AN INVESTIGATION OF CORPORATE IDENTIFICATION AND DISIDENTIFICATION

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the taken-for-granted processes of both identification and disidentification with corporate messages. Theories of identity and identification aided as a starting place in developing a focus for this study and Bakhtin's dialogism perspective provided a lens for understanding how people's word choices in their interviews worked as performances of identification and disidentification in the world of the *Mokum* Corporation, a nationwide company operating in the financial industry. The findings from this study challenge the idea that a corporation controls employee identification. Rather, while the messages from a corporate office can influence what meanings are out for employees to interpret, at the local level interpretation of these messages provides a moment with the potential for either identification or disidentification. When corporate messages conflict with the symbolic meanings interpreted in local management practices, these are moments that can actually lead to divergence and dysfunctional work places.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Last summer, the Bunnik division manager of *Mokum, Inc.*, a nationwide financial advising company, hired me as the marketing and recruitment intern. After the confirming handshake with my new boss, his assistant brought me into a different room. My fingerprint was taken, I signed a few legal forms, and I received a packet full of information about the company. It included mission statements, catch phrases, an historical timeline of the firm, ethical considerations, and inspiring visions to better help customers manage their money. From the furniture, dress code, and coffee cups to how the job interviews unfolded, the confirming handshake, and the small talk, I was learning how *Mokum* socialized newcomers as members of a new culture.

When I called my dad back home in the Netherlands, he said: "Congratulations, now you belong to corporate America." Interpreting such a statement can be done in a multitude of ways. It depends on the different ways that you, as an organizational member, identify with your environment. Some people will take my dad's comment as a big compliment, because becoming part of corporate America is an important goal for them. They associate belonging to corporate America with wealth, freedom, success, and prosperity. Others might not see it this way, would laugh, or take it as a sarcastic comment, or even feel offended. They might associate corporate America with greed, power, and control mechanisms, or corruption. In this thesis it will be shown that people take for granted that *how* they (dis)identify and *with what* they (dis)identify impacts who there are. It is due to the values of the members of *Mokum* that I organized the data in themes such as faith, idolizing and commitment that created strong belonging with corporate *Mokum*, often at the expense of the identification with the local context of the firm.

Humans identify with groups and organizations. A foundational definition by Albert & Whetten (1985) states that "Organizational Identity is (a) what is taken by organizational members to be central to the organization, (b) what makes the organization distinctive from other organizations in the eyes of the beholding members, and (c) what is perceived by members to be enduring or continuing linking the present with the past and presumably the future." This definition implies that employees interpret their company as a unique entity in a process that endures over time. Corporate managers have taken interest in this phenomenon for years now. As Cheney and Christensen (2001) point out, in the corporate world of today managers are preoccupied with identity issues, because when they're not communicating a certain consistent "self," the company might lose credibility and legitimacy in and outside the organization (p. 232). For the benefit of their company, these managers have sought control over this concept of corporate identity. Researchers from different disciplines such as Communication have been working to understand and conceptualize corporate identity, rather than control it (Ruud, 1995; Kuhn & Nelson, 2002; Beech, 2008). These scholars do not share the same assumptions as corporate leaders. For example, scholars such as Ruud (1995) and Beech (2008) believe that corporate identity is a symbolic construct, a social phenomenon. More specifically, identity theories have emerged from the communication field have widened our understanding of how corporate and more local organizational identities are constructed and how identification processes develop among organizational members.

Identity and identification processes in (corporate) organizations have received attention from a wide array of approaches, but continued analysis from a communication perspective is needed to extend these theories and add to an understanding of identity. For example, most research focuses on the shared meanings that are being put forth by management to construct identities in the workplace (Gray & Balmer, 1998; van Riel & Fombrun, 2007). Others, that recognize a more socially and symbolic construction of identity through multiple voices, have used cultural features (Van Maanen, 1991), social scenes (Garbaugh, 1996), networks and duality (Kuhn & Nelson, 2002), dialogue and narrative (Beech, 2008), and other processes as their starting points. Theorizing has also been done on the moment where members diverge between acceptance and rejection of organizational identity as well as disidentification (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001; Pratt & Rafaeli, 2001; Pepper & Larson, 2006). I argue that more development is needed regarding this idea of disidentification since little empirical research has been conducted that takes serious cultural and social constructionist approaches while taking disidentification as its starting place and dialogue theory as its lens. My aim is to extend a focus on disidentification with a qualitative empirical study on disidentification as part of the identification duality process. Also, this investigation will focus on how identitification happens specifically at *Mokum*, and because every corporation is different and new insights are likely to be generated.

Before providing a deeper description of the research perspectives, conceptualizations, and problems under investigation, a brief synopsis of this research will be proposed to set the stage. A qualitative study of communication will be conducted at *Mokum, Inc.*, while using communication perspectives on identification and Bakhtin's theory of dialogics to make sense of the findings that will emerge from the participants. This research will focus on the formative power of discourse, how an organization emerges in talk, and how the organizational dimensions constantly change because different identities are being negotiated. In this talk, the employees possibly create certain tendencies either against or in favor of corporate messages. This divergence is crucial for the organization because it will determine in what direction certain discourses are going, what types of identities are created, and what main perceptions of corporate identity are shared (or not) amongst employees. Thus, I will first analyze how employees interpret corporate messages dynamically almost in relationship to the message. I will do so in interviews where participants interpret the messages with me. Then, by analyzing daily discourse among employees and with me as a researcher, I seek to explain how identities are constructed and negotiated interpersonally. With these two observations, I will build an understanding about the dynamic process of identification as emerging in the process of interpretation of corporate messages. What's interesting here is how corporate sponsors hope a message will be interpreted versus how it is interpreted. If new insights can be found through this analysis of divergence, considering the formative power of discourse, it could teach us about how certain corporate discourses lead a company in a certain direction and how these changes come to be.

A Business-Centric Approach

In larger corporations, where the focus is usually on achieving success and making money, executives have found a strategic tool in the practice of corporate identity management. In such cases, where the concept is perceived as a tool, corporate identity is theorized in a way that has become quite popular. In an academic paper by management scholars Gray and Balmer (1998), the main conclusion is that managing the company's identity and communication system is a responsibility for corporate leaders to gain or maintain strategic advantage (p. 701). Derived from the same work, Gray and Balmer then define corporate identity as being "the reality and uniqueness of an organization" (p. 696). According to Putnam (1983), theorists like Gray and Balmer who assume that identity is something that an organization possesses, like an object or a tool, can be characterized as Functionalists. Functionalists tend to believe one can control identity and shape employees' behavior to reinforce one, shared corporate identity (see Putnam, 1983). The Functionalist approach is a familiar and accepted perspective in the field of corporate identity. A large body of popular management literature demonstrates the stronghold of this perspective.

The *process* in which employees come to this shared reality about their company is often referred to as *identification*. In the business-centric approach, explanations for this concept are generally based on psychology-oriented theories, suggesting that employees integrate corporate beliefs and values into their personal identity as if they were all fixed objects. For example, as Pratt (1998) explains, humans tend to see another (individual, group, or object) as being definitive of one's self. More specifically, he states that "organizational identification occurs when an individual's beliefs about his or her organization become self-referential or self-defining" (Pratt, 1998, p. 172). Building on this, Pratt (1998) argues there are two paths of identification: affinity and emulation. In the first path, an individual recognizes similarity in an organization and they feel automatically attracted to it. The second path is one of emulation, where an employee incorporates organizational beliefs and values into his or her own identity (p. 174-175).

This theory implies causal relationships between fixed elements and some kind of cognitive process that internalizes corporate beliefs into the employee's self. Understanding identification this way makes sense in the business-centric approach because the path of emulation in particular transforms quite well into managerial practices that will supposedly lead to a stronger corporate identity, an example of this is the 'identity mix' discussed next.

For Functionalists, the organization's identity is an observable object that can be revealed by scientific methods. Consequently, it can be molded in any strategically desirable way. For example, Van Riel and Fombrun (2007) argue that corporate identity can be discovered and changed by their notion of the 'identity mix,' a synthesis in which companies can classify all their self-expressions in three forms: communication, behavior, and symbolism. They define this 'identity mix' as the cognitive foundation on which companies can build their "constructed identities" (p. 62-67). A previous publication by Van Riel and Balmer (1997) also states that an organization's historical roots, its personality, its corporate strategy, and the developments of the external environment have to be considered (p. 342). With these elements in mind, the company's current 'self' is understood and management will then further define the corporate identity by emphasizing the features they think will generate stronger identification. Van Riel and Fombrun (2007) seek an outcome that encompasses the entire workforce: "Employees must 'sing in harmony,' as it were" (p. 62). Other theorists such as Collins and Porras (1996) talk about creating a core ideology (core values, core purpose) where the organizational members need to buy into the core ideology in order to establish positive identification. They state: "Core ideology provides the glue that holds an organization together as it grows, decentralizes, diversifies, expands globally, and develops workplace diversity." In this article, corporations such as Hewlett-Packard, 3M, Procter & Gamble, Nike, and Sony are mentioned as great examples of creating competitive advantage through corporate identity. Thus, to Functionalist researchers, corporate identity is a predictable element that can be strategically changed to improve organizational performance.

To assist companies in their endeavor to shape their employees' behavior, different strategies and models are provided to, in the end, accomplish that competitive advantage. Acquiring this favorable corporate reputation is the process Functionalists refer to as identification. For example, to measure the desired employee identification with a company, Van Riel created the Rotterdam Organizational Identification Test (ROIT). This tool measures variables such as job satisfaction, management style, and the perceived organizational culture, with questionnaires that consist of Likert scales. Anderson (1996) would argue that these Functionalist researchers assume there is an object called "a phenomenon," such as a trait, characteristic, or a judgment like the response to a ROIT questionnaire (p. 167). This suggests that Functionalist researchers like Van Riel assume social reality, and in particular identity and identification, exist prior to human interaction and can be discovered through a quantified mechanism. Therefore, identification is a static phenomenon that is represented simply by the marks on a Likert scale. The negotiation of identities that happens through employee interaction seems to be left out of the equation. This study of communication will demonstrate you cannot do that. For Functionalists, the goal of research is to simplify identity and identification in order to take their research into the business world. It is believed that when employees accept the corporate identity, they will be motivated to work hard and make the right decisions to benefit the company. Furthermore, Functionalist researchers believe their theory explains in a scientific manner how things work in an organization and how relationships are causal and certain strategies can change these relationships in order to improve efficiency, effectiveness, and the bottom line.

While a Functionalist perspective is a familiar perspective, other researchers propose the need to reconsider identity and identification as much more complicated than a phenomenon possessed, quantified, and controlled by organizations (Collins & Porras, 1996; van Riel & Fombrun, 2007). Other theorists, dubbed Interpretivists, demonstrate how communication practices serve as identification practices that construct and create a corporate identity. The next section develops this perspective in more detail.

The Interpretive Turn

Interpretivists draw on a very different set of assumptions in their research. Linda Putnam (1983) states: “Interpretivists treat meanings as the essence of organizational communication, but meanings are enacted from verbal and nonverbal messages. They evolve from interaction processes and from the ways that individuals make sense of their talk,” (Putnam, 1983, p.45). Therefore, corporate identity would be a more abstract concept to Interpretivists. They try to uncover and understand corporate identity through social relations. In other words, identities emerge as shared meanings embedded in language, symbols, and many other forms of communication. For example, Albert and Whetten (1985) consider organizational identity as a set of claims and sustainable stories about the unique nature of an organization. Such claims and stories can be clearly projected or hidden in a variety of communication processes, such as storytelling, artifacts, and mission statements. Thus, opposed to Van Riel's idea, corporate identity is not a static phenomenon controlled by a few people, but a symbolic and dynamic construct that emerges in ongoing interactions.

Even though this research perspective gradually comes within close proximity of my own beliefs, an exploration of tangible cultural features, such as jargon and stories, is not sufficient enough to come to a well-rounded understanding of corporate identity. In a piece by Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo (1983), substituting the established systems metaphor with the culture metaphor is introduced as a new way to study organizational communication. They argue that organizations should not be seen as machines, but rather more like tribes (p. 127). At the same time, they express carefulness when using a cultural approach, because a study could become static when solely focused on structural features such as jargon, stories, and ideologies. Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo (1983) promote looking at cultural performances in order to learn how cultural features are created, maintained, and transformed (p. 126). This is a valuable development especially for communication scholars, who are interested in culture or identity as a processes rather than an object. One of the cultural performances that Pacanowsky and O'Donnell-Trujillo discuss is the personal ritual. This is when an individual develops his/her own unique way of doing things and over time that becomes socially significant in the company. Not only the employee's identity is evident here, it also informs and orients others to such identities (p. 135). The authors further explain: "Personal rituals are not only the trademarks of identities and the sources of reputations, but also are the critical incidents which we draw on when we talk about and make sense of particular organizational members, and hence, when we talk about and make sense of particular organizational cultures" (p. 135-136). A research perspective that not only identifies a cultural feature in daily organizational life, but also pays attention to how these features come to be, is important. Attention to such details illustrates how identities are socially constructed and negotiated through cultural performances by organizational members.

Organizational culture research is a specific take on the social constructionism perspective. In essence, Interpretivism and Social Constructionism are synonymous. Brenda Allen (2005) describes the main tenets of this perspective and explains how sociocultural processes affect humans' basic understandings of the world (p. 35). From her essay, we can derive four fundamental assumptions of social constructionism: 1) the world and ourselves should be understood through a critical and/or suspicious stance, 2) all knowledge is historically and culturally specific, 3) language as a social process allows us to make sense of the world; share experiences and meaning with one another, and 4) knowledge and social action are interconnected (Allen, 2005, p. 37-38). These are important views for this study; however, being placed in a box or category such as social constructionism in itself stands in opposition to these beliefs in that we always maneuver dynamically in different social contexts. As Deetz (2001) also encourages, only when the conceptual foundations are well understood, it can be beneficial to borrow from different orientations that complement each other to remain open minded and come to new insights (p. 37-39). Even underneath this umbrella of social constructionism (without concrete borders) there are multiple ways of doing research.

Ethnography and pragmatics are examples of approaches that take culture as a central construct. Discussing their contributions on cultural aspects in organizational communication will help build an interpretive lens for looking at corporate identity, creating a contrast with business-centric approaches in my analysis of *Mokum*. Consistently woven through these discussions the focus remains on communication. For example, Putnam and Fairhurst (2001) say about the pragmatic perspective that "discourse produces organizing through being uttered as a speech act, constituting speech communities, performing conversations, telling stories, negotiating orders, and enacting interaction sequences and patterns" (p. 118). This then ties in with the theory of dialogism for its focus on language use, which will be discussed later drawing from Bakhtin. This way my aim is to paint a holistic picture of identity and identification processes occurring at *Mokum* by using a multi-perspective interpretive approach.

A significant interpretive study is the milestone ethnography by Van Maanen (1991) who looked at the rather extreme use of a corporate identity strategy at Walt Disney Enterprises. Van Maanen gave some remarkable insights on what it's like to work at the Disneyland theme park in Anaheim, California. Since Disneyland is merely focused on providing their visitors with a good time, the company requires a lot from their personnel; they are strictly trained and conditioned to produce a product that Van Maanen calls "laughter and well-being." While guiding the reader through the working environment at Disney, Van Maanen found numerous negative elements to the jobs, such as the relatively low pay and a micro-managing style that would drive most people crazy. Yet, Disneyland always has the luxury to select from a large base of overqualified and motivated employees that willingly buy into the work environment of "smile factory" Disneyland. Van Maanen shows how symbolic features constitute the social order at the park. Most of these features seem to be put forth by management through the practices of socialization, close supervision, and emotional management (p. 257). The different uniforms employees wear for each job category, for example, is an important visual element put forth by management to construct identities that fit into their business model. It creates competition for employees and employee groupings for status.

Van Maanen not only shows how culture and identity are fabricated through efforts by Functionalist practitioners, he also describes a few incidents of employee resistance towards the established culture. Here, from my perspective, it would be interesting to take a closer look at the moment where workers enter the process of identification and either accept or reject corporate identity. Evidently, they seem to have plenty of reason to reject corporate policies, yet they often decide to go with the flow and stay in their jobs. Van Maanen says, “the ease with which employees glide into their kindly and smiling roles is, in large measure, a feat of social engineering” (p. 256). Also, the way Van Maanen describes the Disneyland business model and industry shows some possible interesting resemblances with *Mokum*. Where Disneyland is in the ‘feeling’ business, *Mokum* is in the ‘trust’ business. Where at Disney the employees at the bottom are the core concern for management, at *Mokum* it’s the financial advisors out in the field that constantly deal with customers and represent the firm. Lastly, even though this study is not an ethnography but a qualitative study, Van Maanen’s work is undoubtedly a means of understanding identification processes from a valuable cultural, interpretive view. And while Van Maanen does talk about interactional patterns and discourses here and there, it will be a communication focus, or more specifically a dialogue theory approach, where this study will further research.

Now that the basic ideas and an example of the interpretive turn have been discussed, I will now focus on the communicative performances that emerge in, what

Donal Carbaugh calls, social scenes. This concept is important for this study, because when dialogue at *Mokum* will be analyzed, theorists such as Carbaugh help us discover recurring themes or patterns of cultural meanings that are embedded in social scenes. Carbaugh (1996) developed a theory he called the cultural pragmatic approach. He proposed that we think of identities first “as dimensions and outcomes of communication practices; second, that we think of each identity as a system of communicative practices that is salient in some but not (necessarily) all social scenes; third, that we think of communication, and the everyday practice of social identities, as a cultural accomplishment” (p. 24). In this perspective, through everyday interactions in a particular social scene, an employee’s identity is created. The dynamics of these interactions in a social setting (such as at *Mokum*) also creates a cultural dimension. So, the communication performed in social scenes will illustrate something about the creation of an employee’s identity as well as something about the cultural dimensions of the social setting.

To understand on a deeper level how identities are socially and communicatively constituted through identification, I draw on Carbaugh (1996) again, who recognizes two concepts to draw attention to the process of identification. He argues that any communicative practice can be composed, presumably, of symbols (i.e., potent words, phrases, tropes, or images), forms (i.e., sequences of acts and events), and their meanings. Carbaugh says these symbols identify human agents and communicative forms are being used to enact social identities (p. 16). Even this perspective doesn’t tell us enough on how identities actually come to be. Carbaugh’s theory is helpful as a lens in a qualitative study such as this one; for example, it draws attention to cultural features in communication that explain the meanings in some symbolic practices of identification. However, where these symbols serve as indicators, it is in their interpretation where identity truly happens (Taylor et al., 1996). Drawing on multiple culture oriented theories (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982; Van Maanen, 1991; Carbaugh, 1996) a useful framework will be available to analyze the meanings that emerge from communication that occurs at *Mokum*. This is not enough though, because making sense of cultural meanings in the workplace as discussed above suggests a relatively stable and shared perception of the corporate identity. Identification processes are more chaotic then this due to the ongoing nature, multiple voices, and power dynamics in context. To explain which meanings are actually shared amongst employees, which messages are accepted or rejected, and how identities are interpreted individually and negotiated in group interaction, I will turn to dialogue theory to make sense of identity construction.

Russian literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin was particularly interested in dialogue in the context of everyday interaction. In Bakhtin and Emerson (1984), Bakhtin conceptualized knowledge as being constructed through the processes of dialogic relationships and conversational interaction (p. 110). His original writings came into existence before the interpretive turn, so Bakhtin could be considered a forerunner of social constructionism. And not only Bakhtin's epistemological ideas are of significance here. Considering my focus on corporate identity phenomena, his ontological notion of a socially constructed self is important too. Bakhtin and Emerson (1984) write: "I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another" (p. 287). An obvious key concept here is the notion of outsideness, where Bakhtin draws a clear distinction between the 'self' and 'other' separated in space and time. It provides the opportunity to create identities, because according to Bakhtin humans only come into being through their encounters with an ‘other’ when they engage in the process of making meaning together. Bakhtin, Holquist and Emerson (1986) explain how meaning only reveals depth once it has come into contact with another, foreign meaning (p. 7). For example, Carbaugh’s cultural dimensions about organizations can possibly be better understood when we embrace a theory such as Bakhtin’s dialogism. Previous literature had always suggested a cognitive process of human interaction; it is valuable for me to draw on Bakhtin who turns our focus to dialogue in which individuals makes sense of things through dialectic relations in which they respond to one another through language.

According to Bakhtin, dialogue represents an ongoing, evolving context that affects the participants and is affected by the participants. When Bakhtin, Holquist and Emerson (1986) talk about language use, they speak of ‘utterances’ that make the dialogue concrete (p. 63). In this context, he also suggests that utterances are related to preceding as well as subsequent utterances in the chain of the interaction (p. 94). However, those utterances are not just static words; he understands them as dynamic units that create meaning and relationships. Here we can draw another parallel with what Carbaugh calls communicative practices. In another essay, Bakhtin and Holquist (1981) explain how utterances are always characterized by a context of centripetal and centrifugal forces that create tension. Basically, centripetal forces impose order and centrifugal forces disrupt order. Together they contribute to the constant instability of the world, and the multiple discourses that are resulting from this are referred to as heteroglossia (p. 272). Bakhtin’s dialogical approach shows us how everyday life is full of tension and how identities are complicated and fragmented. For example, due to this heteroglossia and the fragmented nature of identity construction, one could simultaneously identify and disidentify with an organization.

Nonetheless Bakhtin also helps us see how some kind of integrated whole is constructed. In a chaotic context of heteroglossia, people negotiate their views, their understandings, and their standpoints against those of others. From these utterances that occur in dialogue, we can then view identification processes that emerge in the interaction. This notion can be translated to an employee's holistic perception of the corporate organization that he or she works for. It shows how corporate identity is not just a top-down movement, through the communicative process of identification it becomes a cycle that also flows from the bottom up. Thus, while the employees interact with one another, they make meaning of the corporation as a whole, while also constructing their own identities.

So far, discussions about identity and identification constructions have been focused on a positive notion of members identifying with an organization. Functionalists articulate the benefits of building a strong corporate identity, most Interpretivists researching organizational culture have pointed our attention to symbolic features that portrayed a shared and unifying dynamic of identification between the organization and its members. However, some Interpretivists such as Van Maanen (1991) also demonstrated how subcultures develop that resist the shared assumptions. So, social constructionists may be aware of both shared and resisted shared meanings, however Bakhtin really teases this out. His idea of centrifugal forces and a context of heteroglossia opens up the possibility to explore why there is disidentification, which is the starting place of this study. As Pepper and Larson (2006) suggest, when organizational members experience identity tensions, they are wrestling with cultural premises (p. 52). Those premises include communicative cultural performances (Carbaugh, 1996), as well as organizationally embedded values and assumptions (Pacanowksy & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982). According to Pepper and Larson (2006), "disidentifiers do not want to be associated with the values or operational premises of certain organizations," but they also stress a clear distinction between disidentification and low identification (p. 53). In my study, positive identification and disidentification is to be seen, or visualized, on a continuum with lots of space in between both ends. Corporate employees fall on that continuum continuously and dynamically throughout their everyday organizational life experience where they negotiate the corporate identity and cultural premises through dialogue.

Disidentification

In order to come to a better understanding of the proposed continuum of identification, it might be useful to introduce a few more ideas on disidentification. Kenneth Burke is famous for his work in this arena as he emphasized the opposite notion of identification: division. In his theory, he argues that we cannot comprehend the desire for humans to identify without understanding that they are always separate individuals. Burke (1969) explains: "A is not identical with his colleague B. But insofar as their interests are joined, A is *identified* with B. Or he may identify himself with B even when their interests are not joined, if he assumes that they are, or is persuaded to believe so" (p. 20). Especially this last persuaded notion of shared interests, or consubstantiality as Burke calls it, is interesting because that is what generally happens in corporate organizations. According to Burke, we constantly seek consubtantiality (or identification) with others through the shared meanings interpreted from others. However, Burke (1969) also states: “Identification is affirmed with earnestness precisely because there is division. Identification is compensatory to division” (p. 22). Even though Burke focuses more on rhetoric, there is definitely overlap with Bakhtin’s dialogic notion of meaning making amongst separate individuals. In both theories one can identify centripetal (consubtantiality) and centrifugal (division) forces that are being negotiated in a complex social context of heteroglossia.

Most definitions in identity literature revolve around the notion of separateness (Pepper & Larson, 2006, p. 53). A recognized study of the National Rifle Association by Elsbach and Bhattacharya (2001) found that disidentification was happening when people communicated a sense of self-distinctiveness, and even further, they tended to define “who they were not” (p. 406). This can be described as employees trying to paint a picture of themselves as different from the perceived corporate identity or separating themselves by defining what they feel they’re not. Pratt and Rafaeli (2001) for example show how individuals disidentify by communicating symbols that clearly do not represent the traditional “organization man” (or woman) (p. 109). These symbols could be displayed by wearing a slightly different type of clothing than what’s typical or prescribed; or having artifacts in one’s office or cubicle that are not quite mainstream. Also, from Van Maanen’s (1991) work, we learned that employees during sessions at the ‘University of Disneyland’ weren’t always blindly accepting of all the socialization efforts targeted at them in what Van Maanen described as satirical banter, mischievous winking, and playful exaggeration in the classroom (p. 253). These social scenes in which employees actively adjust their own identity from the corporate identity are forms of identity construction towards the disidentification end the continuum. By considering these ideas about disidentification, and on the other hand reflecting back on the foundational definition of identity by Albert and Whetten (1985), one will recognize the distinction between the two ends of the continuum. The moments where employees “fall” somewhere on this continuum is where divergence happens, and where corporate messages are accepted and/or rejected to certain degrees. Acceptance is recognized in dialogue by identifying symbols of shared cultural meanings that are being represented through centripetal forces. Rejection is recognized in dialogue by identifying forms of distinctiveness or resistance in utterances that hold centrifugal forces. The two always overlap in a constantly changing context of heteroglossia. This approach will help me to paint a momentary picture of corporate identity at *Mokum*.

Research Questions

If corporate identity is a communicative phenomenon: identity emerges in the communicative process of identification. It deals with dialogue, language, and communicative practices that illustrate meanings and cultural features in the context of organizational life. As Deetz (1994) highlights, “in all interactions, including those in organizations, perception, meanings, and data transmission are complex, multileveled phenomena produced out of and conflicting motives and structures” (p. 30). With this, we can conclude that corporate identity is complex and conceived in multiple ways. It is important to study, because it explains the company and uncovers why companies do what they do, and how its members relate to their employer and vice versa.

I am interested in the formative power of discourse, how the organization emerges in daily talk, and how the organizational dimensions constantly change because different identities are being negotiated. Organizational members then, while engaging in daily life as their own agents, might discuss certain managerial or corporate messages that reach them, and that mean something to them. In this talk, they possibly create interpretations that either align or diverge from the intent of these corporate messages. This divergence is crucial for the organization because it will determine in what direction certain discourses are going, and therefore what type of identities are created, and what main perceptions of corporate identity are being shared amongst employees. If I can come to know more about this moment of divergence, maybe new theories could be developed that are different from the Functionalistic perspective.

In this study, I will focus in-depth on the creation of social meaning and how it plays out at *Mokum*. In fact, communication will be considered as constitutive of organizations (Pacanowsky & O'Donnell-Trujillo, 1982; Putnam, 1983). Corporate identity as an organizational phenomenon is also constituted by communication, and therefore we will look at interactions, stories, and symbols that create meaning about the organization. In a double role as intern and researcher, I will collect my data at *Mokum*. First, I will explore the top-down corporate messages and how they reach the employees through the identification process. The results from observations should lead to an answer of my first question:

RQ1: How is the relationship between corporate identity and member identity negotiated communicatively?

As corporate messages flow through the identification process, it will be communicated among the organizational members. Therefore, we will also focus on the daily discourse, which will reflect how corporate identity is received and how it constructs the identity of each member. Communication theory, such as identification theories and Bakhtin's dialogism, will help us understand this, and to some extent guide our analysis. At the point of organizational participant identity construction, a certain process of acceptance or rejection of the perceived corporate identity is expected. This will lead us to the second question:

RQ2: How is the divergence between acceptance and rejection of corporate identity constructed and negotiated?

The purpose of this thesis is that *Mokum, Inc.* will gain a valuable understanding of their corporate identity, and how identity is constructed among their members. Also, by investigating the divergence between acceptance and rejection of corporate identity among the members, we will gain an understanding how possible disidentification (when corporate identity is rejected) happens communicatively. This could lead to significant new insight to the body of literature on corporate identity. By discovering meaning making processes through organizational culture theories, looking at disidentification using Bakhtin, and reflecting on the constructed social world at *Mokum*, a recipe is provided for new empirical research on identity and identification. All ingredients for this recipe have been used in previous studies but neither in this combination nor in this context. Lastly, we can also provide *Mokum* with direction and possible suggestions to change their corporate messages and positively reshape the construction of corporate identity.

CHAPTER TWO: METHODS

Taking a position in which organizational communication knowledge is highly interpretive and socially constructed means a qualitative study will be conducted. Therefore, the focus will be on exploring and understanding the daily interactions of participants in the construction of a corporate identity in a specific organization. In order to understand the socially constructed, and deeply held, cultural assumptions of the organizational culture, qualitative data will be collected from organizational members. Here I heavily draw on Lindlof and Taylor (2011) who provide an excellent guide to qualitative methods in communication. They discuss the interpretive turn and the value of these methods in discovering the ways humans use symbolic resources to interpret the meaningfulness of their worlds (p. 45). Also, the authors take notice of the particular trend I seek to expand on: they state, “A growing theme here involves the ‘dialogical’ status of identity as a local, perpetually shifting accomplishment dependent upon collaboration and linguistic mediation” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 46). The goal is, within a relatively short amount of time, to generate a wide variety of data at *Mokum*, made up from mainly participant observations and interviews. This research is flexible in nature and thus field notes, interview dialogue, and various corporate documents all become a part of the investigation. After the collection phase, the data will be analyzed to search for themes that appear from data such as interview responses and conversations between employees.

Site of Research

The communicative process of corporate identification in this study involves participating and observing in a local office with the members of *Mokum, Inc.*, a nationwide company in financial services. In my double role as intern and researcher, data will be collected at the Bunnik division office. Since June 2010, I have worked part time as a marketing and recruiting intern at *Mokum*. This way the business in general and its organizational members in the division are known to me beforehand. The company's home office is located in a major city in the Midwest region and employs around 2,500 employees nationally. *Mokum* was founded in 1937 and not much later it was the first to sell funds following the Investment Company Act of 1940. Today *Mokum's* financial experts advise clients all over the United States on their investments, taxes, retirement plans, etc.

Mokum is an interesting site to study corporate identity because companies in the financial industry demonstrate Cheney and Christensen's (2001) notion discussed earlier, on the preoccupation and near obsession some companies have with their corporate identity. As an intern, I came to know *Mokum* as an organization where the corporate home office actively tries to remind its employees about the culture, mission, vision, and values of the corporation. In the financial world, businesses are concerned with their reputation and public perception of trustworthiness, because these traits are thought of as important for companies dealing with money. Interesting also is *Mokum*'s business model, which is characterized by a commission-based compensation system for financial advisors. The home office provides resources like training, mentoring, offices, and supplies, and many other resources; however, the financial advisors are responsible for building their own client base and are thus directly dependent on their own performance. With this business model, it is in the corporate leaders' interest to grow the number of employed advisors so that the organization can attain new clients. Therefore, recruiting talented people for a career at *Mokum* is always a big priority at a division office such as the one in Bunnik. This means the company is always reaching out to its community to target both prospective clients as well as prospective employees. Corporate identity and reputation are obviously of crucial importance to *Mokum*.

Participants

A selection of employees were recruited for participation in semi-structured interviews. It was important to the study to understand corporate identification on different levels in the company based on the organizational hierarchy. Therefore, I recruited five administrative assistants, ten advisors, and one division manager for individual interview sessions. During my time as an intern at the company, I understood these sixteen prospective participants to be potential key informants because they were knowledgeable about what was going on in the office. They either had a long history with the company or were very engaged and open to me about their experiences and relationships. It was also important to have key informants in all categories of the hierarchy and some based out of the division office and others based from the division's satellite offices. For the observational field research, I observed many different interactions between the 24 employees. These interactions could take place anywhere in the Bunnik division office, ranging from formal meetings to a chitchat in the kitchen. The population included both males and females between the ages of 25 and approximately 70. Although ethnicity was irrelevant to the study, all employees happen to be Caucasian.

Semi-Structured Interviews

There were a total of 16 interviews that ranged between 45 and 90 minutes and were conducted in a location that was convenient for the participant. In total, I interviewed five administrative assistants, ten advisors, and one managing principal. The interviews were conducted in an open-ended, semi-structured format. The domains listed in the table in Appendix A help organize the example set of semi-structured questions. There were places where probes were included asking a participant to extend on an idea that is particularly helpful in understanding corporate identification. For example, when issues arose that had to do with David's role as the local leader I began to probe individuals about David as their manager in each interview. The interviews were audio recorded resulting in 15:36 of interview hours and 194 pages in transcripts. Immediately following each interview, fieldnotes about the nonverbal interactions that occurred during the interviews were written up as well. These fieldnotes captured the general tone of the interview, and I included a section with my impressions regarding central issues and concerns that emerged in the interview. In one of Bakhtin's essays, which he is believed to have written under the pseudonym Voloshinov (1987), he highlighted the importance of intonation and also, what he calls, the extraverbal context. Bakhtin valued an analysis not only of the utterance but also the tone of voice (that could be a site of value judgments) and the overall environment where the communication took place (p. 99-103). This was important for me to note in my fieldnotes.

Observations

Prior to the start of this study, I was able to gain a solid understanding of what the corporation stands for and how things are getting done at *Mokum* as I entered as an intern five months prior to the study beginning. As stated in Lindlof and Taylor (2011), this familiarity with the organization was very important to qualitative research. Being able to act, think, and feel as a true participant is considered a prerequisite to making effective claims about communication (p. 4). The interpretive approach takes seriously the position of social constructionism, aiming to understand the symbolic meaning behind patterns of practice from the perspective of organizational participants. The epistemological significance of interpretation, as a human accomplishment, enables researchers interested in identity and identification to be a visible member of his or her own research environment (Anderson, 1996). In my double role as a researcher and an intern, I might have had a direct impact on situations in the research setting, because I was participating in it. The assumption of social construction of reality justifies this researcher's involvement, as opposed to Functionalistic assumptions where the researcher will try to keep outside of the data collection process.

During the data collection period, I continued to learn about the organization; however, a more specific focus was directed towards communication through which corporate identity happened. While I also continued to work as an intern, I took notes of conversations and meetings. Field observations therefore took place anywhere in the office: the front desk area, the hallway, around the cubicles, in personal offices, and in the kitchen area. Also, I took observational field notes while in the managing principal's office and in the conference room while I sat in on formal meetings.

Document Collection

In addition to the interviews and observations, documents with significance to the study were collected and used in different ways. Certain corporate brochures, pamphlets, and recruiting materials served to familiarize myself with the company even more. These documents helped illustrate ideas and discourses that contributed to the construction of a corporate identity. Also, emails and memos that were distributed from the home office to the employees at the Bunnik division were used in the interviews as an example. These written corporate messages were displayed in front of the participant while I asked them how they had interpreted that message when they first received it.

Data Analysis

After gathering and transcribing all observational and interview data, I started the process of interpretation. Here I used an approach called grounded theory that is discussed in Lindlof and Taylor (2011), but received its merits from Corbin and Strauss (2008). The first step in analyzing was to go over the transcriptions again and labeling and breaking down the raw data into categories. Categorization was an important step that needed accuracy and both inductive and deductive thought, however it was not difficult to comprehend as it refers to sorting units of data with respect to properties that they were having in common (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 246). While going through the transcripts, I coded specific portions that represented a bigger phenomenon or category and entered them in a codebook; this activity is called open coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008, p. 195). The codes are the links between the data and the categories (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011) and are labeled per topic related to, for example, certain interview questions, corporate labels or relationships, and concepts related to the literature that has been discussed. Also, the research questions aided in focusing attention upon meanings in communicative performances that possibly had connections with different or new categories and theoretical conceptualizations. The codebook in the end consisted of three main columns, first the category and its definition, second the codes within that category, and third the chunks of data pertaining to that code and category.

According to Corbin and Strauss (2008), it is valuable for a qualitative study to apply thorough comparison making to your coded data. Therefore, each incident from my data that made it into my codebook was compared with other incidents for similarities and difference (p. 73). Even quotes from within the same code were compared to trigger deep thought about the meaning of a particular utterance and making sure they were entered under the appropriate label. This process is called constant comparisons (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). This was a first important step to come to reliable interpretations. Throughout this process, I came to recognize themed patterns that I then tied in with concepts that established my theoretical framework. Explaining the links that I created between codes that comprised a pattern was a key element in order for my interpretations to be reliable. It also opened up the possibility to freely draw diagrams and write memo's about claims that possibly hold validity about the corporate identity at *Mokum*.

Limitations

After completing the research, three things appeared to me to have limited the dataset. First of all, I was limited by time-constraints of being at *Mokum* only for a set amount of time. During the eight months, a lot happened, yet when I had to finish my data collection period I felt slight disappointment. My story was not all the way finished, maybe I wanted to stay longer and wait for a 'big' change to happen at *Mokum*. However, I believe the data that was derived for this study was substantive enough as key findings were repeated and clarified in dialogue with me. Of course, some elements of the performances of identification at *Mokum* were not fully illuminated due to short time, but in those cases, the data was not used or only mentioned briefly. Furthermore, I contextualized the data through my participant observations and through document collection. The comparison proved substantive in that rich elements of analysis emerged across all three methods of collection.

The second weakness was the limited amount of interaction in the hallways, coffee room, and other office spaces between my informants. This lack of dialogue was a big problem to me at first, because of my supporting literature by Bakhtin. However, the participants started opening up and performed their identities in dialogue with me during the semi-structured interviews. The lack of office interaction might be an interesting topic of investigation for future scholars. What does it mean and how does it affect identity construction? The last limitation is also an advantage, but needs to be acknowledged. It's not always a deficiency, because my English is obviously at a proper level for graduate school; however, I am still an ESL (English as a Second Language) student. This makes it hard sometimes when trying to quickly understand everything, and process and interpret data. Everything seems to be taking a little bit more time. Also, my informants might have not always understood me right away when in dialogue with them. I have had to repeat or clarify something here and there, because of my accent, or word use, or sentence structure. The cultural differences on the other hand can have its advantages. For example, coming from a country with a more socialistic society, certain aspects of American capitalism or the corporate financial industry are not as 'normal' for me than it would be for most American researchers. As a qualitative researcher, it is important to not take anything for granted and as a complete outsider and layman of the industry, this was valuable in my creative and critical thinking about what I found at *Mokum*. This automatically leads us to the next chapter in which the main findings are laid out.

CHAPTER THREE: FINDINGS

In this section, I will tell the story of *Mokum*. Entering the organization and participating at *Mokum* led to a dataset that I analyzed and interpreted. I followed a grounded theory approach to develop answers for my research questions: 1) how is the relationship between corporate identity and member identity negotiated communicatively? and 2) how is the divergence between acceptance and rejection of corporate identity constructed and negotiated? Qualitative research and grounded theory in the field of organizational communication brings significant insights to topics such as performances of organizational roles, metaphors used by organizations to express their identity, and management efforts to induce the identification of workers (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011, p. 25). In this study, qualitative research and grounded theory aided in understanding the dynamics of identification and disidentification in an organizational context.

The meanings that I interpreted arose in dialogic processes, during the semi-structured interviews and other previously discussed methods while at *Mokum* for the three months of data collection. However, the number of conversations between organizational members in the office space was much lower than anticipated. Even though I tried to catch as much hallway talk as possible, silence was much more normal at *Mokum*. The documents, the observational field notes, but predominantly the semi-structured interviews helped in finding themes and patterns in identity performances about the company. By following the grounded theory approach, I was able to become even more involved with the data. As the codes and categories started to form by cross-referencing, the bigger picture started to emerge for me, and I began to uncover some contextualized performances. This bigger picture is “grounded in” the relationships between my data and the categories into which they are coded.

During the semi-structured interviews, the financial advisors sometimes had a tendency to get into detail about financial products or market developments. They also enjoyed discussing their past, how they started their careers, how they started with *Mokum*, and those monologues were often accompanied with interesting personal stories. Overwhelmingly, however, I found that participants began to perform their identification and disidentification with *Mokum* when they discussed the current state of things. In particular, I found that participants became very passionate in their dialogue with me and animated in performing what they believed in and what they did not; what they identified with and what they did not. I refer to these sharing moments as performances, because my informants showed drama and animation when they performed them to me. For example, my informants would look me deeper in the eye when they made a bold statement, or they would insert a silence (drama). Others would talk more quickly and use body language, such as facial expressions and hand movements. These hand gestures, for example, occurred when explaining in detail about sitting next to a top executive (animation). It was interesting to see my data develop this way, because instead of observing performances of identity in dialogue with one another, as they chose to discuss certain aspects of their jobs directly with me, participants began to “act” their identifications and disidentifications in an animated way. Regardless of how all of my participants viewed me, maybe more as the intern, maybe more as a researcher, or even the foreigner, they obviously felt free to perform their feelings and opinions about their jobs, the company, and their relationships at work, with me.

In particular, a discussion about the division manager drew out strong feelings for all participants; however, it was the senior advisors who were the most vivid in their performances. Thus, as I analyzed the data, I found the need to focus my analysis on the senior advisors in order to understand disidentification at *Mokum*. For example, the more I talked to the senior advisors, the more I ran into significant expressions of irritation, frustration, and criticism about the division manager lying beneath the surface at *Mokum*. These social performances were not noticeable to me in the daily talk or meetings at the *Mokum* office, and that is partially the result of the previously noted lack of direct talk on the office floor. It was throughout the interviewing process and analyzing the transcriptions that the most interesting categories, applicable to my research questions, became apparent. This is not to say that this is the only place where disidentification occurs. Rather, it was simply the most vivid. In the next section, the findings are organized into three overarching themes: 1) The Ideal Mokum Family, 2) The Dysfunctional Local Family, and 3) The Desperate Manager. In the first two sections, performances of identification and disidentification will be discussed and in the last part we specifically take a look at David's[1] role as the local manager. His performances were important, because it relates back to both research questions. He played an important role as the link between the local office and the corporate office, and he also emerged as an important figure in identity construction for the other local organizational members; a place where divergence happened.

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[1] All names introduced are pseudonyms

The Ideal Mokum Family

One of the first things that emerged in the data analysis was the commitment to the mission and vision of the corporation at large amongst all the local employees in the Bunnik division. Participants felt the culture and reputation of the company was very reputable and the company was highly regarded amongst all employees. Yet, what became interesting was not only that participants identified with the key *corporate* values, but also that they did not identified with the *local* Bunnik office of *Mokum*; participants described their familial bond with the corporate *Mokum* office, but not with the local office. In this section, we look at *Mokum* as a family in three different ways: Faith in Us, Circle of Champions, and Commitment Ceremony. It describes performances of identity in the familial culture of corporate *Mokum*, the idolatry of its executives, and the undeniable commitment that employees show in their work for *Mokum*.

<u>Faith in Us</u>

There were several social scenes during which participants performed identification with the corporate mission and values. The *Mokum* mission statement is never formulated consistently throughout *Mokum*'s publications, but integrity, commitment to the client, and *Mokum*'s "unique" familial culture are key words that keep coming up in interviews. When talking about those corporate values, oftentimes the term 'home office' would be involved. The fact that they call the corporate office the home office and not headquarters as in most big firms, demonstrates what the corporate executives are trying to do: they want to promote a familial metaphor. The term home office does not just stand for the *Mokum* office campus in a large Midwest city, but for everything that encompasses national matters and what is communicated from those offices into “the field.” Informants discussed the ways in which this communication is conveyed and organized, the business model and policies, the successes and deficiencies, the corporate leaders and the reputation of the *Mokum* brand in the industry, and beyond. None of the employees, from advisors to administrative assistants, were too shy to convey their opinions and describe their relationships with the home office to me.

Senior advisors in particular interact more with the home office and performed their faith in *Mokum* during their interviews. *Mokum* has performed considerably well economically compared to some of its competitors throughout the financial downturn of the last couple of years. Much respect is therefore allocated to the executives of the investment management group at the home office. Gabe, an important senior advisor in the division, stated: “They have a very structured, well thought out, proven system on how to bring in young talent that are usually are masters in finance types of graduates from the big, you know, the Wharton Business School types of things that are really… what we believe to be high-end money manager potential.” The “smart guys” at the home office are clearly looked up to by Gabe and some other advisors in the Bunnik division. There is faith in the hiring process; there is a strong belief that only the best financial talents are selected. In this example, Gabe clearly attaches value to the status of a new investment manager by the school he or she graduated from. The home office, by communicating that they only hire the best of the best, builds a kind of confidence amongst the organizational members in their competency to navigate the company in the right direction through these difficult times in the financial industry. And participants, who are hired, feel they are a part of this status.

Looking at faith a little bit more, specifically in the *Mokum* hiring process, we see that it is not only based on the status of the talented graduates that come in. Another example is performed when advisor Pam quickly, but openly, mentions the former CEO's son Kevin, who is now a division manager in California. Later in this findings chapter, performances of idolizing are discussed where I show how Pam idolizes Kevin's father, former CEO Brad Braden. Part of the same quote is used for both analyses. However, here it is important to note that Pam has an enormous faith in Brad's son Kevin, who she thinks will be a great manager just like his father.

> …and actually if you were to look, this man here last name of Braden, Brad Braden. His son Kevin Braden, there was a memo just sent out the other day about him being Managing Principle down in California and hiring somebody… he's won many awards. His father was very popular but he was thrown in front of a bus in the corporate world and so he's no longer in that capacity. He made an agreement with a company on a handshake. Many people had said: should have been in writing. And it was on a handshake, because he's a man of honor and integrity and a handshake is as good as any legally drawn document.

The fact that she mentions Kevin in a story about his father without a relevant reason, and then emphasizes the awards he has already won, illustrates Pam performing faith towards the company, its executives, and the hiring process. She does not know Kevin personally but automatically has faith in him as a competent leader, because she looked up to his father. In other organizational cultures, when a son of an executive is given a high-up management position, it could lead to opposite performances, such as skepticism or enviousness. Yet, at *Mokum*, there is a common belief that the corporation is always acting (as if a person) in their best interests, which limits disidentification with the corporation at large.

There is a different finding that illustrated performances of faith at *Mokum*. To investigate corporate identification, a recent memo from the home office to all organizational members was brought to my informants' attention. It was a memo that was sent after *Mokum* appeared negatively in news media. The corporation was being accused of trading unauthorized large amounts of futures in a predetermined short amount of time. Several big news channels said *Mokum*, by doing this, seriously disrupted the financial markets causing a so-called 'flash crash' on Wall Street. The memo instructed *Mokum's* employees how to defend their position in the scandal and how to explain the issue to the clients. At the time of data collection, investigations were still ongoing about the flash crash and *Mokum's* involvement. Darren explained to me how he interpreted the corporate message and said:

> And there is some people out researching right now but we believe, the company said that "we believe in what we did, we didn't do anything wrong." And just looking at the track record of our company, we are a conservative company by nature. We are not the type of company that is in the media for negative things. We are not the type of company that gambles in certain areas or crosses the line, we have been around for a very long time and we have real consistent and prudent approach. And I knew that, so when that came out I knew that it was probably not what it seemed to be. And *Mokum* came out right away and said "we know we did not do anything wrong." So this will come out in time and be proven in our favor, and it was, so I really, I honestly did not think that there was anything going on that shouldn't be.

Clearly, Darren is taking for granted that *Mokum* processes are without fault. He states without a doubt that *Mokum* has not done anything wrong, and performs the actions instructed in the home office memo based on what he believes the company to be. The moment where Darren decided if he was either going to buy into the corporate message or if he was going to be critical of it was a moment of identification. Despite all allegations in the news and the ongoing investigations, Darren's decision seemed so easy, because he performs so much faith in the company. It is interesting to see that Darren, who has only been with *Mokum* for a year and a half, uses the pronoun "we" for the organization while in dialogue with me. In his quote are some other underlying cultural meanings. He defines *Mokum* as a conservative company by nature, which implies the assumption of a permanent trait of Mokum that lends to his faith in the company acting appropriately. In Darren's perception, *Mokum* cannot do anything wrong, he simply trusts what the home office tells him and he even denies, in a way, that *Mokum* is in the news negatively. Looking at his short time with the company and his strong performance of faith, the identification process with him and the corporation develops from discourses created by the home office and from stories he picked up from colleagues that will follow in the next section.

<u>Circle of Champions</u>

Top performing employees at *Mokum* qualify to be in an elite group within the organization that gives privileges, a networking opportunity, and a free trip to a nice location with colleagues and executives. This group is called the Circle of Champions. The performances of faith as shown in the last section, this belonging to an elite group, looking up to fellow organizational members with status, and also other performances that will be discussed later, such as commitment, are all part of identity construction. When organizational members spoke with me, I heard more than just words of praise for their leaders or commitment to their roles in the organization. Their words were a reflection of what they felt was expected from them in the organizational role they were playing, and their ideas of what it meant to be working for *Mokum*. These informants performed their identities, which were shaped by the organizational context.

For example, for young advisor Darren, working for *Mokum* means working for a company that does not do anything wrong, that values integrity and doing what is best for the client. This is what he heard from corporate messages and from dialogue with his colleagues. He now works hard in his role, because that is what is expected, and he demonstrates in his talk identification with the meanings that were involved in the corporate discourse. Identifying with corporate values and buying into stories and messages from the home office prohibit Darren from critical observation of his organization and its actions. In social scenes where he talks with colleagues about the company, he said he never heard anything negative, so he has no reason to believe that there has been any negative things going on. Even though a conversation like that, with my informants as colleagues talking amongst each other, never really occurred during my data collection phase, it was communicated to me directly by Darren that these conversations about the company often had a praiseful character. While it was in these talks with colleagues that identity construction develops in dialogue, in participant interviews the meanings with which participants identified became clear. In particular, value premises about the integrity of the executives of the company are shared amongst organizational members. This is where identification with the corporation occurs for new guys such as Darren. His identification with the corporate values and his faith in the home office is reiterated when he performs these value premises directly to me in the semi-structured interview. These different meanings of hard work, integrity, customer focus, and *Mokum* as a family were clearly demonstrated in his talk to me, in a persuasive manner as if he were trying to encourage my identification as an intern as well.

Other qualities at the home office that are praised by the advisors repeatedly are the fund managers. These are the heroes of the company; all informants had nothing but praise for these heroes and felt great pride that these participants worked for *Mokum.* Advisor Gabe: “The investment management group, they are world class. There is no one out there that can even compete with them, let alone beat them.” The new fund managers are all top-notch Master’s in Finance students from the big universities. They all start as analysts and then are slowly trained to manage funds. Some end up in executive offices at *Mokum*, such as Cody. They are looked up to by the advisors, which was illustrated in the stories told to me. For example, Gabe tells the following story:

> You see, we have about twenty limousines roll through our headquarters that are pitching their stocks or bonds to us. We are historically known as the worst, most difficult, shop to come pitch a product to […] In fact Cody has a piranha mounted in his office, because his nickname was the piranha […] When Donald Trump was building the Taj Mahal, he came and pitched his Taj Mahal bonds to us. Yeah, Cody does not care if it’s the president of the United States sitting across the table; he’ll tell them where the sun shines if they think they’re being, you know… bs’d […] we are deferring more and more to Kansas City to manage the client’s money. There is a lot of faith there.

This is a feeling performed by most employees; they all have plenty of faith in whatever the fund managers decide. The younger advisors or administrative assistants do not personally know these fund managers, but by talking to each other and to me *about* how great they are, both the reputation of the fund managers and the symbolic meanings represented by these fund managers perpetuates within the organization. Executives such as Cody are idolized, because of their professional record in the industry and their status within the organization. However, there is more to it than this. Cody is a cultural artifact, he is a piranha, and telling a story that idolizes predatory actions is a performance by *Mokum* of idoltry. Idolozing here represents a feeling of control over a prey who is in danger, and a kind of intimidating 'don't screw with *Mokum*' attitude. The piranha is a vivid metaphor that organizational members such as Gabe enjoy bringing up, because they identify with their company in that sense. They see themselves performing, to a lesser degree, in a predatory manner. Ironically enough, we will find later that some senior advisors, the 'Circle of Champions' qualifiers, in the division handle a similar intimidating attitude towards their own local management. In such a case, David was the prey. The 'don't screw with *Mokum*' attitude is one with a strong meaning of independence that is important for the advisors on an individual level as well. Gabe performed the story about the piranha, the limousines, and Donald Trump in an animated way, with excitement. To be idolized as a *Mokum* executive you need to perform this way, with vivid metaphors and sometimes intimidating behavior. This way, organizational members will recognize and remember the meanings and they can also repeat them by telling the stories in animated ways.

Another story like that was performed by my informant Pam, who pointed out to me in a 2003 *Mokum* newsletter called "The World" an article focused on Brad, the National Sales Manager. He was mentioned earlier in this chapter when I discussed part of the same quote, because it also showed faith through his son Kevin. This article was a reprint of Brad's opening speech at the "Circle of Champions" meeting in 2003. It was an inspirational speech that really touched Pam as an employee. As Pam described Brad, she also put him on a pedestal as demonstrated as she told the following story while pointing at the article:

> …and actually if you were to look, this man here last name of Braden, Brad Braden. His son Kevin Braden, there was a memo just sent out the other day about him being Managing Principle down in California and hiring somebody… he's won many awards. His father was very popular but he was thrown in front of a bus in the corporate world and so he's no longer in that capacity. He made an agreement with a company on a handshake. Many people had said: should have been in writing. And it was on a handshake, because he's a man of honor and integrity and a handshake is as good as any legally drawn document. Well then the insurance company changed the rules and said 'oh, that's not what we said' and Brad said 'yes that is what you said' and nothing was in writing so when we to try and negotiate basically Brad was thrown under the bus. He was a good man. He was the corporate National Sales Manager I believe was his title. So corporations do that, I'm not going to say we haven't done that, you know we're not perfect. We probably do it a whole lot less than other companies. But he blew it, in terms of corporate protection; because of his own values being a man of integrity he believed that other people would be people of integrity as well. And obviously that played against him and somebody had to take the fall, it cost us millions as a corporation.

Pam performs as she tells this story shows how she prefers business to be done in the old fashioned way, and that *Mokum* intends to do it that way. Pam is reaching the end of her career and seems to have a hard time adapting to new developments, she complained about technology and more rules and regulations due to the 2008 financial crisis. She talks about the past at *Mokum* in an animated way; you could hear the sentiment in her voice. *Mokum* is a relatively old company, still headquartered in the rural Midwest instead of all its competitors on Wall Street. The fact that CEO Cody comes from a Midwest farming family, has a piranha mounted in his office, and that Brad confirms a business deal on a handshake, are important cultural performances that make up corporate identity with which organizational members such as Pam strongly identify. She identifies with the corporate values, because of the leaders' reputation and backgrounds. The handshake is a performance that represents the old fashioned way of business that Pam identifies with, demonstrated by the sentiment and the fact that she keeps referencing it. It is not just a handshake; to Pam, the handshake is embedded with integrity and honor, because that was how business was done in the olden days.

Pam is not only identifying with the *Mokum* corporation, she is also disidentifying with other corporations, by distinguishing other financial firms tendency to undermine their employees or take them for granted. In Pam's quote, while idolizing Brad she draws a parallel describing the entire company as a good company, because apparently *Mokum* throws fewer people under the bus compared to other corporations. When corporate leaders at *Mokum* perform identities that perpetuate feelings of honesty and integrity, and always putting the client first, they reify their identity as a company. Some organizational members like Pam, who interact more with these leaders then others, tell their stories to their colleagues in the local offices.

In Mokum We Trust

All organizational members in the division show strong commitment to their work; that is because a big portion of their income is commission based, but also because they believe in their company's values and are willing to contribute. They all work hard and most of them much longer than 40 hours a week. Of course, there are multiple factors leading to the performance of commitment in their work. They are committed to the success of their own practice, they feel responsible for their clients, and they have pride towards each other since all performance metrics are constantly shared around the division by managing principle David. There are also performances of commitment ("commitment ceremonies") more tailored towards the company embedded in the value of trust. These are demonstrated mainly by the younger advisors, like Darren and

Brandon who reside in the division office. Darren told me about his decision to start working for *Mokum*:

> I think the biggest thing for me was a lot of the other ones [financial firms, i.e.] specified in a certain area. Like they would say, we want you to sell these insurance policies, or another one would say you should sell stocks and bonds. And the thing I liked about *Mokum* was that they believed in comprehensive planning, where we can help in every area. They weren't so product driven, like you have to sell a certain amount of these, certain things in a month. They were more about do what's best for the client. And if that means selling this then that's fine, or if it means selling that, that's fine, but you don't have to if it's not right for them. I think they just really believe in putting the client first and doing the best for them. And also, I felt like I was going to get more support and help through the management here than I would somewhere else. Those were the biggest factors.

Darren performs the impression that *Mokum* is the only financial company that is to be trusted. This is demonstrated in the dialogue when he uses the word "helping" a lot, meaning Americans are in absolute need of *Mokum's* services. It is also demonstrated in his language "doing what's best for the client" and "putting the client first." According to Darren, *Mokum* is driven by more than product, it is sincerely helping people. He believes in developing portfolios that are right for the people; he sees *Mokum* as a more ethical finance company than others. However, just like other financial firms, there are incentives for selling certain packages over others, and of course selling more financial products leads to more commission-based income. There are multiple interests in the game as in any other situation with other firms, but Darren's commitment to give it his all for *Mokum* is a demonstration of identifying with the trust value he interprets from the organization.

Justifying his decision to work for *Mokum,* Darren has already built a certain trust to the company that emerges in commitment ceremonies such as the one shown. Even though by now, after working in the firm for 1.5 years and developing some critical views on certain local managerial policies, he strongly expresses trust in the corporation. In his story, he conveys the cultural meanings by saying how the company is loyal to its customers and how management is going to give him support, so in return he is going to be committed and trusting to them. For example, when he discussed a company policy that he did not agree with, he would end the topic by putting it back into perspective in an almost apologetic matter. He would tone down by saying "but no company is perfect" for instance, or go off about wonderful things about the company. Darren identifies strongly with the values of trust of the corporation and therefore performs a commitment ceremony for *Mokum*.

In another interview, David stated me:

> …so Cody was like second in command, but he was a big deal and he was the heir apparent, he was going to be taking over chief investment officer role. And he came in to talk with us, there were about 20 of us there and I was sitting right next to him, so he was right off of my right hand and his left hand would have been touching my right hand. So looking at the side of his face and he was just unplugged talking to us about his career with the company and culture and what he thinks is so important. And what I found very striking is he got choked up, he had to actually stop talking for a while to get his composure under control, because what he was talking to us about is I think related to your question and that is that he said "we manage money… we know that you guys are out there and leading advisors and you're finding people to bring in, add to the advisor-force, so that we can help more and more Americans. And they're trusting us with their money, we never forget who's money this is, we always remind each other every day this is not our money, we're not playing with this stuff, this belongs to somebody else, they needed to do something for their loved ones," and that's when he got all choked up. And it was completely genuine, you could tell it just sort of rolled over like a wave and I thought well, this tells me a lot about this company how it's wired, how its heart is wired.

This story David performed was important in discovering his emotional bond to the organization. The way he described his position at the table in relationship to the speaking executive means he really wanted to emphasize the expressed emotions to support his belief that the person was genuine. David was impressed with the amount of care that this high up person expressed about the money of their clients. To him, it does not only show how this one executive is caring so much, but also the company as a whole. This becomes apparent when David talks about the organization being wired a certain way and having an imaginable heart.

It is interesting to see how David breaks down the physical situation in the room quite extensively. This moment means more to David than just listening to a manager. He found it very special to be sitting right next to this man, he could almost touch him, and he was telling me this in an animated way. The fact that he spoke to me about how he could almost touch Cody and how he was looking closely to the side of his face, that was a meaningful performance. It reminded me of little kids meeting and observing Saint Nicholas when they still believe in him. When you listen to David talk about Cody you would think he was sitting next to a saint. The animation of his performance was visible in the reverence in his voice when he framed the moment and the descriptive words he used.

Building up that moment, describing it in a physical way, David sets the stage for the positioning of himself compared to Cody within the company. Clearly, David looks "up" to this man yet he was sitting next to him. Then this eminent being gets choked up about investing, because people trust them. It was an emotional performance about awareness and responsibility with other people's money. This is an important moment where Cody instills trust in the company, because David sees his performance as genuine. It tells David how the heart of the whole corporation is 'wired.' How exactly it is wired he does not say, but the meaning is embedded in an unspoken way, manifested by David in the saintly description of Cody and classifying his emotions about investing as genuine. Accordingly, trust is more about external trust customers have in the company and faith is more internal. For customers to trust their life blood with this company really moves Cody. It's as much about the money as is it about the trust. The way Cody talks about this lends to David then thinking of the heart of the family that this heir demonstrates. So to be a part of the family, you have to have faith in the heart, the meaning of integrity and strength in order to foster the trust of the customer. Being able to identify with the company this way is important to David, because it justifies his decision to work for *Mokum* and being able to have faith in your executives as an employee creates a peaceful state of mind for both employees and for investors.

Interviewing administrators, advisors, and the managing principle, a relatively unanimous expression of positive feelings emerged as participants discussed the mission and vision of the company as well as most of the support provided by the home office. The organizational members of *Mokum* demonstrated great trust in, and looked up to, their corporate leaders while identifying with the general corporate philosophies and culture. However, when it came to discussing the local office, participants disidentified and diverged greatly from the positive feelings they demonstrated when discussing the "home office."

The Dysfunctional Local Family

There have been performances of disidentification with the home office as well. Interestingly, each person who described disidentification was positioned centrally in the local office in some way. Those who were in contact with all of the local employees were privy to the frustrations of other colleagues. In this section, we first look at disidentification starting with this positioning phenomenon. Secondly, you have the feeling of discomfort and fear that organizational member have in discussing their disidentification in a ‘dance around the issue.’ Lastly, we move into the blame game, where people unleash their disidentification and direct it mainly at one person.

The division’s main administrative assistant, who has been with the company for 23 years, was an important informant, because she always functions in the center of all office communication and activities. She not only told me about her own perspective on things, she also described situations where others’ performances were apparent to her. She acknowledged her role as a switch between the advisors and managing principle David, as well as a central link to the home office. When organizational members were frustrated about anything, they often went to Nancy to vent. Therefore, she was aware of many discourses. One time she said: “We had some advisors that, two that I think of in particular, that wanted not to follow the *Mokum* process for how things are done. They were quite verbal about it… quite verbal about it to the home office in a very negative way. So they were asked to leave and they did.” This is an interesting quote. It became clear that when employees criticized the company, or not follow the *Mokum* “way,” and you are verbal about it, you were either reprimanded or fired.

Advisor Gabe who has clearly shown to identify with certain corporate values of *Mokum*, also expressed some criticism about the "ways" of *Mokum* that are communicated top-down from the corporate home office. As illustrated before, he is impressed with the fund managers and their financial successes, but he also talked quite a bit about other executive branches of the firm being dysfunctional. He formulated it as follows: "I really don't think the people in Tilburry, and maybe even the RVP's [Regional Vice Presidents], truly understand the field. *Mokum*, like most big companies, has fallen into the trap of when you have a physical disconnect. So you need to go out and talk to folks." Gabe believed that the executives at the Tilburry home office only run things by a very small group of highly successful people within *Mokum*, and he questioned how advisable that strategy would be in the long run. Nancy had expressed a similar concern of home office losing touch with the field. Gabe thought compliance had taken control over customer service. He believed that most initiatives rolled out by the home office affecting the advisors' businesses never function the way they said it was going to function. He also felt that the leaders at the home office sometimes seem to care about them and other times not at all. Nancy was more frustrated by the unrealistic recruiting targets and felt that managing principles should have a bigger say and more direct voice in corporate decision making.

Both Gabe and Nancy perform disidentification here and in particular demonstrate that their disidentification involves positioning. First, those who are central to the organization or have a lot of contact with the local office employees, they hear the discontent. Second, the local office feels disconnected or estranged from the home office. From their perspective the home office is not *in touch* with the field, because they experience misunderstanding and a lack of care from their corporate leaders. Members are frustrated, because they feel disconnected from those they look up to in the home office. As presented in the previous section, there is a strong overall identification with the corporate values and instilled trust in its leaders, yet in a context of a local employee's daily practices those home office executives seem pretty far out of reach. Please note that there is a distinction between this frustration with the home office and disidentifying with the local office, which we will discuss in a moment, but the dissatisfaction definitely does not help in the local atmosphere. Disidentification happens on a continuum and this is an example of a degree of disidentification due to positioning, but not a complete disidentification with the ideological values of the company.

All *Mokum* organizational members told me they love working for corporate *Mokum*, but really they also have quite a few critical remarks to make about how the home office operates in relation to the field and what decisions are made by the leaders. In my daily observations around the office, I never heard a dialogue that involved performances of disidentification towards the home office. These performances were rare and only expressed in dialogue with myself either during an interview or indirectly through observations of others. For example, Nancy's statement about the two advisors who were no longer with the firm. In that case, being openly critical about the "ways" of *Mokum* cost the two advisors their jobs. So, organizational members might be very cautious about expressing any negative feelings towards the company. They look up to its leaders and idolize them so much that it silences their own voice at the same time. They feel physically and organizationally positioned so much lower than the home office folks that openly criticizing them seems illegitimate.

Dancing Around the Issue

When a narrower focus is used on the local relationships, one can see the dysfunctionality and uncomfortable situations. In meetings that included multiple *Mokum* employees in the Bunnik division, some of the participants felt an awkward feeling. Uncomfortable relationships amongst the organizational members were hidden and never expressed directly. It was communicated in dialogue with me by subtly hinting at some performances of the dysfunctional family. One of the newer members, Darren, danced around the issue a lot during the interview, because he was also performing his commitment ceremony. He clearly did not want to talk *against* the company, he was relatively new and tried to perform allegiance, but yet he also wanted to express his frustration about the dysfunctionality he was noticing. He was acknowledging that there are some bad relationships going on in the division, he said: “There’s [sic] people that are really close that have been for a long time and it seems like they’re going to be buddy-buddy forever. But then you can definitely tell there’s [sic] been, in the past, some things that haven’t gone good between a couple people and they kind of just avoid each other.” Darren admitted that caused awkwardness in the office from time to time: “…because they’ll be talking about the other person, maybe negatively, and then you’ll be in a meeting all together and it’s kind of weird because you can tell they don’t really want to be in there, in the same room together. So, you can feel that. That happens.” Darren never told me specifically what the issues were that caused bad relationships between certain colleagues of his. He aligned the problems with his theory that there is a lot of type “A” personalities in the office. According to him, those people are a bit more aggressive and when you put them together you can get a little bit of clashing and stubbornness.

Just as Darren was careful in how he described the tension, Advisor George was very careful with his words; he danced around the issue and never expressed many specifics. However, he did disidentify with the local division office through some subtle performances. George has his own satellite office with his two assistants and he is clearly happy to be in that situation. He spoke about staying away from the local office politics and added, "the freedom and independence, and getting away from that nonsense is wonderful." Even though he refused to spell out what he exactly meant by local politics, it definitely had a negative connotation. At a later moment, it became clearer that George has no desire to be involved with the division, to him the involvement is just a geographical casualty. He said: "Even though I'm not officially a division, I just treat myself like I am." This is interesting, because it shows how he does not want to be a part of the local dysfunctional family. On the other hand he stated multiple times how he loves being a part of *Mokum* as a whole, and he elaborated on the good relationship he has with the home office in Tilburry.

<u>The Blame Game</u>

The division of *Mokum* I observed was completely divided. However, not everybody wanted to describe exactly what the problems were. I asked advisor Gabe, "how would you describe the cohesiveness of the division?" And he answered, "It's just not good." It was tough to pull out more of the underlying meanings from the local office that they disidentified with. Also, the lack of field notes while in the offices for hours shows that silence was actually the biggest give away there. The new guys were not too negative when asked the question about cohesiveness in the interview, yet also they noticed the tensions and gave me a few hints while dancing around the issue. Other advisors, however, clarified what the issue was by attributing the dysfunction as the responsibility of one person: the local manager, David.

One of my most important informants when it came to the general atmosphere in the division was Nancy. She worked in the division for 23 years as the main administrative assistant to the division managing principle. She communicates on a daily basis with all levels within the division as well as corporate. As the assistant to David, she claims to know what is on David's mind, what the corporate leaders require of him, and what the advisors and division staff are thinking and feeling. The dynamics in the division clearly have a lot to do with who is managing and Nancy saw a few managers come and go. She admits that with the current manager, David, there have definitely been issues, especially when he just came in seven years ago:

> Well, each time I get a new managing principal it is quite an adjustment let me tell you. His [David] was probably the hardest because he has a vision and he knows what works and what doesn't work and he thinks outside the box and now he and I have conversations and I can understand completely where he is coming from: why he says what he says, why he does what he does. Why he's requested that things be done the way they're supposed to be or the way he wants them. I know why that is now. It's to streamline everything. It just frustrates me a bit that the advisors can't figure that out. It's for their benefit. They just can't figure it out.

Many advisors in the division do not like David as a manager, because he changed a lot of processes drastically when he was brought in. The division had been running without actual management for a while and especially the more senior advisors did not agree with most policies David put into place nor were they pleased with his attitude. Nancy described it as follows:

> It's like a man comes in and the guy has got his landscape all laid out and the new guy comes in and says well you know this would work better if we did this so he takes his dozer and starts stirring up all the dirt and everybody is going, "What did you do that for?" They don't like change. That's what happened. And I'm not sure

> he was used to being challenged on things and everyone in here, the older people, older advisors, senior advisors, challenged him on everything. So it caused a lot of chaos.

Some advisors kept battling and fighting David on his policies and ideology, some learned to deal with them or just decided to accept the situation and not complain. An advisor that got fired right when I came in as an intern/researcher kept rejecting David's approach and it negatively affected the cohesiveness of the division. Nancy states: "he just got on the wrong side of David and it spilled out to several of us." Another indicator of the overall atmosphere in the division became apparent when noticing how the mandatory monthly division meetings were always attended badly while I was there. Advisors that were located in satellite offices obviously preferred not to visit the downtown division office. With their absence, these organizational members communicated a performance of disidentification with David.

A key factor that Nancy points out in the second quote is the change concept. The senior advisors were not used to much local leadership for a while and were content in their own routines within their own rules and guidelines. They valued their freedom and independency, something they felt the home office was providing in their interpretation. All the advisors were doing really well in their business during the time David joined the division as a manager, so nobody had to tell them what to do, because they were successful already. This made any change in the division an issue, because why change anything when all is good? The advisors liked their patterns not simply because they are familiar, but because they meant freedom and success.

The fact that David was their new boss might have already triggered some skepticism among the advisors; they did not want any change so they did not identify with the idea of him being there in the first place. On top of that, David wanted a lot of change; he started his first big leadership position and saw lots of areas for improvement. He wanted to quickly put a stamp on his team and implemented some policies that were heavily resisted by the senior advisors. It caused a stir that lingered on in the division for years. However, it was not just the new policies that the advisors disidentified with; it was David himself they performed disidentification towards. In dialogue with me, they criticized his attitude; they felt they were being treated by David as if they were children. To them, his changes represented disrespect towards them, or a common believe that David did not think they were intelligent. However, they knew better than him how to run the division and they did not like all his proposed changes, so they challenged him on everything.

Advisor Pam told me about what she called a very good conversation she had had with Jessie, the *Mokum* regional wholesaler who is closely involved with everyone in the division. About a year ago, Jessie had asked Pam, “why is your office so dysfunctional?” Pam seemed to be delighted by the question, she said: “So she [Jessie] could see it, she could sense that and that always pleases me when other people are awake and paying attention.” The dialogue with Jessie articulates for Pam that she’s not alone in her interpretation of the atmosphere in the division and somehow makes her feel better and possibly reinforces the negative perception of the dysfunctionality of the team. So, they openly called out their ‘feeling’ about the division, they might not have discussed the specific issues but they both knew what they were meaning.

Most performances of the dysfunctional family came out when my informants were telling me about their local manager, David, the division managing principle. A few of the senior advisors simply do not like him, do not like his managing style, and had bad experiences in dealing with him, which caused problems that spread throughout the division. One of them said, “We wonder if he is bi-polar”; another one said, “he’s hot and cold… you’re never sure what David you’re going to get”; and another, “I think to a certain degree I feel a little victorious when he’s going to step down.” These advisors had obvious issues with David’s performances. They described to me some personal clashes they have had with him. Advisor Gabe also noted, “…and the least important person on the totem pole is the managing principal. That person can go away and we don’t skip a beat.” This shows some disrespect towards the position and the authority of the managing principle, a role that Gabe fulfilled himself in the past.

The advisors emphasized on the moment David came in. According to them, he immediately made a false start, which set the tone for a bad working atmosphere in the division ever since. One of the examples Pam gave me:

> You have situations where a Managing Principle comes in and they’re told certain things about an office. I don’t know what they’re told, but they’re told. So, they come in with a little attitude and one of them is ‘you may have been here for 20 years, but by God I rule the roost.’ So that’s fine for you to own that attitude, but when you start telling me that my files all be gone through and will be done to this standard and its due two days from now. And you know that I have a very vibrant, active practice and 700 files. That required me to bring in extra help and to work all of one night just to get it done, because somebody was stamping their foot and having nothing but attitude. Now, and I was also told that if I didn’t do that I would be fired.

Before David came in, the advisors in the Bunnik division were not used to any form of interference with their practices and therefore his sudden involvement was not appreciated, especially with the threatening tone he used. It caused lots of conflict.

Advisor Joe told me that David screamed and yelled at him at one point in a meeting in front of the others while Joe, in his opinion, had not done anything wrong. Joe told me that after the meeting that day all his colleagues told him that they could not believe that he never got up and just left. Despite these incidents, Joe thinks he has probably the least problems with David than most of his peers. He said: “David treats me better I think, because I deal with his philosophies more and try to do what he wants done.” He brought up the relationship between Pam and David as an example of how he clashed with members of his team. “In the meeting, Pam wasn’t there, he sat and trashed her, a 22 year advisor, his best producer, he trashed her for 45 minutes in this meeting and she was not there,” Joe told me. Advisors performing these stories of frustration to me really reaffirmed the dysfunctionality of the division. The advisors in many ways are dissatisfied with their local manager David and by performing disidentification with him, they blame him for the problems in the division. My informants are telling me about situations where they felt David really messed up in order to blame him.

The Desperate Manager

During my time as an intern at *Mokum*, the most contact I had while in the office was with David himself, the managing principle of the Bunnik division. I assisted him with recruiting strategies and carrying out the implementations. Regularly, I would stop by in his office or he would come to the room in which I was working. Many times he would go off about how tired he was of the insane workload and pressures he experienced in his role. He told me other managing principles were facing similar problems. There was no healthy work-life balance anymore and too many responsibilities. However, most of his peers were too scared to signal those concerns to upper management. When David had a chance to get out of a mandatory corporate business trip to Orlando, he said:

> …the other guys [fellow MP's] that are going to Orlando are getting pretty curious about what that meeting is going to be like, because there's just so much pressure right now and I think some of them are going to get pretty vocal. I'll keep you apprised of what I'm hearing from those guys, because one of them I'm really close to and he's really sideways about stuff too, right now. But it is very, very threatening to put your hand up and say I don't want to do this anymore, because I frankly didn't know if I was going to get fired for just saying 'I'm not happy.' And there shouldn't be that much anxiety out there then there is. There's a lot of anxiety out there right now.

This performance is interesting. David frequently shows strong identification with the values of the home office and idolizes certain corporate executives, yet he is unhappy in his role and scared to express his feelings about the workload to upper management. It is very apparent that while David idolizes and worships the abstract, the daily experience of work is exhausting.

His assistant Nancy works with David the most and of course I asked her too about her perspective on his approach. One of my questions, for example, asked if David has had more problems with the financial advisors in the division or with corporate just hammering on him with recruiting stuff and deadlines. She answered:

> That's two different arenas there. Up until we moved people out of the office I would say the chaos was more with the advisors. But it has become very evident and frustrating that corporate basically has no real idea about what needs to be done in the field. I've always said that what works in theory does not necessarily work in reality. It just doesn't. So he's had frustrations with both of them.

Nancy is the only one fully backing him up in his management style. She recognizes what problems it has caused in the division but then added: "These advisors need to suck it up and listen to what he is saying because if they do, they will become very successful people." It was evident that she really felt sorry for him and how everything turned against him. She believes in his approach.

David is truly divided. He identifies with the values of the corporation, but in daily reality he is very unhappy in his job with the company. He clearly feels overworked and undervalued, which he performed in dialogue to me on multiple occasions. There are two themes in the disidentification that emerges from David. One has to do with positioning. David is the leader of the division, yet the senior advisors do not respect him at all. However, just like David himself, the advisors all look up to the corporate executives; even though at the home office, they do not directly provide the advisors with anything. David feels unappreciated by both the executives as well as his own advisors, except two of the newer ones. He is in the center of the organization yet on a lonely island. The only support and understanding he receives comes from fellow managing principles and Nancy. The second theme is that of fear. David is very anxious about letting people know about his frustrations. He performs the feeling of fear in the quote where he admits that being vocal about the situation and talking about the workload with upper management could cost him his job. David feels threatened by his idols, which is an interesting contradiction, and also brings us to the discussion chapter where we get into these contradictions.

In this chapter, I have shown *Mokum* as an ideal family, as a dysfunctional family, and David as an unhappy and accused local manager. Now a discussion will follow in which these findings will be linked back to the literature as well as my research questions.

CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION

Theories of identification aided as a starting place in developing a focus for this study. Bakhtin's dialogism perspective provided a lens for understanding how people's word choices in their interviews worked as performances of identity in the world of the *Mokum* corporation. These perspectives enabled me to make sense of the cultural meanings with which participants identified as manifested in their communication. The aim of this investigation, however, was to focus also on what lead to disidentification. Theories of identification and dialogism aided in understanding not only with what people identified, but also with what they disidentified and how disidentification emerged in communication. Below, I briefly discuss some key points in the literature in order to set up the significance of the data as it pertains to this literature. This literature originally lead to the research questions: 1) how is the relationship between corporate identity and member identity negotiated communicatively? and 2) how is the divergence between acceptance and rejection of corporate identity constructed and negotiated? In answering these research questions, it became apparent that dialogue constitutes identity even through disidentification when in conversation with the interviewer. Learning how dialogue constitutes identity and disidentity, and how corporate discourses lead *Mokum* in certain directions at a local level is valuable and adds knowledge to further communication research as well as practical implications for the organization.

This research contributes to practical needs in numerous ways. It will create awareness, first amongst organizational members about how they have been communicating or, better, have *not* been communicating. Secondly, it will create awareness amongst corporate leaders about how their corporate messages are being interpreted and integrated into practice. It will give David an interesting insight into what certain employees have performed about him to me. The findings could lead to different managerial approaches from both corporate (home office) and local level (David). It could also lead to new and different performances from the advisors in the division. There might be an increase in daily dialogue around the office. This research will show how *Mokum* is currently organized based on identification and disidentification processes and consequently will raise the question for each involved organizational member if this is considered a good way. When organizational members will interpret my observations a change in performances of identity and (dis)identity is likely to occur, yet this is something for a new research project to investigate. In the end, my goal as a researcher is to show what I saw from a communication perspective.

The Dialogic Utterance and Identification

When discussing phenomena at *Mokum* to build theory, I return to earlier mentioned literature on a regular basis. Bakhtin's focus on language and what he calls the utterance, or language spoken in context, became particularly important in this study. In deconstructing the participant stories and focusing on words like 'piranha,' Bakhtin enabled me to recognize how communicators adapt their words by anticipating the viewpoint of the other. Those utterances about the piranha, for example, are part of the ongoing dialogue at *Mokum* where the members of the organization participating in the dialogue are constantly redefining themselves and the company, including with me as both an intern and a researcher. These utterances make the dialogue always ongoing and never ending. The use of the word piranha was an adaptation of the word for my sake as well as for the sake of the identity of the participant. It was a defining moment; my informants were aware that they had information about their experiences and corporate stories they knew I was eager to hear. So, they began telling me these vivid stories in animated ways, because in me as an independent researcher, they had an audience that was sincerely interested in what they had to say. In dialogue, I asked them to elaborate, to explain, to define the reality with me verbally and through body language such as nodding or raising my eyebrows, asking my interview questions and probes, we co-constructed each other's identities and social reality. Also, Bakhtin and Emerson (1984) explain how participants became conscious of what was important to their identity through dialogue *with me*. He wrote: "I am conscious of myself and become myself only while revealing myself for another, through another, and with the help of another" (p. 287). With me, the informants reconstructed their identity and (dis)identified themselves with the organization in dialogue.

Disidentification

In particular, performances of disidentification were revealed and negotiated as the Bunnik division emerged as a dysfunctional family. Organizational members disidentified through a pattern of frustration and dissatisfaction with David, which they performed in the blame game. These disidentifiers do not want to be associated with the values or operational premises that the local manager David communicates because they contradict the basic assumptions of agency such as choice, power, and prestige with which participants identify from the home office. For example, to be a piranha with integrity is not to be a subordinate cog in a money-making machine. *Mokum* is more than that; to work for *Mokum* is to play an important role in taking care of customers' money. The contrast between identification with the home office and the local division office was a surprisingly evident finding that we can discuss by looking at both research questions.

The relationship between corporate identity and member identity is characterized by organizational members wrestling with the corporate cultural premises and their local manager David. In a context of heteroglossia, there are communicative performances that continuously fluctuate between identification and disidentification. When corporate messages are interpreted by organizational members, there is a notion of outsideness, where employees hope to become closer and be a part of the inner circle. When unpacking corporate identification and comparing it with local organizational identification at *Mokum*, we see that the findings from this study align with what Cheney and Christenson (2001) argued in that there needs to be *consistency* in corporate messages in order for there to be legitimacy. Part of what was found in the data was that there is consistency with the symbolic meanings communicated from corporate (to be a big player, yet to be true to yourself and to have integrity). This however was inconsistent with the local symbolic messages as manifested in David's management actions (to be a subordinate cog in a money-making machine full of unfairness and impeding rules). So, this contradiction lead to disidentification on the local level as his behavior symbolizes "be subordinate." This delegitimizes as it takes away not only from the corporate message, but from the agency of the individuals at *Mokum*. The inconsistent phenomenon is most important here, because it first reinforces Cheney and Christenson's consistency theory and then adds with the new finding at *Mokum* that inconsistency led to more disidentification.

These patterns of identification and disidentification can be unpacked further using Burke's concept of consubstantiality. For example, with all three satellite offices in the division, the senior advisors account for the company in a certain way. They performed identification as they discuss the " ideal family" at *Mokum* and the corporate mission and values (performing integrity, honor, fostering client trust, and creating a world-class investment management group). However, participants performed disidentification with the "dysfunctional family," the division office, due to the symbolic meanings interpreted and associated with David's style of management. In some organizations, managing as supervising would not contradict the assumptions of employees. However, at *Mokum*, the symbolic management actions greatly contradicted the messages and meanings from corporate with which participants identified. Yet, there is more than the need for consistency here. These negative discourses from the advisors in the satellite offices were told persuasively to shape mine, other participants, and their assistants' member identities. Participants aimed to persuade as a mechanism to create consistency with the assumptions with which they identified: negative discourse and disidentification became the means for reaffirming their identification with the corporate assumptions. Assistants Amy, Becky, Leah, and Pam (whose office was next door to David) developed their own unique way of doing things and over time as an agentic form of resistance to the local culture and an agentic form of affiliation with the "home" office.

<u>The Moment of Divergence</u>

Let us take a step back and answer the research questions as stated in this study. At *Mokum*, I found performances of member identity dynamically visible in utterances that held performances about corporate identity. The organizational members were constantly becoming and reconstructing their identities through communication with me and others in relationship to the company. The answer to the second research question closely relates to the first one in this way. If the organizational members are constantly becoming and negotiating their identities through communicative performances, you emerge as someone that accepts and rejects the organization. This can happen almost simultaneously as we see with David, so the divergence is constantly negotiated.

Now look at the underlying value premises. As discussed before in Chapter One, Disneyland is in the business of laughter and well-being, a “smile factory” as Van Maanen (1991) called it. Well, *Mokum* is in the business of faith, integrity, and commitment. There is faith in executive decision making based on reputation, the quality of the investment group, and the hiring process of talented college graduates. As stated before, Albert and Whetten (1985) considered organizational identity as a set of claims and sustainable stories about the unique nature of an organization. This was key at *Mokum*. The piranha in Cody’s office, Brad’s handshake, and Cody’s emotional response to his own speech about working with other people’s money; these are all stories that add to the organizational discourse of centripetal force, because these stories are identified with and repeated in dialogue in animated ways. And similar to the situation at Disneyland, the centrifugal forces that shape identities towards the disidentification side of the continuum have to do with micro managing. Rejection of the corporate identity is visible in dialogue by forms of resistance or distinctiveness in utterances that hold performances of disidentification. Pam and other senior advisors became masters in defining who they were not, just like in Elsbach and Bhattacharya (2001). They were disidentifying with the division office as a corporate dysfunctional family and David personally.

Mokum employees were aiming for distinctiveness from David, because of what he represented. Not simply his methods, but what his methods meant. Messages from David were interpreted with a shared meaning of resistance and they blamed him through powerful discourse of legends and stories that became centrifugal forces throughout the company. David's sudden involvement and authoritative manners were not appreciated. Performances such as blaming are not only the sources of identities, but they also feed a dialogue that facilitated participants' abilities to make sense of *and create* the organizational culture. In other words, the messages from corporate enforce order and David disrupts it.

Struggling with Identity Tensions: David's Story

David himself was obviously unhappy in his job. He seemed a source of heteroglossia in and of itself. He shared the love for the company's values with his employees, the emulation part of identification according to Pratt (1998). However, when it comes to policies and executive decision making he performed different forms of identification (idolizing Cody), but mostly disidentification. He experienced so much pressure from above, unrealistic targets, and simply managing a dysfunctional family was not easy on him. In addition, he felt anxiety about raising his hand to tell his managers in Tilburry that he was not happy with the situation. He thought he might get fired over it.

This is interesting, why perform such commitment and loyalty to a company that would possibly fire you when you simply express your unhappiness?

David loved the company and hated it at the same time. The moment of divergence remains ambiguous, dynamic, and constructed in the moment of dialogue. It underlines what was discussed in the introduction about Bakhtin's heteroglossia, his notion of complicated and fragmented construction of identity. David is a perfect example of residing in tension with your own identity. He performed identification and disidentification with the company almost at the same time. When talking about *Mokum* and its history, a fun 'Circle of Champions' experience, or David's quick rise on the hierarchical ladder, there will be lots of centripetal forces and David performs identification. When talking about taking office as a leader in the Bunnik division, his direct managers, or the work-life balance he is experiencing, there were centrifugal forces and David performs disidentification towards the corporation.

<u>Mokum</u>

In today's financial industry full of scandals and suspicion, *Mokum* receives mostly respect and trust from their organizational members. In the observed dialogues, we recognized manifestations of corporate identity construction, for example in having faith in the company and idolizing the executives. *Mokum* operates from a home office with a strong performed identity. Putting forth messages that communicate symbolically the beliefs that the executives hope the members will buy into is needed. This keeps the ideal family together. However, there is more to it than this, a finding that actually contradicts the idea that management of messages is different than management of people. It seems to be a contradiction in terms of control. Corporate messages can be loosely controlled in regards to the basic symbolic meanings that the corporation wants to communicate (be a big player, be honest). A few messages here and there can have a big impact if it helps people see how they are a part of it. However, what these findings indicate is that you cannot control or manage people's identification, that in fact this leads to disidentification.

Executives that have gained respect throughout the company communicate top down in a functionalistic manner. With these corporate messages, they intend to shape an employee's identity as Cheney and Christenson (2001) have pointed out. The executives believe that when employees accept the corporate identity, they will be motivated to work hard and make the right decisions to benefit the company. However, this functionalistic idea does not work out that way at *Mokum*. Evidently, the familial identity of the company, eagerly communicated by its leaders, is not always performed locally. In fact, the findings challenge the idea that controlling people's identification leads to identification, but at the local level actually lead to divergence and delegitimization. Disidentification and dysfunctional social relations at the local level in the organization show a flaw in this business-centric approach. It shows that 1) corporate identity cannot be seen as a trait, but it is emerging from social relations and communication, and 2) that the causal relationships managers have in mind are flawed, because the competitive advantage they are seeking is not being achieved. An important conclusion is that this is what cannot be controlled, how people make it self-referential. You can control the messages, but not the processes through which people make it their own.

From this study, we gained understanding about how identification processes work at *Mokum* in a communicative way and how disidentification processes work in similar ways. We recognized how the local division office is a dysfunctional family while all organizational members perfectly identify with the beliefs and values of the company. As Deetz (2001) encouraged, it was indeed beneficial to my study to borrow from different approaches and keep an open mind. What I found by borrowing from the business literature was that my findings did indicate an element of trying to control what meanings are important for an organization that they wish to communicate. However, based on my own assumptions, my findings also indicated that based on the local interpretations of both the corporate messages and observations of management that contradicted these messages, disidentification occurred. And do not forget that the company spends a lot of money to cultivate their messages, for example through the Circle of Champions. People ultimately create the identification process and cannot be controlled. However, I think with open dialogue amongst all organizational members, there will be a way to positively reshape the construction of the local division's identity in Bunnik. A couple things will have to change. The corporate leaders need to make sure they keep in touch with the field and understand the values they communicate are good, but do not always play out in local contexts. They should realize that well-functioning local management is key for their corporate messages to have any positive interpretation. On the local side, David will have to change his undemocratic and authoritative management and the advisors will have to become more open minded about his policies and not blame all the bad stuff on him. Finally, more equal voices will lead to a better socially-constructed reality.

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APPENDIX A

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Domain		**Questions**
Demographics	1	When did you start your career at this company, and how did you end up here?
	2	How would you describe your position?
Company & Job	3	What do you value about your job?
	4	Why do you work here at Waddell & Reed?
	5	What are the pros and cons about your job?
	6	What are the mission and/or vision of the company?
Research Question #1	7	How would you describe your job in relationship to the mission of the company?
	8	What is your personal take on these statements and ideas?
	9	What is your role in relationship to these ideals?
	10	What contributes to you feeling like a member of this organization?
	11	What kind of corporate messages do you receive? How do they apply to you?
	12	How would you interpret this (example will be provided) message from corporate?
	13	Do you discuss messages from corporate with your colleagues? If so, whom do you usually go to? Why?
	14	Describe your relationship with 1) HQ, 2) MP, 3) FA’s, and 4) the administrative assistants.
	15	How well would you say do new employees adjust to working in the office environment at Waddell & Reed?
Research Question #2	16	Are corporate messages helpful to your daily work?
	17	Do you talk with colleagues about company-wide issues?
	18	Do colleagues ever change your perspective on corporate messages?
	19	As a division, do you experience a strong cohesiveness? If so, mainly among your co-workers of the same “rank”, or overall?
	20	How does corporate represent (or not) this division?
	21	Do you feel there is a need for improvement in communication at W&R?
	22	What do you think customers think about Waddell & Reed?
	23	What do you think corporate thinks about Waddell & Reed?
	24	What do you think about Waddell & Reed?
	25	Do you actively look around for prospective advisors? What is your take on recruiting policies at Waddell & Reed?
Closing	26	Is there anything I have not asked or that I should know?

APPENDIX B

IRB Approval Letter

BOISE STATE UNIVERSITY

Office of Research Compliance

Institutional Review Board
HumanSubjects@boisestate.edu | 208.426.5401

DATE: January 31, 2011

TO: Wijnand Rijkenberg (PI)
Natalie Nelson-Marsh (co-PI)

FROM: Institutional Review Board (IRB)
c/o Office of Research Compliance

SUBJECT: IRB Notification of Approval
Project Title: *An Investigation of Corporate Identity: The Divergence Between Acceptance and Rejection*

The Boise State University IRB has approved your protocol application. Your protocol is in compliance with this institution's Federal Wide Assurance (#0000097) and the DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46).

Review Type: Expedited
Approval Number: 008-SB11-027
Annual Expiration Date: January 30, 2012

Your approved protocol is effective for 12 months. If your research is not finished within the allotted year, the protocol must be renewed by the annual expiration date indicated above. Under BSU regulations, each protocol has a three-year life cycle and is allowed two annual renewals. If your research is not complete by **January 30, 2014**, a new protocol application must be submitted.

About 30 days prior to the annual expiration date of the approved protocol, the Office of Research Compliance will send a renewal reminder notice. The principal investigator has the primary responsibility to ensure the ANNUAL RENEWAL FORM is submitted in a timely manner. If a request for renewal has not been received 30 days after the annual expiration date, the protocol will be considered closed. To continue the research after it has closed, a new protocol application must be submitted for IRB review and approval.

All additions or changes to your approved protocol must also be brought to the attention of the IRB for review and approval before they occur. Complete and submit a MODIFICATION/AMENDMENT FORM indicating any changes to your project.

When your research is complete or discontinued, please submit a FINAL REPORT FORM. An executive summary or other documents with the results of the research may be included.

All relevant forms are available online. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the Office of Research Compliance, 426-5401 or HumanSubjects@boisestate.edu.

Thank you and good luck with your research.

Mary E. Pritchard

Dr. Mary E. Pritchard
Chairperson
Boise State University Institutional Review Board