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## Framing Identity & Change in the Experience of Interns

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Framing Identity and Change in the Experience of Interns

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### Abstract

The definition and framing of identity in scholarly work often focuses how an individual conducts identity work in response to identity regulation in order to construct a coherent self. This study expands upon this framework by illuminating the ways that undergraduate interns frame what identity is and the consequences of their framing for their resulting identity construction (identity work). Based on in-depth qualitative interviews, this study demonstrates how participants either framed identity as a stable entity or fluid construct. This study encourages the exploration and discovery the colloquial ways workers define and discuss identity, so that scholars can understand how identity is communicatively constructed and interacted in everyday talk.

*Keywords: identity, identity work, identity regulation, identity construction*

### Framing Identity and Change in the Experience of Interns

Critical scholars note that organizations' power no longer lies in the direct orders of a line manager, the rate of an assembly, or the rules of bureaucracy; organizations' control their employees by influencing and shaping their identities (Barker, 1993; Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007; Deetz, 1992). As control becomes more unobtrusive, individuals aren't as aware of it, which gives them little to no ability to recognize that regulation is occurring or resist to it (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007; Wieland, 2011). The subtle ways that organizations shape employees' identities creates an environment where individuals are unobtrusively molded into ideal workers. As Deetz notes (1992), the place to best see and understand delicate communicative processes such as identity regulation and identity work is at times when they are not normalized, which creates an opening to see them take place as the individual becomes accustomed (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007). Undergraduate students entering the professional sector for the first time in the form of internships provide an opportunity to see identity regulation and identity work because their professional and personal selves are contested and in negotiation given the liminal position that they occupy. The purpose of this paper is to better understand the ways individuals' frame what identity is and how this framing affects their resulting identity work amidst organizational regulations of self. Based on in-depth qualitative interviews with six undergraduate interns, I consider how the interns discuss the ways that they changed throughout their internship and the consequences of their talk for framing what identity is—how they conceptualize what is part of their selves.

### **Identity in Organizational Contexts**

In the last two decades, organizational scholars have become more interested in identity as an area of study (Alvesson, 2010; Homer-Nadesan, 1996; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003;

Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). Organizational communication scholars have studied the phenomena of identity and offered a wide variety of theoretical contributions to the understanding of identity. Scholars believe that by understanding identity, they will better understand every other aspect of the organizational context (Alvesson, 2010; Homer-Nadesan, 1996; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). As one of the most popular topics in organizational studies, identity is defined in various ways and these definitions are disputed among scholars.

One way to understand and interpret the vast field of identity literature is viewing it as being comprised of three primary theoretical perspectives: functionalist, interpretivist, and post-structuralist (Alvesson, 2010; Homer-Nadesan, 1996; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). The functionalist conceptualization of identity has and continues to be the dominating perspective within the field of organizational communication. This theoretical conceptualization is represented in the statement made by Collinson (2003) that reads, “human beings as unitary, coherent, and autonomous individuals who are separate and separable from organizations” (p. 523, quoted in Alvesson, 2010). Scholars studying identity from this perspective focus on the individual as having a concrete, coherent, fixed and consistent identity (Alvesson, 2010; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005).

The second conceptualization of identity is that of the interpretivist. Interpretivists view identity as both emerging from social interactions and being constructed out of various relational expectations (Prichard, 1999). Mead explains:

A person is a personality because he [sic] belongs to a community . . . he takes its language as a medium by which he gets his personality, and then through a process of taking the different roles that all the others furnish he comes to get the attitude of the

members of the community (as quoted in Prichard, 1999, p. 8).

According to Mead, identity is constructed through an active, subjective self that drives all that creates an identity (I) and the objective self, which is the compilation of the perspectives of how others view an individual (me) (Prichard, 1999). This theoretical approach, known as symbolic interactionism, is centered on the concept that identity is constructed, and reconstructed through social interactions. Therefore, interpretivists acknowledge the ability of individuals to maintain some agency, yet they are moderated through the concept that identity is formed through social interactions and therefore individuals' agency is also limited by those that surround them. The interpretivist perspective concludes that individuals do not maintain a concrete identity as assumed by the functionalists. Interpretivists also reject the idea of fragmentation as assumed by the poststructuralist perspective (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). The interpretivist perspective sees the complexity of identity as it is shaped through self, work, and organization (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008).

The third lens to view the theoretical conceptualization of identity is from the view of poststructuralists. As anti-essentialists, they reject the idea that identity lies within the individual in a static sense; rather, they are interested in subject positions that are negotiated and re-negotiated constantly in discourse (Homer-Nadesan, 1996; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). According to Homer-Nadesan (1996), "Poststructuralists locate identity, and the meaning it implies, in language use" (p. 50). By locating identity in language, identities (or subject positions) are seen as multiple, varying, and partial because language holds multiple, varying, and partial meanings in each context. Thus identity from a poststructuralist perspective is never concrete, definite, or complete and is influenced by a multitude of discourses and forces within society. Tracy and Trethewey use the term "crystalized selves" to describe the multiplicity of

discourses and facets that each person's identity contains (2005, p. 170). In defining identity as crystallized, they seek to move away from the idea that individuals have "real" and "fake" identities to instead focus on varying, partial, and multiple identities. Poststructuralists reject the essentialist view of functionalists that assumes individuals maintain a consistent self and identity. Thus, they are more interested in the discourses that shape and routinize subject positions than the individual identity.

In this study, I take the interpretivist perspective of identity to understand agency and limitation that young adults maintain over their identities as they enter the professional world and navigate their contested professional and organizational selves (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). In order to better understand how individuals' identities are shaped through social interaction, and highlight individuals' agency over their identities, I will utilize the interpretivist framework of Alvesson and Willmott (2002). According to Alvesson and Willmott, individuals' identities are shaped within organizational contexts through the process of identity regulation and identity work. In using this framework, I view identity as "the self as reflexively understood by the person" (Giddens, 1991, p. 53). While drawing upon Giddens' (1991) conceptualization of self, I understand identity as the narrative that individuals' construct in order to create a coherent, consistent, socially acceptable self (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Giddens, 1991; Wieland, 2010). Identity can include a variety of aspects of an individual such as his or her personality, demeanor, knowledge, skills and background as they are reflexively enacted.

In this study, I am interested in both 1) the process of constructing a self through identity work and identity regulation and 2) framing what counts as identity. The former—identity construction—refers to the communicative processes by which one crafts a narrative of the self—an answer to the question "Who am I?" The latter—framing identity—refers to

socially constructing what identity is and is not. By understanding how they conceptualize identity through framing, I seek to consider the consequences of particular ways of framing identity for their identity work in how they construct self in response to organizational regulations of self.

Identity regulation is the intentional and unintentional modality by which organizations control and shape members; identity regulation is accomplished both by individual organizational members (e.g., a manager) as well as by other organizational actors (e.g., written texts) (Alvesson & Willmott). Thus organizational control is aimed at the identities of organizational members and attempts to shape individuals into persons who act beneficently for the company (Alvesson & Willmott). Identity regulation occurs through a variety of modalities that target the identities of employees and attempts to regulate its employees through encouraging identity formation and identity transformation. Identity formation is a process that creates new portions and areas of ones' identity while identity transformation is the process of altering and individual's identity. Identity formation occurs in a variety of ways on a daily basis that can be summarized into three basic strategies. One strategy is to provide a specific set of motives that set the tone, meaning, and culture for an organization from upper management. A second strategy used to develop new portions of an individual's identity is by maintaining outright and explicit morals and values. A third way that organizations target identity is by creating standards and norms through distinct rules that employees and the organization must follow in order to conduct good business versus bad business. Identity transformation is also accomplished through numerous modalities that are summarized into the following six strategies. The first strategy that regulates identity through identity transformation is to define an individual directly or describe what he or she is. A second strategy is to define the individual by defining



others that are different than him or her. A third transformation strategy is for organizations to define who employees are by what they know and what they can do. Fourth, organizations transform employees' identities by establishing groups and social categories that individuals are members of to define their identity through them. A hierarchical structure—the fifth strategy—can target workers' identities as they may define themselves by describing the level within the hierarchy that they work. Sixth, identity is further targeted through the way the organizational context is specifically defined (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 629-632). In all, organizations utilize identity regulation to create the “appropriate worker” (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002).

While organizations use identity regulation to shape employees identities, these strategies are not always successful and employees have the ability to react to them (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Alvesson and Willmott (2002) and others (Covaleski, 2001; Homer-Nadesan, 1996; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) use the concept of identity work as a process where individual employees have agency as they attempt to negotiate a sense of self within the complex, diverse, and ever-changing life of modern organizations. “Identity work is an interpretive activity involved in reproduction and transforming self-identity” (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 627). In modern organizations, identity work is the process that allows employees to maintain agency over their own identities amidst the various attempts of identity regulation from their employers. In this study, I adapt Alvesson and Willmott's framework to explain and articulate the way that undergraduate interns are framing what identity is and explore the consequences this framing has for the students' resulting identity work. As I use Alvesson and Willmott's framework to explain how undergraduate students frame identity, I highlight issues of control and resistance to bring attention to the undue power organizations have in

regulating employees' identities and how identity regulation directly affects the ability of employees to conduct identity work

### **Control and Resistance**

The concept of identity work is more salient in modern organizations as power has shifted to concertive control. As power becomes less visible, employees are faced with the challenge of navigating its endless complexities and variable nature (Alvesson & Willmott). Power is now embedded in the social and cultural realities that individuals consent to as normal and neutral as they adapt to the professional environment. The challenge of discussing power due to its invisibility is most clearly illustrated through the writing of various scholars who seek to understand the ways in which power is constructed and reconstructed in organizations (Barker, 1993; Deetz, 1992; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985).

Foucault (cited in Deetz, 1992) suggested that when democracy became into existence, power changed drastically; he demonstrated that power no longer existed in basic mandates centralized within one entity, which he defined as sovereign power. Sovereign power existed when governments and monarchs controlled individuals under their regulations and dictated laws that would be followed and if ignored, individuals would face punishment (Deetz). After the end of this simple power and the rise of democracy, a shift to a more complex form of power that is dispersed throughout society in every corner was established. Foucault described this as decentralized, chaotic, and invisible and defined it as disciplinary power (Deetz). As Deetz stated “(power) is spread out through the lines of conformity, commonsense observations, and determination of proprietary” (p. 22) – basically this means that power shapes our taken-for-granted assumptions about the world. The shift from sovereign to disciplinary power can be seen

as transforming the modern organization: In that context, power is exercised as new members consent to norms and values.

The shift to disciplinary power continues to exist in today's society, especially as organizations become increasingly globalized, knowledge-intensive, decentralized, and flat (Barker, 1993; Deetz, 1998; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). Barker (1993) draws upon Edwards' three strategies of control—simple, technical and bureaucratic—to discuss the ways power has shifted within organizations. Simple control is the most straightforward of the strategies and is authoritarian and direct. Technical control makes simple control less apparent because it removes the commands established by superiors on workers and instead allows machines and technology to dictate the pace and work demanded from individuals. Bureaucratic control furthers the invisibility technological power by becoming less demanding. Bureaucratic control is more powerful because is it less visible (Barker). Barker then adds a fourth strategy known as concertive control. Concertive control is when organizations decentralize their power structures and work within self-managing teams and flat organizational hierarchies. Concertive control in creates an even stronger and less visible power structure than bureaucratic, technical, or simple control (Barker, 1993; Deetz, 1998; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). Concertive control is centered within the social norms of organizations therefore it cannot be readily seen or identified, but is constructed in the actions and communication of the workers who consent by actively taking part in their own control (Barker, 1993). Foucault's claims that disciplinary power operates through social and cultural norms of society is supported by other scholars that exemplify the shift through the fourth strategy of control known as concertive control (Barker, 1993; Deetz 1992; Deetz, 1998; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985).

As power continues to become less visible and more variant in nature, it becomes harder to understand the ways that employees' identities are being shaped (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Barker, 1993; Deetz, 1992). Interns allow an opportunity to see identity construction in process because their identities are contested as they enter professional contexts. By utilizing Alvesson and Willmott's framework, I seek to illuminate the identity work that the interns do as they navigate the identity regulations of their internship experiences. This study illuminates the ways in which undergraduate students frame identity.

I began this study with the goal of understanding how student interns negotiate their personal identities in light of their evolving professional identities during their entrée into professional contexts. My research questions and interview guides focused on how interns' identities were regulated and how interns did identity work in response to those regulations. After conducting, transcribing and coding the interviews based on these questions, another theme began to emerge from the data—the ways that participants framed identity through their discussion of identity regulation. In asking questions about the ways these interns were changed throughout their experience at A Consumer Goods Company (ACGC), participants described what they conceptualize as identity. This new puzzle led to what is further outlined in my analysis portion of this paper. I seek to illuminate the ways that interns' identities are regulated throughout their internships while exemplifying through their words how their discussion of these regulations frame identity and how this framing consequently affects their identity work.

### **Methodology**

In order to study these topics, I conducted in-depth qualitative interviews with students who had completed an internship at ACGC during the summer of 2013. The interviews asked participants about their experience in an internship program and solicited open-ended reflections

about how they perceived the changes they experienced throughout their time in the professional context. Interviews were based on a semi-structured interview guide. The in-depth qualitative interviews were from 48 to 67 minutes in length with an average length of 58 minutes.

Throughout each of the interviews I spoke with participants about their time as interns at ACGC. We discussed topics ranging from how they fit-in with their department, their relationship with other colleagues and how they perceived the lasting effects of their internships. I then transcribed five of the six interviews which combined to 55 total transcribed single-space pages. The sixth interview was unavailable for transcription as the recorder malfunctioned during the interview; my detailed field notes enabled me to include that interviewee's story and experience.

After the interviews were conducted and transcribed, I utilized an emic approach to conduct data analysis. According to Tracy (2013) an emic approach gains understanding from the "meanings that emerge from the field" (p. 21). This allowed for a localized analysis and understanding of how interns at one company changed at their internships and how they frame identity. The data analysis process took place through the use of NVivo to organize and code data into categories present within the data. I coded the data on topics such as perceptions of identity, what changed because of the internship, what they gained, how they adapted to the company and how they resisted the identity regulation of the organization. Next, I began to re-organize the first categorizations by using interpretation and identifying similarities and differences among the first level codes. Second-level codes connected to theoretical perspectives within the aforementioned literatures and the research foci resulted from these.

### **Research Participants**

Study participants were former interns at ACGC, located in the Midwest region of the United States. As a privately owned company, it employs over 4,000 individuals at its world

headquarters. The families that originally founded ACGC still maintain complete ownership of the company and the second-generation members currently hold positions in the Chief Executive Office. They strive to maintain the founder's vision, mission and values in every part of the business. These values are Freedom, Family, Hope and Reward. Embedded in every value, action and business decision is the underlying principles of Christianity. Although ACGC is a nondiscriminatory organization, it hosts an annual Christmas party where the Christmas Story is read and a nativity scene is placed out front for all those who drive by to see.

All participants completed an internship with ACGC during the summer of 2013 in various departments at the World Headquarters. I used network and convenience sampling as I, myself, was an intern at ACGC to interview five males and one female intern. All six participants were undergraduate students from a variety of universities looking to develop themselves academically and professionally. They are the ideal population because they were entering the corporate world for one of the first times. As they entered the corporate world for the first time, their identities were contested, meaning they were under negotiation and open for grabs. This openness provided a space in which I was able to view how they framed identity in light of their contested and evolving selves. In the section below, I will provide an introduction to each individual's experience to introduce the reader to the participants and to foreshadow the issues I will take up explicitly in my analysis section.

### **Alex**

While graduating a semester early with his Bachelor of Arts in public relations, Alex, completed six internships throughout his time as an undergraduate student. I spoke with Alex one week before his commencement ceremony. He described himself as "one of the most experienced students that I know of," and anyone who knew Alex would concur with that

statement. He was a self-declared “workaholic,” and “received pride and satisfaction from a job well done.” Alex saw his internship at ACGC as a way into the corporate sector of public relations. He looked at it as an opportunity to learn from “experts in the field.” His internship experience led to a full-time job offer at ACGC.

When asked if anyone outside of ACGC had noticed changes in him, Alex responded by stating that his friends said, “I am happier and more relaxed, now.” He further discussed the ways that he saw himself becoming more relaxed at home and with friends while learning to adjust to the corporate world. At the same time that Alex noted changes in his own identity outside of work, he pointed out instances where he chose to ignore organizational norms. One of the strongest examples he talked about was that he identified as a member of Generation Y and how this affected his perception of work-life balance. His other colleagues and specifically his mentor encouraged him not to respond to email when he wasn’t in the office or told him to stop answering his phone and just enjoy his time. Alex saw this as something that he could not change because it was in his nature, therefore his identity, to always respond to emails and complete his work in a timely fashion. When I asked Alex how he had changed his relationship with work because of his colleagues’ encouragement, he stated, “I don’t really think that I have or that I will.” This demonstrated his attempts to maintain his own perception of self amidst other changes. Additionally, when asked what he had learned from his internship and what the largest changes he went through, he responded by discussing that the largest change he noticed was his attitude, but that he had learned to be “more independent, a better team player, a better networker.” On a follow-up question about what he meant when he said a “better networker,” he talked about the way he carried himself at school and how he had learned to “genuinely care about others when I ask how they are doing.” The changes to Alex’s identity that he contributed

to his internship at ACGC are beyond the boundaries of the organization. Alex's time at ACGC instilled greater confidence, provided better communication skills and allowed for his professional development. On a deeper level, it changed the way he looked at relationships and allowed him to be a happier more relaxed self.

### **Anna**

From struggling to pay her way through college, to changing her major multiple times because of obstacles in the classroom, to discovering an internship opportunity at ACGC, Anna has learned about herself and her identity each step of the way. As a senior graduating in Information Technology, Anna contributes the "180-degree turn-around" to her internship experiences at ACGC. She said that her internship experiences led to an increase in her grade point average, larger extra curricular involvement, acceptance of leadership roles, and increased self-confidence.

Although Anna discussed her internship in a positive light, she also talked about times when she felt different than her colleagues and resisted to maintain parts of her own identity. One incident that she vividly recalled was during the annual Christmas party in early December. The founding families always read the Christmas story to employees. This specific Christmas party, a family member asked employees to raise their hands if they were Christian; Anna does not identify or practice Christianity and chose to keep her hand down while everyone around her raised their hand. She watched a friend who also did not identify as a Christian raise her hand. In that very instant, she could feel herself standing out from the rest of her colleagues while she stood by what she truly believed. She chose not to conform and kept her hand at her side—she says that she maintained her own identity and values. While attributing many of her successes and identity changes, as well as gaining more confidence and learning about the professional



sector, to her internships at ACGC, Anna still acknowledges there were times when she maintained her own identity and resisted organizational norms.

### **Brent**

Brent, like myself, grew up as a member of the ACGC family. Since the time he was born, Brent's father has worked at ACGC. When I asked about how he fit-in with his department at ACGC, he spoke about already knowing what to expect because of his father and being more prepared than others to handle the political aspects of ACGC. Brent used this knowledge from day one as a manufacturing intern where he worked on a project that bridged together blue-collar workers on the lines and the white-collar workers designing and coordinating equipment. He spoke about the ways in which "he changed his talk depending on who he was working with," how he learned to network and become a better communicator, and changed other parts of his behavior. Yet, when I asked how his ACGC internship changed who he was and how it carried with him into the future, he said that it gave him confidence, professional knowledge and a better understanding of his own career goals, he did not see it as changing the "core" of his identity.

### **Steve**

Out of the six participants that I interviewed, Steve was the only one that showed little interest in returning to ACGC for a second internship or fulltime position. When asked about his internship, Steve talked about the relationships he had with his mentor and manager. He said that the major takeaway he learned from his time at ACGC was that he learned the value of having friendships with your colleagues outside of work to enhance your working relationship. At one point he referred to his mentor as "one of the bros" and discussed the practical jokes they would play on each other. He also discussed the ways that he saw himself fitting in with other coworkers in the department. His assimilation started from the very first interview, he stated, "I

just jived really well with the other members of my department.” At the same time, when I asked if he changed during his internship, he responded stating that besides becoming more professional, who he was as a person remained the same. Later in the interview, Steve mentioned that he changed his major from marketing to finance because of his experience at ACGC. His internship demonstrated to him his own strengths and changed his outlook on what his future career should be. Steve perceived his internship experience as one that provided him with professional development, learning experiences and new relationships, but did not see it as something that contributed to his identity.

### **William**

William completed two consecutive internships with ACGC, during the summers of 2012 and 2013. He stated that his experiences taught him about professional contexts, gave him an opportunity for professional development and showed him how to carry himself. The internships increased his self-confidence and helped him decide to pursue a Master’s degree after he finishes his Bachelor’s of Science this April. When asked if he had changed throughout his internship experience in order to fit-in and become a member of ACGC, he stated:

Yeah, I don’t think so, so, I mean there is the obvious things that you are going to say around a group of friends that you are not going to say in the workplace. But in the sense and demeanor of who I am, I don't think I had to change what so ever to fit-in.

He felt welcome from the beginning of his internship. At the same point in time, he noted that the way he carried himself in the halls at ACGC and school had changed. He talked about how he is much better at communicating with others and carrying on a genuine conversation compared to before his internships. Additionally, he noted that he always carries himself in manner that is considered respectable by others because he never knows who may be watching;

something he learned during his orientation to ACGC. William sees his internships as an experience that helped to develop his future goals, professional self and work relationship, but never changed who he was as a person.

### **Oscar**

For Oscar, ACGC meant a place where he felt welcome even though he was different. He is a gay Christian college student. While he felt welcome and considered himself to be a member of ACGC and his department in manufacturing, Oscar also noticed the ways in which he needed to change to completely assimilate. He quickly learned that he should avoid discussing the topics of politics and religion with colleagues because his views were radically different than the majority of individuals around him. He also noted that at one point, his manager and mentor suggested to him that he tone down his flamboyancy, as it intimidated some of the other workers in the department. Oscar said that he appreciated the feedback from his mentor and manager and quickly learned how to interact with colleagues less flamboyantly. He also said that his time at ACGC provided him with greater self-confidence, professional development and networking skills. Yet when I asked Oscar how his internship changed him, he said that it did not change the essence of who he is as a person, but improved his knowledge and skill sets. In an environment where he was the minority, Oscar found ways to assimilate into the department and company and become a successful intern while believing that he'd maintained his own identity.

### **Analysis**

When considering the six narratives, the modalities by which undergraduate students' identities are being shaped are illuminated. Through their discussions, participants spoke about a common theme of how their identities were regulated, which was to teach them how to participate in the cultural context of ACGC. Alex, William and Oscar's narratives all exemplify

how they saw their internship experience as teaching them professionalism and networking. In setting a specific tone, meaning and culture of ACGC, the organization regulated participants' identities by urging them to accept organizational norms and participate in the professional atmosphere through networking and other skills (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Furthermore, Anna, Alex, Oscar, Brent and William discussed an increase in their self-confidence because of their internship experience. ACGC regulated participants through identity transformation by defining who they were, what they knew and what they did. This allowed the interns to adapt to ACGC and become confident in their own skills in order to participate as an effective members of the organization. Another modality of identity regulation that took place during participants' internships is exemplified in Anna and Alex's narratives. Both stories illustrated how ACGC maintained outright and explicit morals and values. In Anna's situation, the company utilized the morals of the Christian religion to regulate its employees and define what the organization stood to be. In Alex's story, ACGC utilized the well-defined value of family to encourage him to stop working from home and respect the organizational value of family (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Thus, the interviews and discussions with the participants demonstrated the various ways that student interns' identities are regulated.

What emerged as most interesting, however, was how the interns' responded (or failed to respond) with identity work to the regulation of their identities. After transcribing the interviews, I began to code them based on topics of identity work, identity regulation, socialization and power. I ultimately came to a point when that data was coded and found myself pondering to figure out how these six individuals' interviews fit together in a meaningful way. I mulled ideas over and spoke with others when it finally became a puzzle piece that was missing in the center. The puzzle piece that fit was an underlying theme emerged from the data that I had not intended

or expected to find: the way that undergraduate students frame identity, what they conceptualize as constituting or not constituting identity, while discussing their internships. From the data set, two distinct ways of framing what identity is became evident—framing identity as a stable entity or fluid construct—each of which holds consequences for how the individual responded to identity regulation with identity work. Participants that framed identity as a stable entity denied that regulation occurred, which made the resulting identity work (potentially resisting) unlikely while participants that conceptualized identity as a fluid construct recognized that identity regulation was occurring and were prompted to conduct identity work. In the next section, I further outline and explain how the individuals' stories above exemplify two distinct ways of framing what identity is.

### **Framing Identity as a Stable Entity**

I mean as a part of who I am. I don't know that it necessarily changed who I am, you know, I feel like through my upbringing and the earlier years of my life and my family, that's what defined me as who I am. So I don't necessarily know that it changed who I was... it doesn't change fundamentally who I am as a person. (William)

This comment made by William illustrates clearly how he framed what identity is within his internship experience. It demonstrates his ability to maintain a consistent identity despite that in other parts of the interview he discussed changing through professionalism and other ways. Steve illustrates a similar framing of what identity is in his response to a question asking how he changed to become a member of the organization and fit in with his department:

I don't think I had to change for that. Because the people I worked with and because we got along so well, just as soon as we started working together it went from being oh I get

along with these people, to I get along with these people and we work well together, so I don't think I had to change myself for that. (Steve)

Like Oscar, Steve did not think he changed in order to contribute productively to the “ACGC Family.” Yet he too identified the ways he altered his outward behavior to act professionally, developed newfound passions, and chose a new major as a result of his internship. Oscar’s narrative also demonstrated this contradiction of acknowledging development while denying shifts in identity. Oscar said that he adapted to the atmosphere and culture at ACGC by toning down his flamboyancy and political views in order to remain consistent with organizational norms; despite this, he said that he did not change his identity. Furthermore, Brent said that he believed that changing his language during his internship did not compromise who he was as a person. Brent, William, Steve and Oscar all acknowledged significant changes and lessons learned from their internship, but still talked about how they were the same person.

This contradiction within the participants’ discourse became more and more evident as I read and re-read them. After reviewing the literature and a long conversation with my thesis mentor, it became evident that the participants were framing what identity is as a stable entity that consisted of internal aspects such as values, beliefs, and personality. They saw their actions, outward appearance, language and behaviors as separate from their identity. In framing identity as a stable entity, participants saw the core of who they were (their identity) as being influenced and shaped primarily from their childhood years with their family, school, religion, etc. The participants constructed their identities as essential entities as they discussed their internship experience. Present-day experiences in professional organizations provided participants with skills, knowledge, and training, but the interns did not see such things as relevant for identity.

Once I recognized how the participants were constructing identity through their discussions of their internship, I began to notice that in framing what identity is in a way that allows them to enact their internal selves and not their external selves as part of identity, these interns failed to recognize the ways professional organizations regulated their identities (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). Instead, they asserted that while the organization changed them, this did not result in changes to self. When individuals denied that identity regulation was taking place by framing what is identity as a stable entity, they were not prompted to conduct identity work in a way that potentially resisted identity regulation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Mumby, 2005; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). My concern is that individuals may become ambivalent objects whose identities are easily regulated by their employers because they segment their identities into two separate pieces, internal and external selves. This may allow organizations to have undue control over the identities of their employees (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985).

### **Framing Identity as a Fluid Construct**

They say I am happier, that I am more relaxed...but, yeah they and I have seen a change. I am a lot more independent than I used to be... that's how I have changed, happier, more relaxed and more independent. (Alex)

As this quotation and his narrative above demonstrate, Alex framed his identity as having been altered throughout his time as an intern at ACGC. In contrast to the first group of interns that framed identity as a stable entity—which allowed them to separate their internal and external selves—Alex framed identity as a fluid construct that included both internal and external aspects of self. He admitted that professional organizations have the ability to regulate his actions, behaviors, beliefs and saw these as part of his identity (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). The framing of what identity is as a fluid construct also emerged in Anna's narrative. This framing

created a vastly different identity navigation experience, as they acknowledge that identity regulation was occurring. By recognizing that identity regulation was taking place, they were able to conduct their own identity work (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). Anna discussed an instance during her internship when she conducted identity work to resist the identity regulation of ACGC through the definition of explicit morals.

...So a ton of people around me raised their hands, and I didn't raise my hand. Well, my manager looked over to see if I was raising my hand and I am like, I'm sorry, I am not going to say that I believe in something when I don't practice it and I am not like, I would feel horrible doing that, that's not me, so um, it's just that type of stuff. (Anna)

This comment of Anna's shows her experience of the Christmas party as mentioned in her narrative. It also exemplifies that Anna and Alex felt themselves constructing identity by resisting organizational regulations of self. This same framing is shown in Alex's narrative when he talks about how he identified with Generation Y in the way that he saw work in relationship to life. He understood that his colleagues were attempting to change the way he saw this relationship, but he chose to construct his identity in a way that allowed him to continue to do work from home, unlike the rest of his colleagues.

Unlike the first group of interns that framed identity as a stable entity and therefore denied that identity regulation was taking place, Anna and Alex framed identity as a fluid construct. In conceptualizing identity as a fluid construct, Anna and Alex framed their internal and external selves as constituting identity. They conceptualized what identity is as fluid, multi-faceted, entities in that they saw identity as being constantly influenced and shaped by outside forces because both their internal selves (values, beliefs, and personality) and their external selves (outward appearance, language and behaviors) were part of their self narrative. Thus they



were able to acknowledge the regulations that took place during their internships. Anna and Alex's ability to recognize the regulation of their identity created space for them to conduct identity work (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, Mumby, 2005). By constructing a more holistic view of self, they realized that organizations have the ability to regulate their identities (identity regulation), and were therefore prompted to maintain agency over their own identities (identity work). At the Christmas party, Anna purposefully chose not to raise her hand (conduct identity work) even when everyone around her did. Because Anna acknowledged identity regulation was occurring if she would have raised her hand to adapt to ACGC's culture, she was able to conduct identity work and not raise her hand in order to resist the identity regulation of the organization. Similarly, Alex conducted identity work by identifying with Generation Y and ignoring the encouragement from his colleagues to stop working from home and school. Anna and Alex constructed their outward appearance, behaviors and language as part of who they are as individuals and by doing so conducted identity work to accept or resist organizational regulations of their identities.

### **Discussion**

In this analysis, I demonstrated the ways undergraduate students' identities were regulated during their summer internship experience. I then explored how six students framed through their discussions of their internships and the affects of their on their resulting identity work. This exploration led to the argument that these undergraduate students framed identity in two primary ways through their discussion of their internships. The first group of interns framed identity as a stable entity, which included their values, beliefs, core, integrity and personality. By separating their external selves from their conceptualization of identity, they denied identity regulation occurred, which made resulting identity work nonexistent. In contrast, the second

group of participants framed identity as a fluid construct, which included their internal and external selves. By framing what identity is as a fluid, multi-faceted entity, these interns acknowledged the regulations of their identities and were prompted to conduct identity work in response.

While my analysis of six interns' experiences illuminates the relationship between how one frames identity and his or her ability to respond to identity regulation based on that framing, I am unable to conclusively make this claim given the small sample size. A larger participant pool as well as deeper and more explicit discussions of identity with participants would provide a better data set to inspect these issues. What this study does demonstrate, however, is the importance of seeking to understand how identity is constructed in everyday speech. The mundane ways that we utilize to describe concepts in everyday speech are consequential for how our reality is constructed (Clair, 1996; Lair and Wieland, 2012). It is through the mundane language, that we as a society define what is and what isn't important in our lives and through mundane language that we not only construct selves but negotiate what does and does not count as part of one's self.

This study demonstrates the importance of understanding how workers frame identity on a daily basis because these conceptualizations have consequences for how control and resistance operate within organizations and society. While in academia there is a plethora of language about scholarly conceptions of identity, we need to consider how everyday people conceptualize identity. Tracy & Trethewey (2005) begin to explore colloquial language for describing identity with the use of the real-self/fake-self dichotomy. However, participants in this study were not establishing a real-self/fake-self. Rather, the majority of the participants framed identity in a way that denied regulations of their identity by conceptualizing it as a stable, internalized entity. It is

necessary for scholars to discover and explicitly understand the way that identity is discussed on an everyday basis and how those discussions frame what is and what isn't identity.

### **Future Directions**

In order to better understand the topics of how identity is discussed colloquially, future studies should utilize a multi-method approach with a broader participant pool. The combination of participant observation and qualitative interviews will allow for a deeper and more explicit discussion of these issues. Participant observation allows the researcher to see what participants do and, more importantly, don't frame as identity. Furthermore, utilizing participant observation in combination with qualitative interviews allows the researcher to ask probing questions about what they observed. Additionally, the research will be able to discuss explicitly with participants what they see as identity. I argue that interns are an ideal population for understanding issues of identity in professional contexts because their identities are contested and up for grabs as they enter the professional world. They allow researchers an opening into the ways that identity is regulated, constructed and enacted on an everyday basis. There is a need to better understand how workers frame identity, so scholars are better equipped to discuss the relationship between identity work and identity regulation in professional contexts.

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