to others their thoughts and feelings about working at Big Alpha. Tina, a twenty-year old woman who was a seasonal, part-time employee and had been working at Big Alpha for a few months, told me how she had overslept and came into work late. She stated,

I thought I had to work at 9:30 so I woke up at 8:45 and looked at my schedule and realized it was 9:00. I called Julie and told her that I looked at my schedule wrong. I just threw on my clothes. When I was walking in Nate, Julie, Lisa, and Alice were all sitting up front and I was so embarrassed. But none of them seemed to really care. I think they were just happy I showed up. But I was so embarrassed.

(1241- 1248)

There was a camaraderie established between myself and Tina because she confided in me. She was willing to disclose to me her situation, which helped us bond together as employees. Therefore, using shop talk to self-disclose to others reflected employees' identification with Big Alpha as well as their identification with other employees.

The third way that employees used shop talk was to vent their frustrations about Big Alpha; thus, it also functioned in a negative way. The second research question asked how are alternative forms of identification reflected in employees' everyday talk? Employees utilized shop talk to convey disidentification. There were numerous occasions where employees spoke negatively about Big Alpha as a company. For example, on the morning of Black Friday, one employee, Emily, who was a full-time benefited employee and had been working for the company for numerous years, claimed, "I am going to quit if we are open on Thanksgiving next year. I think the holidays are ours and we shouldn't work. I will definitely quit" (395-396). Further, other employees spoke about how they were upset with managers. I wrote in my field notes,

When I was done working a cart, I went over to the fitting rooms. I noticed that Tasha, a full-time benefited employee, and Tina, a part-time seasonal worker, were there. Tasha was frustrated and very upset. She said, "I can't believe Alice and Laura (both managers) just called us out for that (the prices were incorrect on an endcap). It was like they were tattling on us. Then during the service session, we were working on it and we got pretty much yelled at for not helping customers. They never recognize me all of the other times I am providing great customer service, but this one time when I not, that is when I get yelled at." (1499-1504)

Deborah, a woman in her late forties who has worked at part-time at Big Alpha for several years, echoed Tasha's sentiments: "I don't remember the last time I got a customer card<sup>10</sup>. They never recognize me" (1506-1508). Another example of employees using shop talk to convey frustration was when two employees, Lucas, a part-time employee, and Liz, full-

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<sup>10</sup> Customer cards were used as a way for employees and managers to recognize individuals.

time benefited employee, were in the breakroom discussing schedules. I spoke about this interaction in my field notes,

During one of my breaks, I overheard Lucas ask Liz and another woman who works primarily on sales floor about why there weren't enough workers. This woman asked Sandy, "I don't know if I am going to take my last fifteen, it is so busy in here." Liz said, "Yes, you should." Lucas said, "Why do they do that? Why do they have so few people?" The woman said, "I guess that is how they do it." Liz then shook her head and said, "No, that's not that." With this she indicated that she was annoyed with this and annoyed with how they do the scheduling.

(2082- 2087)

When employees discussed their negative thoughts and feelings about managers, other employees responded in kind, chiming in with their own frustrations. Although these "bitch sessions" were a way for employees to vent, they also negatively portrayed Big Alpha, possibly inducing disidentification because they all were experiencing frustration and anger. Shop talk functioned as a way for employees to convey their association with their work group and identification through antithesis from Big Alpha.

***Availability.*** Availability refers to employees' discourse about being available to work. Similar to shop talk, availability was both positive ( $n = 6$  % of camaraderie lines) and negative ( $n = 12$  % of camaraderie lines). Employees used stories and small talk when they spoke of their schedules and how they worked many hours for Big Alpha. Some employees went above and beyond their jobs and were available or "on-call" during their breaks. I wrote in my field notes,

I have noticed that some people leave their walkies on during break, especially the supervisors. There have been times when I am looking for Ben, a full-time benefited supervisor for hard lines, because I have a question or someone is looking for Louise, the customer service supervisor. Someone will say over the walkie, “Louise.” Or “Ben.” Then Louise will say, “I am on break. Derek can help you.” Ben will answer the question if it is something small or he will say, “I can help you when I am back from break.” I find this very interesting as it seems like they are always “on” the clock and never get a true break. (1027-1032)

Employees used small talk to demonstrate their loyalty and identification to Big Alpha. They seemed to be “on call” so that they were able to always be working. Employees also used small talk to relay their availability to each other throughout the day. If they were unable to help one another out either with cashiering or stocking shelves, they would communicate this over their walkie: “As I was walking to cashier, I was called to the front. Over the walkie, I heard Jacob, a part-time employee, say, ‘I am with a customer so I can’t come up.’ Someone said, ‘Thank you for letting us know’” (946-947).

Along with being positive, there were also moments where employees spoke negatively about their availability in regards to work schedules. This negative discourse reflected an alternative form of identification such as disidentification, deidentification, or schizo-identification. Many employees were frustrated if they were not scheduled for enough hours during the week or did not get the times and days off they requested. As she was looking at the schedule, one employee (I did not find out her name) complained, “I asked for next weekend and they have me scheduled for work. My parents are in town. Now I have to ask for it off” (676-678). Schedules were a large concern for numerous

employees, and conversations frequently revolved around what hours employees were working on specific days, particularly around the holidays (e.g., Black Friday, Thanksgiving, Christmas Eve, New Year's Eve, and New Year's Day). While speaking of their schedules, employees generally seemed annoyed or upset; therefore, these stories functioned in a negative way. Shop talk seemed to function as a way for employees to convey their frustration that Big Alpha was not concerned about them as individuals.

**Enactment of status-employee.** There were numerous informal ways in which employees enacted their status of being dedicated and hard-working employees as well as moments where employees enacted their status as disidentified workers. Three categories were identified: rebelling, maintaining brand, and mocking.

**Rebelling.** Rebelling consisted of ways that Big Alpha employees defied or resisted their job duties, enacting their status as disidentified workers ( $n = 49.5\%$  of enactment of status-employee lines). Big Alpha employees used humor, shop talk, and stories to rebel against aspects of their job. One way that employees rebelled was not stopping coworkers when they did not follow procedures. For example, I wrote, “Mary, a full-time benefited supervisor for soft lines, saw two people pushing a cart, which apparently they should not do, and she looked at them and said ‘They shouldn’t be pushing that.’ Then she said ‘I don’t get paid enough to care. I don’t get paid enough for this’” (509-511). Mary used humor and shop talk to rebel against an aspect of her job. Another way that Big Alpha employees rebelled was by “hiding out” when Big Alpha needed individuals to help cashier at the front lanes or needed help for other sales floor areas. I wrote about one of these experiences in my field notes where Steve, a young man in his early twenties who was a seasonal worker and had only been working at Big Alpha for a

month, expressed his thoughts about helping cashier through shop talk: “I hate working the front lanes so I don’t go up there very often.” Another employee, Tina, a 20-year-old college student and seasonal worker who had only been working at Big Alpha for a few months, expressed similar sentiments through a story, “I asked, ‘Do you like cashiering?’ She said, ‘No, I try to avoid it, but I really couldn’t this time. Usually I just act like I am busy, but since I was walking by, I had to go’” (987-989). Further, I saw many instances where employees stated that they did not want to work:

After working the abandoned cart for awhile, Emily, Jess, Allison, and Ken all complained about it (all full-time benefited workers). Jess said, “I am sick of this. I am sick of doing this.” Allison chimed in, “Yes, I am ready to go on break.” Jess said, “Shouldn’t we be doing something else. Why do they have us here, we are done with our work for the week. This is stupid.” Emily said “Should we go talk to Nate (manager)?” Jess said, “Yes, let’s talk to him, but I don’t have a walkie.” I offered her my walkie, and she said, “Oh no, I don’t really want one. If I have one, I have to do work. That is my excuse.” One of them walked Nate and they met with Nate to ask him what they should be doing. (827-834)

In this example, Jess used humor to convey her unwillingness to work, dissociating herself from Big Alpha. Another employee, Tina, a part-time seasonal worker, joked about her not wanting to go to the front lanes, “Tina said, ‘Way to take one for the team. I don’t have a walkie that is my excuse.’ Both Tina and Tasha, a full-time benefited employee, implied that they didn’t want to go up to the lanes and waited as long as possible so they wouldn’t have to go up” (1040-1043). From my observations, employees tried to “act busy” or “hide out” when they were asked to help the front lanes. Other employees made excuses of why

they did not want to work or could not work. In this way, they used narratives to rebel and enact their status as unmotivated and potentially disidentified or deidentified employees.

**Maintaining brand.** Employees talked about and behaved in ways that helped to maintain Big Alpha's brand; therefore, maintaining brand consisted of instances where employees demonstrated their allegiance to Big Alpha ( $n = 35$  % of enactment of status-employee lines). These behaviors included straightening products throughout the day, using "we" to indicate that they were closely connected with Big Alpha, communicating with the correct vernacular, and asking customers if they needed help finding specific items. First, many employees were very detailed about straightening products, making sure that their area looked neat. Employees conveyed their pride in their work through small talk. In this way, employees demonstrated that they cared about Big Alpha's reputation, signaling their identification with the organization. Second, employees used "we" when speaking of Big Alpha. One of my trainers, Matt, a full-time benefited supervisor, spoke highly of Big Alpha:

I could tell that Matt had been with Big Alpha for awhile as he was very familiar with Big Alpha's lingo and it was challenging for him to step back and describe to me things not in Big Alpha's lingo. For example, he said, "Okay, we are going to start our carts." I said, "Oh you mean stocking the shelves." He said, "Yes, carts." I could tell he was a bit annoyed that I would call it something else besides carts. Also, he seemed very dedicated to his job as he was very serious while training me. He wanted his area to look good and my performance would reflect on him. (306-312).

Additionally, I was scolded when I did not use the proper terminology: “Then a customer came up to us and asked me a question. I went to Jessie, a full-time benefited employee, and said, ‘This customer is looking for...’ She quickly stopped me and said with a stern tone, ‘This [customer]<sup>11</sup>.’ I corrected myself and said, ‘Yes, this [customer]...’” (461-465). Although not every employee corrected me when I used incorrect terminology, I did have some employees who were very adamant that I called customers by the correct name. Jessie used small talk to illustrate her commitment to and identification with Big Alpha.

Further, during our daily assemblies, the managers encouraged us to ask customers if we can help them find something. Laura, the customer service manager said, “What are the three Cs?” Kim, the store leader, said, ‘Can I help you find something?’ Matt, my trainer, said, ‘Can I put that on your Alpha card.’” Laura said, “I know I always like saving money by using my card.” She said this very quickly and it was odd since we all know that we save money with the card. And then Ben said, “Can I get a cart for you?” (889-892)

Managers used small talk to emphasize that every employee should be asking customers if they need help. In this way, managers were conveying their allegiance and identification with Big Alpha, encouraging others to act with Big Alpha’s best interests in mind. As such, participants used small talk to indicate their status as Big Alpha employees, which was representative of their employee identification.

**Mocking.** The subcategory of mocking included moments when employees ridiculed or laughed at aspects of Big Alpha ( $n = 15\%$  of enactment of status-employee lines) as a way to protect themselves from identifying with Big Alpha. While one

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<sup>11</sup> Actual terminology has been changed to protect the identity of the organization.

employee, Sarah, a young woman in her early twenties and part-time employee, was training me, she stated that “Big Alpha is known for their ‘brand.’ I thought it was interesting that she used air quotes around ‘brand’” (241-242). With this phrasing, Sarah used small talk to mock Big Alpha’s reputation for their brand. Matt, another part-time employee, was talking about coming in late to work the previous week. He used humor to make a joke out of it: “The other day I came in an hour late because I looked at my schedule wrong. Whoops. Laura (his supervisor) wasn’t too mad. That is why she is asking if I am here.” Later on he saw Laura and said, ‘I am here. I came in at the right time today” (1360-1364). Matt made a joke out of coming in late; to him it was funny, and he did not take it seriously that he was late for work. Matt’s humor served to detach himself from Big Alpha and his status as an employee rather than a violation of employee expectations. In fact, mocking seemed to have served to induce schizo-identification as employees indicated their identification and disidentification with Big Alpha.

Another part of mocking Big Alpha was in our name tags. Many employees purposely selected name tags that had different names than their names. For example, during one night, I asked a woman I was working with about her name tag: “When I was done cashiering, I went to softlines and saw Cassie, a part-time employee. However, her name tag said, ‘Pearl.’ I said, ‘Pearl is a funny name’ (I knew her name wasn’t Pearl). She said, ‘Yes, I saw this and thought it would be fun to wear tonight” (1763-1765). I spoke with another employee about her nametag. “I said, ‘I am Kai and you are Jess’ (I read her name tag). She said, ‘Actually it is Jessica (a part-time employee), but I don’t want customers to call me by my real name. It weirds me out” (1782-1785). Name tags were a way for employees to mock themselves and mock Big Alpha as an organization for making

them wear name tags. Additionally, mocking served to shield and protect employees from completely identifying with Big Alpha.

**Us vs. them.** The category of us vs. them consisted of moments when employees' communicated their status as members of Big Alpha and/or their respective work groups ( $n = 5\%$  of all lines coded). Employees' everyday talk reflected their perceptions about Big Alpha, communicating their membership in Big Alpha or their dissociation with competitors. In this way, employees communicated their identification with Big Alpha, connecting themselves with one group and disconnecting themselves with another group. Two subthemes emerged: status and comparison.

Status was the most prevalent category under the larger category of us vs. them ( $n = 79\%$  of us vs. them lines). Status represented moments where employees communicated their identity as members of Big Alpha, demonstrating their superior social standing. For example, numerous employees saw working on Black Friday as something that increased their reputation within Big Alpha; therefore, rites of passage, employee stories and small talk reflected working on Black Friday as something of a status symbol within the company. Working Black Friday was a rite of passage as several employees were excited to work on this day, even though almost everyone worked 10 and 12 hours shifts (normally they only work 8 hour shifts). When I asked about working on Black Friday, many of them told me stories of previous Black Fridays and how insane it becomes. Although it was busy, many employees saw working Black Friday as fun and exciting and a shared experience of being a full-fledged Big Alpha worker.

As well as communicating their status as members of Big Alpha, employees also communicated their status as members of their respective work groups. There seemed to

be a hierarchy in regards to positions at Big Alpha. Managers were the highest on the corporate ladder (at the store level) followed by individuals who worked the sales floor and then cashiers. Managers were observed conversing a lot with each other and less with their subordinates. Additionally, individuals on the sales floor seemed to perceive themselves as higher on the corporate ladder than cashiers. I conveyed this hierarchy in my field notes, “When we broke the huddle, Kim, the store leader, said, ‘Let’s break on “Fresh.”’” Some people put their arms up and did the clapping gesture and said, ‘Fresh!’ Not everyone participated and it was primarily the supervisors and management who participated in the ‘Fresh’ break” (1675-1677). This example signifies that managers were loyal to each other, conveying their status as a member of their work group, and employees were loyal to each other by not complying with members from other work groups.

In addition to conveying work group loyalty, there were many times employees communicated how they hated to cashier and were glad they were hired for sales floor. One women in her late thirties and who was a cashier stated, “Are you sales floor?” I said, ‘Yes.’ She said, ‘I might get to be sales floor after the 1st of the year. It would be nice to change things up’” (1211-1213). With this statement, she implied that her status as a cashier was not as exciting as my status as a sales floor employee. Additionally, some employees liked working in certain areas of the store. I wrote, “One employee, Jess, a part-time supervisor, said “I hate working in market. I love soft lines”” (327-328) while another employee, Nate, a full-time supervisor, said “I would rather work market. I hate working soft lines” (324-326). Therefore, employees used small talk to identify themselves as members of specific groups, in contrast to identifying as members of Big Alpha.

Another way that employees communicated their status as being part of their respective work groups was through eating lunch together and working alongside each other. I noticed that a lot of groups were very cliquey. When I interviewed Christina, an informant who had worked at the same Big Alpha I worked at, she commented, “I don’t know if you felt this way, but a lot of um talking behind each other’s backs and a lot of cliques and I felt like it was a small town. People knew everything about everybody you know just kind of that cattiness. You know. That is something I remember a lot of” (79-82). Through my observations, I noticed the managers primarily interacted with each other while the sales floor employees primarily interacted with members of their groups. Further, on really busy days such as Black Friday, there were not enough walkies and pdas (personal digital assistant) for every employee to have one. My trainer, Jamie, a woman in her mid-twenties, told me that only certain people were supposed to have them. I never heard how this was determined, but I assumed it was based on position and tenure within Big Alpha. This furthered the idea that there was a hierarchy and status within Big Alpha.

Employees not only communicated their status as being part of Big Alpha and their respective work groups, there were a few instances when individuals compared themselves to outside competitors ( $n = 21\%$  of us vs. them lines). One example was when another one of my trainers, Sarah, a young woman in her early twenties and a part-time supervisor, compared Big Alpha to a competitor. Using small talk, she commented, “One of the reasons that people shop at Big Alpha versus [competitor] is that we get additional people at the checkout line so people aren’t waiting long” (243-245). Further, employees started comparing Big Alpha’s hours on Thanksgiving to other competitors who were open. One employee noted, “Well, I always say we are better than [competitor]. At least we aren’t

open this year on Thanksgiving" (396-398). Through this comparison, employees were denoting their association with Big Alpha and their dissociation from other organizations, demonstrating their identification with Big Alpha or their work group through stories and small talk.

### **Management Identification Strategies**

Management at Big Alpha used several communicative strategies during formal training sessions, daily assemblies, and through everyday talk that sought to induce identification among employees. These identification strategies included informal and formal forms of recognition. Management implemented informal ways that both employees and managers utilized that helped induce identification. There were also formally implemented incentives that aimed to persuade employees to enact corporately desired behavior; all of these were created and implemented by managers and supervisors. Therefore, within this category, two categories emerged: positive reinforcement and enactment of status-management.

**Positive reinforcement.** Positive reinforcement consisted of managers and employees reinforcing corporately desired behavior through verbal recognition and tangible incentives ( $n = 17\%$  of all lines coded). Managers and employees recognized coworkers in two ways: informal and formal forms of recognition.

***Informal forms of recognition.*** The first subcategory under positive reinforcement was recognition ( $n = 56\%$  of positive reinforcement lines). Recognition encompassed ways that Big Alpha employees and managers informally recognized coworkers' behavior. One of the most frequent ways that Big Alpha employees recognized each other was through rites of enhancement during daily assemblies. During most days, Big Alpha

managers would hold three assemblies (one for the morning shift, one for the evening shift, and one for the overnight shift) where managers would discuss any new information that was pertinent to their jobs for the day. For example, the week before Black Friday, Big Alpha managers discussed the logistics of Black Friday such as what time employees should arrive, where they should park, and how customers were going to be let into the store. During these daily assemblies, managers would provide an open forum for employees to recognize each other through small talk. Although there was opportunity for employees to recognize others, mostly managers and supervisors recognized subordinates for doing a good job. Ben, a full-time, benefitfitted, supervisor in his middle forties who has been working at Big Alpha for over ten years, lead the daily assembly one day:

Ben said, “Let’s do some recognition.” He said, “I want to thank Danielle, a part-time seasonal employee, for helping with the front. I want to thank Nancy, a part-time seasonal employee, for helping with the pulls.” Kim, the store lead said, “I want to thank the overnight crew for getting all of the abandoned carts done. Let’s keep that up.” (1834-1837)

However, there were a few instances where employees would recognize each other. I commented in my field notes,

At around 10:15, Ted, the manager on duty, called an assembly near the shoes. He said, “Does anyone have any recognition?” Lisa, a woman in her early twenties who is full-time and benefitfitted and has been working at Big Alpha for three years, said, “I would like to recognize Kai for jumping in and working soft lines [the clothing area] even though she hasn’t been trained in the area.” Everyone looked at me. I got a few smiles, but that is all. I felt quite embarrassed as no one said

“Good job.” They just looked at me. Then a few more people recognized each other for working hard to complete their tasks. (773-777)

As the above quotation illustrates, Lisa, an employee working on the sales floor, did recognize me for my work, but these instances were not the norm. Further, it did not matter if individuals were there or not to hear the recognition. Michelle, a late-twenties full-time supervisor for electronics who has been working for Big Alpha for several years, stated, “Thank you everyone who worked last night. We got everything zoned right before 1am so that was really really good” (885-887). As she stated this, there were only a few people who had worked the previous night. Additionally, after someone was recognized, it was rare for other employees to clap or say “Nice job.” I commented about this observation in my field notes:

Today’s huddle was called by Julie, the HR manager. She asked for recognition and a couple of supervisors recognized employees for helping them out in their areas. When someone recognized someone else, there was no really “Good job” or “Way to go.” (841-843)

Managers primarily used rites of enhancement to recognize individuals. These informal forms of recognition seemed to primarily serve as management identification strategies, inducing identification among employees.

Another way that Big Alpha employees recognized each other through rites of enhancement was by writing employee recognition cards. Blank employee recognition cards were placed on one of the walls in the breakroom. There were three categories in which employees could recognize each other: safety, service and task. Employees could take a recognition card and write positive affirmations to an employee, describing how that

individual helped out or did a good job for the day. Cards in the breakroom stated: “Good job being safe today”; “Good job spotting counterfeit currency”; “Way to help customers save 5 percent!”; and “Way to give customer service.” During my times at Big Alpha, management never told me the rules for using these cards; I had to gather what the cards were and how they were used through asking other employees. While working one day alongside Andy, another part-time employee, Ashley, a full-time customer service supervisor, asked over the “walkie” to check a product for her. Once Andy and myself were done helping her, she commented, “Thank you so much. Who is helping me?” Andy said, ‘Kai and Andy.’ Ashley said, ‘Look for comments cards in the break room. You guys are awesome’” (1234-1237)<sup>12</sup>. Another full-time supervisor, Sarah, explained the employee recognition cards, detailing how things have changed:

Way back when I was on the sales floor, we used to do them all of the time for each other. If you get 75 you get a \$25 gift card so it was a no-brainer. Now Theresa, the human resource manager, monitors it so she makes sure it is just not the same people filling them out. It also needs to be more than you did a good job at the fitting room. That is your job so you need to do above and beyond your job.

(1508-1512)

Although anyone was able to fill these cards out, one employee, Nicholas, a part-time employee, mentioned that he did not feel comfortable filling these out. I detailed this interaction in my field notes,

One day, while I was working, Nicholas said, “Now that today is my last day, I feel like I can fill one of these cards out.” He took a card, wrote something on it, and

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<sup>12</sup> Unfortunately, I never saw the card in the breakroom as they were taken down by management at the end of every month. It may have been there, but I was not able to find it before it was taken down.

then handed it to me. It read: Great customer service + fast response.” I asked him what he meant by that and he said that managers are primarily the ones who fill them out so he always felt a little funny filling one out. I took the card and was very excited as it was my first card. (2129-2133)

Employees may not have felt comfortable filling out these cards, and rarely did I see employees fill them out. Few employees spoke about how they felt about these cards and what these cards meant to them, thus, they did not seem meaningful to employees. Sarah, a full-time benefited supervisor who started in July, spoke very nonchalant about her cards: “I know I forgot to put them back there and have several at home, but you should definitely put them back there” (2049-2050). These cards were communicated as a rite of enhancement for Big Alpha managers to recognize employees, but were not enacted in a consistent manner.

***Formal forms of recognition.*** Formal forms of recognition ( $n = 44$  % of positive reinforcement lines) was the second subcategory under positive reinforcement and encompassed moments where management offered incentives to entice employees to comply with specific job duties. Under this category, managers primarily used rites of enhancement to induce identification. For example, management encouraged employees to ask customers if they would like to open up a Big Alpha debit or credit card. Although this was not a specific requirement of our job, management consistently reiterated to us during daily assemblies that we should be asking customers. They also persuaded us through formal means, incentives: “Cathy also was giving away prizes for the cashiers who were getting Alpha debit or credit cards. One person got a store gift card. Another person got a

DVD. Another person got a Big Alpha t-shirt” (1490-1491). These incentives then served as a way for management to induce employees to identify with Big Alpha.

Along with incentives to open Big Alpha debit or credit cards, managers also offered incentives in the breakroom. One day a week Big Alpha held special food days where management would provide food for employees. One day they had make-your-own-pancakes. The human resource manager, Julie, set out griddles and pancake batter and employees were able to make their own pancakes throughout the day. Another day was grilled cheese sandwich day, and on another occasion they had sandwich day. Since I worked at Big Alpha during the holiday season, they had a special meal on December 23<sup>rd</sup> where Big Alpha brought in food from a local restaurant. Employees looked forward to these days:

When I was in the breakroom on my break, I saw two employees, Nicholas, a part-time employee and Kari, a full-time benefited employee, both in their early twenties, who were picking up their paychecks. Nicholas said, “what is that smell?” I said, “They catered in \_\_\_\_.” Then Nicholas and Kari started jumping up and down and said, “It’s the holiday meal, it’s the holiday meal. I am so excited.” (1054-1058)

Other employees also were excited about the holiday meal. During the daily assembly in the morning, Julie, the human resource manager, was recognized for bringing in the food:

A huddle was called by Alice and Nate (both managers). We waited a bit for others to come and then they asked for recognition. A lot of the managers started recognizing individuals for their hard work. Almost all of the recognition was done by managers. Kim, the store leader said, “I want to recognize Lisa for bringing in

\_\_\_\_\_.” Everyone clapped and was very excited. She said, “It is not just me, it is my team.” Then Julie came to the huddle and Kim said, “Thank you for bringing in food for us.” Management also recognized employees for their help yesterday.

(1014-1020)

Many employees were grateful for the meal and the incentive seemed to strengthen their identification with Big Alpha, depicting Big Alpha as an organization who cares about them.

Another type of incentive that management offered to employees was free Big Alpha merchandise if they asked customers if they needed help finding anything. During one of the service sessions, a ritual where employees were to ask customers if they needed assistance for five or ten minutes, the store manager, Kim, said over the walkie, “but the individuals who provided the best customer service...it was a tie...was Justin and Carl, two part-time employees. I will be walking over with your free Big Alpha t-shirts” (1493-1495). Incentives then served as a way to make the working day more pleasurable and enjoyable, but they also served as a way to persuade employees to work hard for Big Alpha. As such, informal forms of recognition functioned to induce employees to identify with Big Alpha.

The final type of formal form of recognition that emerged from the data was the benefits at Big Alpha. More specifically, many employees used stories to illustrate that they enjoyed Big Alpha as a company because of the benefits. These benefits served incentives for employees to stay at Big Alpha. Carla, a full-time benefited customer service supervisor for cashiers, stated that she had left her job as a daycare provider to work at Big Alpha twenty years ago. She said that she needed benefits. She stated, “Big

Alpha does have very good benefits and they treat their employees well.” Another employee, Nick, a man in his middle twenties who has worked full-time for Big Alpha for two years, also mentioned that he was able to move quickly up the corporate ladder. Nick said, “If you are good, you can really move up quickly here. I was here for less than a year and they promoted me to assistant employee lead” (317-318). These types of recognition were ways that management utilized identification strategies in their everyday talk, possibly influencing Big Alpha employees’ identification.

**Enactment of status-management.** The last category that emerged from the data was enactment of status-management ( $n = 4$  % of all lines coded). Enactment of status-management refers to ways that managers enacted their position as Big Alpha managers. Through this enactment, managers associated themselves with Big Alpha and demonstrated their identification with the company. Managers at Big Alpha enacted their status in two specific ways: company-led initiatives to increase customer service scores and sales.

Managers at Big Alpha focused their conversations with subordinates around providing good customer service ( $n = 82$  % of enactment of status-management lines). Although we were not trained necessarily on how to provide good customer service, management was very specific on how we should interact with customers. For instance, during our first day of training, we learned that we should greet customers by asking them a specific phrase: “We should greet individuals with ‘May I help you find something,’ but if they are on their cell phone, we should gauge the situation” (136-139). Additionally, in each daily assembly, managers would remind us to keep answering phone calls quickly. During one morning assembly, Laura, a customer service manager, commented, “We needed to get our numbers up regarding customer service. Customers said that we were not

making ourselves available so we need to do a better job with that" (358-360). During another daily assembly, Laura stated, "We need to get our service levels back up to where they were before the holidays. We need to be green and yesterday we were yellow. Be really good about communication and getting to the calls" (1416-1418). In daily assemblies, Laura would remind us where we stood with answering phone calls quickly, making sure that we got our service to an appropriate level, which was a corporate-mandated level.

Managers not only focused on customer service, but they also focused on sales, which was the second subtheme ( $n = 18\%$  of enactment of status-management lines). During the morning daily assemblies, managers communicated what the sales forecast was for the day and during the evening assemblies, they would state where we stood in regards to the forecast. One full-time benefited supervisor, Ben, during a night assembly, stated, "The Forecast for today was \$464,000. We are not even close. Right now we are at \$161,000." Several people said, "Wow" (1825-1826) and expressed surprise about the low number. Further, we were encouraged to ask customers who were not carrying a basket or pushing a cart if they wanted either a cart or a basket. I commented in my field notes, They [Kim, the store leader, and Lisa, a manager] really want us to get our sales up as we are lower than expected, but up from last year. Kim said that individuals who have carts or baskets buy more than individuals who only carry items in their hands. Therefore, if we see people without carts/baskets, we should offer them one or the other. They also have placed baskets/carts throughout the store to help us with this. (628-630)

This quotation from my field notes illustrates that managers were enacting their status as employees of Big Alpha by focusing on the company's sales and driving sales through their everyday talk. These daily assemblies served to promote and reinforce corporate-led values and policies. As such, managers enacted their commitment and loyalty to Big Alpha during these daily gatherings, reinforcing their identification through narratives and rites.

### **Organizational Structure as a Source of (Dis)identification**

The last general category that emerged from the data was organizational structure ( $n = 24\%$  of all lines coded). Organizational structure consisted of characteristics that defined Big Alpha's culture. Structure played a critical role in how employees communicated with one another. As a participant, I learned my tasks as a member of the sales floor and how to communicate with other employees. Additionally, there were numerous moments in which employees indicated that they were confused and received conflicting messages from management. Thus, within the category of organizational structure, three subthemes emerged: confusion about policies and procedures, task procedures, and communication procedures.

#### **Confusion about Policies and Procedures**

Confusion about policies and procedures encompassed narratives that focused on employees' being unclear or perplexed about procedures or policies ( $n = 41\%$  of organizational structure lines). I often received a different answer depending on who I asked at Big Alpha. For example, one employee, Lucas, who had been working at Big Alpha for three years, was told that he should go and help cashier if they needed help. Another full-time benefited supervisor, Ben, told him otherwise. Ben said, "'I don't want you going to cashier anymore. We need you to do things around here.' Lucas, a part-time

employee, said, ‘Okay,’ and looked directly at him. Then Ben said, ‘Does that make you sad?’ Lucas said, ‘Well...’ and he didn’t really finish his sentence” (1197-1200).

Additionally, almost every person that trained me was not aware that they were training me for that day. I wrote in my field notes,

Today I trained with Savannah, a part-time employee. I was suppose to train with Kurt, another part-time employee. I went to the electronics area to see if Kurt was there, but they told me how he had come and left. Barry, a part-time employee, proceeded to get the manager, Nate, to see where I should go. Savannah did not know she was training me so she wasn’t looking for me. Finally, Nate asked Savannah if she could train me and she said yes. Like the two previous trainers, she didn’t seem so happy to train me. (519-524)

Many Big Alpha employees expressed confusion as to what they should or should not be doing (i.e., when to take breaks, what shift to work, where and how to put up products) because they heard conflicting messages from managers and supervisors. Because confusion frequently occurred at Big Alpha, it resulted in frustration and led to moments of disidentification or deidentification. For example, one full-time benefitted supervisor, Mike, seemed frustrated when there was confusion over whether we should start straightening products or not. I wrote in my field notes,

When I came back from break, Cassie, a part-time worker, and I started zoning. We started zoning the swimsuits. While we were doing this saw us and asked us, “Are you zoning already?” We said, “Yes.” He said, “Okay, we need to figure out what is going on and if we should start zoning already.” (1816-1818)

Another employee, Alyssa, a seasonal part-time worker, seemed agitated when a supervisor told her she was to work in her area and not help other areas: “Alyssa came up to me, Tina, a part-time seasonal worker, and Tasha, a full-time employee, and said, in a very sarcastic tone, ‘I am not sure I can help you as I guess I need to keep to my area’” (1318-1319).

These examples highlight that conflicting messages contributed to employees experiencing disidentification or deidentification.

### **Task Procedures**

The second subtheme under structural aspects was task procedures (n = 35 % of structural aspect lines). Task procedures entailed moments when employees’ everyday talk focused on how to complete a job task. Depending on the area I worked in, I followed different procedures on how to complete my job. However, throughout the store, there were some specific general procedures that hourly employees were to follow. For example, when we came into the store in the morning, we were to “clock in.” Then, we were to make sure that we clocked out for a 30 minute lunch before we hit five hours. If we hit five hours and had not clocked out, we were out of compliance and Big Alpha could get into trouble with the state.<sup>13</sup> I described this involuntary process in my field notes,

When we were done with lunch, I clocked back in. We are supposed to take a 30 minute lunch, no less. We were told in orientation that the system will not let us clock back in if it is under 30 minutes. It is a way for management to ensure that we are complying with the 30 minute unpaid break. (448-451)

Another general task procedure that employees were to follow was that we were not to have cell phones while we were working. We were also to wear Big Alpha’s uniform,

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<sup>13</sup> This is a state law that all hourly earners have to take a 30 minute break for every 5 hours they work and a 15 minute break for every 4 ½ hours they work.

which consisted of wearing a specific color shirt and a specific color pant. Some employees personalized their uniforms by wearing a shade of the required color shirt (i.e., a shirt within the same color family). These task procedures were outlined on the first day of training and employees would often discuss these rules during the work day. For example, I wrote about an experience where one employee was rebelling against the policy:

A little while later, Tasha, a full-time employee, and myself were working a pull.

Tasha said, “Look at Alyssa’s back pocket.” I said, “What?” She said, “She has her iphone sticking out. The white patch is clearly her phone in her back pocket.” I said, “uh oh.” Tasha said, “She could get written up for that.” (1518-1520)

This quotation illustrates an employee rebelling against the rules, but it also illustrates that employees discussed and reinforced these rules in their small talk or shop talk. These instances then served as ways to reinforce employees’ understanding of the rules at Big Alpha. Employees monitored each others’ behaviors and helped clarify organizational rules. Through this reinforcement, employees were possibly inducing identification as they were enforcing company values and behaviors.

Task procedures also were specific to job role. As a member of the sales floor, we “worked carts.” We were to stock products or “work carts” during certain times of the day, specifically in the middle of the day and then towards the later part of the day (closer to store closing), we were supposed to straighten our area. Straightening the area is when we push products forward (to ensure that products look neat and orderly on the shelf) and make sure that rows and end caps (the end of a row) look presentable. The members of the sales floor, and not the cashiers, were responsible for straightening their respective areas. If cashiers had time and there was a lull in customers, cashiers would help straighten an

area. For instance, on my last day, I spoke with Darcy, a young, twenty year old woman who was a seasonal part-time worker and had started two months before me. I stated,

While I waited for Kim, the human resource manager, I spoke with Darcy for awhile. She said, “things are really slow here. I was supposed to cashier and have been here all day.” She pointed at another woman and said, “She was supposed to cashier all day and has been in softlines instead. It is either really busy here or really slow. (2076-2079)

The majority of our day was spent on our tasks; therefore, this was a frequent category that emerged from the data. Employees’ everyday talk concentrated on work tasks, which may have reinforced their connection to, and possible identification with, the organization.

### **Communication Procedures**

The last subcategory that emerged out of the data was communication procedures ( $n = 25\%$  of structural aspect lines). Communication procedures referred to communication rules or courses of action that Big Alpha employees’ denoted in their everyday talk. As a retail organization, there were numerous procedures on how employees should communicate with one another. One essential way employees communicated with one another throughout the store was through “walkies” or walkie talkies. These “walkies” served as a way to quickly ask questions to one another, find out if a product was in the storeroom, rally employees for daily assemblies, and/or ask for assistance from other employees. How we were to use our walkies was communicated via our trainers (although my trainers did not communicate what not to say over the walkie). One way we were to use our walkies was to let others know when we were going on break or when we were done for the day. For instance, I would say “This is Kai. Going on my

15.” I would let my fellow employees and managers know that I was taking my 15 minute break, and I would not be available to work in my scheduled area. However, not all trainers were consistent in their messages. I wrote about one of these discrepancies in my field notes,

Alyssa, a part-time seasonal employee went on break. As she was going on break, she said over the walkie, “This is Alyssa and I am going on my last 15.” When Alyssa came back from break, I asked Alyssa and Ryan, a part-time employee, if we should tell people over the walkie that we are going on break. Alyssa said, “I don’t know, but that is how I was trained.” Ryan said, “Ya, that is how I was trained too.” I said, “No one told me that. I will start to do that.” (1109-1113)

Another way we were to use our walkies was to check to see if a product was stocked in the backroom. Further, we were to use our walkies to ask other employees for assistance or to help a customer find a product. In this way, walkies functioned to connect employees together, no matter where they were located in the store. Employees used walkies to possibly reaffirm their identification with their work groups and/or Big Alpha.

Another way that human resource managers would gauge employees’ thoughts and feelings about Big Alpha was through “chat sessions,” as Big Alpha named it. Shortly after I started working at Big Alpha, one of the human resource managers, Lisa, pulled me aside for a “chat session.” I wrote about this in my field notes:

Since it was quiet, Lisa, the HR manager, came over to have a “chat” session. It was very informal the way she approached me. She said “Hey Kai, how’s it going?” Like normal , I said “It is good.” She said, “I just want to check in on you and see how things are going. We like to do this every once in awhile. So, how has

your training been?" I replied "It has been good and I have learned a lot. It is nice being in the same area again to get more of a hang of it." She said, "Good, Well if you have any questions and/or concerns you definitely can talk to me." (645-652)

Another employee, Tina, a part-time seasonal worker in her early twenties who started one month before me, used stories to convey her "chat session" to me:

Tina said, "Then Kim later said, 'No, I need to talk to you. I thought uh oh, I am going to get fired because I have been out of compliance twice. Well, I am seasonal so I really thought she was going to say you are done. She said, We love you and we want you to stay. I was so relieved.' (1241-1250)

Chat sessions served as a way for members of the HR team to gauge how employees were feeling and serve as a sounding board for any issues they may have. These chat sessions functioned as a management identification strategy as managers were able to show that the organization was concerned about their employees, possibly persuading employees to identify with Big Alpha.

### **Overview of Results from Phase II**

Research question three asked what are the organizational identification messages communicated by Big Alpha? Phase II answered this question by analyzing fourteen of Big Alpha's organizational artifacts using Cheney's (1983b) and DiSanza and Bullis' (1999) organizational identification strategies and tactics as a guide (See Table 1 for a list of Big Alpha's artifacts). Results indicated that Big Alpha's artifacts specifically focused on the common ground technique. Within this strategy, artifacts heavily employed three tactics: expressed concern for the individual, espoused shared values, and offered employee testimonials. Table 3 summarizes the results from Phase II.

## **Organizational Identification Strategies**

The most common identification strategy in Big Alpha's artifacts was the common ground technique. Out of 1063 coded units of text, 67 % of the units were categorized under the common ground technique. The second most common identification strategy was invitation with only 9 percent of coded units of text comprising the invitation strategy. Big Alpha used the identification strategies of transcendent "we," bragging, unifying symbols, identification through antithesis, and recognition of individuals outside the organization less often than the common ground technique and invitation. More specifically, transcendent "we," and bragging were found 35 ( $n = 3 \%$ ) and 23 ( $n = 2 \%$ ) times respectfully while unifying symbols was used 73 times ( $n = 7 \%$ ), identification through antithesis was used 29 times ( $n = 3 \%$ ) and global recognition was used 14 times each ( $n = 1 \%$ ), and finally, recognition of individual contributions was used 5 times ( $n < 1 \%$ ) out of the 1063 coded units of text.

**Common ground technique.** Organizations employ the common ground technique by explicitly stating that the organization has the same interests as the individual (Cheney, 1983b). Under the common ground technique, Cheney (1983b) identified six subthemes: expressed concern for the individual, recognized individual concerns, espoused shared values, advocated company benefits, demonstrated that outsiders praised the organization, and offered employee testimonials.

Of these six subthemes, Big Alpha only utilized espoused shared values, offered employee testimonials, expressed concern for the individual, and advocated company benefits.

**Table 3. Summary of Identification Strategies Used by Big Alpha**

Identification Strategy or Tactic	Overview of Identification Strategy	Frequency (Sentences)	Frequency %
Common Ground Technique	Explicitly states that it has the same interests as the individual (Cheney, 1983b)	717	67
Offered Employee Testimonials	Demonstrate how employees feel about the organization (Cheney, 1983b)	313	29
Advocated Company Benefits	Highlight activities that help individuals attain goals (Cheney, 1983b)	157	15
Espoused Shared Values	Explicitly states that the organization has the same values as the individual (Cheney, 1983b)	147	14
Expressed Concern for the Individual	Demonstrate how employees had role in the success of the company (Cheney, 1983b)	95	9
Invitation	Invite members to join specific groups or contact individuals (DiSanza & Bullis, 1999)	92	9
Recognition of Individuals Outside the Organization	Praise by groups outside of the organization (DiSanza & Bullis, 1999)	80	8
Unifying Symbols	Use name, logo, and trademark to convey values (Cheney, 1983b)	73	7
Transcendent “We”	Use the pronouns “we” and “they” to signify association and dissociation (Cheney, 1983b)	35	3
Identification through antithesis	Unite against a common enemy (Cheney, 1983b)	29	3
Bragging	Discuss accomplishments (DiSanza & Bullis, 1999)	23	2
Global Recognition of Individuals Contributions	Recognize specific work groups (DiSanza & Bullis, 1999)	14	1
Recognition of Individual Contributions	Recognize employees’ accomplishments (Cheney, 1983b)	5	< 1

Only two coded units of text were found using recognized individual contributions and no categories were found to be part of demonstrated outsiders praised the organization tactic.

***Offered employee testimonials.*** The most prevalent tactic under the common ground technique was employee testimonials ( $n = 29\%$ ) or 313/1063 of the coded units of text. Employee testimonials occur when employees discuss how they feel about an organization (Cheney, 1983b). Big Alpha used employee scenarios to illustrate company policies, procedures, and values. More specifically, Big Alpha used employee scenarios throughout their Business Conduct Guide:

Maya, a buyer at Big Alpha, couldn't believe what she was reading: an e-mail from a business acquaintance offering to pay \$3,000 a week to rent the beachfront condo she was offering for \$1,000 a week. It sounded too good to be true, and it was. The potential renter revealed that he was a vendor who wanted to do more business with Big Alpha. He hoped his generous offer would influence Maya to order more product from his company. Maya told the vendor no way, contacted her manager and reported the situation to Integrity @BigAlpha.com. After an investigation, the Merchandising team ended the would-be renter's business relationship with Big Alpha. (art 4, p. 21)

In regards to company policies and values, Big Alpha used employee scenarios to demonstrate what to do and what not to do. Another example using employee scenarios was about honesty in their packaging:

"We have to change our owned-branded trash bag signs and packaging right away," the buyer told Calvin, an employee in Big Alpha's Marketing department. "Our of our big competitors just put out a new package that says their bags are produced

using 50 percent less energy than other bags. Can we say the same thing?" Calvin didn't have to think twice before saying no. Unless we have verification that a claim we make about our products is true, we won't make it. (art 4, p. 31).

These scenarios were found throughout Big Alpha's artifacts, illuminating company policy.

Big Alpha used employee testimonials only on their website, under the diversity section. Big Alpha used video and transcripts of the video to depict employees' thoughts and feelings about Big Alpha. Maria, a Big Alpha employee, stated, "I like to ride motorcycles. I like photography. I love to salsa dance. I have a three-year-old daughter, very beautiful...I feel like Big Alpha allows you to fit in. Like, when you have time that you need to take away for being with family or so forth...(art 6). Another employee, Lourdes, said:

I am a first generation Mexican American. Probably the things I'm most proud of is that I did get an education...Big Alpha encourages me to be myself by celebrating who I am. They've never asked me to be anything but me. The best part of my day is when I drive up and I see the Big Alpha truck and it says "Big Alpha." And then when I walk in, I just walk in with so much pride that it's my building and, most importantly, it's my team. And that is just what Big Alpha's about. We're in the business of people. (art 6)

Overall, Big Alpha utilized 21 of these testimonials to demonstrate to individuals that employees like working at Big Alpha for many reasons.

***Advocated company benefits.*** Big Alpha also employed the tactic advocated company benefits throughout their organizational artifacts. Advocated company benefits entails highlighting activities that help employees attain goals (Cheney, 1983b). Overall,

157/1063 coded units of text ( $n = 15\%$ ) fell under this identification tactic. Throughout the employee handbook, organizational website, and employee guidebook, Big Alpha spoke about the benefits of working at their company. For instance, Big Alpha noted, “As a member of the company you and your eligible family members receive a 10 percent discount at all stores and at the company website” (art 2, p. 2). Further, Big Alpha touted in their employee handbook that employees may receive pay increases during their yearly review: “You may be eligible for a pay increase in May each year at the time of your performance review....(art 5, p. 31). Further, Big Alpha commented about promotions: “As positions become available at the next level, we’ll let you know by posting the openings” (art 5, p. 31). Big Alpha also noted the company discount in a brochure about pay and benefits. Big Alpha states: “As a Big Alpha employee you and your eligible family members receive a 10 percent discount at all Big Alpha stores and Bigalpha.com” (art 2, p. 2).

***Espoused shared values.*** Espoused shared values was another tactic Big Alpha employed having 147 out of the 1063 coded units of text ( $n = 14\%$ ). In this tactic, organizations explicitly state that the employee and the organization have similar values (Cheney, 1983b). Among the shared values espoused were diversity, quality, responsible corporate citizen, compliance, communication, safety, Big Alpha brand, sales, and collaborative, dynamic, and inclusive culture. Big Alpha indicated that they shared similar values to individuals. For example, in Big Alpha’s Business Conduct Guide, Big Alpha wrote, “Behaving ethically and with integrity is essential to maintaining our reputation with our team members as a great place to work, with our customers as a preferred shopping destination, and with our communities and shareholders as a responsible corporate citizen”

(art 4, p. 3). Another example of Big Alpha utilizing the espoused shared values identification tactic is in their Business Conduct Guide:

It's always been important to Big Alpha to be a good corporate neighbor that protects the environment. It's the right thing to do-and it's good for business, too. We know that our environmental record is as important to our customers and communities as it is to us, so we're committed to staying on top of our environmental compliance obligations and making sure that our business practices follow the applicable rules. (art 4, p. 43)

Through their artifacts, Big Alpha is communicating that they are committed to the environment just like its employees.

***Expressed concern for the individual.*** My analysis indicated that Big Alpha used the identification tactic, expressed concern for the individual, as the third most prevalent tactic ( $n = 9\%$ ) with 95/1063 of the coded units of text falling under this category. Big Alpha demonstrated that they cared about their employees' well-being through explicitly stating this in an employee pamphlet in the training folder:

You're at the center of it all-your health, your relationships, career, financial stability and the community that surrounds you. Together, these elements shape your total well-being, or who you are. Becoming the "best" you possible is the whole ideas behind Big Alpha's well-being movement. You don't view your life through the single lens of work, and neither do we. We believe that well-being is not an end, but a means. By making a small decision to improve one area of your life, you positively impact another. It's all about you, the choices you make and the priorities you set. (Art 2, p. 2)

Big Alpha further illustrated utilizing the expressed concern for the individual by pointing out employees' role in making Big Alpha successful: "You play an important role in making sure our customers have a great shopping experience at Big Alpha" (Art 5, p. 1).

**Invitation.** The next identification tactic found in Big Alpha's artifacts was the invitation tactic. Overall, 92/1063 codes ( $n = 9\%$ ) comprised the invitation identification tactic. According to DiSanza and Bullis (1999), the invitation tactic occurs when organizations invite members to contact other members of the organization or join specific work groups. Big Alpha invited individuals to contact specific groups for more information or to learn more about different company initiatives. For instance, Big Alpha encouraged individuals to contact the safety team: "Have a safety concern you want to tell someone about? A suggestion for making work safer? Then we want to hear from you! If you have a concern talk to your supervisor or safety captain" (Art 5, p. 51). Big Alpha also consistently encouraged individuals to contact their supervisor if they had questions. In the Business Conduct Guide, Big Alpha noted, "If you are unsure about what's expected of you, talk with your supervisor to learn what to do" (Art 4, p. 3). These examples demonstrate that Big Alpha encouraged employees to contact specific groups if they had further questions.

**Recognition of individuals outside the organization.** Another identification tactic that Big Alpha utilized was recognition of individuals outside of the organization ( $n = 8\%$ ). According to DiSanza and Bullis (1999), this tactic occurs when groups outside of the company recognize employees. On the company website, Big Alpha listed 78 awards it had received. Big Alpha listed being a great place to work, a leader in corporate citizenship, an innovator and a leader in supporting diversity in their stores. In addition,

Big Alpha wrote in their employee handbook, “The most important measure of how well we're delivering on our stores mission is feedback from millions of customers who take our online survey. We listen to their feedback to make improvements to their shopping experience” (art 5, p. 17).

**Unifying symbols.** Big Alpha also used unifying symbols such as their name, logo, and trademark ( $n = 7\%$ ). In the employee handbook, “Your Human Resources manager will tell you about our employee colors and how to dress for work. We ask that you wear the employee uniform.” Additionally, Big Alpha addressed the use of the name tag: “Your name badge tells customers you're ready to help them. Always wear your name badge when you work and keep it clean and free of clutter. If you lose it, don't worry. You can always get a new one” (Art 5, p. 16). Finally, Big Alpha's trademark was embedded throughout the organizations' artifacts such as the employee handbook, the training folder, training videos, t-shirts, name tags, recognition cards, bulletin boards in the breakroom, and employee identification cards. These are examples of how Big Alpha used unifying symbols to induce employee identification.

**Transcendent “we”.** The strategy of the transcendent “we” was used by Big Alpha less often than the other strategies ( $n = 3\%$ ). With this strategy, organizations use “we” to signify association and dissociation (Cheney, 1983b). Big Alpha employed this strategy to establish how they are different from competitors and similar to their employees using the transcendent “we.” For instance, “We work together to see that every customer who walks through our doors will come back again and again” (Art 5, p. 1). In this quotation, Big Alpha is demonstrating that the employee and the organization have aligned interests. Another example of using the transcendent “we” is when Big Alpha suggests that

employees make their store better: “We have a great time, and with you, it will be even better” (Art 5, p. 1).

**Identification through antithesis.** Along with the unifying symbols and the transcendent “we,” there were a few instances of Big Alpha using the identification strategy of identification through antithesis to convey how they were different from other organizations ( $n = 3\%$ ). Identification through antithesis transpires when organizations and individuals unite against a common enemy (Cheney, 1983b). For example, Big Alpha stated how their customer service stands out from other big-box retailers. They contended, “Asking did you find everything?” will differentiate our customer service from other retailers while allowing us to better serve our customers. It is an important part of delivering a Big Alpha shopping experience every day in every store” (Art 5, p. 18). Big Alpha also dissociated themselves from companies and individuals that acted unethically or illegally, demonstrating how they comply with regulations. Big Alpha noted, “If a vendor or a government official tries to imply that a bribe is just the way business gets done in his or her country, the answer is simple: We don't do it” (art 4, p. 49).

The final way that Big Alpha employed identification through antithesis was suggesting that employees should not support a union through their training video, uniting employees against a common enemy. During our training session, one of the corporate-made videos specifically focused on the reasons why we should not support a union or sign a petition to support a union. I commented about this experience in my field notes,

I thought it was interesting because one of the videos specifically focused on how unionizing would be detrimental to employees. The video noted that it would take away employee's ability to openly express concerns to managers and supervisors

and we wouldn't be able to help our other employees. The video suggested that forming a union would inhibit us from doing jobs that may be outside of our job description and we wouldn't be able to directly talk to managers, but instead we would have to go through the union. The woman in the video specifically said, "What do you do when someone approaches you to sign a petition to unionize? You should say no." (151-158)

**Bragging.** Bragging is another identification tactic that was not predominant throughout Big Alpha's artifacts ( $n = 2\%$ ). Bragging occurs when organizations discuss their accomplishments (DiSanza & Bullis, 1999). An example of Big Alpha using this tactic was found in their Business Guidebook: "Big Alpha's reputation for great design means that we're one of the most imitated retailers in America. Intellectual property we own includes our logo, our brand promise, other trademarks, and patents on innovations." (art 4, p. 27). Further, Big Alpha referred to their employees volunteering: "Throughout the year, Big Alpha employees donate hundreds of thousands of volunteer hours to countless community projects across the country" (art 6). These examples illustrate that Big Alpha used the identification tactic, bragging to detail the accolades of their organization.

**Global recognition of individuals' contributions.** Another identification tactic that was used minimally was global recognition ( $n = 1\%$ ). This tactic is concerned with recognizing specific work groups (DiSanza & Bullis, 1999). Big Alpha employed this tactic by speaking specifically about certain teams within the organization. For instance, Big Alpha commented, "Big Alpha's customer relations and other groups work together to monitor customer concerns about safety and quality" (Art 4, p. 35). Big Alpha utilized this

tactic to convey to individuals that specific groups within the company do their job to ensure customers are safe and satisfied.

**Recognition of individual contributions.** The least common identification tactic was recognition of individual contributions ( $n < 1\%$ ), which is when organizations display photographs of employees and create clubs (Cheney, 1983b). An example of Big Alpha utilizing this tactic was in their employee handbook:

At Big Alpha, we appreciate quality work and quality team members. That's why we have a Great Employee Recognition program. Just spot a Great Employee attitude, a Great Idea or a great act of service and show appreciation with Great Employee cards. Giving recognition is easy-and it feels great! (art 5, p. 24)

Through the program, employees displayed and recognized other employees for doing a good job.

### **Overview of Results from Phase III**

The fourth research question posed asked: How is organizational identification discourse reflected in employees' everyday talk? Using the organizational identification strategies and tactics found in Phase II as a guide, I answered this question by conducting a close textual analysis of the participant observation data to assess what strategies and tactics participants used in their everyday talk. Overall, findings reflect that employees primarily mocked and reflected Big Alpha's identification strategies and tactics. Management, on the other hand, mirrored Big Alpha's strategies and tactics in their everyday talk. Employees communicated work group identity whereas management communicated identification with Big Alpha as an organization. Results indicated that employees primarily used espoused shared values ( $n = 38\%$ ), followed by recognition of

individual contributions ( $n = 14\%$ ), advocated company benefits ( $n = 14\%$ ), expressed concern for the individual ( $n = 11\%$ ), unifying symbols ( $n = 8\%$ ), transcendent “we” ( $n = 8\%$ ), bragging ( $n = 2\%$ ), identification through antithesis ( $n = 2\%$ ), global recognition of individual contributions ( $n = 2\%$ ), and invitation ( $n < 1\%$ ). There were no instances of recognition of individuals outside the organization and offered employee testimonials in the data. Although employees discussed benefits of Big Alpha and positive aspects of the job (and fell under these two categories), I coded these comments under other strategies that I deemed to be more appropriate; for example, I coded a comment made by Nick, a full-time employee, about moving up quickly at Big Alpha under the category of advocated company benefits rather than offered employee testimonials. A list of these strategies and tactics and their frequency percentages are listed in Table 4.

### **Espoused Shared Values**

Espoused shared values was the most prevalent tactic employees used in their everyday talk. Of the 810 instances found, 309 lines of data ( $n = 38\%$ ) were coded for this tactic compared with Big Alpha who only utilized espoused shared values 14 percent in their artifacts. Big Alpha espoused shared values of diversity, quality, responsible corporate citizen, compliance, communication, safety, Big Alpha brand, sales, and collaborative, dynamic, and inclusive culture. Employees reflected nine of these values (i.e., collaborative culture, compliance, safety, communication, quality, Big Alpha brand, and sales) in their narratives and rites. Participants used this tactic when they indicated collaboration, addressed safety issues, communicated about procedures in daily assemblies, discussed customer service, and worked hard to maintain the reputation of Big Alpha through stocking and straightening products throughout the store.

Table 4. Summary of Organizational Identification Strategies and Tactics in Participant Observation Data.

Organizational Identification Strategy and/or Tactic	Frequency %
Common Ground Technique	77
Espoused Shared Values	38
Recognition of Individual Contributions	14
Advocated Company Benefits	14
Expressed Concern for Individual	11
Unifying Symbols	8
Transcendent “We”	8
Bragging	2
Identification through antithesis	2
Global Recognition of Individuals Outside the Organization	2
Invitation	< 1

First, employees espoused the shared values of collaborative culture, quality control, and maintaining the Big Alpha brand. One of the most frequent ways in which employees espoused shared values was through working together. Employees would help each other out when other areas on the sales floor needed assistance. For instance, one day per week, after daily assemblies, we would all go over to a grocery aisle and look through the dates to make sure products were not expired. We did this as a group and were not only enacting the value of collaboration, but also the values of maintaining good quality of Big Alpha’s brand. Another type of assistance we would provide was when we were stocking

frozen foods. We called these smart assemblies. I described the process of these assemblies in my field notes:

When I got done helping cashier, I went back to market as I saw everyone was there. I realized that they must have called a smart assembly and started helping out. A smart assembly is when numerous employees (managers, supervisors, and employees) all help out with pulls. They call smart assemblies a lot in market as the frozen foods need to be put in the coolers within 30 minutes. We only have 30 minutes to get the products from freezer to freezer, otherwise the product is no good. It is a freshness issue. (1614-1619)

Employees' spoke of these smart assemblies in their stories, espousing the shared values of collaboration, quality, and maintaining Big Alpha's brand.

The second espoused value employees reproduced in their everyday talk was communication. Employees would keep each other informed throughout the work day by using "walkies" to communicate if they needed help with a customer, if they were looking for a product, when they were taking their breaks, and if they were leaving for the day. For example, one full-time benefitfitted supervisor, Louise, asked for someone to come and help cashier over her walkie. Nicholas, a part-time employee in his early twenties, stated, "'I am with a customer so I can't come up.' Someone said, 'Thank you for letting us know.'" This was a way for Nicholas to inform others that he was unable to assist the front lanes, reinforcing the shared value of communication.

Sales was another espoused value that employees mirrored in their narratives and rites. Employees would focus on sales goals by stating this value in daily assemblies as well as through small talk with employees. The store leader, Kim, focused on sales in daily

assemblies. She would be constantly reminding individuals to ask customers if they needed baskets or carts. I wrote of one of these instances in my field notes:

Then the store leader, Kim, came over and talked about sales. They really want us to get our sales up as we are lower than expected, but up from last year. She said that individuals who have carts or baskets buy more than individuals who only carry items in their hands. Therefore, if we see people without carts/baskets, we should offer them one or the other. They also have placed baskets/carts throughout the store to help us with this. (628-630)

Further, managers encouraged us to ask customers if they wanted to open Big Alpha debit or credit cards: "Then Ben (a full-time benefitfitted supervisor) talked about Alpha cards. He said, 'We are at eight for the day. Let's try to get to 10 by the end of the night. I have found that people are less scared of debit so keep asking. We don't get any money from it so ask, ask, ask'" (1832-1833). In these ways, Big Alpha employees, specifically managers, were focusing on sales and demonstrated their shared value of sales.

Fourth, employees espoused the shared goal of maintaining Big Alpha's brand through straightening products. Every day, around 2pm, we would do a mid-day straightening session where we would meticulously ensure all products were lined up and neatly presented. I wrote about straightening products in my field notes: "Around 1:30, one of the managers called for a mid-day zone. Mike, a full-time benefitfitted college-aged employee who was my trainer one day and had worked for Big Alpha for six months, said 'everyday we do a mid-day zone. We make sure the products look nice and are all lined up nice'" (458-459). Straightening was a frequent activity in which employees used small talk to espouse shared values.

Compliance was a fifth espoused value that Big Alpha espoused and employees reflected in their discourse. Managers at Big Alpha mirrored this value when they spoke of how employees should comply with laws about scheduled breaks and overtime. Often times, management indicated when we should take our breaks on a worksheet. This worksheet noted where employees were working for the day and when they should take their 15 minute breaks and their 30 minute break. One day, I was scheduled for a 5 hour shift. Because I was unsure when I should take my break, I asked Ben, one of the full-time benefitted supervisors working. I wrote about this in my field notes,

Then I asked Ben how breaks worked as I was only working until 1:30 so it was only 5 ½ hours. Allison, another full-time benefitted employee, was there and said “It depends what you want to do. Since you are only working 5 hours, you could not take a lunch and make sure you clock out before the 5 hours mark.” Then Ben said, “Did you punch in early?” I said, “Yes, three minutes early” and he said, “Keep that in mind. So you will need to make sure to early, so 1:20.” Then another girl said, “Wait, she is scheduled for 5 ½ hours so she will need to take a lunch.”  
(855-860)

During our daily assemblies, management also spoke a lot about making sure we take our scheduled breaks. Kim, the store leader, emphasized how it is important that we take our breaks, especially our 30 minute break so that we are not out of compliance and Big Alpha legally complies. One day, I was out of compliance and one manager, Kari, asked for me to sign a slip of paper indicating why I was out of compliance. Therefore, management's and employees' stories and rites echoed the espoused value of compliance, indicating their commitment to Big Alpha.

The last espoused value that employees reflected in their everyday talk was safety. Safety issues were mentioned almost daily. During our first training session, I referenced how we learned about safety in my field notes: “We watch a few videos about safety. Then we took a safety quiz together. We all went through the quiz question by question and Sarah told us the answers. The questions were on things such as what to do if we get hurt or if we see a spill” (162-166). Further, one of Big Alpha’s managers, Nate, used stories during daily assemblies to reflect the espoused value of safety:

Kim, the store leader, was saying to call for team lifts if there is a team lift sticker. She said “I know people are in a hurry, but we need to be safe.” Nate, the manager of the back room, was talking about lifts and making sure we are taking our appropriate lifts. They also keep a running total, in the office, about how many days we have gone without a safety incident. It has been nine days. If we make it to 100 I guess Nate will grill outside for all of us, no matter what time of year it is. (420-425)

Employees also mirrored the safety value in their everyday talk. For example, one college student, Kristy, who was a seasonal part-time worker, scolded me for not following proper safety procedures:

Kristy and I were both stocking diapers in the baby section. A customer came up to us and asked us to get the box of diapers that was at the very top of the shelf. I knew I could reach it if I stepped on the lower shelf so I did. Kristy said, “You aren’t supposed to do that. You should get a stool in the back. That is a safety violation.” (2136-2140)

Overall, managers and employees reflected numerous espoused values in their everyday talk, demonstrating their identification with Big Alpha.

There were two instances where management emphasized the value of diversity and inclusive culture. First, I was breastfeeding my daughter at the time and pumped during working hours. When I asked about pumping at work in my initial interview, Lisa, the human resource manager, stated, “Lots of employees pump. Actually, there is a woman who just had a baby and she pumps. We have a lot of employees pump and we have locked places for you” (76-79). The other instance where Big Alpha stressed diversity was when Big Alpha received a lot of national press about women who were staging nurse-in demonstrations to advocate breastfeeding their children in public. These demonstrations were in response to a woman being asked to use the fitting rooms when she was discreetly breastfeeding her baby in the store. I wrote,

During our daily huddle, Julie, one of the HR managers, said, “I just want to remind all of you that if you see someone breastfeeding you should not tell them to go elsewhere. If they want an area to breastfeed, where should you tell people to go?” Someone said, “The fitting room.” She said, “Yes, we are an inclusive culture so we want to continue that.” Then she said, “Where do we not tell them to go.” One person said, “The bathrooms.” She said, “That is right. There may be a lot of women in here tomorrow breastfeeding and we want to make sure that they feel welcome.” (2139-2146)

While Julie was espousing the shared values of diversity and inclusivity through this one story, it was in response to the national attention that Big Alpha received in regards to breastfeeding rather than a proactive attempt to reflect this value.

## **Recognition of Individual Contributions**

The second most common tactic in employees' everyday talk was recognition of individual contributions ( $n = 14\%$ ). Big Alpha, on the other hand, utilized this tactic less than one percent. Most of employees' recognition of individual contributions focused on recognizing individuals during daily assemblies or after they had helped cashier. For example, Kim, the store leader, recognized an employee for her help. I wrote about this experience in my field notes, "When I came to the huddle, they were passing around some treats and the store lead, Kim, was congratulating employees for good customer service. She said, 'Lidia always knows the answer to everything and I really appreciate her knowledge'" (339-341). I described another example of recognition that occurred during a daily assembly one day: "Laura, one of the managers, called a quick huddle in men's. She said, 'Ok, let's start with some recognition.' No one said anything. She said, 'I would like to recognize the overnight crew for working a truck. It wasn't that big, but we did it quickly'" (1338-1341).

A second way that employees recognized each other was by thanking coworkers for providing assistance. Many times after I was done helping the front lanes by cashiering, the supervisor on duty would state, "'Thanks for providing quick and pleasant service'" (1210-1211). If there was only one person helping out, the supervisor would directly thank the person who helped. For example, one employee, Lucas, helped cashier a lot and was thanked for his help. Derek, a full-time benefitted customer service supervisor said: "Thank you Lucas (a part-time employee) for your help at the lanes and thank you for helping us get Alpha cards" (966-968). Another full-time benefitted supervisor, Louise, also thanked Lucas for his help cashiering: "'Thank you Lucas for getting that Alpha card'

and ‘thank you everyone for being quick and responsive’” (961-963). This way of recognizing employees was a substantial part of employees’ everyday talk. Recognition was an important part of daily assemblies in which people were recognized for their assistance in helping other areas and increasing the number of Alpha cards sold.

Managers and supervisors also held service sessions where they would announce a “service session” over the walkie and we were to take a few minutes and ask customers around us if they needed assistance in finding a product. During these sessions, managers would then walk around the store to watch to see how well employees provided customer service. I discussed one of these sessions in my field notes: “Kim, the store leader, said, ‘Okay, in the next hour, I will be walking around and looking for the person with the best customer service. The one with the best customer service will get a free t-shirt. There is a great prize on the line’” (1488-1490). Kim also recognized individuals for asking customers if they needed help: “After a few minutes of calling the service session, Kim said, ‘Way to go Steve (a part-time employee) for asking how you can help.’ Then after another minute or two, ‘Good job Mark (a part-time employee) helping the customer find something’” (1482-1484).

Not only did managers and supervisors engage in recognition, but employees also recognized each other’s contributions. However, this was not a common occurrence. One employee, Tina, a part-time seasonal employee decided to recognize another employee, Rita, a part-time employee, by filling out an employee recognition card, but did so only after Rita complained about not receiving one. I wrote,

Tina said, “Rita, I will write you one. I will write you one right now.” She took an employee recognition card and proceeded to write “Rita did a great job helping

customers at the fitting room. Then I said, “Tina, aren’t you going to write one for me.” She said, “Kai, how can I write one for you always being awesome.” (1516-1517)

Although employees did recognize each other, managers more frequently recognized employees. As such, some employees seemed to be frustrated about the recognition cards; therefore, there was some evidence that employees partially mocked this tactic as well. In essence, management reflected the tactic recognition of individual contributions in their everyday talk even though it was not a prevalent tactic in Big Alpha’s artifacts.

### **Advocated Company Benefits**

Advocated company benefits was the third most prevalent tactic in participants’ everyday talk ( $n = 14\%$ ). Likewise, Big Alpha employed this tactic 14 percent in their artifacts. Big Alpha advocated benefits such as the employee discount, health benefits, legal benefits, tuition assistance, job advancement, and competitive pay. Participants enacted this tactic when they referenced these benefits of Big Alpha. For example, during our training, one full-time benefitted supervisor, Anna, told us about the Big Alpha discount:

Anna said that she loves using her Big Alpha card and that it is really easy. She does the debit card and it comes right out of her checking account. She said, “It is really easy.” Most of the other employees were happy when Anna said that there is a debit option and that it gets us another 5 percent off. (172-175)

During the last two weeks of the year, Big Alpha employees also received an additional 10 percent off all Big Alpha brand products. Louise, a full-time benefitted customer service supervisor, bragged about how much she saved: “Louise said she used the discount last

weekend and saved over 47 dollars by using her Big Alpha card and additional percentage off" (962-963).

In addition to the Big Alpha card, participants also spoke about other types of incentives. More specifically, managers developed incentives to help employees achieve sales and customer service goals. For example, the customer service manager, Laura, discussed the implementation of punch cards during a daily assembly: "Laura said, 'If you fill it out within one month, you get a \$25 giftcard. If you eventually fill it out, you get a \$10 giftcard so that is really an incentive to get those conversions. Keep asking'" (1666-1668). Another incentive that managers created was a drawing for attendance. I referenced this contest in my field notes,

During one of my breaks, I noticed that there is a contest for the person with the best attendance from Thanksgiving until New Years. There is a weekly drawing for prizes. If someone comes to all of their shifts, they are entered into the weekly drawing. The first week's prize is a turkey. The second week's prize is a gift card. Another week's prize is a DVD of your choice. Then the grand prize is a HD 19' TV. (951-955)

Implementing and referencing these incentives in their everyday talk was a way for employees to reflect the tactic of advocating company benefits, demonstrating their identification with Big Alpha.

### **Expressed Concern for Individual**

Expressed concern for the individual was the fourth tactic participants used in their everyday talk ( $n = 11\%$ ). Similarly, Big Alpha employed this tactic only 9 percent in their artifacts. Big Alpha expressed concern for the individual by stating how employees make a

difference in their company. Management echoed this tactic in their everyday talk by being considerate of employees' time while employees reflected this tactic by showing they cared for each other. Throughout the holiday season, there were several times when managers advocated employees work hard so that we all could leave early. During the daily assembly on Christmas Eve, Linda, one of the managers, said, "Let's try to get out of here at 10:30. It is pretty slow so there should be no problem getting out of here early." Everyone was shaking their head and nodding" (1130-1132). Shortly after the huddle, I asked Linda if I could leave early considering another employee had already left early and we were not busy. Linda said I could leave early since we had enough people and it was Christmas Eve. Another example of management being considerate was when I was scheduled for times when I was not able to work. I wrote about this episode in my field notes,

I told Lisa, the HR manager, that I was scheduled for times I told them I couldn't work. She said, "Well, it looks like they took you off of the schedule. You wouldn't have been responsible for coming in those times." I said, "Yes, but I just like to check. I don't like just not showing up when I am scheduled to work." She said, "I understand. Well I am glad we could get that taken care of. Do you have any other concerns?" I said, "No, that was my major one." She said, "Well let me know if anything else comes up. See you later." (659-665)

There were several times where the managers took the employees' into consideration, trying to be adaptable and flexible to meet employees' concerns, illustrating their identification with Big Alpha.

Employees also expressed concern for other coworkers. There were numerous times when employees seemed genuinely happy to see each other and spoke about their personal lives with one another. Additionally, if someone needed help with their area, another coworker would be willing to pitch in. I wrote in my field notes,

We checked the dates for awhile and then Cindy, a full-time benefitted employee, came over to the candy aisle, who usually works in the fitting rooms, and said, "We need to go to lunch, can someone finish our row?" I guess she was working price change and all of them needed to go to lunch." I said, "I am done, I can help out." She showed me what areas they had done and what still needed to be checked. I proceeded to check them by myself and then Jason and Barry (part-time employees) came over to help me finish. (1687-1691)

Employees' indicated their concern for others through their everyday talk. They used narratives and rites to convey that they respect their coworkers and generally enjoy their presence, reflecting the tactic of expressed concern for the individual, and possibly indicating their identification with Big Alpha.

### **Unifying Symbols**

Although there were several instances of employees using unifying symbols in their everyday talk, overall this strategy was not frequent in the data ( $n = 8\%$ ). Big Alpha also employed this strategy minimally ( $n = 7\%$ ). Big Alpha utilized this strategy by embedding their trademark into their artifacts, making employees wear uniform colors and a name tag. In general, employees reflected as well as mocked this strategy. Many of the unifying symbols that participants referenced were in regards to the dress code. Employees wore a certain colored top and a specific colored pant to signify that they were employees at Big

Alpha. Sarah, a full-time supervisor for Human Resources, explained to us about the dress code: “What I usually tell people is that if the writing is large enough that you cannot cover it up with a name tag than it is too large. She said when the store is not open, you can wear what you want” (187-190). In addition, employees used specific phrases and words to indicate their status as members of Big Alpha. These phrases are specific to Big Alpha such as certain names they used for customers and a specific phrase we were to use when asking customers if they needed help.

Employees mocked unifying symbols through their name tags. On our first day during training we received a name tag: “Sarah, one of the human resource supervisors, said that these were our temporary name tags until our permanent ones come. Some of our name tags had ‘New Employee’ on them while some of them did not. I did not get one that said New Team Member, but it just said ‘Employee’ and then my name” (178-181). Sarah proceeded to tell us that if we lost it, we could get a new one. But other employees mocked the name tag by selecting name tags that did not reflect their real name: “As we were walking out of Big Alpha one day, Savannah, a part-time employee, said, ‘I like to use the nametag Shannequa. Sometimes customers will think my real name is Shannequa. I find it very funny’” (2090-2021). Therefore, unifying symbols was a strategy that employees utilized in their everyday talk, both reflecting and mocking this identification strategy, signifying disidentification from Big Alpha.

### **Transcendent “We”**

There were only a few instances where employees used the transcendent “we” to indicate their association with Big Alpha as well as their respective work group ( $n = 8\%$ ). Big Alpha also utilized this strategy marginally ( $n = 3\%$ ). In the artifacts, Big Alpha used

“we” to denote their differences from competitors. However, employees primarily enacted this strategy by demonstrating their association with their work group. For instance, Mike, one of my trainers and part-time employee, explained to me how to work on the sales floor in a particular area of the store: “Mike said, ‘We always go up if they need help.’ He said, ‘Kai and I are on our way’” (453-454). Later on in the day, Mike explained to me, “Every day we do a mid-day straighten. We make sure the products look nice and are all lined up nice” (457-458). Another employee, Hilary, a full-time benefitted employee, used “we” to discuss her frustrations with customers: “‘We have so much clearance. I don’t know what they are doing. People come in here (she looked over at a customer) and something drops and they just slide it under the rack. Too lazy to pick it up. It is so frustrating’” (1592-1594). There were a few instances where managers used “we” to indicate our distinction from other Big Alpha stores. For example, we were competing against a store in a neighboring city. The store that received the highest customer service rating won a pizza party. Laura, the customer service manager, spoke about this contest during a daily assembly: “‘We want to beat \_\_\_\_\_ and win the \$150 towards party money’” (896-898). Generally, employees used “we” to signify their membership to specific groups within Big Alpha, and identification with their work group, and managers used “we” to differentiate Big Alpha from competitors.

### **Other Strategies and Tactics**

The last four strategies, bragging ( $n = 2\%$ ), identification through antithesis ( $n = 2\%$ ), global recognition of individuals ( $n = 2\%$ ), and invitation ( $n < 1\%$ ), were very minimal in employees’ everyday talk. In Big Alpha’s artifacts, bragging ( $n = 2\%$ ), identification through antithesis ( $n = 3\%$ ), and global recognition of individuals ( $n < 1\%$ )

were used similarly, but invitation ( $n = 9\%$ ) was utilized more in Big Alpha's artifacts than in employees' everyday talk. Big Alpha would brag about their accomplishments, unite against a common enemy, recognize specific groups, and invite members to contact other members. Employees enacted these strategies by bragging about sales, discussing differences about Big Alpha versus a competitor, recognizing groups within Big Alpha, and suggesting to contact other coworkers. First, there were a few instances where Big Alpha's store leader, Kim, would brag about hitting or surpassing the sales quota for the day. Therefore, employees reflected the espoused value of sales in their bragging tactic: "Then Kim, the store leader, and a few other managers came to the assembly. They said that our sales yesterday were 100,000 over so that is really really good" (884-885). Second, there was also some acknowledgement of the differences between Big Alpha and their competitors:

Another girl, Kristy, is working here part-time and finishing school. She worked at [competitor] and hated it. She said she hated [competitor] because "Here it is really idiot proof whereas at [competitor] you have to think more." She hopes to get full-time hours once she graduates, but she is not sure if that is possible. She was also hired on seasonally. (731-734)

Kristy enacted the identification through antithesis strategy by putting down Big Alpha, subtly demonstrating her disidentification from Big Alpha.

Third, there were a few times when employees engaged the tactic global recognition of individuals' contributions. During one of the daily assemblies, Shelly, a full-time benefitted supervisor for electronics, commented, "Thank you everyone who worked last night. We got everything cleaned right before 1am so that was really really

good”” (886-888). With this comment, Shelly was acknowledging many different work groups rather than just one or two individuals. Lastly, employees occasionally utilized the invitation tactic in their everyday talk. A few supervisors told me that I should ask others to help me listen for calls when I am on break or with a customer. Kim the store leader, said, “What you want to do is call over the walkie to see who can listen for calls.’ I asked over the walkie and someone responded, ‘I can watch the front for awhile”” (472-474). Although these four strategies were not as prevalent as others, they were a part of employees’ everyday talk. Employees enacted these strategies and subtly put down Big Alpha in the process.

### **Summary**

The results of Phase I demonstrated that employees’ everyday talk conveyed employee identification strategies, management identification strategies, and structural aspects. Employee identification strategies encompassed the categories of camaraderie, enactment of status-employee, and us vs. them. Employees utilized narratives and rites to convey their identification with their work group more so than their identification with Big Alpha. Additionally, employees rebelled and mocked Big Alpha, dissociating themselves from Big Alpha in their discourse and inducing alternative identifications. Shop talk, a type of narrative, was a factor in persuading other coworkers to disidentify with Big Alpha. Organizational structure consisted of employees’ reflecting confusion, task procedures, and communication procedures. Although not an identification strategy or tactic per se, Big Alpha’s organizational structure played a large role in if employees identified with or disidentified from Big Alpha.

Results from Phase II indicated that Big Alpha utilized the common ground technique the most, followed by invitation and unifying symbols. Under the common ground technique, Big Alpha employed offered employee testimonials the most, noting employee scenarios as well as real employees testifying to why they love Big Alpha. The second most prevalent tactic was advocated company benefits, with espoused shared values and expressed concern for the individual following close behind. Recognition of individuals outside the organization, unifying symbols, transcendent “we,” identification through antithesis, bragging, and global recognition of individuals all were utilized in Big Alpha’s artifacts, although they were not as prevalent as the aforementioned strategies. The last tactic, recognition of individuals’ contributions, was scarcely utilized ( $n < 1\%$ ).

Finally, Phase III results demonstrated that employees primarily reflected the common ground technique in their everyday talk, specifically focusing on the tactic of espoused shared values. Employees’ everyday talk reflected the values of collaborative culture, communication, quality, Big Alpha brand, sales, compliance, and safety. The second tactic reflected in employees’ narratives and rites was recognition of individual contributions. Managers primarily reflected this tactic by recognizing employees for working hard. Expressed concern for the individual, unifying symbols, transcendent “we,” identification through antithesis, global recognition of individuals outside the organization, bragging, and invitation also were found in employees’ everyday talk, although these were primarily enacted by management. The results of this study also contend that employees used everyday discourse to reflect moments of identification as well as disidentification.

## **CHAPTER FIVE. DISCUSSION**

This study explored how employees at Big Alpha, a big-box retailer, reflected organizational identification strategies in their everyday talk. Previous research has examined identification from an organizational perspective (Cheney, 1983a, 1983b; DiSanza & Bullis, 1999), but few studies have explored how employees reflect these strategies with the notable exception being Gossett's (2002) study of temporary workers. The current study sought to extend the previous research by taking an ethnographic approach to uncover how identification messages are communicated in employees' everyday talk. In doing so, this study extends and supports previous research and offers several new contributions to the organizational communication literature. First, this study extends Gossett's (2002) work on temporary labor by investigating seasonal, part-time, college students as temporary workers. Second, the findings support previous literature on the functions of relationships and narratives in an organization (Brown, 1990a; Collinson, 1988; Helmer, 1993; Martin & Powers, 1983; Mirivel & Tracy, 2005). Finally, this study offers four contributions to organizational communication research: 1) this study extends identification theory by identifying employee-only strategies and communicative aspects of disidentification; 2) findings reveal how narratives and rites are sources of disidentification; 3) results indicate a worker class system which influences employees' levels of identification; and 4) this study demonstrates that there are peaks and valleys in the identification process. In this chapter, first I expound on the results on this study by addressing how this study extends previous research. Second, I analyze how the findings support literature on relationships and narratives, and third, I discuss the unique findings of this study, illuminating the theoretical contributions. Finally, the chapter offers practical

implications we can glean from the results and addresses limitations and areas of future inquiry.

### **New Type of Temporary Workers**

This study extends previous research on temporary worker identification (e.g., Gossett, 2002), expanding our understanding of other types of temporary workers: seasonal, part-time, and college student workers. In her study of temporary workers, Gossett (2002) contends that some organizations may want to limit member identification. From the first day of my employment, Big Alpha did not seem motivated to induce identification with its seasonal, part-time employees. During our first training session, we were asked to show our identification (i.e., social security card and driver's license) so that they could ensure we had the correct two forms. I was surprised that the overview of Big Alpha's goals and values occurred half-way through the training session and were conveyed through corporate training videos rather than through our human resource personnel. Once the videos ended, human resource managers subtly reiterated these values, but Big Alpha did not actively try to induce identification. One reason for this lack of motivation by Big Alpha may have been that many of the employees were college students. Additionally, I worked with several seasonal employees. My observations concluded that seasonal workers did have a different status than long-term full time workers; I was treated differently by management and employees. For example, few employees tried to get to know me on a personal basis. This study found that managers and other employees do not view these temporary workers as "real workers"; they differentiate how they treat provisional workers versus permanent workers , seeing seasonal, part-time, and college student workers as not having a "real job." As such, this study finds indirect

support for Clair's (1996) study on the colloquialism "real job." Clair found that college students denoted a real job as not low paying, utilizes one's education, and consists of a standard 40-hour week (not nights and weekends). Many college students may not have seen their jobs as "real jobs" as retail jobs are often undervalued (Clair). My time at Big Alpha offers tentative support for the perceptions of a "real job" influenced how management viewed college students and this affected to what extent they induced identification.

The phrase "real job" also serves to distinguish class differences (Clair, 1996). Full-time employees who see Big Alpha as their real job do not work to induce identification for seasonal college-aged workers. There were several employees who did not want to get to know me because they knew I was a temporary worker. I formed some bonds with management, but this was primarily with human resource personnel or the store leader, Kim. I felt management did not have the time, or the energy, to actively induce identification at Big Alpha. For example, when Julie, a human resource manager, spoke to me about continuing my employment at Big Alpha after the holiday season she did not specifically list the things I did well or the things they liked about me; she did not try to persuade me to stay. When asked if I would stay on, I told her it was too challenging with school and work so I was only temporary. She did not retort with reasons why I should stay, but simply said, "Okay. If you want to come back in the summer or next holiday season, we would love to have you" (2147-2150). This lack of persuasion functioned as a way to induce disidentification. Although I heard that they wanted me to stay, they did not outwardly show it. Further, management did not treat me any differently before or after

“the talk” (e.g. I was still a seasonal worker); there was no indication that they liked me or had a preference that I became a full-time employee.

Retail organizations tend to have a high level of turnover so the majority of management’s time is spent recruiting and training new hires. Few individuals who worked at Big Alpha stayed on long-term and very few individuals I spoke with work there full-time. It is not surprising, therefore, that human resource management did not dedicate time and effort into inducing identification with employees who do not plan on making Big Alpha their “career.” Taken together, these findings offer support for Gossett’s (2002) contention that some organizations, as well as employees, may not desire all employees to strongly identify with the organization, deepening our understanding that identification is not always desirable for all organizational members. These findings taken together with previous research on non full-time, benefitted workers suggest that part-time, seasonal, and college student workers may have different experiences within the organization, particularly how management seeks to induce identification with these types of temporary workers.

### **Everyday Talk as a Factor in Identification**

This study supports previous research on relationships and narratives (Brown, 1990a; Collinson, 1988; Helmer, 1993; Martin & Powers, 1983; Mirivel & Tracy, 2005) with its findings that everyday talk is a factor in the identification process. More specifically, through everyday talk, employees bonded together and conveyed their identification with their work group, they influenced coworkers’ identification and disidentification with Big Alpha, and they expressed their need to belong. First, narratives such as stories, humor, and small talk served to bond and unite employees together,

supporting past research on stories in organizations (Brown, 1990a). Employees expressed willingness to cover other coworkers' shifts, help others work carts, stock products, and assist them when helping customers. Further, employees seemed to focus heavily on helping one another, a finding that supports past research that indicated the common ground strategy was most prevalent in organizational artifacts (Cheney, 1983b; DiSanza and Bullis, 1999). Although this was the most significant strategy in employees' everyday talk, Big Alpha only utilized espoused shared values 14 % in their artifacts. One of the reasons for this discrepancy is because it seemed employees identified more as members of their work group than with Big Alpha. This identification with a subgroup indicates that employees experienced multiple identifications, supporting past research (Scott et al., 1998).

Identifying with their work group detracted from their loyalty to Big Alpha. They were not committed to working hard for Big Alpha and may have left the organization when another coworker left. Although work relationships negatively affected employees' loyalty to the organization as a whole, identification with the work group positively affects retention. Team work reduces employees' feelings of alienation from the organization (Barker & Tompkins, 1994). Employees who strongly identify with their work group are more apt to stay employed with the organization, even if they do not identify with the organization. There were several employees who spoke of how they enjoyed working with other individuals at Big Alpha. Employees would express their joy over working with an individual. Specifically, one employee, Kristy, a college student who had started working at Big Alpha one month before me, expressed her joy by hugging me when she saw that we were closing the store together one Saturday afternoon.

Another way that findings support previous work on everyday talk is through demonstrating the influence of co-worker relationships on identification and disidentification. Previous research acknowledges that shop talk supports and challenges others' identities (Mirivel & Tracy, 2005). At Big Alpha, employees' shop talk reinforced their identification as members of their work groups, making that identity more salient for employees than their identity as Big Alpha employees. Further, shop talk functioned as a persuasive tool. Pratt (2001) found that employees who disidentified with Amway had confidants that had negative attitudes toward the company. Organizational discourse, specifically narratives, served as way for Big Alpha employees to influence other coworker's thoughts and feelings. This form of persuasion acted as a type of control. Concertive control is a form of indirect control where team members influence other team members. In the concertive control environment, team members ensure that employees follow rules and procedures rather than management enforcing rules (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). Likewise, Big Alpha employees who conveyed negative frustrations in their narratives and rites swayed the individuals around them to see Big Alpha in a similar light. Employee relationships influenced who reflected organizational values and who mocked or rebelled against them. When employees expressed their negative feelings about Big Alpha, I never heard anyone disagree with that employee. As such, employees seemed to verbally and nonverbally support each other when these "bitch sessions" occurred.

Relationships within the organization inhibited the significance of recognition and incentives. Gossett (2002) found that limited contact and few established relationships seemed to weaken the value of recognition programs and organizational newsletters for temporary workers. Likewise, Big Alpha employees who had few relationships did not

benefit from the recognition and incentives implemented by Big Alpha, thereby offering support for previous research on identification by illustrating that close relationships have a factor in how powerful rites and narratives are in the identification process (Gossett).

Finally, findings support previous research that contends identification fulfills employees' basic need to belong (Burke, 1959; Cheney, 1983a, 1983b) and stories act to connect individuals (Brown, 1990a). At Big Alpha, employees seemed to want to belong to a group within the organization. Stories act to bond individuals together (Brown, 1990a) and employees may "bitch together" to develop a kinship (LeGuin, 1981; Trujillo, 1985). Big Alpha employees utilized stories, humor, and shop talk to establish connections and relate to one another offering support for LeGuin's and Trujillo's research. Interestingly, employees did not seek out managers as organizational representatives to enhance their sense of belonging. Rather, employees bonded with members of their respective work groups. In all likelihood, this is because the size of the store, varied hours, and seasonal status. Because the store employs around 250 individuals, employees may not have felt a close association with everyone at Big Alpha, but rather the individuals they directly worked with during the course of their workday. In sum, this research finds support for the integral nature of narratives in the identification process, acknowledging that everyday talk influences employees' level of identification with the organization as well as what identification is or is not salient.

### **Employee Identification**

In addition to extending and supporting previous research, this study reveals four contributions to the literature on organizational identification. First, this study extends, and builds upon, Cheney's (1983a, 1983b) organizational identification theory by investigating

identification from an employee perspective thereby revealing new employee identification strategies as well as communicative behaviors of disidentification. Second, findings from this study highlight that class system affects employees' identification with the organization. The third contribution of this study is acknowledging the role of daily rites and narratives as a source of disidentification. Finally, thus study contributes to previous work on identification by extending our understanding of the peaks and valleys inherent within the identification process.

### **Employee Identification Strategies**

Findings from this study extend Cheney's (1983a, 1983b) organizational identification theory by examining employees' identification and disidentification strategies. Past research has been organization-centric, examining how organizations implement identification strategies to induce employee identification (Cheney, 1983a, 1983b; Gossett, 2002; Pratt, 2001) rather than strategies employees use during their workday that may or may not induce identification with the organization. A few studies (see DiSanza & Bullis, 1999; Gossett, 2002; Pratt, 2001) have analyzed employee identification, but these studies have examined employee perspectives using Cheney's (1983b) organizational identification strategies. This study uniquely focused on the employee-side of identification, analyzing how employees enact specific strategies that either reflected Big Alpha's identification strategies and tactics or mocked and rebelled against these strategies. Therefore, results of this study build on organizational identification theory by offering new employee-only identification strategies and tactics thereby explicating similarities and differences in organizational and employee identification communication. Further, this study contributes to the literature on

disidentification as it pinpoints communicative aspects of disidentification. Findings indicated that employees experienced moments of disidentification more than deidentification, ambivalent identification (Pratt, 2001), and schizo-identification (Dukerich et al., 1998). This was because employees felt used and underappreciated. Employees in retail typically work odd hours (not the 9 to 5 day job), work minimum wage (Vedder & Cox, 2006), and often work holidays. For example, although Big Alpha was not open on Christmas day, many employees worked Christmas day night as they had to alter prices and stock products for the following day. Some research has explored disidentification, ambivalent identification, deidentification, and schizo-identification (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001; Pratt, 2001), but this study uniquely identifies communicative tactics that employees use to denote disidentification.

The results of this study reveal nine new tactics and one new strategy employees enact that demonstrate their identification or disidentification with the organization (See Table 5 for a list of these tactics and strategies). The eight new tactics are maintaining brand, collaboration, availability, rebelling, mocking, mimicking, status, shop talk, and humor and the new strategy is organizational discourse. Big Alpha employees used the first three tactics of maintaining brand, collaboration, and availability to espouse shared values and to link themselves with Big Alpha. The maintaining brand tactic consists of ways employees work to maintain the image of the company. Big Alpha employees would straighten products, help each other in their respective areas and help cashier; all behaviors that positively reinforced their identification with Big Alpha and their status as work group members. The collaboration tactic refers to how employees work together to achieve a goal or accomplish a task. During the course of the work day, employees would work carts

together and help other areas straighten products. If a group needed additional help finishing their work, employees from other areas of the store would assist. The tactic, availability, consists of moments when employees discuss their work schedules and/or their availability throughout the day. Employees would communicate their availability throughout the day, indicating if they were available to help. However, employees spoke often of their frustrations about their work schedules; they were frustrated if they were not scheduled for enough hours or had to work when they specifically requested time off. Therefore, availability, as well as rebelling and mocking, served to dissociate employees from Big Alpha, but align themselves with their work group; thus, these three tactics served as disidentification tactics as well. The fourth tactic, rebelling, consists of times when employees refuse or disobey rules and procedures, either subtly or overtly. Big Alpha employees did not outwardly rebel against the organization, rather, they indirectly did so by not fulfilling all of their job assignments. When the customer service supervisor asked for additional cashiers, they would not directly state they could help out. Instead, they waited to see if others would respond. If others responded, then they did not have to go cashier. Several times employees who were rebelling were asked by management to cashier. At these times, employees would then help out. Therefore, rebelling was not explicit and direct, but was an indirect way of expressing their identification. Past research has found that disidentified employees become angry, annoyed, and even hostile with the organization (Pratt, 2001). Although employees were not outwardly hostile, they did seem annoyed that they had to perform cashier duties in addition to their sales floor duties. Additionally, some employees expressed anger when they were publicly or privately reprimanded. Other employees may never have identified with Big Alpha; therefore, they

were not motivated to help out other areas, thus, were deidentified employees. Mocking, the fifth tactic, was also a disidentification tactic as employees would mock certain rules and policies. Employees who were late to work mocked their tardiness, humorously laughing about it. Therefore, mocking served to subtly disassociate employees from Big Alpha.

As a twist on the strategy of unifying symbols, employees also mimicked Big Alpha symbols such as the Big Alpha brand and wore different names on their name tags. However, when employees mocked Big Alpha's symbols, the gesture itself symbolized something else. Thus, the symbol no longer stood for what it was originally intended, but took on new significance for Big Alpha employees. As such, the sixth tactic, mimicking, refers to instances when employees use revered symbols, communicating a new meaning, or symbolism, for employees. Mimicking served as a way to make fun of certain aspects of the job. Other studies have identified humor as a way to resist the monotonous aspects of the job and to enjoy coworkers' company (Collinson, 1988); at Big Alpha, mimicking (a distinct form of humor) was a way for employees to entertain themselves during the course of the work day, but it also served as an indirect and subtle form of resistance. Rather than wearing the appropriate nametag, employees would wear nametags that did not match their own name. Rarely would managers and supervisors reprimand employees for this behavior, but they seemed to join in on the joke. Instead of seeing it as a form of resistance then, it seemed managers saw it as a meaningless and insignificant joke. In this way, mimicking served as a form of disidentification that was subtle and indirect.

Table 5. Employee Identification Tactics, by Strategy

<b>Espoused Shared Values</b>	
Maintaining Brand	Employees work to maintain the image of the company.
Collaboration	Employees work together to achieve a goal or accomplish a task.
Availability**	Employees discuss their work schedules and/or their availability throughout the day.
Rebelling*	Employees refuse or disobey rules and procedures, either subtly or overtly.
Mocking*	Employees make fun of rules and procedures, taking on new symbolism for employees.
<b>Unifying Symbols</b>	
Mimicking*	Employees imitate symbols, taking on new symbolism for employees.
<b>Identification through antithesis</b>	
Status**	Employees communicate their status as part of their work group; may use the transcendent “we” to indicate their association with the work group.
<b>Organizational Discourse</b>	
Shop Talk**	Employees “bitch” together either about the company or about co-workers
Humor**	Employees crack jokes or attempt to be comical

\*Disidentification Tactics

\*\*Identification and Disidentification Tactics

The literature on disidentification assumes that disidentification behaviors are overt (Pratt, 2001), but findings from this study indicate mimicking and mocking are subtle behaviors that contribute to disidentification.

The seventh new tactic that employees revealed was status which is categorized under the identification through antithesis strategy. Status consists of moments when employees dissociate themselves from the organization in favor of their status as part of their work group. In this process, employees may use the transcendent “we” to indicate their status as members of a subgroup within the organization. Big Alpha employees would often choose working with their work group over helping cashier. Additionally, employees spoke of how they liked working on the sales floor over working as a cashier. Finally, one new strategy was identified: organizational discourse. The strategy organizational discourse consists of everyday talk that employees enact throughout the work day that connect or disconnect them with the organization. More specifically, this strategy encompasses the tactics of shop talk and humor. At Big Alpha, employees used the tactics of humor and shop talk to reflect, mock, and rebel against Big Alpha’s identification strategies. The eighth new tactic, shop talk, refers to moments when employees “bitch” together either about the company or about co-workers and humor, the last tactic, comprises times when employees crack jokes or attempt to be comical. Both of these categories served as disidentification tactics wherein to disconnect employees from the organization and connect them with co-workers. These new tactics and strategies reconceptualize organizational identification to encompass employees’ enactment of identification and disidentification. From this perspective, we are able to glean a deeper understanding of how employees themselves induce identification and/or disidentification.

This new typology allows us a holistic picture of the identification process, rather than just the messages the organization employs to induce employee identification.

### **Worker Class System as an Influence on Identification**

The second contribution of this study is that worker class system influenced employees' identification with the organization. Past research indicates that there is a hierarchy within the organization (Gossett, 2002), but does not address how this hierarchy affects employees' identification with the organization. At Big Alpha, there seemed to be cliques between coworkers and managers; managers seemed to hang out with managers while coworkers seemed to interact with fellow coworkers. Many times during daily assemblies, managers and supervisors would support one another, but few subordinates seemed to chime in enthusiastically. Additionally, if individuals did not know the employee who was being recognized, they would rarely find out who they were and/or nonverbally recognize that individual; employee relationships seemed to negatively affect the extent to which employees enacted identification strategies. For example, employees were the ones that rebelled against helping cashier. If one member of a work group did not help cashier, the other members rarely helped cashier. Further, there was a differentiation or hierarchy among workers and their ability to access tools that symbolized inclusion. On certain days, when there were a lot of individuals working, not everyone had access to pdas and walkies. For example, on Black Friday, my trainer told me that only certain employees were to have these "tools." At this point, I had only worked at Big Alpha for a week so my status was as a trainee; therefore, I was not on "the list." No one at Big Alpha conveyed who was to receive these "tools" and who was not, but I inferred that it had to do with seniority. In all likelihood, the distinction was made based upon my seasonal employee

status. According to Gossett (2002), “organizational leaders may determine that front-line workers, laborers, or entry-level employees do not need to be all that invested in the organization to do an adequate job” (p. 390). Likewise, managers at retail organizations may view seasonal workers as being temporary; these individuals do not need to be fully identified with the organization to do a satisfactory job during the short period they are employed. Therefore, these findings contribute to Gossett’s work on temporary workers, indicating that organizations place higher values on some workers versus other workers and this affects the extent to which they identify or disidentify.

### **Everyday Talk as a Source of Disidentification**

The third contribution of this study is that organizational discourse influences employees’ disidentification, contributing to past research on organizational discourse. Stories reinforce employees’ association with insiders and identification through antithesis from outsiders (Brown, 1990a). Findings indicate that Big Alpha employees utilized narratives such as shop talk and humor to mock and rebel against Big Alpha’s organizational identification strategies. Through enacting stories, shop talk, and humor, employees dissociated themselves from Big Alpha. Everyday talk served as a way for employees to make sense of their negative experiences, causing employees to reject and disidentify with Big Alpha. Therefore, this study contributes to the literature on organizational discourse, indicating that employees used everyday talk to dissociate themselves from the organization.

Additionally, narratives were instrumental in illuminating employees’ disidentification with the organization. Past research suggests employees use stories to relay their innermost emotions and attitudes (Marra & Holmes, 2008). Findings from this

study contribute to this literature as they demonstrate that everyday talk acts as a window into understanding employees' connection with the organization. Instead of directly stating how they felt about Big Alpha, stories, humor, small talk, and rites were used to subtly and indirectly convey their negative attitudes about the organization. Therefore, employees' everyday talk served as a way for employees to express their disidentification.

Lastly, findings suggest that employees used various types of discourse in tandem. Most of the research-to-date on organizational discourse focuses on one specific type of organizational discourse (Brown, 1990a; Marra & Holmes, 2008), rather than analyzing how multiple forms of discourse may collectively reflect employees' connection with the organization. Big Alpha employees utilized several forms of discourse to convey their frustrations with Big Alpha. Additionally, many Big Alpha employees used conflicting tactics (i.e., mocking and status). Therefore, it may not be enough for us to look at one single type of discourse (e.g., narratives) in order to understand how employees' enact identification strategies. In sum, organizational discourse was a strategy that employees utilized to convey their disconnection with the organization.

### **Peaks and Valleys of Identification**

The final contribution of this study is the variability of identification during the many peaks and valleys in the identification process. Identification is not a static construct (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987) and this study extends our understanding of how identification is continually ongoing as narratives and rites seemed to affect employee identification. Employees' used narratives to make sense of their identification with Big Alpha. As such, employees expressed moments of identification as well as disidentification and deidentification. Employees seemed to experience peaks and valleys

in regards to how committed they felt to Big Alpha. These peaks and valleys seemed to be triggered by negative and positive interactions with coworkers and managers. For instance, employees demonstrated their identification with Big Alpha if they worked with their group, but then employees would be reprimanded for something they did and they would enact disidentification strategies. Therefore, results suggest that experiencing another type of identification is a process (Scott et al., 1998). There may not be one episode that spurs employees to disidentify with the organization, but rather several small episodes, or turning points (Bullis & Bach, 1989), that contribute to employees experiencing an alternative form of identification. For instance, Tasha and Tina were publically reprimanded. When they were discussing this instance to coworkers, they spoke of how they never get recognized for helping out customers. Findings also suggest that employees employ certain behaviors that indicate instances of disidentification: rebellious acts, status, availability, mocking, mimicking, humor, and shop talk. These seven types of communicative behaviors seemed to indicate that employees were disbanding their identities as Big Alpha employees.

Although employees did not indicate a complete lack of identification with Big Alpha, these behaviors pushed employees away from identification and into an alternate form of identification (i.e., deidentification, disidentification; Pratt, 2001). Therefore, this study suggests that identification changes and shifts through employees' everyday talk, depending upon the work group, job to be done, and interactions with customers. In this way, disidentification is a process in which employees may enact certain behaviors that contribute to feelings of disloyalty and indifference. This study begins exploring how these alternative forms of identification are communicated via organizational discourse.

## **Implications and Conclusions**

The findings of this study suggest three practical implications. The first implication is for organizations to have a consistent message throughout the organization. If an organization emphasizes one strategy, but employees and managers do not reflect that strategy in their discourse, an organization may need to reevaluate the consistency of their message and possibly train employees on the strategies that the organization deems important. At Big Alpha, the macro level goals of the organization were different from the micro store level communication practices of identification. In essence, the corporate ideology was not readily enacted at the store level and in some instances was undermined by alternative identification frames. A large majority of Big Alpha employees were confused by managers' communication, as messages differed depending on what manager was communicating to employees. Many employees were frustrated by these mixed messages and this may have affected their identification with the organization. In organizations that have various stores apart from corporate headquarters (i.e., big-box retailers), organizational values, beliefs, and attitudes should be consistently conveyed. If employees hear one consistent message, they may be more apt to identify with the organization. Additionally, organizations spend a lot of money, time, and effort in creating and producing organizational artifacts, only to be undermined if employees do not reflect these beliefs and values in their everyday talk. Therefore, organizations need to be aware of how they are conveying their values, goals, and attitudes and how consistent they are in relaying these to their employees in their stores.

Further, organizations do not always want to induce employee identification at the store level. In Big Alpha stores, managers do not always have the time and resources to

induce employee identification with every individual, but at corporate headquarters, they work hard to create corporate documents that seek to induce employee identification. This disconnect is confusing for employees and may undermine organizational identification strategies.

Second, results indicate that employees may not always reflect organizational identification strategies, but may pick and choose which ones they want to carry out through their discourse. Therefore, organizations should be aware of *what* identification strategies employees are reflecting and *how* (e.g., mocking, rebelling) they are communicatively enacting their identification or disidentification. Management may do so by holding more one-one-one sessions and listening and analyzing employee narratives. Management also should critically examine their own rites to assess employees' identification strategies and managements' role in fostering identification or disidentification. As noted in previous research (Cheney, 1983a; Gossett, 2002; Schrottdt, 2002), employee identification can yield positive benefits for the organization. In retail, management is very busy during the work day focusing on work tasks, therefore, this is not an easy task and should not be a way for management to "monitor" their employees as that could lead to many negative and unethical outcomes; employees may feel as though they are always being watched and thus leave the organization. However, management should try to become attuned to their employees' thoughts and feelings as acknowledging the importance of employees' narratives and rites in the identification process would likely reduce retention and behavioral issues. Employees who reflect the organization's identification strategies may be less apt to leave the organization and may be more dedicated to work hard for the organization; therefore, they may reflect organizational

values when they are interacting with customers. Employees also may be more willing to go above and beyond their job duties, asking customers if they need assistance or if they want to open a company credit or debit card. Although some organizations such as Big Alpha do not allow employees to work overtime, employees may fill in for others when needed. Additionally, employees also may take more responsibility for their job, showing up to all of their scheduled work times. All of these positive behaviors contribute to organizations being more financially successful, which is the underlining goal for organizations.

The last practical implication is for employees. Employees are powerful agents of change within the organization. Although they may not directly have power within the organization, they may influence others' thoughts, beliefs, and values through their narratives and rites. Employees' stories, rites, humor, and shop talk were influential in spurring other employees to negatively discuss the organization. Findings indicated that employees' were more influential than management at inducing identification. As such, employees seemed to identify more with their work group than with Big Alpha. No matter what position employees hold within the organization, they may be capable of becoming powerful players within the organization; the locus of control does not always lie with management, but with all employees, including temporary workers, within the organization. Through everyday talk, employees have agency, able to shape and mold their coworkers' beliefs, values, and behaviors. Therefore, narratives and rites may serve as a powerful vehicle for employees to use to demonstrate not only their views and beliefs, but spur other employees to believe similarly. Employees can and do co-create organizational

meaning through their everyday discourse, thus they are capable of shaping others' identification with the organization.

### **Limitations**

Due to the nature of the research design, there are three limitations that must be addressed. First, because this was an ethnography and I conducted participant observations, I was limited by what I could observe. Although my covert status was a benefit in exploring participants' everyday talk, it also posed as a limitation. I was not able to directly ask individuals how they felt about Big Alpha, directly inquire what their thoughts and feelings were about certain events that transpired, or specifically ask what their status was at Big Alpha. My data only reflected things I observed. As such, I could not readily ascertain the status of all employees. I also only worked during certain times of the day; therefore, I was not able to observe employees who worked the overnight shift. Their everyday talk may have been distinct compared to the day shift employees' everyday talk, but unfortunately, I was not able to gather this data.

Another limitation was my length of time in the field and seasonal worker status. Although I spent nine weeks in the field (over 160 hours), I was considered a temporary worker and was not able to form long relationships with employees. My relationships with employees, and the amount they may have disclosed to me, may have been different had I worked for a longer period of time at Big Alpha. Finally, my exposure to Big Alpha's organizational artifacts (such as monthly newsletters, employee recognition cards) also might have been limited due to my seasonal worker status. Had I been a manager or a long-term employee taking advantage of Big Alpha's benefit package, I may have had a deeper understanding of how Big Alpha employed organizational identification strategies

in their artifacts. Although I was privy to Big Alpha's overall explanation of benefits, there may have been additional resources had I been eligible for benefits.

The last limitation consists of analyzing only one Big Alpha store. In order to capture a more complete understanding of Big Alpha, participant observations or interviews at other Big Alpha stores around the country is desirable. In this way, I would be able to understand if my results are similar to or different from other Big Alpha stores. Additionally, I only observed the retail environment. This was a limitation as retail organizations, particularly big-box stores, function differently than smaller businesses. Observing smaller retail stores may enhance my understanding of how employees may reflect organizational strategies, depending on the size of the organization.

### **Future Research**

The limitations and results of this study point to several areas of future research. First, future research should interview employees to gauge how they may talk about identification and disidentification, furthering our understanding of how employees enact identification strategies and tactics. In this way, we would be able to compare how employees' perceive their behaviors with how they enact these behaviors. Second, research also should incorporate the employees' perspective when examining identification strategies. The findings of this study point to the importance of understanding both how organizations utilize Cheney's (1983b) and DiSanza and Bullis' (1999) identification strategies and how employees reflect those strategies in their everyday talk. Whether employees reflect, mock, or rebel against these strategies may allude to feelings of identification or disidentification. Another area of future research is exploring the class system within the organization. Findings point to the influence class has on employee

identification, however more research is needed to explore the factors that may affect what groups are ranked higher than other groups and how this may affect employees' identification with the organization. Further, future research should explore how narratives and rites together may positively or negatively influence employees' commitment to the organization. Findings demonstrate that these two types of organizational discourse may reflect employees' values and beliefs; therefore, they are instrumental in understanding employees' true connection with the organization. As such, various types of discourse should be analyzed in conjunction with one another rather than just examining one type of discourse as several types of everyday talk may be more influential in employee identification. Additional research should also not devalue employee relationships. Employees expressed the value of camaraderie in their everyday talk, which may positively or negatively affect employees' view of and connection with the organization. Finally, future research should continue building on employee identification and disidentification strategies in order to further our knowledge of how employees may enact specific strategies that connect or disconnect them from the organization. Past research has conceptualized identification as a process and product (Cheney, 1983a, 1983b); likewise, we should begin to look at disidentification as a process and product. This study was a first endeavor into understanding what communicative behaviors employees utilize to reflect identification. Additional research needs to add and refine these categories so that we have a deeper and richer understanding of how alternative strategies are communicatively enacted in the workplace.

## **Conclusion**

This study explored how employees at a big-box retailer, Big Alpha, reflected organizational identification strategies in their everyday talk and reexamined the concept of identification, exploring both the employees' and organization's perspectives. This study extends and builds on Cheney's (1983a, 1983b) organizational identification theory by creating nine new tactics and one strategy of employee identification and disidentification. These new tactics and strategy offer us a way to analyze employees' connection with the organization. As such, we are able to more deeply explore how employees' enact specific strategies that subtly connect them and disconnect them from the organization. Findings also indicate that employees used narratives and rites to convey both identification and disidentification. Overall, findings extend previous research on temporary workers by examining part-time, seasonal, college students. Lastly, results support previous research on the function of everyday talk in the identification process.

Past research has largely ignored the employee side of organizational identification instead preferring to study organizationally-driven messages and possible effects. This study provides insight into how employees are powerful players in the identification process. Although organizations may enact different organizational identification strategies depending on one's role within the organization, employees do have agency in the organization and are powerful agents of identification. Through employee identification strategies, employees are able to associate or disassociate themselves from the organization, controlling to some extent the affect that organizations have on them. Although the current job climate may be bleak, employees should take note that they have an influential, and persuasive role, in how and to what extent, they and their coworkers

connect with the organization. Thus, we must continue to explore the employee's perspective in the identification process.

As we look across the economic landscape, we can see visible signs that employees are still struggling to get by in America. Many Americans are working low-wage, part-time, and seasonal jobs. Reexamining the concept of identification from the employee's perspective allows us to better understand how employees, throughout their daily interactions, enact strategies and tactics that affect their identification with the organization. These strategies and tactics affect employees' identification with the organization and thus affect the degree to which employees make decisions with the organization in mind. Previous literature on identification has assumed that employees either take up the organization's identification strategies or leave them alone; however, this study demonstrates that there is a middle ground in which employees may take an organization's identification strategies and make them their own. There are many factors that may affect the employees' connection with the organization (e.g., loss of benefits, low-wages), but this study provides a starting point into understanding that employees' everyday talk is another factor in the identification process.

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