Organizational Culture Gone Awry: The Double-Edged Sword of Ambiguity

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Organizational Culture Gone Awry: The Double-Edged Sword of Ambiguity

A dissertation presented

by

Curtis Kwinyen Chan

to

The Committee for the PhD in Business Studies

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Organizational Culture Gone Awry: 
The Double-Edged Sword of Ambiguity

Abstract

Scholars often conceptualize culture as a resource utilized by actors with strategic intention, and managers have long yearned to master organizational culture. In particular, organizational culture is seen as a crucial part of the recruiting, management, and retention of talent in organizations. Yet, organizational culture may be double-edged: the managerial use of a cultural resource can have unintended consequences. In this dissertation, I examine the research question: How can strategic utilizations of cultural resources go awry of actors’ purposes? In other words, how can cultural resources be double-edged? I draw on a two-year empirical case study of consultants at a strategy consulting firm, including 87 interviews with organizational members, 119 days of observational data, and a range of archival documents.

From these data, in my two empirical chapters, I elaborate two sets of findings about the processes that can allow cultural resources to be double-edged. The first set of findings shows that managers’ use of an ambiguous expression can powerfully mobilize recruits, but it can also provide the interpretive space for members to articulate the expression in ways that diverge from what managers had intended. Recruits can then use these divergent articulations as reasons to exit the organization. The second set of findings suggests that managers’ use of sanctions can overreach managers’ intent. Particularized sanctions targeted at specific people and specific behaviors can enforce norms, but they can be turned into stories that become generalized as they get circulated, abstracted, and mythologized. These generalized sanction stories, then, can serve as justifications for refraining from an entire category of action, rather than the specific behavior managers intended to prevent. In all, my dissertation examines how cultural resources can be
double-edged by theorizing different ways in which organizational cultural resources—intended one way by managers—end up having consequences in unanticipated directions.
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CHAPTER 1:

INTRODUCTION

Culture matters deeply for organizational life. Substantively, patterned meanings in organizations have played a crucial role in explaining a variety of important phenomena. Culture has been implicated in outcomes like leveraged buy-out firms’ systematic disadvantaging of women (Turco, 2010) and professional service firms’ reproduction of socio-economic stratification (Rivera, 2012; Rivera, 2015). And cultural resources have been viewed as key to the attainment of organizational outcomes like organizational legitimacy (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001), organizational change (Howard-Grenville, Golden-Biddle, Irwin, & Mao, 2011; Kellogg, 2011b), innovation (Leonardi, 2011), employee satisfaction (Barsade & O’Neill, 2014), and employee achievement (Goldberg, Srivastava, Manian, Monroe, & Potts, 2016).

Theoretically, the concept of culture has gained strong traction in organizational scholarship over the past few decades, with recent literature reviews asserting the centrality of the concept to the field (Giorgi, Lockwood, & Glynn, 2015) and a renaissance of cultural studies in organizations (Weber & Dacin, 2011). While initial scholarship around organizational culture focused on shared organizational values and assumptions, seen as largely static and constraining of actors, a “second wave” of more contemporary organizational research shifted the focus (Weber & Dacin, 2011). Second-wave organizational scholars of culture began to incorporate a different view of culture, conceptualizing culture largely as a resource rather than a constraint. In this view, actors—including managers in organizations—utilized and drew from culture actively and strategically. Contemporary organizational scholarship, then, typically views culture as a resource.
In this dissertation, I extend and complicate this contemporary cultural perspective. I do so by presenting a case where organizational cultural efforts by managers go off-course of managers’ intents. By presenting data from a two-year, inductive, ethnographic case study of ConsultingCo\(^1\), a strategy consulting firm, I theorize novel pathways by which actors’ cultural utilizations can go awry. As contemporary research would predict, ConsultingCo managers made cultural efforts in active and strategic ways, such as utilizing the cultural expression of having “Impact” to motivate members or enforcing the organization’s communication norms through managerial sanctions. These cultural efforts both initially *seemed* to succeed, manifested in members’ initial mobilization into the organization due to “Impact” and the apparently conforming effect of sanctions on deviant actions. But a closer analysis of the implications of these cultural efforts reveals unanticipated downstream consequences: many members came to use the expression of “Impact” as reasons to leave the firm and sanctions on members led to general communicative restraint that managers had not intended.

The contemporary literature on culture in organizations cannot give a full account of the unexpected consequences of managerial cultural efforts that I observed at ConsultingCo. The literature has focused on actors’ agentic utilization of cultural resources and has largely failed to examine downstream processes of cultural efforts that might misalign with these actors’ interests. Instead, the contemporary literature has focused on strategic accounts, such as entrepreneurs utilizing narratives to obtain legitimacy (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001) and organizational members using liminal spaces to enact cultural change (Howard-Grenville et al., 2011). There is thus a critical lacuna in the organizational culture literature’s inability to explain how managers’ utilizations of cultural resources can go awry of managers’ intents.

\(^{1}\) Names and identifying details presented in this study have been disguised to protect the identity of the organization and the individuals involved.
To meet this lacuna, I draw in this dissertation on 87 interviews, 119 days of observation, and hundreds of archival documents collected during my two-year ethnographic field study of ConsultingCo. I seek to explain how managers’ cultural efforts go awry, in the case of both their utilization of the “Impact” expression and in their enforcement of communication norms. For the utilization of “Impact”, I find that the interpretive ambiguity of the expression was central to the unexpected consequences of the cultural effort. The interpretive ambiguity of “Impact” initially allowed for the expression to resonate with members’ diverse worldviews, but as members accumulated work experiences over time, they came to articulate the ambiguous expression in ways that diverged from what managers intended, using these divergent articulations as reasons to exit the organization in disillusionment. For managers’ enforcement of communication norms, I find that sanctions were key to the unanticipated consequences of this managerial effort. Managers sought to enforce communication norms by enacting particularized sanctions in a targeted, individualized fashion, with the intent to correct behavioral deviance at the individual level. But these sanctions were often turned into stories that became generalized—widely circulated, abstracted from context, and mythologized into organizational tales. These generalized stories then served as cultural tools that members could draw upon as justifications for the general communicative restraint, which managers had not intended.

My dissertation seeks to provide insights beyond the specifics of my case study of ConsultingCo by making several contributions. I seek to begin a scholarly conversation around the study of unintended consequences of cultural efforts. In addition, I hope to infuse this conversation with novel ways in which culture can have unanticipated consequences, by inducing theoretical models from my empirical studies as potential pathways for cultural
utilizations to go awry. Finally, I seek to make general theoretical contributions to the literature on culture in organizations and practical contributions to organizational practitioners.

Having conveyed this overview of my dissertation, I proceed to the remainder of this introductory chapter. First, I review the literature on culture in organizations and in particular the turn in the contemporary literature towards an agentic conceptualization of culture as a resource. I then introduce my central notion of organizational culture as a double-edged sword, connecting Merton’s notion of unanticipated consequences to the agentic conceptualization in the contemporary literature on culture in organizations, and reviewing exceptional works that begin to help us understand how cultural efforts can go awry. Then, I provide an overview of my dissertation study design and approach. I close the introductory chapter with an outline of the rest of my dissertation.

SHIFTING CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF CULTURE IN ORGANIZATIONS: FROM CONSTRAINT TO RESOURCE

Throughout the progression of organizational research, scholars’ conceptualizations of culture have shifted over the years, beginning with the essential absence of a cultural perspective (Morrill, 2008). At the turn of the twentieth century, foundational thinkers in sociological and organizational theory like Max Weber (1978) had a largely acultural view of organizations and bureaucracies, seeking instead universal laws that governed rationalized organizations (Dobbin, 1994a). Early administrative theorists such as Frederick Taylor (1911) likewise sought to codify universal principles of organizations for instrumental purposes. During the 1920s through the 1950s, though, researchers in the “human relations” tradition (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1947) and workplace sociologists (Dalton, 1959; Roy, 1952, 1959) stumbled upon and began to
research informal norms, practices, and sentiments among workers in organizations like machine
shops, factories, and corporations. And in the 1940s, 1950s, and 1960s, early institutionalist
Phillip Selznick and his students pointed to the importance of informal, non-rational

However, it was only in the 1970s and 1980s that a cultural “turn” began to occur
throughout the social sciences. At that point, scholars began to explicitly and systematically
theorize and use the concept of culture in organizational studies (Morrill, 2008). The effect of
this cultural turn reverberated in the field of organizational studies, with the intellectual shift
manifesting in several waves of scholarship. There have been two distinguishable waves of
scholarship on culture in organizations, as Weber and Dacin (2011) noted in a special issue of
Organization Science on cultural approaches to organizations, typified by two different modal
corporalizations of culture, and marked by a shift from conceptualizing culture as a constraint
to culture as a resource.2

The first wave of cultural research on organizations took place during the 1970s and
1980s. This first wave was revolutionary for organizational studies in bringing the notion of
culture to the fore, establishing the theoretical foundations of later work. First-wave studies
included a variety of approaches, including anthropologically-inspired interpretivism (e.g.,
Barley, 1983; Schein, 1983; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979), cross-
national comparative approaches (Hofstede, 1984), and neo-institutionalism (e.g., DiMaggio &
Powell, 1983; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Zucker, 1977). Across these varied approaches, though,
first-wave scholarship typically conceptualized culture as a constraint. First-wave scholars
viewed culture as some set of relatively persistent, coherent, and shared meanings that was

2 Each of these waves represent ideal-typical categorizations which are useful for analytically distinguishing modal
scholarly trends, but it is worth noting that the boundaries between the waves are blurry and that there are exceptions
of studies within each wave that deviate from the wave’s modal conceptualization.
constraining of actors’ thought and action—whether culture took the form of shared semiotic codes (Barley, 1983) or normative isomorphic forces (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Indeed, the editors of a 1983 special issue in *Administrative Science Quarterly* on culture in organizational studies, which is now seen as a pivotal collection of first-wave work, summarized the “thrust of most of the papers in this collection” as being “toward some underlying structure of meaning that persists over time, constraining people’s perception, interpretation, and behavior” (Jelinek, Smircich, & Hirsch, 1983: 337).

The second wave of cultural research on organizations, on the other hand, began during the late 1980s and 1990s and continues through today (Weber & Dacin, 2011). There were several conceptual shifts of this second wave in relation to the first. Building on the foundations laid by key first-wave works (e.g., Meyer & Rowan, 1977), second-wave studies radically expanded the scope of cultural approaches to organizations by treating culture less as an entity to be researched and more as a theoretical lens. That is, scholars showed how notions previously understood as unproblematic were instead culturally constructed and variant, such as rationality (Dobbin, 1994b; Thornton & Ocasio, 2008). Also, second-wave studies again drew on inspiration from first-wave work as part of an intellectual movement from closed-systems approaches to open-systems approaches to organizations, emphasizing not internal organizational dynamics but rather extra-organizational influences and interactions (Scott & Davis, 2007).

Finally, and crucially, many second-wave scholars emphasized the agency of actors—individuals within organizations and organizations as actors themselves—to actively utilize cultural resources. Instead of viewing actors as “cultural dopes” (Garfinkel, 1967) who passively “receive” and get constrained by cultural influence, second-wave scholars often envisioned actors as active and often strategic agents who themselves “used” culture to attain their goals.
Second-wave scholars (e.g., Weber, 2005) frequently drew from agentic conceptualizations of culture from sociologists like Ann Swidler, who seminally theorized culture as a “toolkit” of “symbols, stories, rituals, and world-views, which people may use in varying configurations to solve different kinds of problems” and construct “strategies of action” (1986: 273). Organizational scholars, for example, examined entrepreneurs utilizing stories to legitimate their ventures (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001), avant-garde chefs enacting bricolage to blur product categories (Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2005), accounting firms utilizing rhetorical strategies to legitimize a new organizational form (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005), or German corporations using framing to fit their stakeholders’ preferences (Fiss & Zajac, 2006).

The second-wave 2011 Organization Science special issue on culture in organizations, by contrast to the first-wave 1983 Administrative Science Quarterly special issue, contained mostly articles emphasizing actors’ agency in utilizing cultural resources (Harrison & Corley, 2011; Howard-Grenville et al., 2011; Kaplan, 2011; Kellogg, 2011b; Leonardi, 2011; Maurer, Bansal, & Crossan, 2011; Rindova, Dalpiaz, & Ravasi, 2011; Vaara & Tienari, 2011; Wasserman & Frenkel, 2011; Wry, Lounsbury, & Glynn, 2011). Furthermore, key works of cultural research in top management journals in the years around and since 2011 have been largely in this vein of agentic conceptualizations of actors as well (Anteby, 2010; Giorgi & Weber, 2015; Kaplan, 2008; McPherson & Sauder, 2013; Navis & Glynn, 2010). The contemporary trends in management and organizational theory, therefore, point towards a stronger focus on culture as a resource utilized by actors.
ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE AS DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD

Organizational scholars have thus often argued that the use of cultural resources can be a powerful tool—one might even call it a sword—for actors to strategically utilize to pursue their goals. Yet, a sword can be double-edged, and an actor’s intentional use of culture can have counteracting repercussions undermining intended effects. Merton wrote in 1936 that “the problem of the unanticipated consequences of purposive action has been treated by virtually every substantial contributor to the long history of social thought,” citing Marx and Weber among others (1936: 894). Even though Merton called for “a systematic treatment” (1936: 894) of unintended consequences, eighty years later we still understand little about how the use of organizational cultural resources can have unintended consequences.

In contemporary scholarship on culture in organizations, empirical and theoretical accounts typically end when cultural elements are strategically utilized by actors to achieve their goals, such as legitimizing new ventures (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001; Rao et al., 2005; Wry et al., 2011), enabling collaboration (Kaplan, 2011), or initiating intentional cultural change (Howard-Grenville et al., 2011). However, by ending accounts at the point of an initial, seemingly successful utilization of culture, scholarship has missed out on the theoretical possibility of unintended consequences of cultural utilizations. And, by failing to explore what happens beyond these initial strategic utilizations, scholars cannot explain empirical outcomes of actors failing to achieve their goals through cultural utilizations. So, while we know that organizational culture can be a sharp sword wielded with strategic intent, culture can cut both ways.
Starting the Conversation around Double-Edged Organizational Culture

In my dissertation, I explore the research question: How can organizational culture be double-edged? In other words: How can strategic utilizations of organizational cultural resources go awry of actors’ purposes? My research question—and its accompanying image of a double-edged sword—places the analytic and theoretical emphasis on what I argue is a very important issue. In my view, understanding how unintended consequences of cultural utilizations arise constitutes an urgent consideration because, without it, extant theory is left with a gaping explanatory deficiency. If we take at face value the first-wave notion of culture as constraint, then we have an impoverished, oversocialized notion of actors as “cultural dopes” (Garfinkel, 1967). On the other hand, if we take at face value the second-wave focus on culture as resource, then we have an undersocialized notion of actors voluntaristically drawing on cultural resources to achieve their ends—and we are left with a dizzying array of unexplained phenomena, where things do not go as planned for actors who utilize cultural resources. With so many managers and organizational practitioners trying to use cultural resources to meet their ends, how are their efforts thwarted? How can cultural resources be so slippery, so challenging to utilize? By injecting contemporary conceptions of culture as resource (Swidler, 1986) with a focus on the Mertonian notion of unintended consequences (1936), I hope to spark a scholarly conversation on the important theoretical deficiency of showing how organizational cultural resources can be double-edged.

The notion of unexpected consequences emerging from utilizations of culture is not entirely new, but even key works by scholars of organizational culture at best only allude to the possibility of unintended consequences. Gideon Kunda’s monograph Engineering Culture (1992), for example, acknowledges that an organizational culture—engineered and manipulated
by managers to exert normative control over members—can be met with ambivalence. Joanne Martin, furthermore, in her synthesis of the organizational culture literature (2001), points to the perspective of fragmentation—the third of her three-perspective typology of perspectives on organizational culture—which suggests that unpredictability is inherent to organizational life. Yet, these works have not theorized the concepts and processes that explain how unintended consequences can arise from culture.

To my knowledge, there has not been a focused scholarly conversation or in-depth theory building and testing around the topic of how organizational culture can be a double-edged sword. At the same time, though, I would be remiss to not acknowledge some relevant insights from various management or sociological literatures, even if these insights were not explicitly articulated as part of a conversation around how organizational cultural resources can be double-edged. I attempt to begin this scholarly conversation, then, by reviewing the literature and incorporating insights into a conceptual narrative, laying a theoretical foundation on which my dissertation research can build.

Laying the Theoretical Foundation: The Short-Sightedness of Purposive Action

Because Merton’s classic work (1936) on unanticipated consequences of purposive action is an important building block of my perspective, I first review this work, showing how it provides important first principles but ultimately does not answer the research question of how organizational cultural resources can be double-edged. I follow Merton’s careful definitions of each of his terms in the notion of unanticipated consequences of purposive action (1936: 894-896). Unanticipated consequences are those that are not the actor’s “intended and anticipated outcomes” of her actions. Anticipated outcomes are positive and “relatively desirable to the
actor,” and unanticipated consequences are commonly negative and undesirable to the actor. *Consequences* of purposive action are “those elements which would not have occurred had the action not taken place,” including elements that are relatively distally downstream to the action. *Purposive* action is an actor’s effortful endeavor “which involves motives and consequently a choice between various alternatives.” Purposive action, then, is in contrast to un-purposive or unconscious behavior, which involves “conditioned reflexes” and “instincts” rather than motives and choice. Yet, purposive action does not need to “involv[e] clear-cut, explicit purpose”; “it may well be that such awareness of purpose is unusual, that the aim of action is more often than not nebulous and hazy.” Finally, *action* can take two forms. The first form of action is the “unorganized” action of an individual. The second form of action is “formally organized” action in which “like-minded individuals form an association in order to achieve a common purpose.”

Merton goes on to offer an account of what he viewed as “the factors involved in unanticipated consequences” (1936: 898-904). One factor limiting an individual’s ability to correctly anticipate the consequences of his actions is “ignorance” or “lack of adequate knowledge.” This lack of knowledge can be in the form of the inherent inability to perfectly predict outcomes due to the stochasticism of human behavior. Lack of knowledge could also take the form of incomplete information due to one’s inability to detect small explanatory differences or due to the need to take action before full information is acquired. A second factor is human “error” in “any phase of purposive action”, whether it be in appraising a situation, selecting a course of action, or executing the course of action selected. These human errors might take the form of psychological or cognitive biases; for example, “in cases of wish-fulfillment,” “emotional involvements lead to a distortion of the objective situation and of the probable future course of events.” A third factor that limits an individual’s ability to correctly anticipate
consequences of one’s action is the “immediacy of interest,” a kind of short-term perspective in which humans pay their full attention to the “immediate” consequences of an action rather than understanding more distal consequences of the action. Thus far, then, Merton’s work lacks an analysis of the role of cultural factors. These first three factors involve psychological and cognitive factors like lack of knowledge, psychological biases, and myopic focus.

Merton’s fourth and fifth factors do begin to get at the social and cultural factors that might help us understand how organizational culture can be double-edged (1936: 902-904). Merton’s fourth factor suggests that part of the reason why unanticipated consequences arise is that humans often overridingly act in accordance with their “basic cultural values” to obtain the “subjective satisfaction of duty well performed”, at the expense of attending to “further” and wider consequences of those actions. An example of this is manifest in Weber’s study of the Protestant ethic, wherein Protestants’ “active asceticism paradoxically leads to its [Protestantism’s] own decline through the accumulation of wealth and possessions entailed by decreased consumption and intense productive activity”. A fifth and final factor limiting the ability to accurately predict the consequences of one’s action is that the prediction itself changes the situation. A striking instance of this was Marx’s “prediction of the progressive concentration of wealth and increasing misery of the masses” in the form of his doctrines, and the doctrines themselves “did influence the very process predicted.”

Merton’s culturally oriented insights, too, emphasize the short-sightedness of a focal actor in pursuit of her goals. All of Merton’s insights, then, focus on short-sightedness and trace factors around the focal actor herself. Even Merton’s culturally oriented insights do not account directly and explicitly for other actors present. An actor’s purposive action does not take place in a social vacuum. Rather, a focal actor’s actions are embedded in social situations with other
actors—and these other actors can react to the focal action and can take actions on their own. And while Merton almost certainly was implying that other actors are involved in interceeding processes that derail a focal actor’s purposive action, he does not provide detail on the processes of how the presence of other actors can lead to unintended consequences. Thus, as seminal and insightful as it was, Merton’s work on unanticipated consequences of purposive action does not go far enough; Merton himself suggests this, modestly claiming that his work is “no more than the briefest exposition” and ending his paper with a call to action, hailing a “need for a systematic . . . study of the elements involved in the development of unanticipated consequences of purposive social action” (Merton, 1936: 904). This brings us to the next part of my literature review, in which I bring in insights from more contemporary relevant literature on culture in organizations.

**Insights from Exceptional Contemporary Literature: Other Actors’ Resistance**

Together with the seeds planted by Merton’s cultural insights, I bring in ideas from the few, exceptional pieces of later cultural scholarship that touch upon unintended consequences. This will allow us to begin building a lens to understand how other actors can derail a focal actor’s utilization of a cultural resource. It is particularly puzzling when one considers that this happens in an organizational context. After all, organizations, it is often said, represent a coming-together of individuals working towards a common purpose (Scott & Davis, 2007). Why and how, then, would other actors interfere with a focal actor’s utilization of a cultural resource in an organizational context?

A few key works of the post-Merton organizational literature, especially in the vein of old institutionalism, has shown us that a reason why other actors might interfere is because the
notion of a common organizational purpose is something of a myth, an ideal that is never attained. Philip Selznick, one of Merton’s most prominent students, insisted that organizations are not perfectly rationalized systems operating merely as means to achieve leaders’ ends. The human individuals who constitute the organization’s membership bring their “whole” selves to work and can resist managerial directives (Selznick, 1949: 251). In other words, there is the possibility for conflicting interests and identities among actors within an organization.

In an organization, then, other actors’ identities and interests can provide reasons for them to resist a focal actor’s cultural utilizations. Studies from the sociological and labor relations literature show that workers actively resist managerial cultural utilizations, in the form of collective action or movements of worker solidarity against management (Vallas, 2003; Vallas, 2006; Videla, 2006). A few studies in new institutional theory support this notion too. Turco (2012), for example, shows how managers of Motherhood, Inc.—a company seeking to commercialize maternal support products—utilized a euphemistic discourse to gain legitimacy with target customers. But because many workers had professional identities that aligned with this euphemistic discourse, they came to resist managers’ utilizations and re-purpose the discourse as a semiotic weapon to oppose managers. In addition, Zilber (2002) showed how feminist founders of a rape crisis center intended socialization practices to promote feminist causes. However, therapeutically-oriented volunteers later entered the organization and because of their occupational identities, these volunteers re-framed these same socialization practices to promote therapeutic causes. Thus, these few exceptional works of contemporary cultural and organizational scholarship show that an important process by which organizational culture can be double-edged is when an actor’s cultural utilization is resisted, seized, and re-purposed by other actors in an organization.
My Dissertation: Not Resistance but Emergence of Interpretive Divergence

Resistance is important, but it is not the whole story, and it is not what I observed in my dissertation study. Active member resistance to managerial attempts may be conspicuous, but they may not be the norm in modern organizational life. It might be more common, instead, to see subtler and more emergent processes of interpretive divergence in organizations. That is, in the absence of active resistance, consequences that managers did not intend might still emerge because members’ interpretations gradually and emergently come to differ from managerial interpretations. Furthermore, theorizing these emergent processes of double-edged organizational culture is important because it could allow organizational scholars to expand their explanatory purview, offering explanatory accounts not only for organizations where there is resistance but also for organizations where resistance is not apparent.

In my dissertation, I uncover findings that have less to do with resistance and more to do with the gradual emergence of member interpretations that differ from the interpretations intended by management. In one study, I posit that the ambiguity of an organizational expression can allow divergence over time; here, members do not actively resist managers but rather find themselves drifting away from managerial interpretations as they accumulate work experiences. In another study, I show that it is not that members actively resist managers’ efforts to enforce cultural norms; rather, as members cope with particular managerial sanctions, they come to circulate and produce more generalized sanction stories that can be applied in ways that managers did not expect. I came to these findings inductively, theorizing from data I gathered in an empirical case study of consultants at a strategy consulting firm. Next, I briefly describe the research design and methodology of this case study.
DISSERTATION DESIGN AND METHOD

From January 2014 to December 2015, I conducted a two-year case study of a strategy consulting firm, ConsultingCo. (Chapter 2 describes the setting in more detail.) I gained access to the firm through two contacts in ConsultingCo’s top leadership. I met with each contact separately. Both contacts described to me a similar vision: while the leadership team felt that overall ConsultingCo was moving in a productive direction, there seemed to be something “weird” going on in ConsultingCo, including member sentiments of dissatisfaction and fear, both of which were surprising to the collective leadership team. The leadership team, despite their efforts, felt that there was a portion of the workforce that was somehow not on-board with their intents, with possible “negative externalities” of leadership actions. With these broad issues in mind, I began my study inductively, seeking to understand the “weirdness” of ConsultingCo, seeking explanations for salient puzzles, and keeping an open mind as to the nature of the puzzle.

Throughout my study, I was guided by an approach of gradually focusing the data collection, analysis, and theorizing onto the emerging phenomenon of interest (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During the initial, exploratory stages of my research, I conducted interviews by asking broad, open-ended questions (e.g., “What is work like here?”) (Spradley, 1979). In my observations, too, I maintained a broad scope, attending a wide variety of meetings and observing a diversity of conversations. From these initial explorations, salient and recurrent themes emerged. (I detail the specific themes in the data analytic sections of each of my empirical chapters, chapter 3 and chapter 4.) As my research progressed, I continued to collect broad, ethnographic data, but I also focused efforts on probing further into these themes over the course of my data collection.
Data

Throughout my study, I pursued three types of field data: interview content through semi-structured interviewing, observational data through participant- and unobtrusive-observation, and archival documents. These distinct sources of data constituted a mixed data-collection approach (Small, 2011) offering the benefits of diversifying the situations that I observed. Such variation increased data heterogeneity, useful for a sampling approach of obtaining variation around theoretical phenomena of interest (Patton, 1990: 172).

I collected 87 semi-structured interviews with 60 ConsultingCo members—52 full-time members and 8 summer interns, interviewing some members multiple times. The full-time interviewees included 47 consultants: 8 Analysts, 10 Associates, 11 Senior Associates, 5 Project Managers, 8 Principals, and 5 Partners. (Although some of these interviewees were promoted over the course of my study, I label each interviewee by their highest-achieved rank during the study period.) The rest of the full-time sample included 5 professional staff: 3 junior administrative staff members and 2 senior administrators. I also interviewed 8 summer interns: 4 summer Analysts and 4 summer Associates. I treated the interviews with professional staff and interns as supplemental to my primary focus on full-time consultants.

Interviews were conducted in ConsultingCo meeting rooms, cafes, or over the phone. Ranging from 30 to 150 minutes in length, all interviews were given permission to be recorded with few exceptions. For unrecorded interviews, extensive notes were taken during and immediately after the interview. Interviews initially followed an open-ended protocol including topics like career history, reasons for joining ConsultingCo, highlights and challenges of the job, and project and team experiences. Later interviews included similar open-ended questions as
well as more specific questions around the emerging themes of the study. The interview sample was constructed following a logic of theoretical sampling, progressively identifying theoretically relevant categories of respondents and ensuring sufficient numbers of sampled respondents in each category (Small, 2009; Weiss, 1994). For example, the salience of the connection between culture and exit or de-mobilization (described in further detail in chapter 3) made apparent two theoretically important categories of respondents—members who stayed (stayers) and those who exited (leavers)—since these member categories represented contrasting outcomes. I sampled interviewees accordingly, endeavoring to interview enough respondents in each category for comparison. (See table 1 for an overview of the interviewee sample, including sub-samples of stayers and leavers.)

Table 1:
Overview of Interviewee Sample and Stayer/Leaver Sub-samples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sample (N=60)</th>
<th>Stayers (N=33)</th>
<th>Leavers (N=19)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Position</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Full-Time</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultants</td>
<td>47</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyst</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Associate</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Manager</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Administrative</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assistant</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Head</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Summer Interns</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysts</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associates</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In addition to interviews, over two years, I collected observational data of 119 days of observation, an average of about 5 days a month. I visited ConsultingCo’s primary office, attended off-site events, and listened to conference calls. During my observations, I took detailed notes on various formal meetings (e.g., new hire training sessions, company town halls, strategy sessions) and informal interactions (e.g., lunchroom conversations, social events). I also supplemented the interview and observational data with archival data, including hundreds of documents on a range of employee-facing (e.g., employee evaluation scores, meeting materials) and job-candidate-facing issues (e.g., recruiting materials). Finally, to stay current with happenings at the firm when I was not on-site, I had biweekly calls with the head of talent management at ConsultingCo, one of the most senior professional staff members. This contact gave me updates on the latest occurrences at the firm. I used these updates to target my collection of additional, relevant data.

**Appropriateness of Approach**

My inductively produced findings seemed to best speak to the literature on culture in organizations as well as to the notion of unanticipated consequences, so I ultimately came to frame this dissertation through the lens of organizational culture and unanticipated consequences, as shown above. In selecting a framing for this dissertation, though, I also sought to ensure that my methodological approach was congruent with canonical views of studying both organizational culture and unanticipated consequences.

In regards to organizational culture, my dissertation study was an ethnography, which, according to Van Maanen, is the “written representation of culture (or selected aspects of a culture)” (2011: 1). Congruent with Van Maanen’s conception, then, the subject of my
ethnography was culture, and the method of my ethnography was fieldwork, “the full-time involvement of a researcher over a lengthy period of time (typically unspecified) and consists mostly of on-going interaction with the human targets of study on their home ground” (Van Maanen, 2011: 1-2). Furthermore, my fieldwork allowed me to collect wide-ranging data on interpretations, actions, and organizational and interactional contexts—indispensable data for studies of organizational culture, which focus on patterned meanings and actions (Martin, 2001).

My design and approach also meets the challenges of studying unanticipated consequences of purposive action. Merton, in his foundational text, makes several methodological notes concerning the study of unanticipated consequences of action, and I attempt here to address how my ethnographic study is a reasonable, holistic choice to address these methodological issues. A first key issue is “that of ascertaining the actual purposes of a given action” (Merton, 1936: 897). To meet this issue, one’s data ought to be deep enough; sufficient rapport and empathy with informants ought to help researchers get closer to eliciting informants’ “actual” purposes. In ethnography, the repeated exposure to informants is conducive to the solidification of rapport, crucial for informants to feel comfortable enough to reveal deeply held motivations. For example, I came to build particularly strong rapport with the head of talent management at ConsultingCo, who in addition to providing updates on events at ConsultingCo, provided important insights into the intentions of senior leaders. Furthermore, my ethnographic study of ConsultingCo traced what Merton would call the “formally organized” efforts of the ConsultingCo leadership, whose “common purpose” affords a “better opportunity for sociological analysis since the very process of formal organization ordinarily involves an explicit statement of purpose and procedure” (1936: 896). In other words, the formality of ConsultingCo leadership’s codification and utilization of particular aspects of ConsultingCo’s culture helps my
claims that ConsultingCo leadership had intended a particular set of consequences from particular actions (for instance, the leadership intended the utilization of the “Impact” expression to be inspirational and motivational for recruits and members, as detailed in chapter 3).

A second key issue is “the problem of ascertaining the extent to which ‘consequences’ may justifiably be attributed to certain actions” (Merton, 1936: 897). Certainly compared to most quantitative research methods, ethnographers are typically less able to systematically control for confounding variables to isolate causal effects. But ethnography trades off causal robustness for an important advantage of breadth and flexibility of data collection. Breadth and flexibility is just as essential to the problem of unanticipated consequences because, as Merton notes, a particular difficulty of the study of unanticipated consequences is seeing the holistic, “sum-total” of consequences. This sum-total includes, importantly, consequences distally and broadly linked to an actor’s focal action, such as “consequences to other persons mediated through the social structure [and] the culture” (1936: 895). Ethnographers’ thematic and temporal breadth of data collection has advantages against, say, a survey method that is more constrained in its data collection on particular variables at particular times. Furthermore, ethnographers’ flexibility of data collection can allow them to shift their data collection efforts to follow emerging consequences that were not apparent from the beginning of the study.

There is a third reason why an ethnographic field study ought to be appropriate to address the notion of unanticipated consequences of action: there is strong methodological precedent. Merton’s own students (e.g., Selznick, 1949) were able to study unanticipated consequences employing in-depth case studies to great effect. Overall, then, Merton suggests that it is methodologically prudent for scholars to present a “self-conscious[s]” account of whether “the juxtaposition of the overt action, our general knowledge of the actor(s) and the specific situation
and the inferred or avowed purpose ‘make sense’” (1936: 897). I argue that my ethnographic case study allows me to do just that – to “make sense” holistically of the actions, intents, interpretations, and unintended consequences at ConsultingCo, and I attempt to show this throughout my dissertation.

OUTLINE OF DISSERTATION

Broadly, I have three goals in the purposive action of producing my dissertation, which I link here to the outline of my dissertation chapters.

My first goal is to establish as a topic of explicit scholarly conversation the study of how organizational culture can be double-edged. I hoped to accomplish this goal in this introduction, chapter 1, by motivating my dissertation and drawing several strands of literature together. In this chapter, I introduced my dissertation to readers. I set the stage theoretically by providing the theoretical motivation of my dissertation, rooted in scholarly understandings of organizational culture. Because the organizational culture literature has neglected to explain how unanticipated consequences of purposive action might emerge, I suggested that my dissertation could contribute to the organizational culture literature by drawing on an empirical case study that offers novel insights into the processes that can allow actors’ strategic utilization of cultural resources to go awry of their initial purposes. After situating my dissertation theoretically, I described my methodological approach to my case study. I gave a brief overview of the overall research design and data collection strategy of my dissertation.

My second goal is to draw on empirical data to theorize some novel pathways and models for the study of double-edged organizational culture. I hope to accomplish this goal with my empirical case study. In chapter 2, I set the stage empirically for the rest of the dissertation by
Chapter 3 represents one of the two empirical chapters showing the processes that can allow culture to be double-edged. In chapter 3, I examine how interpretive ambiguity can enable a cultural resource—utilized by managers with strategic intent—to go awry of managers’ intentions. I find that managers utilize the ambiguous expression of having “Impact” with consulting work to mobilize and motivate members. And while ConsultingCo members noted that they were excited to enter the organization to have “Impact,” many members came to cite “Impact” as a reason why they exited the organization in disillusionment. From my findings, I induce a process model that explains how the interpretive ambiguity of an expression can allow it to be double-edged, at first mobilizing but then later de-mobilizing members. I suggest that an ambiguous expression at first powerfully resonates with a broad swath of recruits. But, as members accumulate work experience over time, they can come to articulate the ambiguous expression in ways that diverge from what managers intended. Members might use these divergent articulations to assess their work negatively, providing a rationale for exiting the organization. I suggest that chapter 3 can have theoretical implications for scholarship on culture and framing in organizations.

Chapter 4 represents the second of my two empirical chapters. Having established in chapter 3 that the ambiguous expression of “Impact” entailed organizational challenges and was linked to many members’ exits, I turned to understanding why such issues and other challenges were not voiced to upper management in the organization. By unpacking this empirical puzzle, I came to realize that a second set of processes of double-edged organizational culture was at play—centered on how managerial sanctions overreached managers’ intents. I show that even
though particularized managerial sanctions suppressed deviant behavior like “complaints,”
managerial sanctions could take on lives of their own, being spun into stories that became
generalized. Across the organization, these sanction stories were circulated, abstracted away
from particular circumstances and actors, and mythologized with sentiments, images, and
assumptions. Members could then use these generalized sanction stories as cultural justifications
for overall communicative restraint, refraining from speaking up in general. Thus, managers’
sanctions overreached managerial intent by leading to organizational silence more generally,
rather than simply restraining deviant behavior.

My third goal is to zoom back out and posit more general theoretical and practical
contributions. I hope to accomplish this in my discussion chapter, chapter 5. In it, I discuss the
implications of my dissertation research. I posit the theoretical implications of my research,
suggesting that my dissertation contributes to the literature on organizational culture by
accounting for how processes around interpretive ambiguity and cultural sanctions might enable
the utilization of cultural resources to be awry of actors’ intents. I also explore the practical
implications of my study, describing some potential implications for organizational
practitioners—for leaders, managers, and workers. Even though practitioners trumpet the
importance of organizational culture, there are many pitfalls that await practitioners who believe
that culture can be easily manipulated for their ends. By sensitizing practitioners to the specific,
theoretical ways in which the utilization of cultural resources can go awry of their intentions, I
provide insights that might shape how organizations anticipate and deal with such double-edged
possibilities.
CHAPTER 2:
SETTING

On one of my many days into the field, I gazed through bleary eyes at the blur of trees along the roadway. I was on a private shuttle that bussed passengers from a public transportation stop to various corporate offices in the suburbs of a northeastern U.S. city. After a bumpy ride, the corporate shuttle came screeching to a stop. I slung my computer bag over my shoulder and bumbled out of shuttle, murmuring my thanks to the driver. Out front, proudly displayed in metallic block lettering to roadway passersby, was the name and logo of the small, strategy and management consulting firm of my study: ConsultingCo, as I have come to call it pseudonymously. I tapped my key fob against the security panel. A polite beep ensued, and then the glass double doors unlocked with a loud clack. I pulled open the doors and walked inside. The office opened up into a lobby area, themed with tones of white, gray, and brown, paneled and floored with tile, glass, and wood. Nancy, the front desk coordinator, greeted me with my name and a warm smile.

Welcome to ConsultingCo.

THE FIRM

ConsultingCo is the pseudonym for the strategy consultancy that I studied for two years, from January 2014 to December 2015. ConsultingCo advises client companies on how to formulate strategy, develop organizational capabilities, and design businesses. It was founded in 2000, at the turn of the twenty-first century, making the firm about 15 years old at the time of study. ConsultingCo was founded by two men: one, Ian, was a business academic whose
theoretical work has been viewed as seminal in the field of business growth, strategy, and innovation; the other, Howard, was a seasoned strategy and management consultant with years of experience at a large consultancy. Over the years, the organization grew from a partnership of two individuals to a firm with its own professional staff and consulting team. As the organization grew, its objectives shifted over time. Initially, ConsultingCo was focused on applying Ian’s scholarly work to clients’ relatively delimited problems around innovating new businesses and facing the threat of new market entrants. The consultants did this primarily by delivering workshops and engaging in relatively short-term consulting projects with clients. But over time, as the organization grew in size, ConsultingCo began to acquire more clients, refined its service model, and re-oriented its focus towards longer-term relationships with clients focused on larger-scale and broader strategic issues that involved seeking business growth. The most decisive part of this shift towards occurred around 2011 to just before the time of my study in 2014, and during this time, the headcount of the company grew from 48 at the first quarter of 2011 to 75 in the first quarter of 2014.

At the time of my study starting in 2014, then, ConsultingCo had re-oriented itself towards becoming more of a strategy consultancy helping clients with broad business problems of growth, and less of a boutique consulting shop dealing with a relatively smaller niche of clients seeking to launch and build new products and services. A document called “The ConsultingCo Story,” written at the beginning of 2013, pointed to the organization’s stated goal of being “enablers of [client] growth” (2013-02-06_A).3 By 2014, ConsultingCo’s clients were typically high-ranking executives at Fortune 500 companies across a range of industries, including healthcare, financial services, and consumer goods.

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3 In parentheses are data identifiers for each of the data points. The first numbers indicate the date of origin of the data source and are in the format of year, month, and then day, where available. The letter after the numbers indicates type of data source: “I” for interview data, “O” for observational data, and “A” for archival data.
During my study from 2014 to 2015, ConsultingCo’s members consisted of consultants and administrative staff, where consultants worked in teams to conduct analyses and provide recommendations to clients on their business problems, and administrative staff performed support functions such as marketing and human resources. During the two years of my study, the total membership of ConsultingCo on average grew over the period, accounting for both the attrition and addition of human capital. Membership ranged from a minimum of 68 to a maximum of 98, with an average of 80 members at ConsultingCo across the period. Consistently, consultants comprised about 70 percent and administrative staff comprised about 30 percent, so there were, on average, about 56 consultants and 24 administrative staff. The vast majority of members were based in ConsultingCo’s primary office, based in the northeastern United States, which was the office that I primarily studied. ConsultingCo did have two other offices, one in western Europe and another in eastern Asia, but these offices were small in size, each about five in number. I focused my analysis on the consultants at ConsultingCo’s main office because they constituted the core membership of the organization. Among the consultants, during my observation window, there were approximately the following average counts and percentages across six hierarchical levels, from most to least senior: 11 Partners (19 percent), 6 Principals (10 percent), 8 Project Managers (14 percent), 8 Senior Associates (14 percent), 14 Associates (26 percent), and 9 Analysts (17 percent).

THE WORK

What was the typical workflow of a consulting project? Usually, a consulting project was solicited from a potential client by a senior consultant, like a Partner or Principal. By having meetings with potential clients, assessing their problems, providing valuable insights, building
relationships with them, and promoting ConsultingCo’s capabilities, senior consultants sought to either persuade new clients to engage in projects with ConsultingCo or to continue contracts with existing clients. Senior consultants typically submit project proposals to potential clients. Once a senior consultant “sold” a project to a client, ConsultingCo leaders got to work allocating resources to the project in order to get it done. Leaders formed what was called a consulting “team” to meet the work needs of a project. Together, the consultants (senior and junior) assigned to provide service to a particular client for a particular project constituted a consulting team.

The content of a team’s work on a client project could vary radically from project to project, but the overall structure of a project typically involved several phases: problem-identification, data collection, data analysis, recommendation-formulation, and client-communication. In problem-identification, a team met with the client to understand what the client’s needs were and to begin formulating a plan for addressing those needs. In data collection, the team set to work conducting research—collecting information on items such as market and industry trends, the needs of the clients’ customers, and insights from key opinion leaders who were experts in the industry. In data analysis, a team analyzed the information they collected to formulate the insights that would support their recommendations to the client. Recommendation-formulation involved the production of ideas that could address the client’s issues based on the information collected and analyzed. Finally, in the client-communication stage, the team produced and delivered a set of PowerPoint slides and an oral and visual presentation to the client to convey their insights and recommendations. In this communication stage, the client weighed in and gave feedback, which provided the grounds for the next iteration.
of problem-identification, data collection, analysis, recommendation-formulation, and client-communication.

Within a given project, the cycle repeated frequently—with consultants rapidly producing recommendations, meeting with clients, revising recommendations, and having more meetings with clients, until the project reaches a conclusion. A project’s conclusion might be reached when the contract of work laid out by the original project proposal is met. Alternatively, if clients are dissatisfied with the work and elect to “fire” the team or to not pursue further projects with the consulting firm, a project might reach its conclusion that way as well. (This was an infrequent outcome.) Desired outcomes for ConsultingCo’s leaders, though, often involve either the continuation of a client engagement with a series of projects or a client’s satisfaction with a concluded project and willingness to refer colleagues to engage in projects with ConsultingCo. In other words, ConsultingCo, as with any other for-profit company, was always seeking more revenue from existing streams or new revenue streams altogether.

THE CONSULTANTS

Consultants—junior and senior—worked together in consulting teams to further the firm’s goals of providing client service. Each consulting team was typically comprised of anywhere from two to ten members—where one to four senior consultants (Partners, Principals, or Managers) guided the team and performed much of the client interaction and presentation, and where one to six junior consultants (Senior Associates, Associates, or Analysts) performed much of the ground-level research, analysis, problem-solving, and document production.

Each consulting level thus had its own set of work responsibilities. Partners were owners of ConsultingCo, overseeing firm strategy and operations, seeking out new business by selling
projects to existing or new clients, and providing high-level advising for clients and directions for consulting teams across multiple projects. Principals also oversaw multiple projects but provided teams more hands-on guidance; they focused on advising existing clients rather than seeking out new business, and using teams’ analyses, they crafted the overall storylines of client recommendations. Project Managers were the central point-people for a given project, coordinating with clients, interfacing with Partners and Principals, managing and delegating analyses to more junior consultants, and ensuring the cohesion of analyses with the storyline of client recommendations. In the rest of this dissertation, I occasionally refer to the groupings of Partners, Principals, and Project Managers as “leaders,” “senior members,” or “managers” because they were considered by informants to be in managerial or leadership roles.

The other three levels of consultants could be considered “junior members”, as they were typically called. Senior Associates oversaw within a single project several “workstreams” (sets of tasks within a client project), conducting analyses and closely managing Associates and Analysts. Associates were typically hired from elite business schools, and they were staffed on a single client project and tasked with conducting the in-depth analyses for client projects and producing PowerPoint slides that communicated these analyses. Analysts, typically hired from elite undergraduate programs, supported Associates or played the role of Associate if there was no Associate on the team, and they also similarly conducted research, analysis, and slide production for a single client project.

Having in this chapter conveyed a sense of the setting overall—with overviews of the firm, the work, and the consultants of my study—in the next chapter, I turn to a central puzzle in the story of ConsultingCo. This is a puzzle around the ambiguous expression of “Impact”.

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CHAPTER 3:
DOUBLE-EDGED CONSEQUENCES OF AN AMBIGUOUS EXPRESSION

The sweet smell of fresh fruit and sugary toppings filled the air as I walked into the frozen-yogurt shop. It was July of 2015, and moving quickly from the warm summer air to the highly air-conditioned indoors gave me goosebumps. I shuddered as my body acclimated, torn between two thoughts of whether the chill was appropriate: the store’s products, after all, were frozen—but, I mused to myself, did the customers and employees have to be too?

I settled onto one of the wooden stools to wait. An informant, Blythe, had asked me to meet her there. She had said that there was something important she wanted to tell me.

When I first met Blythe back at the beginning of my study in 2014, she was only about four months into her new job as an Analyst at ConsultingCo. I requested an interview with her, and she suggested that we meet in one of the conference rooms at ConsultingCo’s office. During the interview, I asked her what brought her to ConsultingCo, and she said that the notion of “Impact”, one of ConsultingCo’s “Pillars” or keywords characterizing the firm’s priorities, was appealing to her. In her mind, she said, “Impact” described well what she valued and why she came to ConsultingCo. She said, “I joined [ConsultingCo] because of my whole, like, interesting path that led me here. My path is so much who I am and what I intend on continuing to do: help[ing] people and mak[ing] an Impact” (2014-01-30_I).

Over the next year and a half, Blythe became very well regarded at ConsultingCo. She was promoted to Associate unusually quickly; while most Analysts do not see promotion until at least two years into their roles, Blythe’s performance reviews were stellar, and managers fast-
tracked her to the role of Associate at the end of her first year. Across the organization, junior and senior members alike expressed their delight with her work ethic, attitude, and energy—so much so, in fact, that Blythe was given the “Pillars Award”, an annually awarded distinction for being most nominated by her ConsultingCo colleagues as an exemplar of the Pillars.

Yet, about a year and a half after I first met Blythe, I interviewed her again, in June of 2015. She told me then that “on an emotional level, I wouldn’t say that I’m super happy with Impact at [ConsultingCo]” (2015-06-19_I). And a month later, in July, I received an email from her, asking if I could meet. She suggested a frozen-yogurt shop.

Blythe arrived at the frozen-yogurt shop and greeted me with a hug. She thanked me for meeting with her, and she suggested that we line up for some yogurt before we sat down to talk. There was a new flavor of the day: lavender and honey. I ordered a small cup of it, and Blythe followed suit. After ordering, Blythe stood, bantering amiably and self-deprecatingly with the cashier. Although frozen-yogurt was generally healthy, Blythe said, she felt guilty about getting chocolate as a topping, but she would anyway. “Live a little,” she laughed. After getting our frozen-yogurt, we plopped down at a wooden bar near the exit. Blythe and I continued our small talk.

Before long, though, the conversation turned to her big news: Blythe was going to leave ConsultingCo. She had already signed the papers for her new job doing strategy work at a healthcare startup. Blythe said that she was no longer satisfied with her work at ConsultingCo. When I asked her why, she said that she was tired of being “so far from impact.” She continued, “I want Impact. . . At this stage in my life, it is the most important thing in a job to me” (2015-07-27_I).
The experience that Blythe underwent at ConsultingCo represents a broader phenomenon of interest: excited entry and disillusioned exit, a paradoxical mobilization towards and then de-mobilization away from an organization. Even more puzzling is that the very idea that seemed to draw Blythe into ConsultingCo—“Impact”—was also a key reason she felt compelled to leave. In this chapter, I seek to provide an explanation of how “Impact” was implicated in this paradox of mobilization and de-mobilization. In so doing, I will provide a theoretical account of how an organizational cultural element can be double-edged.

In this chapter, I will first provide some relevant theoretical background, drawing from the organizational literatures on mobilization, framing, and semiotics. Second, I describe how my field site served as a suitable setting for my study. Third, I describe my analytic approach, focused on the expression of “Impact”. I then illuminate the findings of this chapter. I end the chapter with a discussion of the chapter’s theoretical and practical implications.

MOBILIZATION AND AMBIGUOUS FRAMING

The mobilization of members in organizations has been a vital area of study. I use the term mobilization to mean motivating members to join, participate, or work cooperatively in an organization. Because mobilization involves fundamental processes of social commitment, identification, motivation, and action, organizational scholars have avidly examined mobilization for theoretical reasons (e.g., Kaplan, 2008; Kellogg, 2009, 2011a; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2008; Scully & Creed, 2005). Mobilization is important for substantive reasons as well. Organizational actors—individuals within organizations or organizations themselves—seek to motivate members, and actors’ ability to mobilize matters for various outcomes, including successful
implementation of change (Kellogg, 2009), product innovation (Rao & Drazin, 2002), and member buy-in to strategic initiatives (Kaplan, 2008). The mobilization of recruits, then, is important for both theoretical and substantive reasons.

Scholars have shown that actors’ use of framing strongly influences mobilization. Drawing on social movement theory (Benford & Snow, 2000), organizational scholars (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014), particularly second-wave cultural scholars of organizations (Giorgi et al., 2015), have persuasively argued that actors can utilize frames strategically to achieve their mobilization goals. Framing is the social process through which actors utilize frames—“principles of organization which govern the subjective meanings we assign to social events”—in order to communicate with and motivate other actors (Goffman, 1974: 11). Frames can be powerful because they can resonate with targets’ cultural worldviews, inspiring targets to contribute their work or resources to a cause. In other words, targets are likely to be mobilized by a frame if targets interpret the frame as having ideas aligning with their own central beliefs (Benford & Snow, 2000).

Ambiguous frames are often particularly efficacious because they enable various interpretations, robustly mobilizing a wide variety of audiences. Interpretive ambiguity can be defined as the “state of having many ways of thinking about the same circumstances or phenomena” (Feldman, 1989: 5). Social movement scholars have identified “master frames”—such as framing causes as being about human rights, choice, injustice, or democracy (Benford & Snow, 2000)—that are broad, “flexible modes of interpretation” that function as “inclusive systems” wherein various groups can interpret these frames differently (Snow & Benford, 1992: 140). Other scholars have noted that frames can be strategically ambiguous (Eisenberg, 1984) or enable a “thin” cultural coherence (Ghaziani & Baldassarri, 2011) such that different groups’
interpretations of a given frame can allow collective mobilization, even if the groups’ interpretations are quite distinct.

One need only to look around at our contemporary organizational world to notice salient examples of ambiguous organizational frames (Evans, 1997), including Apple’s framing of its employees as those who “Think different”, Google’s original framing of its values as “Don’t be evil,” or 3M’s framing of its products as “Innovation”. Such organizational frames can powerfully mobilize audiences, as they are highly ambiguous and open to various interpretations. These words could also function as mission statements (Podolny, Khurana, & Hill-Popper, 2004; Thompson & Bunderson, 2003) or identity claims (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Navis & Glynn, 2010), but these ambiguous words can all be understood as frames that organizations utilize to mobilize audiences, including potential recruits.

Consistent with the literature, in my study of ConsultingCo, I find that managers initially mobilized recruits to the organization by ambiguously framing ConsultingCo’s work as having “Impact.” Because the ideas that recruits interpreted from the “Impact” frame resonated with their worldviews, they were mobilized to join the organization. But existing scholarship on framing fails to explain the rest of my case, wherein I find that, later, many members drew on that same ambiguous frame to de-mobilize and pull away from the organization. Several key, interrelated gaps in the framing literature prevent extant scholarship from explaining this latter part of my case.

First, the literature typically fails to examine what happens beyond the initial framing that mobilizes members to the organization. Most of the literature on organizational framing focuses on the initial, successful utilization of frames—showing how framing or framing-like practices resonate with members, gaining acceptance of strategic shifts (Kaplan, 2008), change efforts
(Kellogg, 2009, 2011a), technological usage practices (Kaplan & Tripsas, 2008; Leonardi, 2011; Mazmanian, 2013; Orlikowski & Gash, 1994). But the literature largely fails to follow members after mobilization. So, these organizational studies of framing cannot explain my study because they do not account for the use of frames in de-mobilization—in compelling members to lose commitment to the cause and to exit the organization. In fact, the study of de-mobilization is rare, and what few studies exist do not focus on the effects of framing (Davenport, 2014). By accounting for events after the initial mobilization, I can show how a frame may not only mobilize and recruit individuals but may also de-mobilize members—compelling them to exit—after they join the organization.

Second, the framing literature mostly does not account for how ambiguity can fail to be helpful to framing efforts. Extant scholarship has largely focused on how interpretive ambiguity is strategically useful for framing efforts. The literature on organizational framing portrays ambiguous frames as particularly successful in enabling the perception of common ground between groups (Donnellon, Gray, & Bougon, 1986; Leonardi, 2011). Yet, I find that the very frame that initially mobilizes members to an organization might also become the frame that later drives members out. There are, after all, many instances in which ambiguity becomes untenable for organization members, and in such instances, members can attempt to articulate and make their own sense of this ambiguity, potentially in ways that managers did not intend.

Third, and relatedly, the framing literature neglects to examine how recipients of a framing effort can reinterpret a frame over time. The literature generally neglects the longitudinal and experiential bases of framing (see for exception Kaplan, 2008). Experiences over time not only influence the success of framing efforts but also are the phenomenological building blocks from which frames are constructed (Benford & Snow, 2000; Goffman, 1974). As scholars have
argued, the framing literature has not sufficiently addressed how frames are built and re-built from experiences over time (Cornelissen & Werner, 2014; Giorgi et al., 2015). Thus it misses the possibility that recruits can come to divergently interpret an ambiguous frame because of their accumulating experiences in the organization.

In missing these three points, the literature on framing—with its focus on actors strategically utilizing frames to mobilize targets—has missed the overall question of how ambiguous frames can be double-edged. To help build a theoretical framework to account for the potentially double-edged nature of ambiguous frames, I bring in a complementary theoretical perspective: the literature on semiotics in organizations.

SEMIOTICS AND AMBIGUOUS EXPRESSIONS

How can we begin to understand the double-edged nature of an ambiguous frame like one’s work having “Impact”? Because frames can be reinterpreted in multiple and potentially divergent ways, I suggest a reconceptualization of the content of an ambiguous frame—and ConsultingCo’s frame of “Impact” in particular—in semiotic terms as an ambiguous expression. In semiotics, an expression is a materially experienced signifier, such as a printed word or verbalized word, and a meaning is a mentally signified concept, such as an idea of what a word denotes and connotes. The relationship between an expression and an interpreted meaning is called a sign (Barthes, 1967). For example, a modern-day English-speaking scholar might perceive the expression of the word “journal” in written form and might interpret that expression to mean an academic publication outlet for scholarly research.

An important tenet of semiotics is that the relationships between expression and meaning are essentially arbitrary—dependent on the cultural conventions to which a person is accustomed
(de Saussure, 1998). So, the possibility for disconnects in understanding between people over the same expression is one that semioticians would acknowledge. For example, the expression “journal” might be interpreted by a scholar as meaning an academic publication outlet, but that same expression “journal” might be interpreted by the scholar’s young child as meaning a diary of one’s personal thoughts and feelings. Likewise, within a formal organization, a single expression can relate to different meanings for different organizational members. The notion of culture as a double-edged sword—particularly the possibility for incoherence and misunderstanding between people interpreting the same expression—fits well into the framework of semiotic theory.

Yet, the application of semiotic theory to organizational studies has largely emphasized cultural coherence and consistency of interpretation within and across collectives. A seminal semiotic organizational study was Barley’s (1983) examination of the occupational culture of funeral directors. Barley focused on the cultural “coherence necessary for claiming that members of a group under study share a perspective” (1983: 399). Barley focused his analysis on interpretive redundancy: on how different expressions can point to the same meaning. For example, he suggested that although the sewing of a corpse’s eyelids shut and a living person’s naturally closed eyelids are distinct material expressions, these expressions could be interpreted by funeral directors and funeral participants as having similar meanings of evoking peaceful sleep. Another important semiotic study of organizations was one by Weber, Heinze, and DeSoucey (2008), in which the authors acknowledge their focus on “elements of cultural coherence” among actors in the social movement for grass-fed meat and dairy products (2008: 563). For example, they showed that farmers were mobilized by cultural codes of authenticity, sustainability, and naturalness used by grass-fed movement activists because there was some
concordance between farmers’ interpretations and activists’ interpretations. In my study, on the other hand, I emphasize the possibility of a single expression being interpreted in different ways, pointing to how a cultural element—such as an expression—can be double-edged and have implications for divergence and interpretive fragmentation in the organization.

In the current study, I examine how an ambiguous expression mobilized by managers in an organization can be experienced, interpreted, and utilized by members of an organization in ways that managers did not intend or anticipate. I theorize how the cultural characteristic of interpretive ambiguity enables downstream processes that can make a cultural utilization double-edged. To do this, I draw on empirical data from my case study.

SETTING AS INTENSITY CASE

My case study and setting are particularly well suited for the study of organizational culture. ConsultingCo serves as an “intensity case”, wherein a theoretically relevant phenomenon is manifested in ways that are information-rich but simultaneously not so unusual as to be idiosyncratic (Patton, 1990). First, ConsultingCo was an information-rich site for the study of culture because culture was an extremely salient topic of conversation and discussion at ConsultingCo. There was the sense among informants at ConsultingCo that the cultural features of the organization were quite notable. Cultures often have a defining theme that organizes multiple domains of meaning and activity (Barley, 1983); in this case, the central feature of the organizational culture was the cultural element and expression of what members called “Impact”.4 The word and expression of Impact was very salient in my observation window.

Emically, Impact was the first and highest priority of ConsultingCo’s listed Pillars, which senior

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4 As a matter of convention, I capitalize the emic term “Impact” throughout this chapter as a way of distinguishing it from any etic, scholarly usage of the word “impact”. Also, I place the term “Impact” in quotation marks only to this point in the chapter, omitting quotation marks in later usages.
leaders decided upon as the primary aspects of ConsultingCo’s culture. Impact was pointed to by informants as the most important of the Pillars, and the expression of Impact permeated organizational life and conversation. Impact came up frequently in the interviews, observations, and archival documents I collected. My study of the expression of Impact thus represents an information-rich example of an organizational cultural phenomenon, providing dense, textured data and making otherwise subtle dynamics more visible.

Second, ConsultingCo had features resembling a broader organizational population of firms in that ConsultingCo was non-elite and relied on its organizational culture as a key part of its recruiting and retention strategy. The majority of firms are—by the exclusive nature of elitism—non-elite, and non-elite firms like ConsultingCo lack the very high organizational status afforded to elite firms (e.g., McKinsey and Company) that could cloud the influence of culture on mobilization over members. Instead, ConsultingCo had to rely on culture centrally in its attempts to recruit, manage, and motivate organizational members. The link between ConsultingCo’s culture and key organizational outcomes like mobilization was intense and salient, thereby also providing rich information on this link.

DATA AND ANALYTIC APPROACH

In the early stages of my field study, I observed that the term Impact was used often, variously, and consequentially at ConsultingCo. Since the salience of the Impact expression in my field site was quite evident, I began to probe into how the notion of Impact functioned at ConsultingCo and what consequences it had, seeking to collect data on as many mentions of Impact as I could. For example, I paid close attention when Impact came up in my observations of consultants, noted when archival data mentioned Impact, and at the end of interviews probed
about Impact if interviewees did not already mention it (although the vast majority of interviewees mentioned Impact without prompting).

My data analytic approach involved reviewing the data, writing analytic memos, and considering theoretical frameworks, in an iterative process (Charmaz, 1983; Golden-Biddle, 2001). I sought answers to emergent puzzles, constructing a theoretical model that appropriately represented my data, until reaching theoretical saturation (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). As I iterated, I converged upon a more specific analytic process focused on the use of the Impact expression.

My particular analytic process for this empirical chapter was as follows. I sought to understand the varying cultural interpretations and usages of Impact, in order to build a theoretical model of the expression of Impact and its characteristics, processes, and consequences. Because Impact was mentioned variously, I set out to characterize these variations, finding several broad categories of processes—resonance, deferral, experiential reflection, articulation, and assessment. I considered these categories credible because they appropriately captured the emic uses of the Impact expression. In this analysis, I also realized that there was a particular characteristic of the Impact expression at the heart of the processes: ambiguity. I therefore sought connections between Impact’s ambiguity and the processes I observed. In addition, noticing that informants interpreted Impact in different ways, I induced a typology of emic interpretations of Impact—“Client Impact”, “Social Impact”, or “Personal Impact”—coding mentions for this typology. Throughout these analyses, I consulted the literature, sought more data in the conceptual categories, reshaped categories, and eventually produced my theoretical model of the processes through which culture can be double-edged. Eventually realizing that the Impact expression was a case of a central cultural element with
countervailing effects of producing mobilization and de-mobilization, I used my data to build theory around how culture can work in double-edged ways.

As a supplementary analysis, I conducted a count analysis of Impact mentions. For the 47 full-time consultants in my interviewee sample, I identified pieces of interview transcript pertaining to Impact, putting them into Microsoft Excel. Out of 47 full-time consultant interviewees, 45 mentioned Impact, and of these 45, 28 consultants stayed at ConsultingCo in my observation window and 17 exited. I focused on the full-time consultants because consultants were my research focus and because intern consultants did not have comparable outcomes of retention or exit, since interns contractually have only a three-month stint at the firm. In my frequency count analysis, I took the compilation of Impact mentions among full-time consultant interviewees as a corpus (803 mentions total). I manually coded each Impact mention with associated interviewee characteristics and emic interpretation. I noticed in this analysis that the expression of Impact was often but not always used in an evaluative sense (501 out of 803 mentions) to describe work positively or negatively, coding each mention as such. As I will show later, in the latter sections of the findings and in table 2, I used this count analysis to compare how members who mostly assessed work through certain interpretations of Impact differed from those who mostly assessed work through other interpretations of Impact, in order to supplement my primary qualitative analysis.

5 My unit of analysis here is what I call a mention of Impact. I operationalize a mention as a thread of direct or indirect references to Impact. A mention has several features. First, a mention is a thread of references, making it more expansive than a single word occurrence. A single mention can involve the informant using the word Impact several times, so long as these uses form a distinguishable thread of similar references. For example, if an informant uses the word Impact twice in a given sentence, with similar implied meanings, that would count as a single mention. Second, a given mention can be either direct or indirect. Indirect references were when it was clear that the informant was referring to one of the induced interpretations of Impact, even when the word itself was not explicitly stated (e.g., where the notion of Impact was referred to as “it”). Most mentions were direct in that informants explicitly used the word Impact.
FINDINGS

In this section, I describe the findings of my study. First, I provide background on the expression of Impact, arguing that it exhibits interpretive ambiguity—the key characteristic of the cultural element enabling processes that explain dualistic effects. Second, I argue that Impact’s ambiguity allows ConsultingCo leaders to initially mobilize members. Third, I examine how the ambiguity of Impact allows a later de-mobilization of many members. I show how, together, these processes explain how culture can be double-edged, producing consequences that leaders had not intended, leading some members to exhibit de-mobilization and disillusioned exits.

An Ambiguous Expression

The idea of Impact was a central part of ConsultingCo’s strategic efforts to mobilize members, as a means of inspiring people, drawing them in, and drawing them together. Impact was the centerpiece of what members called the Pillars of ConsultingCo. Established before my observation window in 2012, the Pillars were a set of words that ConsultingCo’s senior leaders decided were distinguishing of the organization’s culture. Impact was regarded as the most important of the Pillars. Principal Stewart said of Impact, “In my mind, it’s got to be one of the most important [Pillars]. . . I can’t recite [the rest of] them off inside of my head. . . Ultimately, it [Impact] is the whole point of doing any of our work” (2013-06-10_I). In an internal motivational video, Impact is listed as the first of the Pillars before a clip from an interview with Partner Leo saying, “I think Impact is really at the heart of what ConsultingCo does” (2013-0_A).
The expression of Impact was intended by organizational leaders to mobilize people to join the firm and to produce cohesion among members. Principal Heath said that Impact was supposed to be “a real rallying cry for people” (2014-01-23_I). Isabel, a Project Manager, said that Impact can “help us come together as a group” and can provide a “common language around how people work” (2015-03-23_I). The intent of senior leaders to use Impact to mobilize members was further apparent from interviews describing the origins of Impact. In 2012, Isabel told me, there were a series of layoffs that shook ConsultingCo’s membership. There was “a sense of loss and confusion, and, you know, anger amongst the people who stay[ed].” She said that this event was “a prompt” for a cultural initiative, the codification of Impact and the other Pillars (2015-03-23_I). Partner Leo similarly noted that the production and promotion of Impact as a Pillar was a cultural response to this shakeup, which he partly attributed to a deficiency in socialization. “People,” he said, “weren’t getting as indoctrinated” as they should have been (2015-04-08_I). Senior leaders, then, promoted Impact as a cultural initiative to ameliorate this sense of confusion and lack of socialization—to mobilize members and recruits with a unifying statement that rallied members. As Isabel said, leaders promoted Impact, saying, “this is what sets us apart” and “this is why we’re different” (2015-03-23_I). In all, as Leo said, the purpose of promoting the Impact Pillar was about “trying to align . . . on where we were headed, what type of work we wanted to pursue” (2015-04-08_I).

But what did the expression of Impact mean? The meaning content signified by a particular expression can vary widely, and as we will see, this variation played a role in the double-edged aspects of the Impact expression. Yet, for all members of ConsultingCo there was at least some shared meaning of Impact. The commonly understood and shared interpretation of Impact was that it meant a beneficial change in outcomes due to some action. There were two
notable aspects of this shared meaning. One was that Impact entailed a cause and effect—some difference in outcomes due to some action. Associate Blythe defined Impact as “changing some people or some thing or system” (2015-06-19_I). Heath, a Principal, said, “Impact, for me, would be, like, some real, rock solid results [where] we would say, like, we were the critical element for making these things happen” (2014-01-23_I). Partners Trevor and Sean claimed, respectively, that “Impact [is] . . . a thing [that] exists—that didn’t exist [before]. . . without you” (2015-01-20_I) and that “Impact means. . . doing whatever it takes to make sure that our work . . . translates to real change, difference, results” (2013-05-28_I). A second aspect of the shared meaning of Impact was that it was not simply change, but desirable, beneficial change. Principal Lorraine explained, “Impact is about, you know, changing the world for the better” (2013-06-05_I). Principal Stewart echoed this notion, saying that Impact was about “changing things for the better” (2013-06-10_I). Thus, the implicit core of shared meaning around Impact is that it entailed some beneficial, causal change.

Despite this shared meaning, the expression of Impact was highly ambiguous at ConsultingCo. Ambiguity, here, means that a given expression (e.g., the word “Impact”) can have different meanings within a particular grouping of individuals (e.g., members of ConsultingCo), in a particular social setting (e.g., in the context of work at ConsultingCo). Beyond this core of shared meaning, there were three unevenly shared interpretations of Impact that elaborated on this core. The first was an interpretation around “Client Impact,” involving a focus on clients as the target of positive change. This interpretation, as we will see, was the interpretation that was organizationally endorsed by ConsultingCo’s senior leaders. A second interpretation of “Social Impact” referred to a focus on society as the target of beneficial change, indicated by outcomes like societal health. A third interpretation, “Personal Impact”, was
focused on the agent rather than the target of beneficial change, relating to whether the individual felt that she or he as the primary agent (rather than the collective team, project, or organization as agent) was nontrivially contributing to the project or desired outcome. As will be shown later, these latter two interpretations were not organizationally endorsed by ConsultingCo’s leadership. The different interpretations of Impact played an important role in the downstream processes that unfolded around the ambiguous expression of Impact.

The First Edge: Mobilizing Recruits

Organizations initially mobilized members by effectively recruiting them to the organization. Impact constituted a core element of ConsultingCo’s recruiting strategy and was tightly integrated into recruiting tactics. Consultants placed onto recruiting teams—those consultants excused from client work temporarily to engage in recruiting efforts—were trained to underscore the worth of ConsultingCo’s work by using the expression of Impact. I observed a breakfast meeting where recruiting team leaders tutored consultants to deliver particular messaging to potential recruits. Recruiting leaders handed out a document to consultants listing questions frequently asked by potential recruits and suggested answers. To the question, “Why should I consider ConsultingCo?” the document suggested the answer, “You’ll have the opportunity to work on big challenging problems that will have an Impact on the world” (2015-09-11_A).

The prominence of Impact was also evident in recruiting materials directly presented to potential recruits themselves. In a brochure for prospective candidates, a bold-faced headline—accompanied by a stock photograph of two men high-fiving on a mountaintop—described the work that ConsultingCo consultants did: “We help leaders and their enterprises achieve lasting
Impact.” Impact was framed to recruits not only as a core characteristic of working at ConsultingCo but also as a differentiating aspect, compared to other firms. In a PowerPoint presentation targeted at business school students, one of the slides was titled, “What makes us different?”, with the subtitle, “Our [Pillars] and People.” The Pillars were then listed, with Impact first and the rest of the Pillars in alphabetical order (2014-10-28_A).

**Resonance**

The ambiguity of Impact allowed it to resonate broadly with audiences. By resonance, I mean that recruits interpreted the expression of Impact in ways that connected with their existing worldviews. Due to the interpretive flexibility of Impact, Impact could accommodate a variety of interpretations and could fit in with a range of worldviews stemming from different experiential backgrounds. For ConsultingCo, Impact invoked resonance across broad swaths of age, occupational background, and hierarchical differences. ConsultingCo recruited younger Millenial generation individuals as well as older Generation X candidates, people with entrepreneurial or non-traditional backgrounds (e.g., work in non-profit, artistic, or social sectors) as well as those with traditional business backgrounds (e.g., for-profit industry work, consulting), and candidates for junior as well as senior consulting positions. Associate Eric noted the diversity in consultants’ experiential backgrounds: “I was talking to [another consultant] the other day, and we were talking about [how] everyone comes to ConsultingCo at a different point. It's almost like there's a track, and you come in from different points” (2015-04-05_I). Senior Associate Sandra also remarked on the diversity of “people’s different backgrounds” who were drawn by Impact to ConsultingCo, including entrepreneurs, “someone who went to [a design school] . . . or someone who used to work in non-profits”, as well as recruits from more “standard”,
“traditional” business backgrounds of for-profit industry work or other consulting firms (2014-07-28_I). These different experiential backgrounds could inform different worldviews.

Yet, despite different worldviews, various recruits could feel resonance with the singular, ambiguous expression of Impact. Liam and Alina, for example, both had received an MBA degree and became Associates at ConsultingCo at the same time. Both were attracted to the firm because of the idea of Impact. Liam said he came to ConsultingCo to have “higher magnitude of Impact” to “make a difference in the world” (2014-09-11_I). Alina said, “I came to ConsultingCo because I feel really strongly that with my career . . . I want to Impact people” (2015-06-19_I). But Alina and Liam had different occupational backgrounds and somewhat different worldviews. Alina had done for-profit industry work in a consumer products firm, and she viewed Impact as being about “how do you really help your clients change the trajectory of their company” (2014-10-02_I). By interpreting Impact as being about Client Impact, the influence her projects could have on clients, Alina could see the expression of Impact as resonant with her worldview. Liam, on the other hand, had worked in a social entrepreneurial setting, and he saw Impact as transcending “commerce generally” and being about a “humanitarian relationship,” saying, “Who can argue with [the] humanitarian world, right? It's so objectively good” (2014-10-07_I). By interpreting Impact as being about Social Impact, or the possibility of helping a social good through commerce, Liam could view the expression of Impact as being resonant with his own worldview. So, despite these subtly different worldviews, the expression of Impact mobilized both Alina and Liam to join ConsultingCo. In all, then, the ambiguous expression of Impact helped to recruit an interpretively diverse workforce.

Indeed, Principal Ellie noted the interpretive diversity captured by Impact, saying that “it means a ton of things to different people” (2015-03-10_I). Talent head Raquel also
acknowledged that different members of ConsultingCo were “unique in terms of defining Impact” (2015-03-31_I). Alina, too, commented on the interpretive diversity of members around Impact, saying, “I actually think . . . people have very different ideas about how they want to personally Impact the world. . . . I think it’s just like each person has their way that they’re best suited to Impact the world. It’s like what are you particularly good at? What gets you excited?” (2015-06-19_I). At this point, then, the ambiguity of Impact might be seen as strategic (Eisenberg, 1984), in that the expression appealed flexibly to people with various interpretations of Impact.

The resonance of Impact was not only broad but also deep. Many members reported that Impact was deeply important to them in the recruiting process, citing the emotional quality of their reactions to Impact. Ellie, a Principal, described how Impact was “something that people feel deeply in their heart and their gut as something they want to do” (2015-03-10_I), emphasizing the emotionality of the idea’s resonance. Likewise, Associate Liam described Impact passionately, saying that “Impact is . . . a core part of most professional choices of my life” (2014-10-07_I). In a particularly lengthy interview, summer Associate Allison said, “Impact matters to me a lot,” describing how the promise of Impact was a part of the emotional “rollercoaster” of joining the firm (2015-07-24_I). In addition, Principal Neil said forcefully of Impact, “absolutely, it matters,” tracing the contours of his career choices to leave his previous consulting firm and join ConsultingCo strongly in terms of “our ability to make Impact” (2015-07-23_I).

Yet, while members’ feelings of deep resonance excited them, this also heightened expectations. Because recruits were mobilized to join the organization at least partially on the premise that Impact was a differentiating aspect of ConsultingCo, they hung onto the idea of
Impact, awaiting to see how the work at ConsultingCo would meet their expectations. Ellie said, “I think people . . . put more of a premium on Impact, and it’s part of the reason they choose ConsultingCo and therefore have pretty high expectations about what that means” (2015-03-10_I). In other words, recruits mobilized by Impact were also highly expectant about it.

Members recognized that recruits generally held high expectations around Impact. Senior Associate Sandra mentioned that recruiting around Impact set the bar high; she said that among recruits “there’s an implicit understanding of [a] result, or some kind of tangible action that emerges from Impact, which needs to be measured. [And] that puts the onus on us [at ConsultingCo] to live up to that” (2015-04-08_I). Project Manager Viraj said that recruits were “coming in with the expectation [that] they're going to be out there creating something, doing something . . . Impactful” (2015-04-11_I). Indeed, Analyst Nikki during her summer internship at ConsultingCo said, “Impact for me is, like, very valuable in the type of firm I’m work[ing] at—I will be heavily looking at Impact” (2014-08-13_I).

Deferral

Once mobilized, the recruits entered the organization with excitement, often citing Impact as a reason for joining the firm. Yet, in the early stages of their careers at the firm, beyond mentioning their emotional resonance with Impact, recruits largely deferred on reflecting more deeply and critically about what they meant by Impact. This occurred for several reasons.

First, at the beginning of their time at the firm, recruits could plausibly believe that their interpretation of Impact was consistent with the organizationally endorsed interpretation of Impact because they were socialized into linguistic norms of frequent and equivocal use of the term Impact. Recruits noticed that people at ConsultingCo used the word Impact frequently and
equivocally. As Analyst Reggie said, “ConsultingCo is big on using that word” (2014-02-08_I). Reggie noticed that leaders would often speak equivocally about Impact, expressing in “internal meetings” and “company emails” the importance of “Impact on society through changing big companies,” pointing to the effects of big companies on “emerging markets and giving people access to healthcare.” Here, Reggie notes how leaders used the singular expression of Impact equivocally to mean somewhat different ideas of Impact—including Client Impact and Social Impact (2014-02-08_I).

In my observations, I also saw leaders using the expression of Impact equivocally in front of recruits. In a town hall meeting, Partner Lyndon equivocally mentioned Impact to sing the praises of a consulting team’s work, saying, “There’s some reason to believe that they [the team] could Impact tens or hundreds of thousands of lives and double the size of the [client] franchise” (2014-10-28_O). In one sentence, Lyndon used the expression of Impact to suggest both an interpretation of Client Impact, by referring to the client “franchise” “doubling [in] size”, as well as another distinct interpretation of Impact, Social Impact, or the possibility of producing social benefits for “tens or hundreds of thousands of lives.” Such equivocation was also used prominently by one of the most senior Partners of the firm, Trevor. During a company party, Trevor called the room to attention, warmly welcoming attendees. Trevor described the importance of ConsultingCo’s Pillars, lionizing Impact most prolifically. He described Impact as making a change in “how clients think” and described ConsultingCo as a place where people want to “change the world” and help society better itself (2014-12-11_O). By experiencing such equivocation around Impact, recruits came to experience a “veneer of consensus”—apparent surface agreement about the definition of a social situation (Goffman, 1959). That is, the equivocal use of Impact may have created a vague sense that members were on the same page.
about Impact, whereas, in reality, there were underlying differences in interpretations of Impact that individuals held beneath that veneer (Winship, 2004).

A second reason that recruits deferred on reflecting on their interpretations of Impact was, at this early stage in their careers at ConsultingCo, recruits were preoccupied with acclimating to the organization and conveying competence. “First coming in, I wasn’t focused on Impact,” Analyst Reggie said. He continued, “I was just focused on trying to get up to speed. . . First coming in, I was like ‘Don’t fail,’” concluding with a laugh (2014-02-08_I). A third and final reason is, at such an early stage, recruits did not believe they had sufficient information to confidently cross-examine the ambiguous expression of Impact, giving the organization the benefit of the doubt as to whether the organizational notion of Impact would align with their own interpretation of Impact. One summer intern Analyst Rose said, “I’m an intern, so I don’t know that I can really evaluate . . . Impact” (2014-08-12_I). Rose, who only spent a few months at ConsultingCo as an intern, decided to come back to ConsultingCo full-time as an Analyst. In all, the mobilization of recruits through the resonance of Impact was maintained as members initially deferred on reflecting on Impact.

The Second Edge: De-Mobilizing Members

Workers’ motivations, though, have the chance of dissolving. After entry into the organization, recruits began to get staffed onto projects and accumulate work experience. They sought to make sense of their complex work experiences, seeking to interpret and organize their experiences. As they interpreted their experiences, they used the expression of Impact in increasingly reflective ways. Over time, the conditions for deferring reflection on Impact deteriorated, as recruits got more comfortable with being a ConsultingCo member and as they
accumulated experiences that allowed them to more confidently judge how they felt about Impact.

ConsultingCo members engaged in several interpenetrating interpretive processes. First, members engaged in experiential reflection—taking stock of their work experiences, seeking to organize their experiences to better come to grips with them, and finding themselves drawing on the expression of Impact, since it was readily available in ConsultingCo’s organizational cultural toolkit. Second, they engaged in articulation—finding the expression of Impact too vague to helpfully organize their experiences and seeking to specify the expression of Impact into more precise ideas. Third, members engaged in assessment—using these articulations of Impact to come to evaluations about the worth of their work.

At ConsultingCo, these interpretive processes were very much intertwined. An illustration elucidates this notion. Analyst Audrey said in an interview,

[Thinking about] what I was doing day to day… at ConsultingCo, I very much noticed that I had some projects where I felt like I had great Impact. . . [but] I found that [on a project with a healthcare client]. . . I felt like I was just sort of a piece of the puzzle. . . which was not a feeling I wanted to have. . . I sort of identified this thing as a Personal Impact to something. . . It’s the ability to facilitate change in some way. . . And the fact that I can personally do that is one thing. The fact that ConsultingCo can do that is another. . . My Personal Impact within a project felt like it was getting smaller and smaller. (2014-10-08_I)

Here, Audrey reflected on her experiences, including her experiences on a healthcare project, by drawing on Impact. She then articulated and “identified” that what she meant by Impact was Personal Impact. In articulating this idea, she authored a way to make sense of her experiences. Adopting this articulation of Impact, she assessed the worth of her work at ConsultingCo overall, and came to pass a negative judgment on her experience, rationalizing that she felt that her ability to personally “facilitate change” was getting “smaller and smaller.” This example illustrates the interrelated nature of these interpretive processes. Audrey’s reflection on her
project experiences through a lens of Impact, her articulation of Impact into Personal Impact, and her use of this articulation to assess the worth of her work were all interlinked. While these were commingled processes, I consider them in separate sections below for analytic clarity. First, I consider how members reflected on their experiences and drew on Impact. Subsequently, I consider how members articulated the generic, ambiguous expression of Impact into more specific ideas of Impact. Then, I examine the ways that members assessed their projects through their articulations of Impact.

Experiential Reflection

As members accumulated experience at the organization, they reflected on and attempted to make sense of their experiences. During my interviews with them, consultants took stock of project experiences, recounting stories from their work at ConsultingCo. As they told these stories, they recalled their sentiments on the project. To make sense of their sentiments, they brought Impact into their accounts. People draw on salient ideas and frames to organize their experiences, and because of how saliently the idea of Impact was suffused into the culture of ConsultingCo and because of members’ resonance with and expectancy around the idea, Impact was anchored in members’ minds. Thus, members sought to organize their experiences by drawing on the expression of Impact. As Analyst Reggie said, “the word Impact [was] so ingrained into the culture, so [we] re-appropriated it, right? . . . [We] take that underlying culture and try to fit it to the current situation” (2015-08-22_I).

At this stage, having accumulated work experience, recruits’ attempts to use the expression of Impact to organize their complex experiences were stymied by the ambiguity of Impact. The ambiguity of Impact began to present itself saliently and unnervingly to them.
Recruits at this stage acknowledged the ambiguity of Impact, like Audrey, an Associate who said, “Impact . . . is very vague” (2014-01-23_I). Associate Lawrence groused, “My problem with Impact is that people say it when they haven’t figured out what’s next” (2014-11-01_I). Alina, likewise, said, “The term Impact is very vague. It can [be] implied in many different ways” (2015-06-19_I). Over time and with the accumulation of experience, then, the ambiguity of Impact that was previously strategic began to glaringly present itself to members. At this stage, ConsultingCo members considered: If Impact was something that they cared about and that resonated with them, and if Impact was, lo and behold, so ambiguous, what did Impact really mean to them?

Articulation

To help organize their experiences, members sought to articulate the expression of Impact for themselves. By articulation, I mean that members specified more precise interpretations of Impact. Members took the generic expression of Impact and specified what they meant by it. Associate Eric described the thinking behind this process. He said, “[The word Impact is] thrown around a lot. [But] what does Impact mean. . . Maybe [there’s] a problem in that. You talk about your project and you think about it like, ‘Oh, is that worth it? Is that what we do? Is that really Impact?’” He continued, saying, “[So] this is what you should do, right? You should cut up the parts, what Impact means” (2015-04-05_I). There were several ways in which members “cut up” or articulated the “parts” of Impact.

First, members often articulated Impact into the idea of Client Impact, or making a positive change for clients. Principal Ulrich said that Impact was about “being very client-minded” (2013-06-03_I), and Partner Lyndon said he would define Impact as the answer to the
question, “Did the client create something new – did it become a reality, versus, did it get shelved, did it get killed off?” (2014-07-08_I). Second, members sometimes articulated Impact in terms of Social Impact. Members interpreting Impact as Social Impact realized that Impact excited them because of the possibility of positive change in societal outcomes. Senior Associate Abby, for example, articulated Impact as Social Impact when she talked about “an Impact that’s not just financial.” She elaborated, “You’re not helping a company make more money; you’re helping, you know, deliver a healthcare solution or you’re helping spread education” (2014-01-21_I).

Members’ interpretation occasionally led them to third articulation: Personal Impact. This emphasized a meaning of Impact related to feeling like they, personally and individually as the primary agent, were substantially contributing to projects. This was the articulation that Associate Audrey had used above. She articulated, “This is Impact: I . . . as an individual, have actually contributed some value” (2014-10-08_I). Audrey described how Personal Impact involved feeling that she had the ownership to contribute to the project significantly—such as building a “creative, real argument or creating a business idea”—rather than mindlessly executing menial tasks where “anyone could have done it” (2014-10-08_I). As Analyst Lawrence said, Personal Impact was about feeling like one’s “agency is significant” (2015-02-27_O). Ownership and autonomy, then, were viewed as key to this articulation of Personal Impact. Project Manager Isabel noted the importance of “getting increasing levels of ownership over things . . . remove the layers of approval . . . [to] feel like I’m delivering that Impact” (2014-01-23_I).
Assessment

The third interpretive process was assessment, as members adopted these articulations of Impact to evaluate the worth of work at ConsultingCo. ConsultingCo members assessed their project work through their articulations of Impact and came to positive or negative judgments of the work’s worth. Principal Neil, for example, used the interpretation of Client Impact to positively assess the worth of his work. He said, “When you have time to reflect on Impact, I guess, or what we've been able to achieve at certain companies, that gives me pride in the work that we do. . . At [a healthcare client], we've really changed, in very fundamental ways, the way they think about their business, so that's pretty awesome. That's pretty cool that you're able to say you're a firm and you were part of a team that had a huge Impact on the way a company runs itself” (2015-07-23_I). Associate Firth, on the other hand, assessed his work negatively through Personal Impact, saying, that “what . . . it is that I really dislike, . . . it’s kind of like, on that Impact note. You know, that kind of hits a lot of it, I think. . . You know, just the beautification of slides, as I mentioned, I think is—I don’t really like to do [it]” (2014-02-04_I). Likewise, Analyst Lawrence viewed his work negatively through Personal Impact, grumbling, “If it’s all your time changing the color of boxes on slides . . . that’s dumb” (2015-02-27_O).

Convergence or Divergence

The above processes of experiential reflection, articulation of Impact, and assessment were consequential for the de-mobilization of members. Through these processes, members exhibited either interpretive convergence or divergence with the organization.

By convergence, I mean that a member’s private interpretations were consistent with what ConsultingCo as an organization had anticipated and intended. Client Impact could be
thought of as a convergent articulation of the expression of Impact because it was the interpretation that was organizationally endorsed by ConsultingCo’s leadership and institutionalized in the firm, as suggested by my observations of the firm. The interpretation of Client Impact was apparent in much of the organization’s culture. For example, on the first day of a weeklong training for new hires called “Boot Camp,” Partner Lucas charismatically held court, teaching recruits about the ConsultingCo Pillars. His eyes scanned the room as he said, “[Pillar] number one is Impact. You can read what it means and you’ll get a sheet.” Meanwhile, a consultant circulated sheets of paper with a statement about Impact clearly intended to be about Client Impact: “We are driven to help our clients succeed” (2015-09-08_O). The notion of Client Impact was also enshrined in ConsultingCo’s wall art in a glass-covered case. With the word Impact printed in bright colors, the wall art depicted a cartoon of a client remarking cheerfully on how ConsultingCo had an Impact on her thinking. My interview data also validate that Client Impact was the organizationally endorsed interpretation. My interview with Ellie, a very senior Principal at the firm in very close touch with the Partners, said of the organizationally endorsed interpretation of Impact: “The definition of Impact [is] in terms of Client Impact . . . So it [Impact] would basically [be] having a lasting change, like, a lasting change for the better, in how the client behaves, in terms of the types of things we want to encourage” (2015-03-10_I).

Members’ articulations of Client Impact were generally associated with convergent assessments about work that the company had intended—positive assessments about work. For example, Associate Ona said her work felt “meaningful” to her because of Client Impact. She said, “For me that's impact: it's helping [a client] bridge a gap that they couldn't bridge before, or that they didn't even know was a gap before. I think that's meaningful and also in way where it's not just an experiment that you do in their head, but they could actually go out and try with their
dollars and cents. For [our work with a health insurance client organization], . . . they [insurance client] wanted to make this [initiative] happen, but they weren't sure how. They couldn't see the immediate steps. . . [We helped them by] bridging the gap. . . Getting everything in place in a way that helps your client go from one side of the gap to the other” (2015-05-27_I). Analyst Kyle, likewise, said it was “meaningful” to work for “really big companies,” saying, “I really get excited about really big companies who are doing, like, meaningful things. Even if we're working on a small part of that. . . Working for, like, big companies is exciting.” Kyle elaborated, “You can see this at [a large manufacturing client]. . . We did, like, a five-day innovation-manager training, like a year or eighteen months ago and. . . they've gone out and done [that training] themselves. Like, they've come up with the rest of the ways themselves. There's so much business-shaping that. . . they're doing independently and it's great to see that, like, the training and capabilities that we've done for them has been, like, actually. . . used by their company.” (2015-08-20_I).

Because the interpretation of Client Impact was ConsultingCo’s intended interpretation of Impact, it was this meaning of Impact that the organization was designed to optimize around. Senior leaders of ConsultingCo sought out work and projects that fulfilled a vision of Client Impact. Built into the framework of senior leaders’ selection and pursuit of client projects, for example, were criteria around Client Impact, such as whether the project was likely to shift the organizational outcomes for the client. In other words, ConsultingCo as an organization was set up to seek out work that would have Client Impact, so members’ assessments of work through the lens of Client Impact were more likely to be positive.

By divergence, I mean that members’ private interpretations departed from what ConsultingCo as an organization had intended. ConsultingCo had not endorsed and had not
intended for Impact to be interpreted as Social Impact or Personal Impact, so both were divergent articulations. Social Impact and Personal Impact were not institutionalized into ConsultingCo like Client Impact was. What allusions to Social Impact there were at the organizational level were only that: vague, indirect allusions. For example, on ConsultingCo’s website under the heading of “Impact Stories”, there were triumphant tales of ConsultingCo’s projects with clients, which included a story of one project with a Fortune 500 healthcare client in which ConsultingCo helped design a client-branded, low-cost medical device for poor consumers in an emerging economy. Members could easily have interpreted from this story the project’s Social Impact on an emerging economy in need of medical innovation, but the story explicitly emphasized the project’s Client Impact on the healthcare client organization. Ellie, the high-ranking Principal, validated that Social Impact was not part of ConsultingCo’s institutionalized definition of Impact when she said, “I don’t think the Partners see Impact as specifically social. It’s not our business objective. . . I think the Partners all agree that that’s not part of our vision and definition of Impact” (2015-03-10_I). Likewise, Personal Impact was not institutionalized at ConsultingCo. It was not alluded to at all in ConsultingCo’s online, website, and other archival materials. Ellie said of Personal Impact: “Anything that could feel like that actually isn’t valued or rewarded… I don’t feel that I have a lot great to say about that. And I think that’s an indication that it’s not—it doesn’t feel top of mind in the organization” (2015-03-10_I).

Because the articulations of Social and Personal Impact were not what ConsultingCo had intended for Impact to mean, the organization was not set up to seek out work that had Social Impact or that allowed members to feel Personal Impact. Thus, viewing one’s work through these divergent articulations often entailed divergent assessments of work that the company had not intended: negative conclusions. For example, Associate Liam viewed his work through a lens
of Social Impact and said that he assessed his work very negatively, particularly on “projects where I fundamentally don't believe in the business.” He described his aversion to consulting projects with clients like a fast-food service client, saying it was “really hard” to work for a company that he felt had negative implications for societal health outcomes. He said, sourly, “it's a company that just—full stop—I wish didn't exist.” (2015-05-04_I).

Senior Associate Abby also assessed her work negatively through a Social Impact lens. She recalled her negative sentiments when she felt her work with a health insurance client became exclusively oriented towards solving the client’s business issues rather than producing useful products for the client’s consumers. She said:

I remember with one healthcare [insurance] client, it [our work] started turning . . . into kind of repetitive, um, like, workshops . . . where it felt like the same ideas were coming up time and time again . . . [It] started to feel like . . . ‘how do we help them [clients] get over a hurdle,’ where, at the end of the day, it wasn’t really going to increase benefit to patients—it was really about helping them with business needs. Um, and I think, obviously, we want our clients to grow and to succeed. But . . . [I] didn’t feel like there was as much satisfaction because, eh, it wasn’t that it was going to expand the access to healthcare or that it was going to help diagnose new people. It was like, literally, let’s help deal with some internal business functions. And again . . . there are people who are fascinated by that stuff. I just, you know, I’d rather make sure there’s some kind of ultimate Impact of the work I’m doing (2014-01-21_I).

The negative conclusions about work that members came to, often through the lenses of Social and Personal Impact, loosened the control that ConsultingCo had over these members, and moved members towards de-mobilization.

Some members mostly exhibited divergence, and others mostly exhibited convergence with the organization. Why this variation? While the focus of this chapter is on answering the “how” question around the processes through which divergence and de-mobilization is possible, and not on the “why” of specific predictive factors from which divergence springs, I posit that members exhibit more or less divergent articulation and assessment based on their accumulated
socio-cultural experiences. This is consistent with theory that suggests that how individuals use cultural resources depends on their own cultural repertoires, which come from their life experiences with a variety of cultural toolkits across different settings (Swidler, 1986, 2001). At ConsultingCo, there were two particularly salient categories of experiential accumulations that might explain divergence.

The first category involved individuals’ accumulated experiences prior to organizational entry. These pre-entry experiences include individuals’ prior occupational involvement, since being socialized into an occupation can leave a cultural imprint on individuals (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). Individuals might be divergent because they were divergent pre-entry; that is, individuals’ pre-entry experiences may have led to divergent interpretations of Impact from the outset of their employment at ConsultingCo. For example, Associate Liam, who had come from a social entrepreneurial occupational background—and who had described to me his various entrepreneurial products designed for emerging market populations—interpreted Impact divergently as Social Impact from my first interview with him (just 1 month after his entry to ConsultingCo) all the way through to my last interview with him (9 months after his entry to ConsultingCo). Liam ended up viewing his work at ConsultingCo mostly negatively. He said that he only had “a certain capacity for . . . projects that do not stir my soul,” invoking the notion of Social Impact. He said that an accumulation of projects that fail to meet his expectations around Social Impact “shortens my expectations of how long I will spend at ConsultingCo” (2015-02-03_I).

The second category of experiential accumulation that may explain divergence involves individuals’ post-entry experiences. Individuals might become divergent post-entry due to particular project experiences at ConsultingCo that they have after entry. Associate Blythe, for
example, came from a social entrepreneurial background and started off interpreting Impact divergently, but also interpreted Impact more divergently over time as she gained project experience. This was indicated by the shift from my first interview with her (4 months after her entry), where she mostly interpreted Impact divergently as Social Impact, to my last (22 months) interview with her, where she interpreted Impact divergently as Personal Impact in addition to Social Impact. This later divergent articulation around Personal Impact was likely due to accumulated experiences Blythe had on a project for a large healthcare client company, wherein she felt marginalized as a bit player on the team with little actual influence or say on the direction of the project. By making sense of these project experiences, Blythe came to realize that an interpretation of Impact that mattered to her was not only around whether the project had a positive influence on societal outcomes, but also whether she as an individual was personally having an influence on the project. Hence, she began to articulate Impact as Personal Impact in addition to Social Impact. Blythe’s divergent articulation was associated with mostly negative evaluative conclusions about her work, concluding that her work made her “just feel so removed from the actual Impact” (2014-01-30_I).

There are three reasons to believe that the presence of the ambiguous Impact expression will over time continue to be a force for more divergence and de-mobilization at ConsultingCo. First, because Impact mobilizes an interpretively diverse set of recruits through the process of broad resonance, the expression’s ambiguity amplifies the diversity in pre-entry experiences, making it more likely that people will assess their work divergently from the outset of their career at ConsultingCo. Second, because the expression of Impact is so embedded in ConsultingCo’s culture and so saliently anchored in members’ minds, members will continue to
be compelled to view their post-entry project experiences through the lens of Impact, which continues to make Impact a “sticky” expression that will influence members’ assessments of their work.

Third, even though there are members who, at the end of the observation window, did have articulations that were mostly convergent with the organization’s intention, these members can always be “at risk” for later divergence. For example, a member showing convergence at the end of my observation window was Associate Alina. She was convergent pre-entry, as her pre-entry experiences led her to think of Impact as Client Impact, convergent with ConsultingCo’s endorsed interpretation. Coming from a for-profit industry background, she was excited about working with big companies and interpreted Impact mostly convergently as Client Impact from my first interview with her (2 months after her entry to ConsultingCo) to my last (10 months after her entry). Alina viewed her ConsultingCo work mostly positively. Drawing on the notion of Client Impact, she said, “I love it here. I love what we’re doing. The way we’re Impacting aligns with the way I want to Impact things” (2015-06-19_I). Alina, then, was an ideal case of a member whose interpretations of Impact aligned with those institutionalized at ConsultingCo. Yet, a consultant like Alina—even one as apparently convergent and sanguine as her—can always be at risk for becoming more divergent over time and with experience. As members accumulate more project experiences—and especially because project experiences tend to be quite variant in an industry like consulting—members might continue to have more diverse, potentially negative experiences. Alina admitted, “I would say that for the most part I feel really energized by being in ConsultingCo.. . . I love the Impact we’re having.” But, she cautioned, “there’re going to be highs and lows,” and the question for her in the future, she said, would become: “is [this] a lasting low?” (2015-06-19_I). A member with convergent articulations like
Alina, then, re-enters the cycle of accumulating variant project experiences, and so long as the ambiguous Impact expression has cultural influence in the organization, she will continue to be at risk for eventually interpreting Impact in divergent ways with the accumulation of negative project experiences.

Thus, overall, the second edge of Impact—of de-mobilization—was enabled by the ambiguity of the Impact expression, which engendered a set of interpretive processes of experiential reflection, articulation, and assessment, which enabled the potential for interpretive divergence from the organization. And, if members diverge strongly enough, they not only may become disaffected with their work, but they may also undergo the ultimate divergence and de-mobilization—manifested as a disillusioned exit from the company, which I examine next, in the final section of the findings.

De-Mobilization

The processes around the ambiguous expression of Impact had a number of consequences for de-mobilizing various members of ConsultingCo. I suggest that the interpretive divergence that emerged around Impact can be linked to individual-level implications of disillusionment and exit. In so arguing, I claim that the ambiguous expression of Impact, while initially mobilizing various members, had counteracting effects of de-mobilizing many members.

The ambiguous expression of Impact was implicated in the de-mobilization of members at ConsultingCo, as evidenced by individual consequences of members’ exits due to Impact. Many members reached conclusions through their interpretations of their work and Impact that they did not find the work at ConsultingCo meaningful enough (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski,
Various disillusioned members exited the organization in my observation window, citing divergent articulations of Social and Personal Impact as part of their exit rationale.

Several members drew on the divergent articulation of Personal Impact in describing their disillusionment and their motivation for leaving the firm. Analyst Audrey, said that “Personal Impact” was “something that I want in my jobs, for them to be fulfilling for me,” noting that from a perspective of Personal Impact, she was not satisfied at ConsultingCo (2014-10-08_I). Audrey left to work at a venture capital company, directly designing and launching portfolio companies. When I asked her why, she evoked an interpretation of Personal Impact, saying, “projects [at ConsultingCo] were just becoming [a] mundane thing that I could be less involved with, and sort of [have] less Impact on. . . . So . . . I felt like my Impact was becoming trivial” (2014-10-08_I). Associate Alberta also evoked an interpretation of Personal Impact when said she did not feel like she was given the autonomy to have Impact, even though she had wanted “to help be a part of the solution” (2014-01-17_I). Later, Alberta exited the firm to work in internal strategy in the healthcare industry, on the basis that she “wasn’t being leveraged to [her] full potential” and was not allowed to “be a part of the Impact” (2014-08-12_I). In another example, Associate Blythe told me, “I’m pretty jaded about Impact. I’ve thought about other options for myself moving forward” (2015-06-19_I). Blythe later left the firm to work in internal strategy at a medical startup. After her decision to leave, she told me that she left because she was tired of being “far from Impact”, and making “slides that no one is going to see” (2015-07-27_I), invoking an articulation of Personal Impact.

Even senior members exited the firm on the basis of Personal Impact. When I asked a Partner, Leo, why he left ConsultingCo to go to work as a director of an investment portfolio at a professional services firm, he said, “Actually it was Impact, . . . the opportunity to apply myself
directly to one of the portfolios we were helping to develop and then see it through to completion. Having that sense of direct ownership versus advising the owner is important [to me]” (2015-04-08_I). The fact that senior members like Leo left ConsultingCo with an exit rationale centered on Personal Impact is striking, suggesting that the institutionalized definition of Impact was supra-individual and supersedes any given senior leader. Even being a senior member of the firm, then, could not “save” Leo from his interpretive divergence from the institutionalized definition of Impact. Leo, recognizing that he had come to view Impact in ways that diverged from the firm’s intent, had found a reason to exit the firm, and exit he did.

Members also drew on the divergent articulation of Social Impact as part of their rationale for why they felt unhappy at ConsultingCo and why they chose to exit. Senior Associate Sable reflected on her decision to leave ConsultingCo through the lens of her passion for “social innovation” and Social Impact. She said, “I’m, like, I’m just not my best me anymore. I’m not me anymore, you know, on this job. Like, I’m not happy.” She continued ruefully, “There’s nothing you’re willing to—there’s nothing that can kind of fix that. Like, no amount of money or—when you feel like that, you just… it’s the worst.” (2014-07-16_I). Sable left ConsultingCo to found her own startup that produced a product around education. She invoked an articulation of Social Impact to justify this choice, saying, “On a given day, . . . two or three more people go use [my education] product or service that fundamentally changes their experience. . . Ideally thousands of people, you know. . . Something that really can make a positive social difference. . . That's kind of huge” (2014-07-16_I).

Senior members of ConsultingCo also exited the firm because of Social Impact. Principal Ellie, for example, used the articulation of Social Impact to explain her reasoning for leaving to go work at a large apparel company, focusing on the development of environmentally friendly
solutions for a company division. She said, “I come from a family of activists, . . . [and] I feel like I’m actually going after my roots, which feels good, . . . It does feel like personally [a] more satisfying and a better fit, . . . specifically driv[ing] towards and somehow making some aspects in the world either better or less worse” (2015-03-10_I). Again, it was striking to see Ellie, who was the informant who told me about the organizational definition and intention behind Impact, leave the firm on account of a divergent articulation of Impact. Like Leo, being senior could not save her either from her interpretive divergence from the firm’s organizationally endorsed interpretation of Impact.

My qualitative data thus suggest strongly that the ambiguous Impact expression was linked to members’ exit. Associate Eric explained that it was quite common for consultants to leave ConsultingCo because of Impact. He summarized the situation thoughtfully, saying, “ConsultingCo becomes a hub where. . . it attracts a lot of people, but it's never a destination. . . . I feel like at ConsultingCo, you want to find yourself, what Impact really means. . . . Because Impact is such a broad term, everyone comes out of ConsultingCo with a very different definition of what Impact means. They go searching for something else” (2015-04-05_I).

As supplementary evidence supporting the notion that the Impact expression—and particularly the divergent articulations of Social and Personal Impact—is linked to disillusionment and exits from ConsultingCo, I show in table 2 a count analysis of mentions of Impact among interviewees who mentioned Impact and who were full-time consultants. I designated as “convergent members” interviewees for whom more than half of Impact mentions were of the convergent articulation Client Impact. I designated as “divergent members” interviewees for whom more than half of Impact mentions were of the divergent articulations Social or Personal Impact. The table shows suggestive support that divergent members had more
negative mentions of their work than convergent members. Across divergent members, the average proportion of negative assessments of work was 59 percent, as compared to convergent members’ average of 36 percent. In addition, the table shows that divergent members were more likely to exit in the observation window than convergent members. Of the 20 divergent members, 13 exited in the observation window, meaning 65 percent of divergent members exited. Of the 25 convergent members, 4 exited in the observation window, meaning 16 percent of convergent members exited. This supports the notion that interpretive divergence around Impact was associated with disillusionment and exit.

### Table 2:
Negative Evaluations of Work and Exit Rates Among Divergent and Convergent Members

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Average Proportion of Negative Evaluations of Work</th>
<th>Proportion of Members Who Exited ConsultingCo in Observation Window</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Divergent members</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>65%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Convergent members</td>
<td>36%</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note: This frequency count analysis was conducted on interview transcripts of the 45 interviewees who mentioned Impact and who were full-time consultants (not interns or administrative staff). I designated as “convergent members” interviewees for whom over half of Impact mentions were of the convergent articulation Client Impact. I designated as “divergent members” interviewees for whom over half of Impact mentions were of the divergent articulations Social or Personal Impact.*

According to aggregate company turnover data, there were 25 exits during my two-year observation window, 19 of which were voluntary. The first year’s annual voluntary turnover rate was 14 percent and the second year’s was 9 percent, making the average annual voluntary turnover rate over the two-year period 11.5 percent. While this is not necessarily a high voluntary turnover rate, it is remarkable how many exits were influenced at least partly by the idea of Impact. I interviewed 19 people who exited voluntarily. And of these 19, 17 interviewees mentioned Impact, and 13 interviewees generally fit the pattern of exhibiting divergence.
In sum, the ambiguous expression of Impact was associated with the de-mobilization of many members who voluntarily exited the firm, against the firm’s intents. I claim that voluntary exits were against the firm’s intent because of my observations of strategy sessions among the senior leaders of the firm. The turnover at ConsultingCo was cited as problematic for project staffing because ConsultingCo was a relatively lean firm. Compared to larger firms, Principal Ulrich said, “exits hurt us more.” “Right,” added Partner Lucas, “and exits will continue to hurt us more,” because “we’ll be under-scaled for a long time” (2014-10-27_O). Later in this meeting, Lucas implicated the recruiting process. He pointed to what he believed were central issues in the spate of exits, noting that some of the “legacy big challenges” for ConsultingCo included the “standardization on recruiting and what we’re saying.” “And let’s be clear,” Lucas declared, “We have said things that are inconsistent with what we actually do and have.” He grimly added, “And it has caused enormous problems for us” (2014-10-27_O).

Yet, even though ConsultingCo leaders were aware of the exits and the cultural issues in the organization, the ambiguity of the term Impact may have inured it to deep scrutiny as a source of difficulty. In fact, there was a considerable deal of confusion around why there was disillusionment and turnover, which made it more difficult for leaders to understand how to re-mobilize disillusioned members. While members articulated the Impact expression into more specific ideas in interviews and in small-group settings, these discussions of articulated notions of Impact did not reach the leadership of ConsultingCo; the frame remained ambiguous at the organizational level. So, while leaders who stayed on at ConsultingCo could view work as being Impactful, perhaps in terms of Client Impact, other consultants, including those who left, may have viewed the work as not meaningful, in terms of Social or Personal Impact. The confusion generated by the expression of Impact, then, might explain why, as Lucas voiced in the meeting
of ConsultingCo leaders, “One of the things that bothers us is that there is so much going well in the organization, but our people are so unhappy relative to what the business is. I don’t know how” (2014-10-27_O).

DISCUSSION

Theorizing Interpretive Ambiguity as Double-Edged Sword of Organizational Culture

Based on the findings of my inductive case study of ConsultingCo, I induce a more general theoretical model, summarized in figure 1, that describes the processes through which the key characteristic of ambiguity can produce downstream processes that allow a cultural expression to have double-edged effects.

Figure 1: Model of an Ambiguous Expression Enabling Mobilization and De-Mobilization

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cultural Characteristic</th>
<th>Mobilization</th>
<th>De-Mobilization</th>
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<td>Ambiguous Expression</td>
<td>Resonance</td>
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<td>Convergence</td>
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The first edge of an ambiguous cultural resource—the mobilization of members—is produced through resonance and deferral processes. In resonance, recruits experience feelings of connectedness between their interpretation of an ambiguous cultural expression and their existing worldviews. Recruits are drawn into the firm and enter the organization. In deferral, recruits defer on making their own sense of the cultural expression. Instead, they spend time socializing into linguistic norms of using the expression equivocally, are preoccupied with acclimating to the organization and negotiating roles for themselves (Reichers, 1987) as competent colleagues, or cite their inexperience with work at the organization.

The second edge of an ambiguous expression—the de-mobilization of members—is produced through interpretive processes of experiential reflection, articulation, assessment, and divergence. Recruits get staffed on projects and begin to accumulate increasingly diverse and complex work experiences. They attempt to make sense of their work (Maitlis & Christianson, 2014), and as they make sense of their work experience, they engage in several interpenetrating interpretive processes. Recruits reflect on their experiences and draw on the expression to help organize their experiences. But the ambiguity of the expression compels them to engage in articulation. Recruits articulate more specific ideas derived from the ambiguous, original expression; how recruits produce these articulations is dependent on their individual identities which are constituted from the stock of accumulated socio-cultural experiences and interactions—prior to and after entry to the organization (Swidler, 1986, 2001; Weick, 1995). Recruits can then use these articulated interpretations to assess the worth of their work; after all, evaluation always occurs through culturally conditioned lenses (Giorgi & Weber, 2015; Lamont, 2012; Rivera, 2015).
These interpretive processes might lead to members either interpretively converging or diverging from the organization’s intents. For those members who generally converge with the organization, they continue to accumulate work experiences, from which they can continue to undergo interpretive processes, effectively re-entering the set of members who may be “at risk” for diverging. For those members who generally diverge from the organization, some may continue to remain committed to the organization and work through their ambivalence (Petriglieri, 2015) as they continue to accumulate experience, but some may diverge so far that they decide to leave the organization. The overall consequences, then, for these processes include the ultimate de-mobilization of various individual members in the forms of disillusionment and exit.

All of the processes stemming from the ambiguity of the cultural expression introduce, mask, or pronounce interpretive variation in the organization. The resonance process introduces variation in recruits’ pre-entry interpretations of the cultural element. The deferral process masks and perpetuates the diversity in interpretation at the beginning of members’ careers at the firm. Members then accumulate diverse project experiences, which enhances the pre-entry experiential variation with post-entry experiential variation in project work. And through articulation, members pronounce this accumulated experiential variation in their specifications of the cultural expression, which are then used as lenses to assess the worth of their work. As the accumulated variation mounts—whether because members were divergent pre-entry or become divergent post-entry—the chances of divergence and the chances of de-mobilization increase. Overall, then, the ambiguity-enabled interpretive variation around the cultural element produces its double-edged nature. There is a natural accumulation of variation in the form of experiences over time in the absence of an ambiguous cultural expression. But, the ambiguity of a cultural
expression can enhance but mask variation, helping give the cultural element countervailing effects of mobilizing and de-mobilizing members.

The above process model constitutes what Little calls a “how-possible” explanation rather than a “why-necessary” explanation (1991). Instead of showing “that an event, regularity, or process is necessary or predictable in the circumstances—that is, to identify the initial conditions and causal processes that determined that the explanandum occurred,” I show “a description of a functioning system in which various subsystems perform functions that contribute to the performance capacity that the larger system is known to have” (Little, 1991: 4). In my case, the “functioning system” is ConsultingCo as an organization, the “subsystem” is the ambiguity of the Impact expression, and the performed “functions” of the subsystem are the processes of resonance, deferral, experiential reflection, articulation, and assessment that contribute to the mobilization and de-mobilization of members, the “performance capacity that the larger system is known to have”. Furthermore, “these [kinds of explanations] are in fact a species of causal explanation; we are attempting to discover the causal properties of the subsystems in order to say how these systems contribute to the capacity of the larger system” (Little, 1991: 4). I therefore show how it is possible for culture to be double-edged—and for the dualistic mobilization and de-mobilization to be explained by the ambiguity around a cultural element.

**Theoretical Contributions to Literature on Culture and Framing in Organizations**

My study offers several contributions to the literature on framing and culture in organizations. First, my model shows how interpretive ambiguity can be not an asset but a liability for users of frames and cultural resources. Framing and cultural scholars have mostly
argued that ambiguity is beneficial. Because ambiguous cultural objects “sustain a relative divergence of interpretations” (Griswold, 1987: 1106), they can be culturally powerful, where “‘cultural power’ refers to the capacity of certain works to linger in the mind and . . . to enter the canon” (Griswold, 1987: 1105). Framing research has also shown, for instance, that ambiguous ideas mobilized strategically can enable perceived common ground between previously conflicting groups (Donnellon et al., 1986; Leonardi, 2011), getting organizational members to accept strategic shifts (Kaplan, 2008), institutional change efforts (Kellogg, 2009, 2011a), and technological usage practices (Kaplan & Tripsas, 2008; Leonardi, 2011; Mazmanian, 2013; Orlikowski & Gash, 1994). And other literatures have noted the possibility of framing or framing-like practices in organizations enabling the management of groups, such as spanning workers’ divergent values through pluralist practices (Besharov, 2014), organizing diverse groups through bridging cultural practices (Braunstein, Fulton, & Wood, 2014), or using ambiguous narratives to manage workers’ different reactions to change (Sonenshein, 2010).

However, scholars tend to neglect how cultural ambiguity might have dysfunctional consequences for users of culture. The current study shows that a cultural element’s ambiguity might initially be beneficial for the organization using the cultural element because it mobilizes a broad variety of recruits, but that the element’s ambiguity also increases the chances for eventual interpretive divergence in the organization between members, which makes it harder for members to be managed.

Another contribution of this study is that it complicates a key assumption of framing and contemporary culture theorists around agency. As Weber and Dacin (2011) suggest, many contemporary scholars assume only one of two conceptualizations of culture and agency: that culture is primarily a constraint where actors passively acquiesce to being shaped by culture
(e.g., Keller & Loewenstein, 2011) or that culture is primarily a resource where actors agentically and actively utilize culture (e.g., Harrison & Corley, 2011; Howard-Grenville et al., 2011; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001). Essentially, cultural scholars generally treat cultural agency as a constant within a given study. This study shows, however, how the degree of actors’ agency to act based on their cultural usages might be somewhat variant over time and with experiential accumulation. After all, it may not be that actors are “relentlessly” engaged in radical production of new meanings (Patterson, 2014: 7), but rather that while actors can be engaged in meaning-making new interpretations and producing strategies of action, they often also are “meaning-maintainers” (Goffman, 1967). As I showed, members of ConsultingCo, in earlier stages of their membership in the organization, were less willing to jump to evaluative conclusions about their work and exit the organization; instead, they deferred until after they felt they accumulated sufficient experiences to reach evaluative conclusions based on their own interpretations of the cultural expression of Impact, only eventually coming to exit the organization. This variation in agentic use of a cultural element to enact strategies of action helps to explain the puzzling dynamic of initial mobilization and subsequent de-mobilization, but moreover, it helps to advance the cultural literature by encouraging future scholarship to further examine how cultural agency might fluctuate over time and with experiential accumulation.

**Practical Implications**

The findings from this study have several practical implications that could be drawn from its theoretical model. The first implication for practitioners is to beware the use of ambiguous expressions in recruiting and managing the organization’s membership, as they are both appealing and potentially dangerous. Such expressions are appealing because they are vague
enough to appeal to a wide variety of audiences. But this study shows that the ambiguity of these expressions can lead to unintentional downstream processes that undermine the goodwill that these expressions initially generate. Attention to the use of such expressions could be implemented in the form of organizational trainings that encourage attentiveness to communication and that underscore the potential for unintended negative consequences of ambiguous communication.

Second, if practitioners must use ambiguous expressions, they can attempt to intervene. During recruiting, for example, practitioners might consider doing some clear, transparent communication to potential recruits about the expression, thereby reducing its ambiguity. By seeking to inform recruits what the expression means according to the company, practitioners provide recruits with important information. This is information recruits may use to self-select out of the recruiting pool if their interpretations of the expression do not align with the company’s endorsed interpretation. While this may reduce the initial mobilization advantage of having an ambiguous expression, one could argue that it would behoove the organization to have misaligned candidates self-select out of the organization initially, rather than investing time, money, and effort in recruiting candidates whose interpretations around this key expression do not fit well with the company’s.

**Conclusion**

Scholars and practitioners have continued to be fascinated by culture and the ways in which actors attempt to use culture to achieve their goals. The deployment of cultural expressions, particularly those that have ambiguous, broad appeal, has been shown to be quite powerful and effective—an efficacious, strategically used force. Yet, culture might also be a
double-edged sword. A cultural expression, purposively used, might run amok of the intended purpose. By theorizing the characteristics and processes that explain how a cultural expression can be the bearer of both the production and destruction of a key organizational outcome like mobilization, this study aims to contribute to our understanding of organizational culture as a double-edged sword. In other words, I hope to enhance our comprehension of the intentional use of culture and the unintended consequences that may result. By enhancing this understanding, the current study seeks—dare I say it—to have an impact.
CHAPTER 4:

OVERREACH OF MANAGERIAL SANCTIONS

If, as established in the previous chapter, there was dissatisfaction and disillusionment at ConsultingCo due to “Impact,” why were such issues and other challenges not voiced to leaders? After all, if organizational members are discontented with their experiences, they in principle have an alternative to exiting the organization: they can voice their concerns and grievances to leaders with the hope of seeing some organizational change (Hirschman, 1970). Why, then, did many members not voice their issues with top management of the firm?

By inductively unpacking this empirical puzzle, I came to the theoretical realization that here, too, double-edged organizational culture played a role: managers’ enforcement of organizational norms through sanctions had unintended consequences. This empirical chapter thus fits into the overall dissertation theme of understanding the pathways through which managerial efforts to strategically utilize cultural tools can go awry of managers’ intents. At the same time that this chapter concerns theoretical phenomena that interrelate to those of the prior empirical chapter, though, this chapter has a distinct substantive and explanatory focus. While the previous chapter examines the managerial control objective of mobilizing members to feel positively about their work, this chapter examines another managerial control objective of enforcing communication norms among members. And while the previous chapter described processes wherein interpretive ambiguity could explain the incidence of de-mobilization, this chapter concerns a distinct set of processes wherein managerial sanctions can explain unanticipated consequences of silencing members who might not have otherwise been silenced.
In this chapter, I first articulate the theoretical puzzle of how managerial sanctions could lead to unanticipated consequences. Second, I provide an account of my analytic approach for the chapter. Third, I present my findings from my case study around how managerial sanctions led to unanticipated consequences. I end the chapter by noting potential contributions to the literature on sanctions, conformity, and voice in organizations.

SANCTIONS AND NORM ENFORCEMENT

In a variety of settings and literatures, scholars have viewed sanctions as powerful tools that actors use to produce conformity with norms. Sanctions are crucial for a number of important social forces relevant to organizations. Powerful state actors can enact sanctions on organizations to enforce field-level norms through coercive isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Intermediaries and mediators can enact sanctions in the form of legitimacy discounts to enforce category norms (Zuckerman, 1999). Scandals that deviate from societal norms are met with sanctions that bring organizations or individuals back into line in some way (Adut, 2005). And within a given organization, managers enact sanctions to compel conformity at the individual level with organizational norms (Feldman, 1984). So, the expected response to sanctions, then, is often conformity. This scholarly precept is so taken-for-granted as to seem banal.

But by theories of conformity, managerial sanctions should not lead to unanticipated consequences. How, then, might one explain unexpected consequences of managerial sanctions? There are a number of existing explanations. One category of explanation is the resistance explanation: actors resist sanction efforts (Hodson, 2001). Such resistance can take the form of rejection of norms (Merton, 1938), collective action (Dixon, Roscigno, & Hodson, 2004;
Roscigno & Hodson, 2004), or individual resistance like sabotage, absenteeism, and theft (Roscigno & Hodson, 2004). Sanctions, then, can have unexpected consequences because they arouse feelings of injustice and sentiment among members, leading to revolt. A second category of explanation is the decoupling explanation: actors might appear to the sanctioners to be conforming with norms—symbolically or formally complying—but behind-the-scenes the actors deviate from enforced norms. Organizational sociologists (Dobbin, 2009), institutional theorists (Meyer & Rowan, 1977), and symbolic interactionists (Goffman, 1959) all have produced versions of the decoupling explanation. In the decoupling explanation, sanctions can have unexpected consequences because actors strategically “play the game” of symbolically complying while informally deviating.

Both resistance and decoupling explanations, however, have implied that actors faced with sanctions take a generally strategic mindset in their reactions to sanctions. In the resistance explanation, actors actively move against sanctioners. In the decoupling explanation, actors strategically take action backstage while keeping their frontstage actions symbolically compliant (Goffman, 1959). Yet, both resistance and decoupling explanations miss an important possibility: that actors might not be either actively resisting or actively decoupling in response to sanctions, but rather that unexpected consequences can come from more emergent, gradual processes in the wake of sanctions, as members go about their work lives, telling colleagues stories to cope with sanctions, abstracting contextual information away from these stories, and attaching emotions and labels to the stories. I observed at ConsultingCo that sanctions can have unexpected consequences because the sanctions overreach – not leading to resistance or decoupling but rather to a set of emergent and gradual processes that enable unexpected consequences.
My research question in this chapter, then, is this: What are the emergent and gradual processes that allow sanctions to overreach sanctioners’ intents? I utilize data from my case study to unpack this question. In my case analysis, I inductively discovered that ConsultingCo was an organization in which managerial sanctions seemed to have unintended consequences. I describe the analytic approach next.

DATA AND ANALYTIC APPROACH

My analysis of the findings in this chapter took place after my analysis of “Impact” in chapter 3. A puzzle emerged from chapter 3 of why members did not raise the issues they were having with “Impact” to the firm’s management. In analyzing the data further, I discovered that many members not only failed to voice issues with Impact to management but also suppressed voice efforts generally, in fear of managerial retribution. I sought in this chapter, therefore, to unpack the processes underlying members’ fearful silence and communicative restraint.

Similar to the previous chapter, I took an overall inductive approach of iteratively reading the data, composing analytic notes, and considering various theories (Charmaz, 1983; Golden-Biddle, 2001). As I came to realize the salience of sanctions as an explanation for why informants kept quiet about many issues, I refined a more specific analytic process, targeted at understanding sanctions and their downstream consequences at ConsultingCo.

First, across my interviews with informants, I noticed that managerial sanctions played an important and central role in why informants did not voice issues with management. I compiled the data that spoke to managerial sanctions (such as performance reviews and interview transcripts of members getting sanctioned) to flesh out what was happening during these sanctions. Second, I sought to trace the processes analytically preceding managerial sanctions. In
tracing the processes analytically preceding sanctions, I saw that many of the key sanctions were related to socially constructed norms around communication. I compiled the data on socialization, from data such as my observations of trainings, meetings with new hires, interviews with managers, and archival data on performance criteria.

Third, I sought to trace the processes that analytically followed managerial sanctions, in order to understand what was leading to members’ silence. I compiled the data that could speak to these processes, namely interview excerpts from managers and members about sanctions. I noticed that sanctions were talked about as stories. I noticed in particular that sanction stories were circulated, abstracted from context, and elaborated in almost mythical ways. I realized that these processes together constituted a generalization of the sanction events into broader, conceptual stories that members could apply to their own lives at ConsultingCo. Finally, I then constructed a process diagram that connected all the concepts and relevant data together.

**FINDINGS**

My findings demonstrate how managerial sanctions to enforce organizational norms can overreach beyond what managers had intended. I show the processes through which this occurs at ConsultingCo. First, I show how managers enforced communication norms through particularized sanctions. Second, I show how these managerial sanctions moved from particularized events to generalized stories of sanctions. Third, I show that the generalized sanction stories served as cultural justifications for communicative restraint at ConsultingCo.
Enforcement of Norms through Particularized Sanctions

Managers enforce organizational norms through sanctions. In this findings section, I first show that ConsultingCo managers socially constructed norms of how to appropriately communicate. These communication norms centered on maintaining a problem-solving and action-orientation focus. I then show that to enforce these communication norms, managers enacted sanctions on counternormative communications. Subsequently, I suggest that these sanctions were particularized, targeted at the actors who did the deviant actions.

Social Construction of Communication Norms

Managers socially construct communication norms primarily through socializing members. At ConsultingCo, managers attempted to socialize members into communication norms that centered on maintaining a focus on “problem-solving” and “action-orientation”, and they did so in a number of ways.

First, managers constructed problem-solving communications as central to the identity of consultants at ConsultingCo. In a training session for new hires, Senior Partner Lucas facilitated a discussion with the new consultants. After introducing himself, he said, “So I get to talk to you for 45 minutes on what it is like to think like a consultant.” He continued, “Just a simple question for all of you: what do consultants do?” Lucas paused to survey the room. A new recruit ventured a response: “Organize thinking.” Lucas nodded and said, “We organize thinking.” He looked around some more, drawling, “Okay,” prolonging the word as though to suggest there was more to be said. Another recruit raised his hand and offered another answer, suggesting that consulting was about solving problems. Lucas affirmed that this was the answer he was looking for: “Yeah, no, that's it. It's that simple, right? At its most basic level, consulting is about
problem-solving, right?” (2015-06-08_O). Lucas continued to assert that consulting was about not only identifying problems for clients but also proposing solutions. Being a consultant, he claimed, was not only about saying but doing—about constantly keeping one’s focus on what action could be taken to solve a problem. Here, Senior Partner Lucas socialized members into communication norms by asserting the centrality of being a problem-solver and an action-oriented thinker in the identity of being a consultant at ConsultingCo.

Second, managers advised members to “tweak” their day-to-day language to communicate with a focus on problem-solving and action-orientation. Internal conversations and emails between members of ConsultingCo regularly featured terms like “actionable” and “next steps”. Language emphasizing problem-solving was also central to external “deliverables” (products to be given to clients) which often took the form of PowerPoint slides. I shadowed Associate Peter for a day, following him as he went about his client work with his team, and I observed an illustrative instance of socialization into action-oriented communication (2014-04-08_O). Peter and his new Analyst teammate George sat in the office of Principal Heath. Their other teammate, Senior Associate Abby, was on speakerphone in Heath’s office, sniffling and sounding hoarse from her cold. Heath led the meeting by walking through the PowerPoint slides the team had produced, reviewing the text on each slide. George pitched an idea for how to re-write a bullet point on a slide, suggesting, “How about ‘There are many principles or guiding truths that—’”. Abby jumped in, “The ‘guiding principles’ part seems academic. I like how it’s framed now because it feels more tactical than academic. It’s about ‘challenges’.” Heath affirmed, “Yeah. Yeah, I like that. ‘Challenges’.” Peter added, “Like overcoming ‘challenges’ or ‘barriers’.” Heath agreed again, saying that he liked that wording because it did seem more “tactical” (2014-04-08_O). George was a new Analyst who had only been at the firm for about 3
months, whereas Peter, Abby, and Heath were long-tenured members of the firm, who had been there for 3 years, 7 years, and 1.5 years respectively. In this example, then, the more senior members of the team demonstrated to George that there were more organizationally appropriate ways to word the text on slides, emphasizing problem-solving by focusing on communicating usable “tactics” rather than “academic” “guiding principles”.

This brings us to the third way that managers socialized members into communication norms of action-orientation and problem-solving: boundary-drawing. In boundary-drawing, consultants rhetorically made distinctions between themselves and other groups to reinforce their occupational identity of being problem-solvers. An instance of boundary-drawing is the above example of Abby noting that “guiding principles” sounded “academic”. In noting that the term “guiding principles” sounded “academic,” Abby drew a boundary around academics as a group—typifying them as less oriented towards problem-solving and “actionable” steps. In contrast, Abby emphasized consultants’ focus on having “tactical” recommendations for clients. More generally, long-tenured consultants labeled situations as “academic” to suggest that a thought exercise would be ultimately unhelpful for clients. For example, Heath disapproved of problem-solving approaches that were “very academic,” in which people “spend a lot of time debating minutiae.” Heath said that “academic” meant “creating constructs for the real world. . . [that] largely don’t take into consideration the real world.” “Some things are very simple in the real world,” he said. He claimed that academic approaches “make it ludicrously complicated.” Ultimately, Heath insisted that an academic discussion “doesn’t drive Impact for clients” (2014-01-23_I).

The three socialization strategies outlined above were somewhat more implicit in pointing to communication norms at ConsultingCo. The fourth way that managers socialized
members was more explicit. Managers shaped consultants’ communications through formal criteria outlining normative expectations. An employee guide describing the criteria for strong work performance, called a Proficiency Profile (2014-01-10_A), showed that “Communications” was one of the key “Consulting Competencies,” one of the “core set of consulting skills that every ConsultingCo consultant should have.” The criteria frequently cited the importance of problem-solving and action-orientation across all forms of communication, including writing emails, producing PowerPoint slides, and verbal interactions. As illustrations, the following criteria were listed as signals of communication competency:

- “Content is increasingly ‘recommendation’ vs. ‘results’-focused (i.e. here's what you can do to solve this problem vs. here’s what we found out about the problem)”
- “Is able to connect how [information] fit[s] into the broader problem-solving approach”
- “Creates . . . slides that clearly convey . . . recommendations”
- “Clearly states the ‘so what’ on the slide”
- “Coaches . . . by providing clear, specific and constructive feedback”

Each of these criteria highlight managers’ preferences that members communicate “recommendations”, “so what”, and “problem-solving”.

Managers conveyed these formal criteria not only through documents but also in-person. For example, echoing one of the criteria in the Proficiency Profile, Administrative Head Cynthia outlined in a meeting with Analysts what constituted “really good feedback” when raising internal organizational matters, such as comments on teammates’ performance. Such feedback, Cynthia said, was “actionable,” “specific,” and “forward-looking.” In this meeting, Analyst Jeana conformed to communication norms by providing an example of how she was given feedback by her own manager, emphasizing that she liked the feedback because it “help[ed] me take action” (2015-07-31_O). Once again, here, consultants were encouraged to use language focused on and championing action-orientation and problem-solving.
Sanctions on Counternormative Communications

With any set of socially constructed norms, there is always some notion—implicit or explicit—of what constitutes deviant behavior. At ConsultingCo, managers viewed particular kinds of communications as running counter to norms—such as “unhelpful complaints” without clear action plans, noticeable “stress” and “frustration” in communication, “academic” fixation on details, or neglect of “big-picture” recommendations and solutions. To enforce organizational norms, managers enacted sanctions on members who deviating from prescribed communication behaviors. These social sanctions could be either informal or formal.

First, sanctions could occur informally, manifested as being “yelled at”. Senior Associate Aldric mentioned an experience of communicating an issue to managers that was evidently viewed as deviant behavior. He said that he aggrievedly voiced a concern that “went really sour.” During a project in which claimed to have worked “a hundred hours a week,” Aldric brought up his concerns as a frustrated complaint, without a clear action plan:

You know, my comment was, ‘Holy crap, this was really bad. I’m really frustrated.’ I mean, I brought [it] up through [what] I thought were the right channels. . . . The Partners kind of talked about it . . ., which led it to the point where it just kind of blew back on me in a really bad way. (2014-01-16_I)

Aldric felt that he “just got yelled at for complaining” and for being “an insubordinate individual.” He elaborated:

Yeah, I just got yelled at for complaining, basically. . . . The fact that we’re still having this conversation is actually kind of remarkable . . . You know, HR should have seen that happening as it was happening and figured out a way to fix it or at least give me cover in a proper forum, right? As opposed to like [a Partner] bring[ing] down the hammer on me repeatedly, um, and basically be[ing], like, ‘You’re an insubordinate individual’ (2014-01-16_I).

In addition, Alberta told me that she was once informally sanctioned when she emailed a Partner voicing a concern about the insufficiency of a committee called the “Culture Committee.” She
said that, in response, the Partner became “defensive” and chastised her for complaining without a solution (2014-01-17_O).

Second, social sanctions against counternormative communication could also be manifested in formal evaluations. In performance reviews, managers often noted lapses in problem-solving communication as counternormative. For example, Principal Isaac, who composed a year-end performance review for Associate Umar, wrote of Umar that an “important area of improvement [is that] there were times when Umar was visibly stressed about the ambiguity associated with project work and momentarily 'gave up' after not having found a solution” (2015-12-03_A). Associate Intern Chase, in his performance review, was also chastened, directed to “be more active and engaged in team problem solving” (2015-08-12_A). In addition, Project Manager Ray sanctioned Associate Donovan in his review for failing to consistently communicate with problem-solving in mind, noting that there “are some questions” about Donovan’s “ability” for communicating consistently with a “problem solving” mindset (2015-12-03_A).

Through performance reviews, managers also enacted sanctions against the counternormative behavior of communicating with excessive focus on “academic” details and neglecting communicative focus on a big-picture “strategic” picture, “so what” summary points, and “answers” or solutions to relevant problems. The performance review for Associate Intern Allison suggested that she ought to “pull the group back to more strategic topics,” rather than excessively focusing on “very detailed conversation” (2015-08-12_A). Project Manager Derek impelled Analyst Mindy in her performance review to better and more consistently “communicat[e] the ‘so what’” in her problem-solving, noting this as a barrier to her ability to “move to the next level” (2015-12-03_A). And, in their performance review of Analyst Jeana,
Principal Neil and Project Manager Colleen pointed Jeana towards better practicing “‘answer-first' verbal communications” and “problem-solving by focusing on how details support bigger-picture case issues” (2015-12-03_A).

Additionally, in performance reviews, managers formally sanctioned counternormative behavior of failing to communicate with a “positive” “demeanor,” centered on “helpful,” “constructive” feedback. Partner Linda wrote of Senior Associate Ramona that a crucial “development area” for Ramona was “striking the right balance of . . . constructive criticism” (2015-12-10_A), suggesting that Ramona’s communication could be overly censorious, without a clear, constructive plan. Project Manager Tristan sanctioned Analyst Intern Vivian for her lapses in maintaining a positive tone of voice. Tristan’s review of Vivian read that Vivian “at times let some of the frustration or shock of the pace [of the project] show.” He elaborated that Vivian’s “development areas” included “maintaining a positive, helpful demeanor even in long, difficult cases” (2015-08-12_A). In addition, Principal Orson rebuked Associate Liam for often communicating counternormatively, deviating from a helpful and positive tone. Orson wrote in his performance review of Liam that Liam’s “approach to interpersonal interactions (blunt, direct, transparent to a fault) . . . creates a poor impression.” Orson elaborated that Liam ought to “adjust his communication style (language selection/tone) based on his audience,” otherwise this communication deviance would be a “barrier to his . . . upward trajectory” (2015-12-03_A).

**Particularization of Sanctions: Private, Contextualized, and Rationalized**

Managers particularized these managerial sanctions of counternormative behavior. That is, managers used sanctions in a targeted, individualized fashion, with the intent to correct behavioral deviance at the individual level, disciplining specific members for specific actions
that deviate from organizational norms. Managers believed that there was not vast, widespread behavioral deviance in the organization, but rather that there were “individualized” and “personal” cases of counternormative communication behavior. Most managers believed as Raquel did that deviance or “rumbling” was “usually a couple of people versus a whole team” or “a one-off situation where they might have just had a bad day” (2014-06-19_I).

There were three ways in which managers particularized sanctions. First, managerial sanctions were largely private in that managers used sanctions so that only the individual being sanctioned and the manager doing the sanctioning were present at the point of interaction. Managers typically directed sanctions at members individually, either in performance reviews (typically viewable only by the member being reviewed and the writer of the review) or in closed-door meetings. In fact, closed-door meetings were the norm at ConsultingCo. From my observations, rarely were office doors open when there was more than one person in the office, and especially when sensitive topics came up in meetings, like performance issues, a member would typically get up and shut the door.

Second, managers typically contextualized sanctions with particular circumstances. In performance review roundtables, managers were careful to recognize the role that particular circumstances played in members’ deviance, as well as the conditions surrounding an issue and how it was addressed. For example, at a performance review roundtable, Project Manager Colleen couched her developmental feedback to Analyst Jeana in the context of Jeana being in a complicated project with “a lot of moving parts, tight deadlines, a lot of ramp up needed on the client and client context, and . . . a tough industry to get to know very quickly” (2015-06-15_O).

Third, managers rationalized sanctions, enacting them in a matter-of-fact fashion, devoid of apparent emotion and sentiment. In my observations of performance review roundtables, I
noticed that managers tried explicitly to take the sentiment out of the evaluations and considerations. Managers were also coached to not convey sanctions in a way that made it seem like a personal attack or upbraiding against the consultant’s personality or inherent characteristics. Instead, managers were coached to focus on particular behaviors and actions that needed correction.

The particularized sanctions—private, contextualized, and rationalized—against counternormative behaviors occasionally had the intended managerial effect of gaining conformity through the adjustment of members’ deviant communications. Senior Associate Aldric, for example, had been sanctioned for enacting counternormative behavior of aggrievedly complaining. Aldric said he learned his lesson, seeking to maintain his performance level by framing critiques in less stark terms and with a clearer recommended action plan. He reasoned, “you know, it’s never, it’s never good to make enemies and have to repair fences at the senior Partner level” (2014-01-16_I).

**Generalization of Sanction Stories: Circulation, Abstraction, and Mythologization**

Once a sanction has occurred, however, it becomes interactional history. Members can recount sanctions, in accounts that I call sanction stories. These sanction stories can take on lives of their own. Whereas managers often couched their specific sanction events in particularized contexts, as members produced sanction stories, these stories could become generalized. That is, sanction stories could become widespread, schematized, and could be attached with sentiments, images, and assumptions. Members generalized sanction stories through three interpenetrating processes: circulation, abstraction, and mythologization.
Circulation of Sanction Stories

As mentioned, managers’ delivery of sanctions to members were relatively private affairs at ConsultingCo. Yet, awareness of sanctions was not limited to those who were directly sanctioned. Stories of sanctions on deviant behavior *circulated* widely throughout the organization, diffusing through conversation and word-of-mouth, becoming effectively quite public. So, even for members who had not been directly sanctioned, it became clear that senior members could become displeased when they encountered counternormative behavior and could enact sanctions.

The circulation of sanction stories manifested itself in several ways. First, through interactions, members who were directly sanctioned conveyed stories of their sanctions to other members. Raquel noted that when people were sanctioned, those people often spread word and warned others of their experiences, as “helpful advice”. Others, then, end up with the cultural knowledge of sanctions as well. “When people go off-course,” she said, “there are repercussions for them” and “then everybody else [hears] about it” (2015-09-29_I).

Second, members heard sanction stories from sanctioners themselves. In an interview, Project Manager Bethany noted that she recalled a Partner “at one point was complaining about people complaining about their feelings on things.” Bethany concluded that the Partner had enacted sanctions on others for their counternormative behavior of complaining, although she noted that the Partner did not mention which “people” he sanctioned for their complaints. He now seemed to be conveying those sanctions to her, she said, because he was venting, out of his own frustration. She elaborated, “It seemed like his annoyance was: ‘I have mouths to feed, I’m working on that. If the side effect of that is [that] you’re not as happy, like, buck up and shut up, because you wouldn’t have any job without me going out there and selling’” (2015-06-19_I).
Associate Peter also recalled hearing a similar story from another Partner. Peter told me that the Partner expressed feeling exasperated; in the Partner’s mind, leaders were making efforts to ease tensions, and he wondered why junior members anxiously complained. Offhandedly, the Partner told Peter that he had informally sanctioned others for their complaints, but it seemed to Peter that the Partner was just confiding in him (2014-08-06_O). And Project Manager Isabel, too, noted that a Partner “voiced to me that he’s frustrated that people complain.” According to Isabel, this Partner “doesn’t have a tolerance for listening to complaints.” Instead, Isabel said, the Partner is a consummate “problem-solver” and “needs a problem statement of what’s going on at ConsultingCo” that is paired with some solutions or recommendations, rather than complaints without solutions (2014-09-18_O). So, whether members were directly sanctioned by leaders, heard warning tales from members about getting sanctioned, or heard from leaders expressing their frustrations, sanction stories on counternormative communications of various kinds circulated throughout the membership at ConsultingCo.

*Abstraction of Sanction Stories*

Abstraction was another important process where stories of sanctions moved from particularized to generalized. At ConsultingCo, members often abstracted sanction stories, stripping them of contextual information surrounding the sanction event. Even though the sanction events themselves usually involved a large deal of contextualization, in telling their stories, members often abstracted sanction stories from both interpersonal and circumstantial context.

Members who conveyed sanction stories often anonymized the people involved in the story, self-consciously stripping out information containing the names and identifying
information of specific interactants in the sanction experience. Members even used terms like “person” or “individual” to conceal people’s gender alongside anonymizing them. Raquel, for example, recounted sanction stories of unnamed members informally being sanctioned by an unnamed sanctioners—all of whom were described without identifiers and with terms like “this person,” “this individual,” and “they” throughout the stories to conceal people’s identities and genders (2014-09-23_I; 2015-03-05_I; 2015-11-03_I). Similarly, Alberta conveyed a sanction story, noting that an actor said, “We need to take this person off the team” (2014-03-11_I).

Members also often de-contextualized sanction stories of the particular circumstances and conditions surrounding the sanction. Members who de-contextualized such stories did so ostensibly with the motivation of protecting the reputations of the people involved, but also because as the sanction stories circulated, there is a natural loss of information as stories are passed around from person to person. As Eric said, “through informal channels, um, a lot of things get lost, right?” (2014-03-11_I).

The process of abstraction is thus interrelated to the process of circulation. As sanction stories are circulated from person to person, they can be easily abstracted, with contextual information being lost due to the low-fidelity nature of verbal communication and the limitations of human memory and cognition. And through abstraction, a story stripped of context can become effectively schematized and simplified, which makes the story all the more easily circulatable.

Mythologization of Sanction Stories

Finally, sanction stories also become generalized through mythologization, where members reified sanction stories into organizational tales, with associated emotions and imagistic
symbols. In contrast to rationalized sanctions, in which sanctions are conveyed matter-of-factly, mythologized sanction stories become less of concrete events and more of conceptual fables, adorned with various sentiments, images, and assumptions. The predominant sentiment adorning these sanction stories was fear, but the images and assumptions associated with sanction stories were diverse. Here, I describe several kinds of sanction stories and how members mythologized them.

**Mythologizing performance-review sanction stories.** Members mythologized stories of people being sanctioned in performance reviews. Having heard sanction stories of members getting chastised in performance reviews, many members came to adorn these stories with sentiments of fear and anxiety. Senior Associate Thorpe said that he and other members were often “anxious about reviews” (2014-02-06_I). Analyst Audrey, likewise, admitted that “there’s . . . this insecurity for everyone about performance” (2014-01-23_I). And Alberta noted that generalized sanction stories “driv[e]” what she called “a culture of fear”. She described sanctions by managers as being at the root of prevalent fear at the firm, saying, “people are just terrified of screwing up all the time,” she said. She added that it “sounds ridiculous and dramatic,” but, she insisted, “the feeling that's associated with that is so strong” (2014-08-12_I).

Members adorned performance-review sanction stories with evocative images. The adornment of stories with images is powerful because the images infuse into the story particular elements that might not have been in the original stories. Some members recounted sanction stories by using the image of “black marks,” a visual metaphor that infused the sanction story with the notion of irreversibility, as it encapsulated a narrative of someone getting marked with a permanent stigma on their performance record. Associate Alberta, for example, brought up the notion of a “black mark,” in part of her sanction story of getting labeled as an ineffective
communicator. She emphasized the irrevocability of the mark, saying “that if a single Partner just decides that you’re not going—[that] you don’t have a future at the firm—you’re just done. . . . You can't recover from that, no matter what you do” (2014-08-12_I). Even leaders and managers could attribute images to sanction stories, even if they do not themselves believe that the sanction stories are valid, as they talk about the perceptions of other members in the firm. Partner Lyndon said, for example, “Some people think that . . . you can’t remove the stain of a really bad project” (2014-07-08_I). And during a meeting where professional staff members discussed organizational challenges, Project Manager Isabel mused that “there’s . . . fear that every bad thing is going to go on the performance review,” which members felt were a “black mark” that threatened “getting promoted” or just generally “having bad things written about you [on performance reviews]” (2014-09-18_O).

Members also attributed the image of a “credit score” in recounting performance-review sanction stories, which, contrastingly, imbued into sanction stories the idea of reversibility but which also emphasized the difficulty of recovering from sanction. Associate Peter recounted the sanction story of an Associate he knew, who he said “was put in a position to run [a set of focus group interviews] and [the Associate] bombed, he absolutely bombed, right . . . [It] fucked up his credit score, right? It really messed up his credit.” In telling the sanction story, Associate Peter adorned it with the image of a credit score. After telling the sanction story, Peter added, generally, that “the way we handle mistakes at our company is like a credit score.” “If you make a mistake,” he said, “it will take a couple months before that mistake is wiped from your record.” A mistake, claimed Peter, can turn a well-regarded person into someone who is “set . . . up for failure”. Peter concluded, “You make that mistake, you have to earn your way back from it. There’s no, like, benefit of the doubt, like, as far as I can tell.” (2014-01-19_I). In yet another
image attribution, as she gave me a ride home, Project Manager Isabel adorned her own sanction story with an evocative image of a “police citation,” confiding in me that she felt like she got a “police citation when I would mess something up” (2014-09-18_O). The image of a police citation conveyed the sense of an accusational, confrontational tenor of being sanctioned.

Members also adorned performance-review sanction stories with assumptions and elaborations of how the sanctions took place. Senior Associate Zia made assumptions based on sanction stories of year-end performance reviews. Having never been in such a setting, she theorized around what it could look like: “They [managers] definitely talk at the end of year. I think what happens, what I heard, is that they put your name up on the board and they just talk about you for how long they need [to]. And [they] determine where you are in the ranking and [whether] you are going to move up or not or whatever” (2014-07-16_I). Another assumption around performance-review sanction stories was theorization that if members did not hear explicitly that they were doing a good job, it meant the worst: that their performance reviews would show they were performing poorly. Analyst Rose said:

I worry about, like, ‘Oh gosh, was that the best work that I could have turned in?’ . . . You know, it’s hard for me to evaluate the work. . . . I don’t know what it means to turn in excellent work here. So it’s hard to know, like, okay, ‘What's my best and what is the firm’s best and how can I get there?’ (2014-08-12_I)

Likewise, Analyst Camilla admitted:

I’m really nervous about my final review . . . Probably, like, the one thing they [managers] are going to look at is ‘Has she improved’ . . . It’s ‘Has she improved on [communication] structure?’ And that’s a huge component of what [a] consultant is, right? . . . So it makes me nervous because, like, I know that’s the thing they’re going to look at” (2014-08-12_I).
But because both Rose and Camilla had not heard explicitly about how they were doing, they were feeling nervous and anxiously theorizing about how they would be rated on their final year-end reviews.

**Mythologizing firing sanction stories.** In addition to mythologizing performance-review sanction stories, members also mythologized stories of people getting fired. These mythologized sanction stories were particularly prevalent in the aftermath of lay-offs. Members, unsurprisingly, associated these stories with sentiments of fear. Associate Firth recalled, “there was a year when everyone was fired here,” and this sanction story induced him in a sense of fear, saying, that he was anxious because “there’s this notion that I might lose my job at any point” (2014-02-04_I). Even managers recognized the sentiments adorning firing sanction stories. Partner Linda recognized that members could “feel the fear” after a round of terminations (2013-10-27_O), and Principal Heath said “people are more nervous now . . . always worried that there will be lay-offs.” (2014-01-23_I).

Members adorned firing sanction stories with evocative images. Analyst Audrey invoked an image of a “chopping block,” emphasizing the grimness surrounding firing sanction stories:

> When you talk to people about how things are, there are just huge insecurities about “Am I performing? Are other people getting this sort of feedback? Am I good enough? Are they going to fire me?” Like, if I’m just . . . meeting expectations, . . . am I on the chopping block? Just, sort of, these crazy melodramatic insecurities that—then sometimes someone is fired and they’re totally validated. And everyone gets nervous again. (2014-01-23_I)

Members also adorned firing sanction stories with assumptions, theorizations, and elaborations. Senior Associate Thorpe noted that the “worry,” “anxiety,” and “stress” around performance and keeping one’s job was exacerbated by his theorizations surrounding the firing sanction story, fretting about the “way that people left [the firm].” He said, “people were leaving [ConsultingCo] quietly and, I don’t know, I think that left a little bit of a discomfort. Because if
someone’s leaving quietly, you know, people read into that.” Someone leaving quietly, he said, was “opposed to, I don’t know, . . . like, the whole farewell email thing,” where “people would send out farewell emails and everyone, like, gives someone a pat on the back.” He went on, darkly, “Two people I know that, like, left . . . when I was starting—there was no farewell email” (2014-02-06_I). Another theorization around firing sanction stories was around being unstaffed; this theorization involved the worry that being unstaffed could be a sign of being unneeded for the firm, a portent of an impending termination. Leah connected the firing stories with the anxiety that she and others felt from being unstaffed. She said, “When people are like 50 percent unstaffed, . . . there's like anxiety . . . You could feel this anxiety growing, growing, and growing.” Leah continued, “Well, they've been unstaffed for five months, so clearly there's something going on here . . . so that was worrisome to me” (2015-04-04_I).

Mythologization can be related to circulation and abstraction. As stories were circulated, elaborations and adornments could be added idiosyncratically by people who circulated them, and some of these adornments could stick to the story as it circulated. And, in turn, mythologizations of stories—partially because the stories became laden emotions, images, and assumptions—could become more memorable and circulatable to other organizational members. The abstraction of sanction stories also allowed for the stories to be more easily mythologized, since stories deprived of interpersonal and circumstantial contexts could more facilely be elaborated with emotional content and symbols like images.

**Generalized Sanction Stories as Cultural Justification for Communicative Restraint**

The generalization of sanction stories helped to raise the sanction stories from dyadic gossip to a part of the organizational cultural toolkit, publically accessible by and salient to
organizational members. As with other cultural toolkits, members could draw on these tools as justifications for action, or inaction (Swidler, 1986). Members’ *application* of generalized sanction stories involved drawing upon them as justifications for refraining from an entire category of action, rather than the specific deviant actions that managers had intended to suppress with their original, particularized sanctions. Members at ConsultingCo applied generalized sanction stories as cultural justifications for communicative restraint in general and keeping silent about their concerns.

Because sanction stories were circulated widely, sanction stories were accessible to members well beyond those who were sanctioned. Members who had never been directly sanctioned mentioned at various points in interviews that they were nervous to bring up issues to managers. For instance, Analyst Renee had never been directly sanctioned, but in my interview with her, she drew on generalized sanction stories in her anxieties about giving feedback. She drew on generalized examples of people getting sanctioned when trying to give feedback, fretting that there were not truly anonymous avenues for feedback. Any person in the company who collected feedback, she said, could potentially influence members’ evaluations in some way or another. She said, “there’s not, like, . . . a person I can go to and, like, say things anonymously.” Even administrators in the human resources team were seen as “[having] control over your job . . . and . . . communicat[ing] directly with other people in the company” (2014-08-12_I).

Because sanction stories were abstracted, members could see sanction stories not in terms of particularized sanctions against specific actors doing specific things but rather in terms of a blanket prohibition on an entire category of action, such as asking questions that challenge the status-quo. Analyst Lawrence, who also had never been sanctioned directly, told me in an
interview that he did not feel that he could safely ask the work-life balance questions on his mind, fearful of the evaluative consequences he might suffer in performance reviews. He said:

Right now, I’m so afraid to challenge it [the existing work-life balance status quo] because I’m afraid that, like, it will come back in my performance review or something that I was, like, whining about – [Look,] I don’t have [a] problem with meeting, I think working sessions are terrific, [and] I think a lot of them do need to be in person. [But] why do they need to be in person at the end of the day on Thursday and not any other time on Thursday? And also, like, I would like to feel comfortable asking that question, because I’m afraid to ask that question right now. . . . It will just reflect poorly on me or I’ll look ungrateful or, like, I’m not trying to work hard, which is not at all how I feel. (2014-11-01_I)

Here, Lawrence emphasizes that he does not want to shirk at his job and is willing to work hard, but he felt he was struggling with his work-life balance and did not feel he could bring up the question with his managers without it “reflect[ing] poorly” on him.

Finally, the mythologization of the sanction stories helped the sanction stories be more easily applicable because, adorned with sentiments, images, and assumptions, the mythologized sanction stories were more memorable and readily accessible. For example, the fact that the vivid notion of “black marks” was discussed by multiple participants, including Alberta, Lyndon, and Isabel, suggests its accessibility and applicability. Alberta, for example, readily applied the black mark notion to make a generalized justification for communicative restraint, saying, “If you constantly penalize people for trivial crap, they’re fundamentally going to stop doing things that are really good” like speaking up about issues. She continued, “[I’m] less likely to take initiative because I’m so scared about what might happen if I do something out of line” (2014-08-12_I).

Although I have characterized managers as enacting many of the sanctions that led down this path, managers themselves were not immune to having these generalized sanction stories affect their ability to raise issues to people even higher up in the organization. In fact, the cultural justifications for silence could even extend to managers themselves. In a meeting with Project
Manager Colleen, she admitted to me that “We have a feedback-oriented culture . . . [but] I don’t think there’s that permission with everyone here.” When on a project she felt at some point that “we [as a team] didn’t really know what we were doing . . . [but] we didn’t have that conversation.” She felt communicatively restrained. In some ways, she said, “the biggest problem we have [at ConsultingCo] is transparency.” (2014-10-28_O).

Overall, the findings show that it is possible for managers to overreach with their sanctions on counternormative behaviors. ConsultingCo managers sought to shape individuals’ behaviors through particularized sanctions, and by enacting particularized sanctions on counternormative communications, they might have gained some conformity. But as tales of those sanctions were recounted from person to person in the organization, the sanction stories became generalized through circulation, abstraction, and mythologization. The generalization of those stories allowed members (including those who were never themselves sanctioned) to draw upon them as cultural justifications for not communicating issues to management at all. Thus, by silencing particular counternormative communications, managerial sanctions—through the generalization of sanction stories—gradually and eventually enabled the unanticipated consequence of silencing other kinds (even potentially conforming kinds) of communication.

DISCUSSION

Theorizing Sanction Overreach as Double-Edged Sword of Organizational Culture

From my case study findings, I induce a theoretical model that shows how sanctions can lead to unanticipated consequences through processes of moving from particularized sanction events to generalized sanction stories that can be used as cultural justifications for general communicative restraint. The model is summarized in figure 2.
As the model shows, communication norms are socially constructed in every organization, along with implicit or explicit notions of what is normative or counternormative. While there are many instances in which members conform with communications norms, members can also communicate in ways that managers deem counternormative. Managers can respond with particularized sanctions to counternormative communication, whether informally chastising members in meetings or formally devaluing members in performance reviews. These sanctions might elicit particularized conformity, where sanctioned members, chastened, conform with the specific prescriptions suggested in the managerial sanctions. This conformity thereby reinforces communication norms.

Yet, there may also be unanticipated consequences of managerial sanctions. Members can give accounts of sanctions to other members, producing sanction stories. And members can
**generalize sanction stories** through a set of three interrelated processes, which, as mentioned in the findings, all reinforce one another. Sanction stories can be *circulated* throughout the organizational membership, as gossip spreads and information diffuses from sanctioned or sanctioners to other members, effectively making the sanction stories public. Even if very few members are actually sanctioned, there is the possibility for widespread effects through casual associations (Pontikes, Negro, & Rao, 2010). Sanction stories can also become *abstracted*, removing contextual information from the sanction story like the people and the circumstances involved. And sanction stories can become *mythologized*, emotionally infused with fear, adorned with images like “black marks,” and elaborated with assumptions and theorizations.

When circulated, abstracted, and mythologized enough, these generalized sanction stories can become part of the *cultural toolkit* of the organization, publicly and readily accessible by an organization’s membership. In various contexts, members can then draw on these cultural tools to *culturally justify* an entire category of action or inaction. One particular category of inaction—staying silent or a *generalized communicative restraint*—can therefore be facilely justified, even for members who had never been sanctioned and for communications that would have conformed with norms.

**Theoretical Contributions to Literature on Sanctions and Conformity**

This chapter can contribute to the literatures on sanctions and on conformity. First, my study theorizes a novel set of emergent processes that can produce unanticipated consequences from managerial sanctions. The existing literature tends to suggest either that sanctions will produce the expected consequence of conformity or that there are one of two responses to sanctions that could produce unexpected consequences: decoupling (Meyer & Rowan, 1977) or
resistance (Roscigno & Hodson, 2004). Yet, I find in my study subtler, emergent, and gradual processes that fall neither into the category of decoupling or resistance. The generalization of sanction stories occurs not because members seek to resist or to decouple—but rather through the normal, natural course of members’ communication, interaction, cognitive schematization, and idiosyncratic elaboration. My study therefore contributes to the literature by emphasizing these emergent processes, adding another possible response to sanctions and theorizing a novel pathway by which sanctions can have unintended consequences.

**Theoretical Contributions to Literature on Voice**

With this chapter, I can also make several contributions to the literature on communication and voice in organizations. First, I point to the importance of taking a social constructionist perspective in understanding organizational voice phenomena. The existing literature on voice and silence has imposed an etic, scholarly criterion of what “voice” constitutes—of employee voice being “constructive” in its intent (Morrison, 2011). But I argue that the social definition of this criterion of “constructiveness” is socially and contextually contingent. In my study, I show how the notion of acceptable and “constructive” voice is socially constructed by managers at ConsultingCo through their attempts to socialize members into organizational norms.

Second, by adopting a social constructionist standpoint, I point to a novel pathway by which collective communicative restraint can emerge. Existing literature on voice and silence has largely black-boxed the cultural and interpretive processes by which a collective silence can arise (Morrison, 2011), so my study contributes by theorizing the ways in which sanction experiences can be circulated, abstracted, and mythologized into cultural tools of fear that can be
used to justify silence. Third, my study contributes to the voice literature by emphasizing the role of emotions in silence and bringing a cultural perspective to the study of emotions and silence. Much of the voice literature has emphasized cognition, and, as Morrison admits, emotions are understudied but theoretically important in the voice literature (2011: 384). Studies in the voice literature that have examined emotions (Detert & Edmondson, 2011; Kish-Gephart, Detert, Treviño, & Edmondson, 2009) have mostly taken a micro-level and psychological perspective on emotions, neglecting to examine from a meso-level and cultural perspective how emotions can become integrated into an organizational culture, becoming part of a cultural justification for silence. My study shows that sanction stories can be generalized into organizational cultural tools that can represent both interpretive meaning about the sanction experiences as well as emotional content of fear.

**Practical Contributions**

My study could make several contributions to organizational practice. First, because managerial sanctions are common in most organizations, this study underscores that managers should pay attention to the downstream processes and consequences of their sanctions. In particular, my study might suggest that managers look out for the processes of circulation, abstraction, and mythologization among members. By finding a way to ameliorate those processes, managers might stem the slippage between their sanctions and their intended consequences. However, managers ought to be especially careful, though, in finding a way to ameliorate the processes of generalization of sanction stories without engendering more downstream effects. After all, a natural managerial response to stem the circulation, abstraction, and mythologization of stories might be through sanctions on gossip, undue extraction of
context, and adornment of stories. But additional sanctions might lead to even more downstream production of stories that members can then come to use in ways that managers did not expect.

Second, because enabling employee voice is crucial to the health of an organization, managers in many modern organizations would likely prefer to enable voice efforts and inhibit silence. By understanding the model of how silence can be culturally enabled despite organizational norms that ostensibly espouse the importance of voice, practitioners can glean insights into how to decrease the chance that generalized communicative restraint occurs in their organizations. Practitioners could recognize, for example, that strong managerial sanctions play an important role in enabling this communicative restraint. While practitioners might assume that sanctions are important to the maintenance of desired organizational norms—enforcing communicative norms of problem-solving, for example—sanctions can have side effects. These sanctions could go beyond the intended purpose of reinforcing desired norms and instead start a process in which stories of sanctions get circulated, abstracted, and mythologized into a cultural toolkit that emphasizes fear of sanctions in general. Practitioners could use this understanding of the side effects of sanctions to their advantage, by being judicious, gentle, and thoughtful in sanctioning workers. Managers could ameliorate the blow of sanctions on workers by emphasizing, for example, their commitments to supporting and helping workers grow at the same time that they gently advise behaviors more consistent with organizational norms. My study therefore contributes to practice by pointing out that ordinary managerial activities of enacting sanctions to reinforce norms can have unintended consequences.
Conclusion

In all, my chapter suggests another way in which organizational culture can be a double-edged sword. In many organizations, managers intend to reinforce organizational norms through sanctions on counternormative behavior. Yet, sanctions can have runaway, unintended effects. Even if sanctions are confined to a small portion of the organizational membership and confined to particular deviant behaviors, stories of sanctions can become publicly accessible across the organization and can become generalized into bits of cultural knowledge. These cultural bits, then, can be used as justifications for refraining from entire categories of communication, an effect that twists away from what managers intended to encourage. We know that organizational culture is hard to manage. But, this chapter sheds light on a particular path by which culture seems to resist its utilizers, by which cultural forces allow reality to squirm away from actors’ ideals.
CHAPTER 5:
DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Our journey has taken us from theory to field, and in this final chapter, we return to theory again, to the abstractions with which social scientists can accumulate stocks of more and better explanations of empirical phenomena. In this chapter, I discuss the implications of my dissertation research. First, I will offer a synthesis of themes from my empirical chapters. Second, I will then posit the theoretical implications of my research. My research contributes to the literature on organizational culture by accounting for processes of how interpretive ambiguity and sanctions might enable the utilization of cultural resources to go awry of actors’ intents. Third, I explore the practical implications of my study, describing some potential implications for organizational practitioners—for leaders, managers, and workers. Even though practitioners trumpet the importance of organizational culture, there are many pitfalls that await practitioners who believe that culture can be easily manipulated for their ends. By sensitizing practitioners to the specific, theoretical ways in which the utilization of cultural resources can go awry of their intentions, I provide insights that might shape how organizations anticipate and deal with such double-edged possibilities.

A SYNTHESIS OF DOUBLE-EDGED CULTURAL FINDINGS

Even though my empirical chapters—chapters 3 and 4—concern distinct empirical phenomena with distinct explanatory processes, there are both overarching themes that connect them as well as contrasts that distinguish them. In this section of my discussion, I offer a
synthesis of both overarching themes and contrasts that theoretically relates the findings in my two empirical chapters, illustrated schematically in figure 3.

Figure 3: 
Synthesis of Double-Edged Culture Models

The model in chapter 3 and that in chapter 4 exhibit some overarching themes. The first part of the overarching story of both models is that there is some managerial intent behind managerial action. That intent in chapter 3 was the intent to mobilize members, while in chapter 4, the managerial intent was to gain conformity of members to the particular behaviors prescribed in organizational norms. Second, managerial intent to some extent drives managerial action. But that managerial action—whether a utilization of a central expression in the organization or a sanction effort—is often ambiguous.
Third, there are different ways in which recipients of a managerial action can interpret the action. In other words, *recipient interpretation* of an ambiguous managerial action can go in a lot of different directions. My empirical chapters show that there are at least two *pathways that show how* recipient interpretations can differ: divergent articulation or generalization. Chapter 3 shows that the “Impact” expression was *divergently articulated* as Social Impact and Personal Impact, divergent from the managerial interpretation of Client Impact. Chapter 4 shows that recipients’ interpretations of sanctions were *generalized* such that the scope of the sanction was expanded beyond the managerially intended particularized scope.

My empirical chapters also suggest at least two sets of *reasons that suggest why* recipient interpretations can differ, both posited in chapter 3. I posited that one reason why recipient interpretations can differ is because there is a lot of *experiential diversity* both across-persons as well as within-person in an organization, and this experiential diversity shapes how individuals make their interpretations (Swidler, 2001). A given individual has considerable intra-individual experiential diversity, stemming from their vast stock of pre-entry experiences (prior to organizational entry) from their occupational, demographic, familial backgrounds. And intra-individual experiential diversity is enhanced by post-entry experiences, such as the different projects that one can get staffed on. And organizations usually have far more than one individual; this fact expands the experiential diversity in the organization even further, as we account for across-person experiential diversity within an organization. A second reason why recipient interpretations can differ is because of *situational diversity* within an organization, that is, the variety of situations in which individuals might find themselves making interpretations. There is considerable temporal variability in an individual’s interpretations. Allowing “Impact” to simply resonate at the beginning of one’s career at ConsultingCo might be sufficient, and interpreting
“Impact” in a very articulated way might not be so important at that early stage. But later in one’s career, it might be become quite important to interpret Impact in clearer and more articulated ways.

Fourth, each of these extremely hard-to-predict recipient interpretations could be used for *recipient action* in a huge variety of ways. In chapter 3, I showed that members utilized the notion of Impact to justify their dissatisfaction with their work and de-mobilization from the organization. In chapter 4, I showed that members could use the generalized sanction stories to justify their generalize communicative restraint on organizational issues. The variety of potential recipient outcomes and actions, then, is also vast.

With this synthesis of the models from my empirical chapters in mind, we can understand how difficult it is to manage culture, to utilize cultural resources in strategic ways. Given this, it might not be unusual or extreme to observe unintended consequences from cultural efforts. In fact, unanticipated consequences of cultural efforts might be quite commonplace and therefore even more deserving of explanation and thorough theorization.

**THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS**

This brings me to my theoretical implications. While each of my empirical chapters offers distinct theoretical implications for particular literatures, this dissertation overall seeks to enrich the literature on culture in organizations. I aim to contribute to scholarship on culture in and around organizations by theorizing how a cultural resource can be double-edged. The current study offers several advances to scholarship. According to much of the contemporary literature, culture can be used as a resource by actors, with agency and intention (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001; Swidler, 1986; Weber & Dacin, 2011). In drawing from cultural toolkits to build strategies
of action, actors such as organizations intentionally utilize culture for a variety of purposes (Swidler, 1986). Yet, the intended use of culture might give way to unintentional consequences.

The first contribution, then, of my dissertation is that it draws attention to the potential for culture to be double-edged, to have unintended consequences contravening intended effects. Like contemporary cultural scholarship, the current study recognizes the agentic and strategic use of culture by actors (e.g., Bertels, Howard-Grenville, & Pek, 2016). But unlike the literature, it answers Merton’s (1936) call for the study of unanticipated consequences by focusing attention on the possibility for an organization’s agentic use of culture to go awry of its intended purpose. In chapter 3, I showed that the Impact expression utilized by ConsultingCo to mobilize members had unintended consequences of allowing later de-mobilization of various members. In chapter 4, I showed that managers’ sanctions to enforce communication norms can overreach in creating a cultural toolkit justifying general communicative restraint. By suggesting that culture can be double-edged, my dissertation offers intriguing alternative framings to existing studies consistent with the idea that cultural elements can have unintended consequences (e.g., Castilla & Benard, 2010; Kunda, 1992; Martin, Feldman, Hatch, & Sitkin, 1983; Martin, Knopoff, & Beckman, 1998: 460; Sonenshein, 2010; Tilcsik, 2010; Turco, 2012). My dissertation therefore emphasizes that the double-edge of culture is a phenomenon worth theorizing, and the potential occurrence of double-edged culture in others’ studies suggests that there is some generality to the phenomena that I observed.

Indeed, my second contribution is that I suggest that there is some potential for my dissertation’s phenomena to have some analytic generalizability; with my studies, I could shed light on constructs “at a conceptual level higher than that of the specific case” (Yin, 2014: 40-41). Though I cannot infer statistical generalizability from a case study (Yin, 2014), I suggest
that chapter 3’s phenomenon of an ambiguous expression might be analytically general and found in other settings. For example, scholars have pointed to various cultural elements that might be considered ambiguous, such as “market” (Jabko, 2006), “teamwork” (Gibson & Zellmer-Bruhn, 2001), “partnership” (Contu & Girei, 2014), “revolution” (Sewell Jr, 1996), “originality” (Guetzkow, Lamont, & Mallard, 2004), “globalization” (Fiss & Hirsch, 2005), “relevance” (Antebay, 2013), “merit” (Rivera, 2015), and even “love” (Swidler, 2001; Yeung, 2005).

In addition, chapter 4’s phenomenon of sanctions going overboard—where particularized sanctions become generalized stories that provide cultural justification for restricting general communication—might be found in other settings as well. For example, parental socialization and disciplining of children—particularly working-class parental strategies—often has unintended consequences (Calarco, 2014; Lareau, 2011). Parents who sanction their child’s particularized behavior of, say, “disrespectful back-talk” might find that the child generalizes the sanction story, making it a cultural justification for refraining from help-seeking at school. Such reluctance could be detrimental to the child’s academic performance, due to teachers’ intersubjective views of what constitutes quality (Calarco, 2011). Another example might be when professors socialize their students, enacting sanctions—typically informal—on students’ particularized behaviors. A professor might sanction his student for not random-sampling in her cross-national survey work; the student might then generalize the sanction story to believe that random-sampling is necessary for qualitative work as well, using the generalized sanction story to refrain from any qualitative work that does not employ random-sampling, which could have unintended consequences for how she conducts and evaluates scholarly work (Lamont, 2009).
My dissertation’s third contribution is that it not only recognizes the possibility of double-edged culture but also contributes further by offering theoretical models that give scholars a starting point for explaining how culture can be double-edged. I accounted for two mechanistic sets of processes that enabled the utilization of culture to go awry of utilizers’ intents. In chapter 3, I theorized the characteristic that stood at the root of the cultural element’s unintentional consequences—ambiguity—as well as the downstream processes of resonance, deferral, reflection, articulation, assessment, and divergence that flowed from this characteristic and enacted the two edges of culture, mobilizing and de-mobilizing members. In chapter 4, I theorized around a prevalent form of cultural control—particularized sanctions—to suggest the downstream processes of generalization (circulation, abstraction, and mythologization) and application that made possible the overreach of a managerial sanction effort, inhibiting not just a particularized behavior but a generalized category of action.

The downstream processes of ambiguity and of sanctions in chapter 3 and chapter 4 respectively thus offer possible “sensitizing concepts” (Blumer, 1969) for future research. I encourage future scholarship to build upon, test, or elaborate my models’ elements using different methodological approaches or complementary theoretical frameworks. For chapter 3, a productive future study might, for instance, further specify the model by comparing, within a single setting, multiple ambiguous expressions and considering the conditions in which some ambiguous expressions have double-edged effects and others do not. One possible approach to such a study might involve characterizing the vocabularies of different social groupings in an organization (Loewenstein, Ocasio, & Jones, 2012), finding the multiple points of vocabulary and cultural overlap, measuring the cross-group ambiguity of those overlaps, and observing the communicative and cultural processes that occur for these vocabulary overlaps. Such a study
might find that certain kinds of ambiguous expressions lead to the downstream processes of resonance, articulation, and divergence, and others do not. Similarly, for chapter 4, future studies could elaborate the sanction overreach model by comparing several particularized sanctions, identifying conditions in which some particularized sanctions lead to downstream generalization processes and others do not.

**PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS**

Organizational practitioners have long yearned to “master” culture in order to effectively manage their workforce. There are several practical implications that could be drawn from this study, its theoretical models, and their synthesis.

One implication is that my study validates warnings that organizational culture is difficult to control (Schein, 2009). As my synthesis above showed, there are a wide variety of reasons that organizational cultural efforts can go awry. A second implication is for practitioners, especially managers, to dedicate particular attention to the possibility of organizational culture to not just be difficult to control but for it to be explicitly double-edged—not simply one-sidedly positive or negative. The managerial literature has been rife with either sanguine views of organizational culture or outright indictments of organizational cultures as driving negative events. But my study suggests that organizational culture is neither good, nor bad, but rather can have both desired and undesired effects. By allocating more attention to that explicit possibility, managers can point their attentions in a productive direction.

Speaking of pointing attention in the right direction, the third implication is that this dissertation points to the specific areas of double-edged culture that are potential challenge points and tensions. The findings from this dissertation not only validate that culture is difficult
to control but also posit *how* a utilization of culture might run amok of its initial purpose. For example, a key challenge point is that interpretive ambiguity is inherent to managerial action, and useful for certain purposes, such as an ambiguous expression mobilizing members with a wide variety of experiences—but ambiguity is also potentially dangerous in that the expression can be divergently interpreted, which can lead to problems down the line. Another key challenge point that is particularly relevant to managers is the tension between under-enforcement and over-enforcement of behaviors and interpretations. Chapter 3 shows that the under-enforcement of the Impact expression allowed for the space for members to divergently interpret the expression. Chapter 4, however, shows the potential for over-enforcement resulting in problems, as it showed that sanctions on communication behaviors were received by members in ways that overreached managerial intents.

And finally, a fourth implication is that managers can use the specific models presented in chapters 3 and 4 to review potential paths by which events could unfold in their organizations if they are to use ambiguous expressions and sanctions on behavior. Even though managing culture is inherently difficult, the more information that managers have about how events and interpretations have in the past occurred, the more managers can undertake their fraught, difficult but potentially rewarding cultural endeavors with caution and awareness.
APPENDIX A:

ADDRESSING ALTERNATIVE EXPLANATIONS FOR CHAPTER 3

My account in chapter 3 suggests that an ambiguous expression can be linked to double-edged effects of mobilizing and de-mobilizing members. I do not suggest that there were no other relevant factors in explaining both mobilization and de-mobilization of members, but I do suggest that the ambiguous cultural element was a highly salient, relevant, and theoretically productive factor that did profoundly matter in explaining these outcomes. However, it is worth considering several alternative accounts.

First, was it possible that what mattered most in explaining the de-mobilization of certain members at the individual level was human capital and performance? For example, is it the case that individuals who left were poor performers, and the exit rationales of Personal Impact were simply rationalizations told by leavers who could not adequately perform? I believe that this is not a viable explanation because I studied the individuals who voluntarily left, and they mostly had average or even well above-average performance ratings throughout their tenure at ConsultingCo. Some of the consultants who left were even widely considered “superstars” who showed very strong performance. The flipside, then, of this alternative account is that consultants who were above-average or superstar performers may have exited not because they were unhappy, but rather because their superior human capital allowed them to be presented with better job opportunities (e.g., they were recruited to other firms by corporate head-hunters) that compelled them to break away from ConsultingCo. Again, there is reason to believe this is not the case. By and large, the above-average and superstar leavers did express unhappiness with their jobs at ConsultingCo and they actively sought out alternative opportunities, citing the
rationales of Personal and Social Impact. Moreover, these alternative opportunities were often not “better” by various objective metrics of pay and stability; many of the leavers left high-paying, stable consulting jobs at ConsultingCo to take on lower-paying, riskier jobs either working at a startup or becoming an entrepreneur. This supports the notion that many leavers did exit because of Social or Personal Impact, divergent articulations from the ambiguous Impact expression.

A last alternative account is that the expression of Impact is invoked simply retrospectively as an ex-post account of events and therefore has little explanatory value. I would suggest, in line with prior scholars, that retrospective account-making can be explanatorily important; as scholars of sensemaking would acknowledge such retrospective accounts can serve “as a springboard to action” (Taylor & Van Every, 2000: 40). Furthermore, my data show that interpretations by participants can temporally precede their decision to leave. For example, my second interview with Blythe was conducted 21 months after she joined ConsultingCo; in this interview she was already using the articulations of Social Impact and Personal Impact to negatively assess her work (2015-06-19_I). My third interview with Blythe was conducted a month after that, where, at that point, she had decided to leave ConsultingCo by joining a startup, citing the same articulations of Social Impact and Personal Impact (2015-07-27_I). Thus, Blythe’s divergent interpretations in the second interview preceded and may have precipitated her decision to leave ConsultingCo.


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