A Hierarchical Model of Organizational Identification

Joel Solomon
Regent University

Andrea Casey
The George Washington University

This research study examined the organizational identification process in an organization whose identity claims appeared to be congruent and mutually reinforcing. The study sought to understand members' identification with each of the identity claims or a subset of the claims over time. A qualitative case study design was employed to understand the individual nature of the identification process. Results showed that as identification emerged, participants responded to a set of multiple identity claims in a hierarchical manner. This study helps foster an understanding of the process of member choice to identify with organizational claims and the shifting hierarchy of organizational identity claims in the process.

INTRODUCTION

Life is filled with a multitude of questions—some more difficult than others. Often, the questions that seem to be the simplest are the most difficult to answer. "Who am I?" is an example of this paradox. Answering this question takes considerable reflection and frequent iterations to represent who we truly believe we are. In organizational life, this question takes on a different form: "Who are we?" The literature on organizational identity and organizational identification focuses on the process and outcome of individuals and organizations answering this complex yet critical question. While organizational identity and identification have been extensively researched, a clear understanding of the relationship between the two remains elusive (Brickson, 2005, 2013; Besharov, 2014; Hsu & Elsbach, 2013).

The most widely accepted definition of organizational identification is "the perception of oneness or belongingness to some human aggregate" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 21). An assumption in this definition is that when individuals "identify" with the organization, they do so to the set of aggregated claims (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Brickson, 2005) or they identify with other groups within the organization (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; Sluss & Ashforth, 2008). Identification appears to emerge through both bottom-up interactions between employees with pluralistic views as well as through "top-down identification management strategies" (Besharov, 2014, p. 1486).

Recently, studies of identification in hybrid organizations with multiple organizational identity claims have suggested that organizational members may place importance on some but not all of the organizational identity claims, and their identification may not be consistent over time (Besharov, 2014). These studies have primarily focused on multiple-identity organizations or hybrid-identity organizations, in which organizational conflict may occur when members identify with different sets of claims

(Besharov, 2014; Foreman & Whetten, 2002; Glynn, 2000; Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997). While such research is important, it is also important to understand identification processes in organizations where identity claims appear to be congruent and mutually reinforcing. In those organizations, the assumption of congruence may lead managers to mistakenly believe that all members view the organization in the same way and identify with all the claims as one. In the context of a multiethnic church with multiple identity claims, this study addressed the question: What is the role of multiple identity claims in the identification process? This study is significant for organizations as they seek to attract members and retain them as well as sustain relationships with these members over time.

The study draws on the robust theory and research on organizational identification, particularly the process of organizational identification, and the work on organizational identity, as discussed in the next section.

ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY AND IDENTIFICATION

Two streams of research support members' dynamic connection to their organizations: organizational identity and organizational identification. Ashforth and Mael (1989) viewed organizational identification through the lens of social identity theory. Their perspective brought a significant shift within the study of organizational identification, with its consideration of the organization as its own kind of category with which people choose to socially identify. Their social identity perspective of organizational identification and their seminal definition (though often modified or explored further) has become one of the primary approaches in the organizational identification literature. Organizational identification is more than just individuals' consideration of themselves as group members; it is the degree to which they include the organization in their self-concept (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Sluss & Ashforth, 2008).

This study takes the stance that identification is both a noun and verb, one that designates a process of becoming (Ashforth et al., 2008; Pratt, 2000) that ultimately emerges from the organization's identity (Vough, 2012), connects to the organizational identity claims (Brickson, 2005), and enacts the organization's identity (Chreim, 2002). This study also defines this oneness as cognitive, affective, and behavioral (Ashforth et al., 2008; Chreim, 2002; Sluss et al., 2012).

Albert and Whetten's (1985) seminal definition of organizational identity centered around that which is central, enduring, and distinctive to an organization. The organization's identity determines how it will relate to members and nonmembers (Brickson, 2005) and in turn how organizational members should act on its behalf (Albert et al., 2000). Ultimately, organizational identity is concerned with the answer to the collective's question of "Who are we?" (Albert et al., 2000). Yet many organizational theorists have proposed that organizations may have multiple identity claims, and other organizations are hybrid (such as family businesses), which by definition have multiple conflicting claims (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Foreman & Whetten, 2002; Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997; Glynn, 2000). When the question of "Who are we?" is posed, organizational members may not perceive a single congruent answer (Pratt & Foreman, 2000).

The idea of multiple identities relates to both the individual and organizational level: individuals have and interact with several identities ranging from social identities (Mead, 1934) to ethnic identities (Das, Dharwaldkar, & Brandes, 2008); individuals identify with several types of groups (Ashforth et al., 2008; Sluss & Ashforth, 2008); and organizations may have multiple identity claims or may be hybrids with conflicting claims (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). For the organization, dual identities have been discussed in several ways: as multiple identity claims (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) that may sometimes compete with each other (Foreman & Whetten, 2002; Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997) or as different identity claims for different collectives within the same organization (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Member perception is another element to consider, as the organization's identity may not be perceived the same way by every member (Martin, 2002).

These multiple identities may cause issues in the identification process as members may identify with one claim more strongly than another, with that claim changing over time (Foreman & Whetten, 2002; Brickson, 2005); it may also cause issues in organizational members' understanding of the roles they are

required to enact (Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997) or may pit one unit against another as they fundamentally define the organization's identity differently (Glynn, 2000). Pratt and Foreman (2000) proposed that organizational members will respond to multiple claims in one of four ways: compartmentalization (preserve all identity claims but make no attempt to connect them together), deletion (remove one or more of the multiple claims), integration (fuse together all of the claims to produce a "distinct new whole"), and aggregation (keep all of the claims and attempt to create connections between them). Leaders and managers within these dual-identity organizations, however, are often required to hold all of the identity claims (Albert & Whetten, 1985), and the inability to do so may hinder effectiveness. Foreman and Whetten (2002) found that organizational members enact separate organizational identification processes for normative and utilitarian identity claims. It is critical to extend research to organizations that espouse many identity claims that on the surface may be congruent and equal yet may not be understood in the same way nor held as equally important by all members and across contexts and time.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Rationale and Setting for Case Study Design

A qualitative exploratory case study design was employed, as the purpose of the study was to develop an in-depth and holistic understanding of a specific phenomenon in relation to a known theoretical construct: organizational identification (Yin, 2003, 2009). The conceptual framework positioned the study theoretically at the intersection of organizational identity and organizational identification. The study focused on building theory by understanding the dynamics of organizational identification in an organization with multiple identity claims, where the claims were conceived as congruent and mutually supportive. To better understand the member's identification process to a specific set of multiple identity claims, a single, specific, bounded setting (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003) was chosen.

A church offers the potential for a research setting where the identification process with a seemingly congruent set of claims can be explored. Most churches' values and related identity claims are seen as interconnected or congruent and equally important. For example, in the statement "We are a church devoted to wholehearted worship, to scripture as authoritative, to prayer, and to impacting our communities," the four claims are not inherently in conflict, yet members may identify with some claims more strongly than others, or may not identify with one or more of the claims. A musician may integrate the claim of worshiper into his or her identity more than one devoted to scripture does. The specific church chosen for this study was Hope Church, which is well established and has been in its community for more than 10 years. This church describes its values and how they are enacted in its literature for members and potential members. These dynamics made Hope Church an ideal setting for developing theory on how the identification process emerges in an organization with multiple identity claims.

Data Collection

The level of analysis for the process of organizational identification in this study was the individual church member. This study specifically examined the individual's identification journey as he or she responded to the specific claims of the organization. Data collection occurred in two stages: (1) description of the research site and the organizational identity claims, and (2) emergence of the identification process for church members in relation to these claims.

Three data collection methods were used in this study: in-depth individual interviews, document review, and observation. Data were triangulated as recommended by Yin (2009), Strauss and Corbin (1996), and Glesne (1998). Semistructured interviews were the primary data source in order to gather "both retrospective and real time accounts by those people experiencing the phenomena of theoretical interest" (Gioia et al., 2012, p. 19). The first author was the primary researcher and collected the data; the second author was involved in the analysis and interpretation of the data.

Interviews

The study employed in-depth, semistructured interviews, which took place in two stages. The initial stage focused on collecting data to surface the organizational identity claims. Interviews were conducted with paid staff members across functions in the organization during initial visits to the church to understand the organizational identity claims from the perspective of organizational actors who spoke on behalf of the organization and to understand organizational actions that might offer insight into the process of organizational identification.

The second stage of interviews focused on members of the church, who also volunteered for many of its activities. They were interviewed on the second visit to the site. The focus of these interviews was to understand their identification journey and insights related to organizational identity claims. These interviews were specifically structured to understand the saliency of each of the identity claims to participants. Also, questions were structured to surface organizational actions that contributed to each member's identification process. The data from this second stage of data collection were additionally triangulated with the data gathered from observations and documents gathered within the first stage to better understand multiple facets of each participant's identification process.

Purposeful sampling was used to select participants. The participants in the first stage were selected primarily based on role, tenure, and ethnicity. We included individuals who could speak for the church (e.g., the senior and assistant pastors, senior staff) and those who had been in these positions for a number of years. We also wanted to include individuals with different ethnicities, since the church spoke about the importance of multiethnic congregations. In the second stage, among those who self-identified as members of the church, individuals were selected to represent varying lengths of membership and varying ethnicities. Table 1 outlines the 25 participants' demographic characteristics. Each is referred to by his or her participant number throughout the study.

TABLE 1
PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS

Participant	Ethnicity	Length of membership (years)
1	Asian	11
2	Anglo	12
3	Anglo	3
4	Anglo	2
5	Black	12
6	Hispanic	11
7	Anglo	6
8	Black	9
9	Black	4
10	Black	5
11	Anglo	5
12	Anglo	9
13	Anglo	7

14	Black	12
15	Anglo	12
16	Anglo	1
17	Black	3
18	Anglo	8
19	Black	6
20	Black	6
21	Hispanic	4
22	Anglo	12
23	Black	9
24	Black	12
25	Anglo	12

Documents

Documentation from different media was selected and reviewed to corroborate, further explicate, and at times question outcomes of the initial analyses from the interviews (Glesne, 1998). Organizational documents were selected based on their potential to offer insights into the identity claims of the church, as well as to the identification process. Documentation included mission statements, periodic bulletins/ newsletters, content from the organizational website (specifically aspects that addressed activities and ministries), pictures (which spoke to the demographics of the church pastors, staff, and members), the employee handbook, documents created for new members and visitors, the senior pastor's and the church's Twitter page, and advertisements used for recruitment. The documents that were part of a member's first interactions with the church, as well as the formal membership onboarding process, were particularly key because they constituted one of the primary avenues through which members learned about the church, its mission, and what it stands for—factors that are potentially integral to understanding the organization's identity and the identification process.

Observations

Data representing the organization were gathered through 30 hours over 5 days of nonparticipant observation for the first phase of data collection. These data were used to (1) contextualize interview accounts of the identification process, (2) observe the actions of the church as a social actor and the relationships of these actions to the stated claims, and (3) observe individual members' responses to these actions during key events. The second and third points were important, as we wanted to observe how the organization referred to the relationship between the claims and how new members might experience these actions when they were engaging in church activities. Furthermore, we wanted to see which claims were being espoused as official organizational claims. The observed events included new member classes conducted by staff and key nonpaid volunteers and weekend services. Additionally, we observed staff meetings and interactions in the main office area.

Data Analysis

Data analysis activities were guided by suggestions of Miles and Huberman (1994), along with Saldana (2012), for coding the interview data. The three main data streams for the study—interviews, documents, and observations—were triangulated to develop what Yin called "converging lines of

inquiry" (2009, p. 115). The data were coded with Saldana's definition in mind, whereby a code was determined to be "a word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and/or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (2012, p. 3). Furthermore, Miles and Huberman's (1994) three types of codes (descriptive, interpretive, and pattern codes) were used to guide code creation and organization.

Identifying the claims

The first step was to describe the claims espoused by the organization as the identity claims of the church; thus, first-cycle in vivo codes (Saldana, 2012) were used to represent the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1996). After analyzing the staff interviews for identity claims, the observations and documentation were analyzed with these claims in mind as well as to surface other claims. For example, if a leadership team was composed of members of different ethnicities, this was coded as *multiethnic*. If the bulletin had sign-ups for community outreach, this document was coded as *outreach*. This coding process served as the foundation for the next step in analysis, as member interviews were analyzed.

Describing the identification process

The second stage involved mapping members' identification process. This stage had two primary steps: (1) coding members' interviews for their understanding of the identity claims; and (2) coding members' identification journeys in relationship to the claims. This second cycle of coding (Saldana, 2012) began by using the parent codes from the first cycle that made up the identity claims and matching them to the member's perception of the claims. In addition, in this cycle, codes were generated from the organizational identification literature and applied as interpretive codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). We started with a small set of codes (such as *affinity, emulation, self-enhancement, distinctive*) generated from the identification literature. These later served as parent codes, and sublabels were created to further refine the description of the process. Additional codes emerged as members spoke about their connection to Hope Church.

Finding the emergent patterns

The last step of analysis was to surface themes that emerged across the participants' journeys. A third and final cycle of coding (Saldana, 2012) took place when we analyzed the data for emergent pattern codes (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As the final step of the analysis, a matrix of significant events in the identification process as reported by members was compiled. These events were highlighted by members as critical in their emerging relationship with Hope Church and specific characteristics of the church.

FINDINGS

Hope Church

Hope Church was founded by the senior pastor, "John," in the early 2000s after 4 years of struggling with the ethnic and economic divide among churches in his city. The founder is a leading voice in the movement of multiethnic churches—defined as a church where its majority ethnic group does not exceed 80% of its total population. The founder cited statistics that as of 2013, only 13.7% churches met that criterion. Hope Church was multinational, with 30 different nations represented, and had three campuses in two southern U.S. states.

Hope Church's environment

The first of the three locations of Hope Church is in the heart of a mid-sized city, minutes away from a historic high school that was the turbulent scene of forced integration of Black students into an all-White school in the late 1950s. The town as a whole seemed economically depressed. The immediate area around Hope Church was lined with run-down businesses, boarded-up windows, and several homeless shelters. Interviewees often referenced the zip code where Hope Church was located when articulating the church's desire to help its community. In that zip code, the median family income was $35,641, compared

with $107,942 in the more affluent zip code nearby. One stated: "I would be concerned about keeping kind of the DNA of Hope Church if we, for instance, moved to a fancy building in [town]. I mean, that just wouldn't happen anyway. I just don't think, I just don't think we'd ever do that" (P12). Another commented on the building:

> The economically depressed setting of our zip code also influences what the Hope Church building looks like. The high criminal rate . . ., homeless, prostitution, drug dealers—this is a hard place to be, a hard place to be, and I don't, we try to reach every person, you know, around this community, around the city. But when you build a fancy building, I was told you can scare a lot of people. (P06)

When talking about the differences between Hope Church's zip code and the affluent area, one staff member highlighted the people:

> I'm not just bashing on [other side of town], . . . but here at Hope Church there's so many secondary identities. You know, there's rich, there's poor, there's powerful, there is homeless, there is the disenfranchised, there's intellectuals, there's highly educated, there's blue-collar, there's 35 different ethnicities, there's Catholic, there's Methodist, there's Baptists, Bible Church, there's Presbyterians, there's charismatics. (P01)

The senior pastor stated: "We see ourselves as pastors of the entire community" (P02), and a member described her first visit to the church by highlighting its "hands-on" nature:

> We have always been hands-on; we believe in getting out and doing ministry. . . . We serve the community with our, with the homeless and the economically diverse people that have need for food assistance and stuff like that, close, and so we began right away to work in the [program] and serve the people of the community. (P09)

Hope Church's history

In the early days, Hope Church met in the founder's home. One of the founding members (P08) recalled that during those early days, the meetings were about brainstorming what a church that was multiethnic, economically diverse, and intentionally trying to reach their community could look like. A well-respected Black leader in the city helped John start the church. As John noted:

> So I think the first, most significant thing was that I, I didn't start the church and then try to add diversity to it. I went right away and started the church so that we could say a Black and a White man started this church together. . . . [Name] coming alongside me to actually plant [start] the church too, [with] his caliber and his reputation in the city—that helped to say to people both White and Black, [I'm] not crazy. (P02)

Very soon after, two key people joined Hope Church's work: a tenured professor and a Hispanic pastor known for his outreach work. These two individuals came to work at the church, leaving their careers for either no monetary gain or an extensive pay cut. John noted that this gave credibility to the work at Hope Church:

> So all this was happening and these are significant things because what it was doing, it was validating, it was validating the vision and it was verifying the credibility of the church in the early days that something unique is happening there. Because how are . . . all these diverse, really you know stout, high-caliber-character individuals are joining this work when there's, relatively speaking, there is no money, there's no building; it's still pretty much a vision. (P02)

Soon the church moved from homes into another church's facility—meeting when that facility was available. One member described the church at this time as the "stealth church." John described the circumstances surrounding the church acquiring its current building:

> In 2003, when we got this building, we rented this 80,000-square-foot Wal-Mart for $.10 a square foot, $800 a month. That was like huge, because you know, I mean just the miracle of how much space we got for how cheap, which kind of stood in the face of all these churches, always buying land and building buildings. . . . By taking over an abandoned space and bringing it back to life—

and of course over the next few years we would learn a lot about that—and the credibility that gave the church. . . . We've been in the space month to month for probably like, probably 6 to 8 years. . . . At any moment they could go: You have 90 days to leave. And it's just never happened. (P02)

One of the church's most recognized outreach programs was started shortly after it moved into the building. This program began as an intentional effort to reach the community.

Organizational Identity

Three organizational identity claims for Hope Church emerged during the first phase of data analysis: multiethnic, economically diverse, and community outreach-focused. These were seen most clearly in Hope Church's official statement of "who they are" as an organization:

A multiethnic, economically diverse church established by men and women seeking to know God and to make Him known through the pursuit of unity in accordance with the prayer of Jesus Christ (John 17:20-23) and patterned after the New Testament at Antioch. (Organizational website, New members booklet, 2014)

Documentary and observation evidence for each claim is summarized in Table 2, and the sections below present evidence from all sources in support of the claims.

TABLE 2
ADDITIONAL DOCUMENTARY AND OBSERVATION EVIDENCE FOR IDENTITY CLAIMS

Claim	Evidence	Source
Multiethnic identity	"Championing the biblical mandate of the multi-ethnic church via the Hope **Global Network. . . "**	Church's leadership conference
	"I'm amazed at how many are taken in by the Eph 4 missional conversation while completely missing the Eph 2-3 racial conversation. #context"	Hope Church Twitter page
	"While the American Church continues to clamor for all things missional, the greatest needs of our day concern all things racial."	Hope Church Twitter page
	"For the last 53 years, I've longed to see the church fill that hole in the gospel. I've been longing for the day when the church would not be Jew or Gentile . . . Black or White. . . . Today, in this place, is fulfillment of that longing for the church."	A national voice on diversity after a visit to Hope Church
Economic diversity	"To effectively engage a community, churches must address its spiritual, social and financial needs."	Hope Church Twitter page
	"Hope Church is a catalyst to serve people living in and around [city] emerging University District by helping to meet their social, economic and spiritual needs resulting in real community transformation."	Flyer
	"As you enter the facility (a former Walmart), you'll be warmly greeted by people from a wide variety of ethnic and economic backgrounds."	Hope Church webpage: What to expect
	Several homeless people working on building for church	Observation
Community outreach	"18,078 individuals served, total households 2,893: this represents 106.87% of the 2,707 households living in poverty in [zip code]."	2013 highlights
	"150 Families were blessed with furniture for their homes."	2013 highlights
	"50 young women in 2013 (over 1,000 diapers a month are given away to moms)."	2013 highlights
	"Every Tuesday evening 12-14 patients, mostly from [zip code], are seen for acute dental care."	2013 highlights
	"300 active/open cases helping people to become naturalized/US citizens."	2013 highlights

Multiethnic

In the entrance of Hope Church, the flags of 30 nations hung from the ceiling with the three most prominent flags being those of the United States, Mexico, and Spain. Signs and the prayer cards on the seats were in English and Spanish. In the entrance to the church, tables advertised a leadership conference conducted by Hope Church for its leaders. One of the primary sessions was "Helping our Latino/ Hispanics become better integrated into the life of Hope Church" (Rise: 2014 Leadership Advance Booklet). Many paintings were on the walls, with many in the African American tradition. A large sign that hung in the hallway said, "Walk together in Christ," and a similar one in the sanctuary said, "Worship the Father as one." Pictures of the congregation were prominently placed in many areas of the building, and all of these pictures showed people of multiple ethnicities.

Leadership team. Ethnic diversity was also reflected in the leadership for church services. Many staff referenced this as being an intentional part of their service planning because it reflected the ethnic diversity of the staff: "[People] can see a lot what kind of church we are because we are very diverse staff" (P06). One staff member mentioned the ethnic diversity as a part of how he spoke to guests: "I encourage people who are new to our church to visit us at least three times in order to understand how we mix diversity from the platform" (P07). Similarly, members noted the following: "I think it's important and I've enjoyed and I think it's been very beneficial at Hope Church if we're going to be a thriving multiethnic church, that that multiethnic view is reflected in our teaching pastors" (P12).

The many different ethnic backgrounds of the church's leadership were observed in all aspects of the church services. The senior pastor (Caucasian) spoke, the campus pastor (Asian) greeted and gave announcements, and the whole church was greeted by Hope Church's hospitality coordinator (African American). Throughout the morning worship services, several references were made from the platform (primarily from the senior pastor) about Hope Church's mission and call to be a multiethnic church:

> Because that's what people see when they visit. . . . If there's nobody on staff that's preaching that's Hispanic or multiethnic, either one, you know, or Black, at all, . . . it's hard to really convey the true mission of the church, you know, even if it's in your mission statement. (P12)

The focus on creating a multiethnic leadership team was highlighted in hiring decisions:

> So [name] was part of this church early, in its early days, some of the other staff that were African American, etc., before [name], and then when [name] joined and got a Chinese guy, and just that expression I think's been really important to embracing people in a leadership position regardless of their ethnicity, and that conveys a really important message. . . . With that comes stylistic differences, but . . . that then spans over into who's on the elder board and again the worship style that has brought with it musically, etc., and so it gives really a tremendous diverse feel. (P04)

Congregation. During Sunday services, the members who were setting up and preparing for the morning appeared to be from different ethnicities. For example, a Hispanic man sang songs in Spanish. An African American man and Asian man acted as greeters and prepared the coffee bar. In addition, several Caucasian people set up tables. This environment was also described on the website ("What to expect"): "As you enter the facility (a former Walmart), you'll be warmly greeted by people from a wide variety of ethnic and economic backgrounds."

Economic diversity

Economic diversity was another identity claim that emerged. It was central to the church and was one way members distinguished their church from other churches—in particular an affluent church on the west side of the city where the pastor had worked before. One staff member compared Hope Church to an affluent church, noting:

> It just becomes another social club, really, . . . where everybody's at church, everybody votes Republican, everybody goes to the same school, everybody roots for the same school, and everybody has a high-level income, okay? (P01)

One of the ways the claim of economic diversity was referenced in the interviews related to the homeless population of the congregation. One staff member spoke of it this way:

> When you go to church on Sunday, it's interesting because you can have someone who's homeless, who doesn't smell like they've had a shower for quite some time on one side of you and on the other side you could have somebody who's very well educated, middle-class, maybe even upper middle class and/or wealthy, and you know it's just a part of what the experience is here. And that's a norm here, where in many churches that's a bit of an anomaly. (P04)

Another member spoke of how this claim could sometimes be offensive to others:

> I like the idea that like on the Sunday morning there are guys in the—homeless guys before we would set up. . . . I can remember this one guy [name] in particular, way, way back when, he would come in like on a hot day. He could be sweaty, dirty, you know have his bag on him, and he would just come in and sit, you know? It was, it was offensive to some people, but I felt a need to go up to him. And back then I was a greeter, I wore a lot of hats back then, but I felt the need to go up to him and make sure he felt welcome. Can I get you some water . . . ? (P13)

Community outreach

Community outreach also surfaced as an identity claim. Hope Church's new member book spoke of community outreach as the way the church could meet the spiritual, social, and financial needs of its community in its zip code. Hope Church spoke of itself as being one with its community: "If we 'are' the community, there is no degree of separation, no 'us' and 'them.' Instead it's 'us.' We attempt to stay in touch with the needs of the community, the problems of our people" (p. 36). Examples of community outreach included the feeding program, a ministry to help women in prostitution, foster care adoption, and financial classes for the community.

Community outreach as a claim also surfaced in response to critical events in Hope Church's history. As stated by the longest-tenured associate pastor:

> It was such a huge, spectacular fight between John and [name], you know, the two founding pastors, . . . over [name] coming here. . . . No, just a disagreement on whether or not he was ready to come, because he couldn't speak any English. You know, it was a bold thing for us to hire [name] . . . because we knew we needed a full-time Latino pastor that could make good inroads into the Hispanic community. (P01)

This staffing action emphasized a commitment to diverse leadership (they needed a Latino on staff) to reach the church's immediate community. At the time, this commitment was, in one of the staff's words, a risk, as this pastor could not communicate with most of the staff but had the potential to increase the church's ability to reach this community. This was important both for the betterment of their lives and ultimately to attract potential new members.

The focus on community outreach was evident throughout the church. Flyers on outreach programs were present as you walked into the building. Outreach was also a part of the sermons. The back of the room in which the sermons were delivered was roped off for several programs that worked with kids who were "aging out" of the foster care system. Flyers for a program that feeds hundreds of homeless and poor families were prominently displayed on tables in the lobby.

Organizational Identification

The role of multiple identity claims

From Phase 2 of the data analysis, an understanding of the identification process with Hope Church's three identity claims emerged as participants described their process of becoming one with or belonging to the church. Participants spoke of identification with the church as a whole and also to its individual claims. Regarding the former, some focused on their identification to the church through their connection

to other members—"If you come here, you have to be willing to love everybody and to share a loving relationship with the membership" (P09)—or a general vision of the church—"It's very important for us to be a member here because we both fully agree with the vision of Hope Church" (P14).

A broad identification to the church was also evident in participants' use of language such as "we," "us," "belonging," and "connected"—language frequently mentioned in other studies when members describe identification with the organization as a whole (Sluss et al., 2012). This language also aligns with the identification literature that describes members viewing the organization or group as an aggregate (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994; Sluss & Ashforth, 2008).

When asked to describe Hope Church, a common response was to simply link all the claims in one or two statements: e.g., "We are a group of people diverse in cultures, you know what's that word, economic, economic diversity, and we are working together and walking together to please God" (P16) or "I'd just give you our mission statement, which is Hope Church is a multiethnic, socioeconomically diverse missional church that is calling people to Christ and encouraging them to walk together in unity" (P07).

While speaking of Hope Church as a whole, the participants communicated an understanding of all three of Hope Church's claims and the connections between them. In short, the participants spoke not only of an identification with Hope Church as a whole, as Ashforth and Mael (1989) would have suggested, but also of their identification with a group called Hope Church that had three defining identity claims.

Members also described their identification with the claims as a set as they spoke about their initial search for a church with a specific claim. They described a search for a church with a particular characteristic, and in addition to experiencing the searched-for organizational identity claim, members described how they identified with the identity claims of the church as a whole:

> I was not necessarily looking for ethnic diversity but I was looking for a place where I felt comfortable, . . . I guess I was looking for a sense of belonging. . . . Having grown up in a very ethnically diverse family, I never really thought about an ethnically diverse church, because I had only grown up in church with Black people. So, you know I thought it was pretty cool that I now was part of a body of believers that you know were represented from so many different nations, you know so many other people who were truly my neighbors, you know that didn't look like me. (P21)

Another member shared his identification with one specific identity claim of the church, economic diversity, that was not part of his initial search for a church:

> For a while it was kind of how do I avoid these [homeless] people. . . . I think as God helped the vision kind of grow in me, I find myself, even though it's still uncomfortable, really wanting to engage people, wanting to get to know people that aren't like me. (P20)

Relationships to multiple claims—emergence of a hierarchy of claims

Although members spoke of identification with all the claims, they also highlighted their identification with one claim over others. For example, when asked to identify something that if taken away would cause Hope Church to no longer be Hope Church, one Spanish-speaking member identified both its multicultural nature and its economic diversity. She added, though, that the claim of community outreach was so critical in her decision to stay a member of the church that without it, she said, she would leave. "That's what makes Hope Church, Hope Church. You know, they can, they can reach out and serve straight to the cultures and communities" (P19). Additionally, she noted that the claims of economic diversity and the importance of multiethnic community were also important to her, yet if they were no longer present in the church, she would still choose to stay a part of the church.

An elder (a nonstaff member with a pivotal role in the church's governmental structure) also referenced a connection to the claim of community outreach: "To me that's [outreach] such a fabric of the church. I mean, I would say more than race, more than diversity. I would say the outreach of the church is really what makes it Hope Church" (P20). Another member echoed this same hierarchy of claims as he

discussed a scenario of economic diversity being removed: "I've got to get out of here [laugh], time to go, when is this going to be over" (P16).

For others, the importance of one particular identity claim at Hope Church would also inform their decision to join another church in the future, should that be needed:

> My wife is like this 100%, you know, we can never go to another church that's different than this. . . . Any time that we've ever visited a church, like if we're back home or something, and where it is all White or all Black or whatever, I mean it just, there's something about it just doesn't sit right with you. . . . We've seen it the other way and because we feel like ultimately this is what heaven will be like. (P11)

A hierarchy of identity claims emerged (Figure 1), suggesting that one claim was the primary focus in the identification process, with the other claims serving a secondary focus. The primary claim was a key factor in the participant staying connected with Hope Church while the other claims were negotiable. While participants valued these secondary claims, their connection to these claims was not as strong in their decisions to remain a member of the church. This hierarchy of claims served as a foundation for the identification process.

FIGURE 1
IDENTIFICATION AND THE PARTICIPANTS' HIERARCHY
OF MULTIPLE IDENTITY CLAIMS
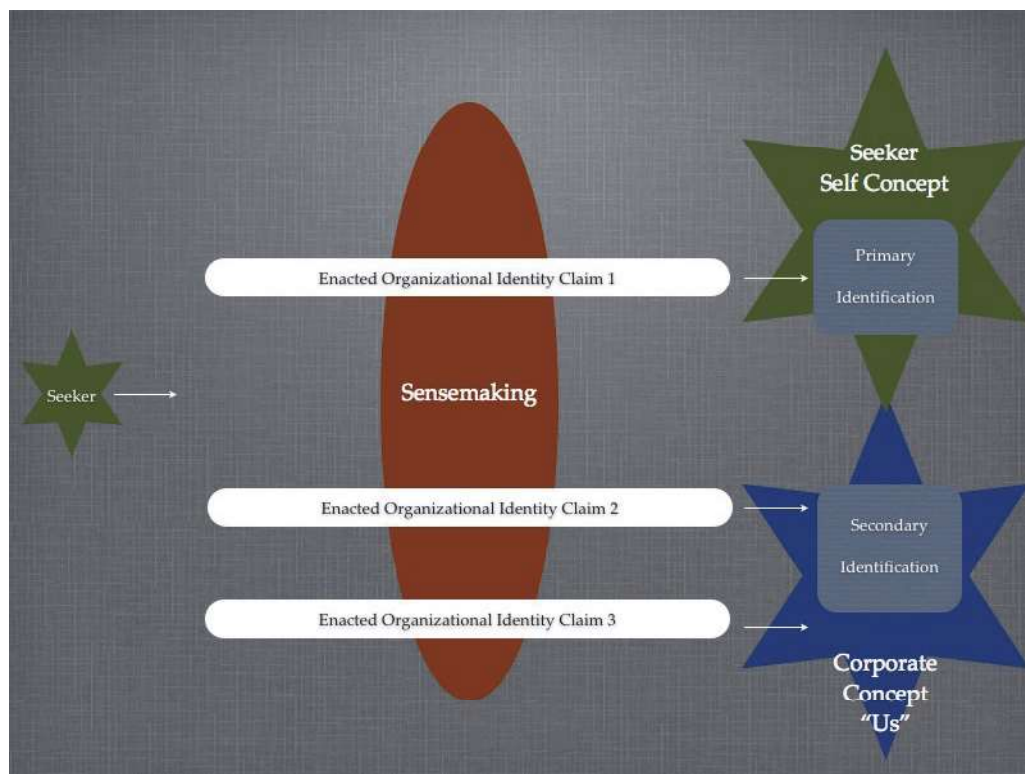
DISCUSSION

This study concludes that both identification to a hierarchy of claims and one claim in particular as well as identification to the whole are needed to fully understand the identification process. In this study, identification included both a sense of connection to each of the individual organizational claims and a sense of connection to the set of claims as a congruent whole.

Congruence of Identity Claims

While participants' responses reflected a hierarchy of identification to the individual claims, they also perceived the claims to be coherently aligned. This is an important point as it relates to findings regarding primary and secondary identification. Had the claims been overtly competitive, the participants would have needed to choose certain claims over others. Also, if the organization had been divided in how these claims were expressed and enacted, the member would have been influenced in which claims would become a primary or secondary identification. However, because the individuals saw these claims, in a variety of combinations, as a congruent set, they identified with the organization as a whole. For identification literature, this finding of participants seeing the identity claims as congruent is a new insight.

Although the issue of identification with multiple identity claims has not been widely researched, findings to date have been similar. Specifically, members in organizations with competitive multiple identity claims tend to identify with one claim over another (Glynn, 2000; Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997; Pratt & Corley, 2007). These studies have emphasized the hierarchy of claims that attract members' attention. The findings of this study suggest two clear departures from past research. First, this study found that the members identified with all of the claims promoted by the organization. Second, the claims were perceived as congruent. Based on Pratt and Foreman's (2000) categorization of response to multiple claims in an organization, many of the staff and members responded through aggregation, rather than through compartmentalization, deletion, or integration.

Participants described Hope Church's claims as distinct. Although the claims were congruent, members did not describe them the same way. This congruence of the claims appeared to facilitate identification with all the claims. The claims were interconnected in many ways. For some, maintaining the church building in a modest fashion represented the claims of economic diversity and community outreach. For others, the claim of community outreach was present in activities related to the claim of multiethnicity. The church leaders also enacted the interrelationships between the claims. For example, the church hired a non–English-speaking Hispanic pastor to attract new members from the growing Latino population in their area. This action reflected the relationship between the community outreach and multiethnic claims.

The Process of Identification to a Hierarchy of Claims

The study found that participants identified with all of the claims and described them as a congruent set. Additionally, many of the participants described a process of identification in which they identified with one primary claim and to a lesser degree with a secondary set of claims. To more fully understand the hierarchical identification model, a discussion of primary identification and secondary identification is needed. The claim that was most salient or the closest to the individual's self-definition served as the primary identification. For these members, one claim served their primary need to be met by the church. The remaining claims were secondary and emerged as negotiable in the identification process. In this case, the individual would consider staying in the church even if these organizational claims were no longer enacted. While strength of identification has been addressed in theory and research on identification, the contribution here is that the strength of identification is considered through the lens of each individual organizational identity claim. It's important to consider the presence of multiple organizational identity claims, even when the claims appear to be congruent and not competitive (Glynn, 2000; Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997; Pratt & Corley, 2007).

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS

Theoretical implications of this study for identification theory relate to the presence of multiple identity claims and the strength of the individual's identification. While the study supported Ashforth and Mael's (1989) idea of identification to the aggregate whole, the study found that multiple identity claims, even if congruent, may create an organizational context where Ashforth and Mael's (1989) definition of identification to the aggregate whole does not adequately represent the identification process. In this

study, a member's identification process emerged as having a stronger connection to one claim over all others, although the member identified with the set of claims as a whole, and this represented a shifting hierarchy over time. Strength of identification to different claims should be considered in future research in exploring identification to multiple-claim organizations. Additionally, exploring the intersection of hierarchical identification and ambivalence identification (Schuh et al., 2016) would give insight into both the process and outcomes of identification.

Multiple Identity Claims

Within the identification literature, the most commonly used definition is "the perception of oneness or belongingness to some human aggregate" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 21). As this definition shows, it has generally been assumed that when individuals "identify" with the organization, they identify with the aggregate (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), other groups within the organization (Sluss & Ashforth, 2008; Cooper & Thatcher, 2010), or the identity claims as one general set of claims (Brickson, 2005). This study suggests theoretical implications for organizational identification when the identification process takes place in an organization that defines itself with more than one claim (Foreman & Whetten, 2002; Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Individuals may not identify with all of these claims equally and may not identify with all of the claims at the same time (Besharov, 2014).

This study found that, when members were asked about their connection to the church if one or more claims were missing, some voiced that they would leave if a particular claim was no longer part of the church but not necessarily if others disappeared. While the critical claim varied based on the individual, the pattern remained. One claim was usually more critically important to the identification process of the individual member than others, even though the organization spoke of these claims equally. The claim that the individual searched, visited, and stayed for may hold a hierarchical role within the individual. If this is the case, it would be logical that the individual would leave if that particular claim were not present, as the interview data suggested.

Multiple identity claims and varied identification to specific claims may ultimately call into question the nature of the definition of organizational identification. If an organization has multiple identity claims and an individual identifies with only some, could that individual be considered as identifying with the organization? Moreover, if other members identify with the organization based on different identity claims, then what does "oneness with a human aggregate" really look like? Furthermore, the findings could speak to the reasons for group identification (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; Riketta & Van Dick, 2005; Sluss & Ashforth, 2008) or work passion and job performance (Astakhova & Porter, 2015), as those groups that the individual identifies with may be the groups similar to them. These highly salient groups may determine which claims hold the primary identification and which claims hold a secondary identification. By implication, group identification may be a more critical process than organizational identification.

Strength of Identification

A potential implication of the study for identification theory relates to the strength of the individual's identification, even when the member does in fact identify with all of the claims. The study posits that the member's identification to the aggregate is greater than to the set of claims themselves (those claims that hold secondary identification only). This may show Ashforth and Mael's (1989) idea of identification to the aggregate whole to be accurate. Finally, the study presents the individual's identification to one claim as stronger than both the secondary claims and the aggregate as a whole. In all of the cases, understanding the strength of the member's identification is a part of understanding the individual's identification. Strength of identification should be considered in future research that explores identification to multiple-claim organizations. This contributes to the definition of identification. What does "strong" identification or "weak" identification look like, and how are they defined?

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

While the context for this study was a faith-based organization, the implications for practice apply to other organizations as well, suggesting several ways the organization may be able to address the identification of its members to further advance its mission and goals. First, this study suggests that leadership creates a sense of temporal continuation and congruence of the identity claims for the membership to identify with. Due to the role of saliency and primary identification, at any time a leader or manager may enact a specific claim in a different way. As leaders and managers change, employees may receive mixed messages about the identity claims, which may lead to confusion that hinders the identification process. Thus, an organizational view of leadership as concentrated in specific people may be problematic for a consistent and congruent identification process. However, viewing leadership as a function of the organization, with those functions seen throughout the organization, may prevent the mixed message of one claim being espoused differently in different parts of the organization. Additionally, viewing leadership as a function may aid in the transference of the claims from one generation to another, thus facilitating the enduring nature of the identity claim.

Second, organizational leaders may want to make organizational identity claims very visible. If newcomers do not easily see all the claims, they may leave believing that certain claims are not part of the organization. The consistent celebration of claims by managers, leaders, and other members may act as a powerful sensebreaking strategy for new members, as they learn how existing members describe positive encounters relating to the identity claims. In light of company buy outs, mergers, and acquisitions (Giessner, 2011), it will be pivotal to understand the impact of organizational actions (Lam et al., 2016) to help new members identify with existing identity claims or help old members engage with the new set of identity claims.

Additionally, senior leaders may play a significant role in the identification process of some members. Consequently, consistent accessibility of newcomers to senior leaders may prove to be extremely influential in the individual's identification process. Due to the particular role that a pastor plays, consistent interaction with the senior pastor may have the most influence on the identification process of new members as it relates to sensebreaking and sensegiving actions.

Finally, understanding that identification is a holistic process (cognitive, affective, behavioral, and spiritual) may help managers and leaders understand the nature of the member's identification. Engaging in behavioral actions congruent with identity claims does not mean the individual has identified with the organization. Simply "obeying" organizational norms while feeling emotionally detached from or opposed to the claim that the norms represent may signal weak or nonexistent identification.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

There is still much to learn about identification and the impact of multiple identity claims on the identification process. The study findings suggest several areas for future research.

First, this study was retrospective, and members may have forgotten smaller events that had a culminating effect on their identification process. A longitudinal study that can track the individual as he or she is experiencing the events may give a better sense of the timetable of emergence. Furthermore, a longitudinal study may also provide insight into members' sensemaking process as they revisit their connection to the organization. Members' sensemaking may be more detailed and multidimensional than what a retrospective study can describe.

The identification research is still dominated by a snapshot view of how individuals connect with organizations; developing a more nuanced understanding of the process of how identification emerges over time is critical. Moreover, is identification static or dynamic? Specifically, do members go back and forth in their identification processes? These kinds of questions speak to what it means for an individual's identification process to be just that: a process of becoming (Ashforth et al., 2008).

Second, the study has shown how the element of faith contributes to how people identify with, and ultimately seek, membership in a particular church. Faith can be an influential filter in how individuals

see the organizational claims. The saliency of members' faith may also shape how they process their connection to that organization. Further research on the role of faith in the personal identity of the member may provide some significant insight concerning the individual's sensemaking around identity claims. More specifically, the role of faith as it relates to the antecedents and outcomes of identification may shape how the individual sees self-enhancements and in-groups and out-groups.

Finally, the identification literature has suggested that the perceived oneness of identification ultimately becomes part of the member's self-identity to the point that the individual feels the pain of organizational failures and the joy of organizational successes and feels personally critiqued when the organization is criticized (Mael & Ashforth, 1995). In this study, the perceived oneness with the organization seemed at times disjointed and incomplete. Although this was not a strong finding, it is still a potential area for future research.

CONCLUSION

This study enhances our understanding of the process of member identification with a subset or shifting hierarchy of organizational identity claims. The implication of multiple identity claims and varied identification to specific claims ultimately calls into question the nature of the definition of organizational identification. These implications also extend to the members themselves as they seek to identify or understand their sense of belonging to the organization. Consequently, an organization may hold a distorted view of its members' identification process and may operate on various assumptions about its members that are not accurate. The question of why and how some members identify with parts of organizational claims and not others and how this evolves over time has yet to be fully understood. It is fair to say that the deceptively simple questions of who we are and why we have chosen to be who we are continue to elude our cognitive pursuit of a simple answer.

REFERENCES

Albert, S., & Whetton, D. (1985). Organizational identity. In L. L. Cummings & B. M. Staw (Eds.), *Research in organizational behavior* (pp. 263–295). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Albert, S., Ashforth, B., & Dutton, J. (2000). Organizational identity and identification: Charting new waters and building new bridges. *Academy of Management Journal, 25*, 13–17.

Ashforth, B., Harrison, S., & Corley, K. (2008). Identification in organizations: An examination of four fundamental questions. *Journal of Management, 34*(3), 325–374. https://doi.org/10.1177/0149206308316059

Ashforth, B., & Mael, F. (1989). Social identity theory and the organization. *Academy of Management Review, 14*(1), 20–39.

Astakhova, M., & Porter, G. (2015). Understanding the work passion performance relationship: The mediating role of organizational identification and moderating role of fit at work. *Human Relations, 68*(8), 1315–1346. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726714555204

Besharov, M. L. (2014). The relational ecology of identification: How organizational identification emerges when individuals hold divergent values. *Academy of Management Journal, 57*(5), 1485–1512. https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2011.0761

Brickson, S. L. (2005). Organizational identity orientation: Forging a link between organizational identity and organizations' relations with stakeholders. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 50*(4), 576–609. https://doi.org/10.2189/asqu.50.4.576

Brickson, S. L. (2013). An integrative model accounting for the role of identity in organizational identification. *Organization Science, 24*(1), 226–245. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1110.0730

Chreim, S. (2002). Influencing organizational identification during major change: A communication based perspective. *Human Relations, 55*(9), 1117–1137. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726702055009022

Cooper, D., & Thatcher, S. (2010). Identification in organizations: The role of self-concept orientations and identification motives. *Academy of Management Journal,35*(4), 516–538.

Das, D., Dharwadkar, R., & Brandes, P. (2008). The importance of being 'Indian': Identity centrality and work outcomes in an off-shored call center in India. *Human Relations, 61*(11), 1499–1530. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726708096636

Dutton, J., Dukerich, J., & Harquail, C. (1994). Organizational images and member identification. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 39*(2), 239–263. https://doi.org/10.2307/2393235

Foreman, P., & Whetten, D. (2002). Members' identification with multiple-identity organizations. *Organization Science, 13*(6), 618–635. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.13.6.618.493

Giessner, S. (2011). Is the merger necessary? The interactive effect of perceived necessity and sense of continuity on post-merger identification. *Human Relations,64*(8), 1079–1098. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726711406979

Gioia, D., Corley, K., & Hamilton, A. (2012). Seeking qualitative rigor in inductive research: Notes on the Gioia methodology. *Organizational Research Methods, 16*(1), 15–31. https://doi.org/10.1177/1094428112452151

Glesne, C. (1998). *Becoming qualitative researchers*. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon.

Glynn, M. A. (2000). When cymbals become symbols: Conflict over organizational identity within a symphony orchestra. *Organization Science, 11*(3), 285–298. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.11.3.285.12496

Golden-Biddle, K., & Rao, H. (1997). Breaches in the boardroom. *Organization Science, 8*(6), 593–611. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.8.6.593

Hsu, G., & Elsbach, K. D. (2013). Explaining variation in organizational identity categorization. *Organization Science, 24*(4), 996–1013. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1120.0779

Lam, L. M., Lui, Y., & Loi, R. (2016). Looking intra-organizationally for identity cues: Whether perceived organizational support shapes employees' organizational identification. *Human Resources, 69*(2), 345–367.

Mael, F., & Ashforth, B. (1995). Loyal from day one: Biodata, organizational identification, and turnover among newcomers. *Personnel Psychology, 48*(2), 309–333. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1744-6570.1995.tb01759.x

Martin, J. (2002). *Organizational culture: Mapping the terrain*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781483328478

Mead, G. H. (1934). *Mind, self and society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.

Merriam, S. B. (2009). *Qualitative research: A guide to design and implementation*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.

Miles, M. B., & Huberman, M. (1994). *Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Pratt, M. (2000). The good, the bad, and the ambivalent: Managing identification among Amway distributors. *Administrative Science Quarterly, 45*(3), 456–493. https://doi.org/10.2307/2667106

Pratt, M. G., & Corley, K. (2007). Managing multiple organizational identities: On identity ambiguity, identity conflict, and members' reaction. In C. Bartel, S. Blader, & A. Wrzesniewski (Eds.), *Identity and the modern organization* (pp. 99–118). London, UK: Psychology Press.

Pratt, M., & Foreman, P. (2000). Classifying managerial responses to multiple organizational identities. *Academy of Management Review, 25*(1), 18–42.

Riketta, M., & Van Dick, R. (2005). Foci of attachment in organizations: A meta-analytic comparison of the strength and correlates of workgroup versus organizational identification and commitment. *Journal of Vocational Behavior,67*(3), 490–510. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jvb.2004.06.001

Saldana, J. (2012). *The code manual for qualitative researchers*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Schuh, S., Van Quaquebeke, N., Goritz, A., Xin, K., Cremer, D., & van Dick, R. (2016). Mixed feelings, mixed blessing? How ambivalence in organizational identification relates to employees' regulatory focus and citizenship behaviors. *Human Relations,69*(12), 2224–2249. https://doi.org/10.1177/0018726716639117

Sluss, D., & Ashforth, B. (2008). How relational and organizational identification converge: Processes and conditions. *Organization Science, 19*(6), 807–823. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1070.0349

Sluss, D., Ployhart, R., Cobb, M., & Ashforth, B. (2012). Generalizing newcomers' relational and organizational identifications: Processes and prototypicality. *Academy of Management Journal, 55*(4), 949–975. https://doi.org/10.5465/amj.2010.0420

Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Strauss, A., & Corbin, J. (1996). *Basics of qualitative research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Vough, H. (2012). Not all identifications are created equal. *Organization Science,23*(3), 778–800. https://doi.org/10.1287/orsc.1110.0654

Weick, K. (1995). *Sensemaking in organizations: Foundations in organizational science*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Yin, R. K. (2003). *The role of theory in doing case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Yin, R. K. (2009). *Case study research*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.