THE DOUBLE-EDGED SWORD OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE: THE PRODUCTION AND DISSOLUTION OF NORMATIVE CONTROL BY AN AMBIGUOUS EXPRESSION

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Abstract: Culture is often described by scholars as a resource utilized by actors with strategic intention, and managers have long yearned to master organizational culture. In particular, culture is seen as a crucial part of the recruiting, management, and retention of talent in organizations. Cultural resources can be utilized by managers to obtain normative control over members—getting members to commit to, identify with, and be satisfied with the organization. Yet, culture may be double-edged: an intentional use of a cultural resource can have intended effects as well as unintended consequences. In this paper, I build theory around how a cultural resource can be double-edged, by theorizing how a cultural expression may both produce and dissolve normative control. I draw on a two-year, ethnographic case study of consultants at a strategy consulting firm wherein managers use the expression of having “Impact” with consulting work to recruit and motivate members. Members noted that they were excited to enter the organization to have “Impact,” but, later, many members cited “Impact” as a reason why they exited the organization in disillusionment. Drawing on my case study, I induce a process model that shows how the ambiguity of an expression can allow it to be double-edged. I show that an ambiguous expression powerfully resonates with a broad swath of recruits. But, as members accumulate work experience over time, they can come to articulate the ambiguous expression in ways that diverge from what managers intended. Members might use these divergent articulations as reasons to exit the organization. I conclude by suggesting this study’s theoretical implications for scholarship on control and culture in organizations.

Keywords: organizational culture; normative control; semiotics; ambiguity; ethnography
Contemporary scholars (see Weber & Dacin, 2011) have emphasized how culture can be a potential resource or toolkit, agentially used by actors with intent to “solve different kinds of problems” and construct “strategies of action” (Swidler, 1986: 273). Organizational actors often use cultural resources to recruit and manage talent. Scholars have shown that culture can shape recruiting (Rivera, 2012; Zilber, 2006), motivate people to join organizations (Weber, Heinze, & DeSoucey, 2008), socialize organizational members (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979), compel members to support change (Kaplan, 2008; Kellogg, 2011), and engender commitment (Chatman, 1991; Kunda, 1992; O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991). Furthermore, ever since the 1980s, the popular business press has brimmed with recommendations that organizational practitioners can leverage their organizational cultures to achieve their goals (Barley & Kunda, 1992; Barley, Meyer, & Gash, 1988). Practitioner articles often treat culture as a tool for recruiting talent, building loyalty in members, and compelling members to work hard and happily at a firm.

Managers often attempt to use culture to enact normative control, “bind[ing] employees’ hearts and minds to the corporate interest” (Kunda, 1992: 218), and effectively “regulat[ing] workers by attending not only to their behavior but to their thoughts and emotions” (Barley & Kunda, 1992: 364). Under normative control, “members act in the best interest of the company not because they are physically coerced, nor purely from an instrumental concern with economic rewards” but rather because “they are driven by internal commitment, strong identification with company goals, [and] intrinsic satisfaction from work” (Kunda, 1992: 11). A prevalent, persistent logic of managerial control (Barley & Kunda, 1992), normative control has been seen as an organizational solution to obtain the cooperation of members, despite their partially incongruent goals (Ouchi, 1979). Managerial control has also been viewed more critically as
perpetuating inequalities through the undue exploitation of workers (e.g., Burawoy, 1979; Mears, 2015). Whether normative control is viewed primarily as crucial or objectionable, though, scholars have shown that the use of organizational cultural resources is often a powerful tool—one might even call it a sword—that can cut through members’ ambivalences and achieve normative control (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1996; Pratt, 2000; Van Maanen, 2010; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984).

Yet, a sword can be *double-edged*, and an intentional use of culture can have counteracting repercussions undermining intended effects. Robert C. Merton wrote in 1936 that “the problem of the unanticipated consequences of purposive action has been treated by virtually every substantial contributor to the long history of social thought,” citing Marx and Weber among others (1936: 894). Even though Merton called for “a systematic treatment” (1936: 894) of unintended consequences, 80 years later we still understand little about how the use of organizational cultural resources can have unintended consequences.

In contemporary scholarship focused on culture in organizations, empirical and theoretical accounts typically end when cultural elements are strategically utilized by actors to achieve their goals, such as legitimizing new ventures (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001; Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2005; Wry, Lounsbury, & Glynn, 2011), enabling collaboration (Kaplan, 2011), or initiating intentional cultural change (Howard-Grenville, Golden-Biddle, Irwin, & Mao, 2011). However, by ending accounts there, scholarship has largely missed out on explaining unintended effects of culture. Examining what happens beyond these seemingly successful, initial utilizations of culture can help our understanding of how culture can have unintended consequences. So, while we know that culture can be a sharp sword wielded with strategic intent, culture can cut both ways.
In this paper, I build theory around how an organizational cultural element can be double-edged—outlining the characteristics and the downstream processes that allow a cultural element to have dualistic effects of producing and undermining normative control. I do this by drawing on data from a two-year, inductive, ethnographic study of a strategy consulting firm’s organizational culture. I found that members initially gave their hearts and minds to the organization but that later many members grew cold to the organization, pulling away and exiting the firm. I further found that a key cultural element—central to the organization’s culture—enabled normative control but also subsequently undermined control over many members. In explaining this phenomenon, I build a theoretical model for the characteristics and processes allowing a cultural element to be double-edged.

Below, I draw on existing theory on semiotics and culture to provide some theoretical background helpful for understanding my empirical study. Then, I describe the methodology of my empirical study and subsequently present the findings. Afterwards, I build a theoretical model of the characteristics and processes that explain how a cultural element can be double-edged. I conclude with the study’s implications for theory on control and culture in organizations as well as implications for practice.

SEMIOTICS AND AMBIGUOUS EXPRESSIONS

To understand how culture can be double-edged, we ought to say what is meant by culture. While scholars acknowledge differing conceptualizations of culture (Glynn, Giorgi, & Lockwood, 2012; Martin, 2001), I take culture to be “the publicly available symbolic forms through which people experience and express meaning” (Swidler, 1986: 273). An organization’s culture, accordingly, can be understood as those symbolic forms that are organizationally
available (Harrison & Corley, 2011). My understanding of culture is thus in line with contemporary research viewing culture as “a reservoir of . . . ‘bits of meaning’” (Weber & Dacin, 2011: 289).

My conceptualization of the symbolic forms or bits of meaning that constitute culture follows from semiotics (de Saussure, 1998; Peirce, 1958). The central notion in semiotics is that of a sign, which is an association between an expression (a materially experienced signifier like a printed word or verbalized word) and an interpreted meaning (a mental, signified concept like an idea of what a word denotes and connotes) (Barthes, 1967). For example, a modern-day English-speaking scholar might perceive the expression of the word “journal” in written form and might interpret that expression to mean an academic publication outlet for scholarly research. For semioticians, the culture of a group consists of the patterned systems of expressions, meanings, and interpretive connections between expressions and meanings, as well as the behavioral patterns associated with the interpretations that group members make (Barley, 1983). Thus, an organizational culture can be seen as primarily about how organizational members organize their experiences, interpret meanings from these experiences, and act in accordance with these interpretations.

Organizational cultures, however, are rarely homogenous or static (Martin, 2001). Members do not come into the organization as cultural blank slates nor do they unvaryingly internalize the organization’s cultural conventions. An important tenet of semiotics is that relationships between expression and meaning are essentially arbitrary and are dependent on the cultural conventions to which a person is accustomed (de Saussure, 1998). So, the possibility for disconnects in understanding between people over the same expression is one that semioticians would acknowledge. For example, the expression “journal” might be interpreted by a scholar as
meaning an academic publication outlet, but that same expression “journal” might be interpreted by the scholar’s young child as meaning a diary of one’s personal thoughts and feelings. Likewise, within a formal organization, a single expression can point to different meanings for different organizational members. The notion of culture as a double-edged sword—particularly the possibility for incoherence and misunderstanding between people interpreting the same expression—fits well into the framework of semiotics.

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

My study will suggest that a crucial characteristic that can allow a cultural element to be powerful and potentially double-edged is interpretive ambiguity. Extant cultural scholarship would concur that this is an important characteristic of cultural elements that can make them efficacious (Griswold, 1987), but it has less to say about how this characteristic may make culture double-edged. The cultural sociological literature suggests that the ambiguity of cultural elements may strengthen their efficacy. Ambiguous expressions can allow for various interpretations, enabling a given expression to resonate with a range of audiences, eliciting audiences’ affiliations, support, and resources (Heaney & Rojas, 2014; Meyer & Whittier, 1994; Wang & Piazza, 2016). Ambiguity can be understood as the “state of having many ways of thinking about the same… phenomena” (Feldman, 1989: 5). Social movement scholars have described how particularly powerful cultural elements are often broad, “flexible modes of interpretation” wherein various audiences can understand these cultural elements differently (Snow & Benford, 1992: 140). The ambiguity of such a “multivocal” element allows for it to be “interpreted coherently from multiple perspectives simultaneously” (Padgett & Ansell, 1993: 1263). Many scholars conclude that interpretive ambiguity can be strategic (Eisenberg, 1984), enabling a “thin” cultural coherence (Ghaziani & Baldassarri, 2011; Griswold, 1987) such that different groups’ interpretations of a given expression can allow collective mobilization, even if groups’ interpretations are quite distinct.

Yet, if ambiguity is posited by existing theory in cultural sociology to enable cultural elements to be efficacious, how might such cultural elements be double-edged? How might an ambiguous expression at first produce normative control, only to later undermine it? In the
current study, I examine how an ambiguous expression mobilized by managers in an organization can be experienced, interpreted, and utilized by members of an organization in ways that managers did not intend or anticipate. I theorize how the cultural characteristic of ambiguity enables downstream processes that can make a cultural utilization double-edged. To do this, I draw on empirical data from my case study, discussed below.

METHODS

Setting

From January 2014 to December 2015, I conducted a two-year case study of a strategy consulting firm, ConsultingCo, an organization that advised client companies on how to formulate strategy, develop organizational capabilities, and design businesses.\(^1\) Organizational members consisted of consultants and administrative staff. Consultants worked in teams to conduct analyses and provide recommendations to clients on their business problems, and administrative staff performed functions such as marketing. Clients were typically high-ranking executives at Fortune 500 companies across a range of industries, including healthcare, financial services, and consumer goods. The total membership of ConsultingCo on average grew over the two-year period of study, although there was both attrition as well as addition of human capital. Membership ranged from a minimum of 68 to a maximum of 98, with an average of 80 members at ConsultingCo across the period. Consistently, consultants comprised about 70 percent and administrative staff comprised 30 percent, so there were, on average, about 56 consultants and 24 administrative staff.

\(^1\) Names and identifying details presented in this study have been disguised to protect the identity of the organization and the individuals involved.
I focused my analysis on the consultants at ConsultingCo because they constituted the core membership of the organization. Among the consultants, during the observation window, there were approximately the following average counts and percentages across six hierarchical levels, from most to least senior: 11 Partners (19 percent), 6 Principals (10 percent), 8 Project Managers (14 percent), 8 Senior Associates (14 percent), 14 Associates (26 percent), and 9 Analysts (17 percent). Partners were owners of ConsultingCo, overseeing firm strategy and operations, seeking out new business by selling projects to existing or new clients, and providing high-level advising for clients and directions for consulting teams across multiple projects. Principals also oversaw multiple projects but provided teams more hands-on guidance; they focused on advising existing clients rather than seeking out new business, and using teams’ analyses, they crafted the overall storylines of client recommendations. Project Managers were the central point-people for a given project, coordinating with clients, interfacing with Partners and Principals, managing and delegating analyses to more junior consultants, and ensuring the cohesion of analyses with the storyline of client recommendations. In the rest of this paper, I occasionally refer to the groupings of Partners, Principals, and Project Managers as “leaders” (because they were considered by informants to be managerial or leadership roles). Senior Associates oversaw within a single project several workstreams, conducting analyses and closely managing Associates and Analysts. Associates and Analysts, typically hired from elite business schools or undergraduate programs, respectively, were tasked with conducting the in-depth analyses for client projects and producing PowerPoint slides that communicated these analyses.

This setting is particularly well suited for the study of organizational culture and normative control. ConsultingCo serves as an “intensity case”, wherein a theoretically relevant phenomenon is manifested in ways that are information-rich but simultaneously not so unusual
as to be idiosyncratic (Patton, 1990). First, ConsultingCo was an information-rich site for the study of culture because culture was an extremely salient topic of conversation and discussion at ConsultingCo. There was the sense among informants at ConsultingCo that the cultural features of the organization were quite notable. Cultures often have a defining theme that organizes multiple domains of meaning and activity (Barley, 1983); in this case, the central feature of the organizational culture was the cultural element and expression of what members called “Impact”. The word and expression of Impact was very salient in my observation window. Emically, Impact was the first and highest priority of ConsultingCo’s listed Pillars, which senior leaders decided upon as the primary aspects of ConsultingCo’s culture. Impact was pointed to by informants as the most important of the Pillars, and the expression of Impact permeated organizational life and conversation. Impact came up frequently in the interviews, observations, and archival documents I collected. My study of the expression of Impact thus represents an information-rich example of an organizational cultural phenomenon, providing dense, textured data and making otherwise subtle dynamics more visible.

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

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2 As a matter of convention, I capitalize the emic term “Impact” throughout this paper as a way of distinguishing it from any etic, scholarly usage of the word “impact”. Also, I place the term “Impact” in quotation marks only this first time, omitting quotation marks in later usages.
ConsultingCo’s culture and key organizational outcomes like normative control was intense and salient, thereby also providing rich information on this link.

**Design and Data**

My study was a two-year ethnographic case study. I was guided by an approach of gradually focusing the data collection, analysis, and theorizing onto the emerging phenomenon of interest (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). During the initial, exploratory stages of my research, I conducted interviews by asking broad, open-ended questions (e.g., “What is work like here?”) (Spradley, 1979). And in my observations, I attended a wide variety of meetings and observed a diversity of conversations. In these early stages of my study, I observed that the term Impact was used often, variously, and consequentially. I began to probe into how the notion of Impact functioned at ConsultingCo and what consequences it had. As my research progressed, I continued to collect broad, ethnographic data, but I also focused efforts on understanding the varying cultural interpretations and usages of Impact, in order to build a theoretical model of the expression of Impact and its characteristics, processes, and consequences. Realizing that the Impact expression was a case of a central cultural element with countervailing effects of producing and dissolving normative control, I used my data to build theory around how culture can work in double-edged ways.

I pursued three types of data: interview content through semi-structured interviewing, observational data through participant- and unobtrusive-observation, and archival documents. These distinct sources of data constituted a mixed data-collection approach (Small, 2011) offering the benefits of diversifying the situations where Impact was mentioned. Such variation
increased data heterogeneity, useful for a sampling approach of maximum variation around the theoretical phenomenon of interest (Patton, 1990: 172).

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

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

In addition to interviews, over two years, I collected observational data of 119 days of observation, an average of about 5 days a month. I visited ConsultingCo, attended off-site events, and listened to conference calls. During my observations, I took detailed notes on various formal meetings (e.g., new hire training sessions, company town halls, strategy sessions) and informal interactions (e.g., lunchroom conversations, social events). I also supplemented the interview and observational data with archival data, including hundreds of documents on a range of employee-facing (e.g., employee evaluation scores, meeting materials) and job-candidate-facing issues (e.g., recruiting materials). Finally, to stay current with happenings at the firm when I was not on-site, I had biweekly calls with the head of talent management at ConsultingCo, one of the most senior professional staff members. This contact gave me updates on the latest occurrences at the firm. I used these updates to target my collection of additional, relevant data.

**Data Analysis**

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

As I collected and analyzed my data, I noticed the salience of the Impact expression in my field site, making sure to collect data on as many mentions of Impact as I could. Because Impact was mentioned variously, I set out to characterize these variations, finding several broad categories of processes—resonance, deferral, experiential reflection, articulation, and assessment. I considered these categories credible because they appropriately captured the emic uses of the Impact expression. In this analysis, I also realized that there was a particular characteristic of the Impact expression at the heart of the processes: ambiguity. I therefore sought connections between Impact’s ambiguity and the processes I observed. In addition, noticing that informants interpreted Impact in different ways, I induced a typology of emic interpretations of Impact—“Client Impact”, “Social Impact”, or “Personal Impact”—coding mentions for this typology. Throughout these analyses, I consulted the literature, sought more data in the conceptual categories, reshaped categories, and eventually produced my theoretical model of the processes through which culture can be double-edged.

As a supplementary analysis, I conducted a count analysis of Impact mentions. For the 47 full-time consultants in my interviewee sample, I identified pieces of interview transcript pertaining to Impact, putting them into Microsoft Excel. Out of 47 full-time consultant interviewees, 45 mentioned Impact, and of these 45, 28 consultants stayed at ConsultingCo in my observation window and 17 exited. I focused on the full-time consultants because consultants were my research focus and because intern consultants did not have comparable outcomes of retention or exit, since interns contractually have only a three-month stint at the firm. In my frequency count analysis, I took the compilation of Impact mentions among full-time consultant
interviewees as a corpus (803 mentions total).\textsuperscript{3} I manually coded each Impact mention with associated interviewee characteristics and emic interpretation. I noticed in this analysis that the expression of Impact was often but not always used in an evaluative sense (501 out of 803 mentions) to describe work positively or negatively, coding each mention as such. As I will show later, in the latter sections of the findings and in table 2, I used this count analysis to compare how members who mostly assessed work through certain interpretations of Impact differed from those who mostly assessed work through other interpretations of Impact, in order to supplement my primary qualitative analysis.

**FINDINGS**

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

\textsuperscript{3} My unit of analysis here is what I call a mention of the frame of Impact. I operationalize a mention as a thread of direct or indirect references to the frame. A mention has several features. First, a mention is a thread of references, making it more expansive than a single word occurrence. A single mention can involve the informant using the word Impact several times, so long as these uses form a distinguishable thread of similar references. For example, if an informant uses the word Impact twice in a given sentence, with similar implied meanings, that would count as a single mention. Second, a given mention can be either direct or indirect. Indirect references were when it was clear that the informant was referring to one of the induced interpretations of Impact, even when the word itself was not explicitly stated (e.g., where the notion of Impact was referred to as “it”). Most mentions were direct in that informants explicitly used the word Impact.
An Ambiguous Expression

The idea of Impact was a central part of ConsultingCo’s strategic efforts to obtain normative control over members, as a means of inspiring people, drawing them in, and drawing them together. Impact was the centerpiece of what members called the Pillars of ConsultingCo.

Established before my observation window in 2012, the Pillars were a set of words that ConsultingCo’s senior leaders decided were distinguishing of the organization’s culture. Impact was regarded as the most important of the Pillars. Principal Stewart said of Impact, “In my mind, it’s got to be one of the most important [Pillars]. . . I can’t recite [the rest of] them off inside of my head. . . Ultimately, it [Impact] is the whole point of doing any of our work” (2013-06-10_I).

In an internal motivational video, Impact is listed as the first of the Pillars before a clip from an interview with Partner Leo saying, “I think Impact is really at the heart of what ConsultingCo does” (2013-0_A).

The expression of Impact was intended by organizational leaders to mobilize people to join the firm and to produce cohesion among members. Principal Heath said that Impact was supposed to be “a real rallying cry for people” (2014-01-23_I). Isabel, a Project Manager, said that Impact can “help us come together as a group” and can provide a “common language around how people work” (2015-03-23_I). The intent of senior leaders to use Impact as a way to assert normative control over members was further apparent from interviews describing the origins of Impact. In 2012, Isabel told me, there were a series of layoffs that shook ConsultingCo’s membership. There was “a sense of loss and confusion, and, you know, anger amongst the people who stay[ed].” She said that this event was “a prompt” for a cultural initiative, the codification of Impact and the other Pillars (2015-03-23_I). Partner Leo similarly noted that the

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4 In parentheses are data identifiers for each of the data points. The first numbers indicate the date of origin of the data source and are in the format of year, month, and then day, where available. The letter after the numbers indicates type of data source: “I” for interview data, “O” for observational data, and “A” for archival data.
production and promotion of Impact as a Pillar was a cultural response to this shakeup, which he partly attributed to a deficiency in socialization. “People,” he said, “weren’t getting as indoctrinated” as they should have been (2015-04-08_I). Senior leaders, then, promoted Impact as a cultural initiative to ameliorate this sense of confusion and lack of socialization—to produce normative control with a unifying statement that rallied members. As Isabel said, leaders promoted Impact, saying, “this is what sets us apart” and “this is why we’re different” (2015-03-23_I). In all, as Leo said, the purpose of promoting the Impact Pillar was about “trying to align . . . on where we were headed, what type of work we wanted to pursue” (2015-04-08_I).

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

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

The First Edge: The Production of Normative Control

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

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

**Resonance**

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Deferral**

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

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

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

A second reason that recruits deferred on reflecting on their interpretations of Impact was, at this early stage in their careers at ConsultingCo, recruits were preoccupied with acclimating to the organization and conveying competence. “First coming in, I wasn’t focused on Impact,” Analyst Reggie said. He continued, “I was just focused on trying to get up to speed. . . First coming in, I was like ‘Don’t fail,’” concluding with a laugh (2014-02-08_I). A third and final reason is, at such an early stage, recruits did not believe they had sufficient information to confidently cross-examine the ambiguous expression of Impact, giving the organization the benefit of the doubt as to whether the organizational notion of Impact would align with their own
interpretation of Impact. One summer intern Analyst Rose said, “I’m an intern, so I don’t know that I can really evaluate . . . Impact” (2014-08-12_1). Rose, who only spent a few months at ConsultingCo as an intern, decided to come back to ConsultingCo full-time as an Analyst. In all, the normative control obtained over recruits through the resonance of Impact was maintained as members initially deferred on reflecting on Impact.

The Second Edge: The Dissolution of Normative Control

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

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

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

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

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

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

Articulation

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

First, members often articulated Impact into the idea of Client Impact. Principal Ulrich said that Impact was about “being very client-minded” (2013-06-03_I). Partner Lyndon said he would define Impact as the answer to the question, “Did the client create something new – did it become a reality, versus, did it get shelved, did it get killed off?” (2014-07-08_I). Second, members sometimes articulated Impact in terms of Social Impact. Members interpreting Impact as Social Impact realized that Impact excited them because of the possibility of positive change in societal outcomes. Senior Associate Abby, for example, articulated Impact as Social Impact when she talked about “an Impact that’s not just financial.” She elaborated, “You’re not helping a company make more money; you’re helping, you know, deliver a healthcare solution or you’re helping spread education” (2014-01-21_I).
Members’ interpretation occasionally led them to third articulation: Personal Impact. This emphasized a meaning of Impact related to feeling like they, personally and individually as the primary agent, were substantially contributing to projects. This was the articulation that Associate Audrey had used above. She articulated, “This is Impact: I . . . as an individual, have actually contributed some value” (2014-10-08_I). Audrey described how Personal Impact involved feeling that she had the ownership to contribute to the project significantly—such as building a “creative, real argument or creating a business idea”—rather than mindlessly executing menial tasks where “anyone could have done it” (2014-10-08_I). As Analyst Lawrence said, Personal Impact was about feeling like one’s “agency is significant” (2015-02-27_O). Ownership and autonomy, then, were viewed as key to this articulation of Personal Impact. Project Manager Isabel noted the importance of “getting increasing levels of ownership over things. . . remove the layers of approval . . . [to] feel like I’m delivering that Impact” (2014-01-23_I).

Assessment

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

Convergence or Divergence

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

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

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

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

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

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

Senior Associate Abby also assessed her work negatively through a Social Impact lens. She recalled her negative sentiments when she felt her work with a health insurance client became exclusively oriented towards solving the client’s business issues rather than producing useful products for the client’s consumers. She said:
I remember with one healthcare [insurance] client, it [our work] started turning . . . into kind of repetitive, um, like, workshops . . . where it felt like the same ideas were coming up time and time again . . . [It] started to feel like . . . ‘how do we help them [clients] get over a hurdle,’ where, at the end of the day, it wasn’t really going to increase benefit to patients—it was really about helping them with business needs. Um, and I think, obviously, we want our clients to grow and to succeed. But . . . [I] didn’t feel like there was as much satisfaction because, eh, it wasn’t that it was going to expand the access to healthcare or that it was going to help diagnose new people. It was like, literally, let’s help deal with some internal business functions. And again . . . there are people who are fascinated by that stuff. I just, you know, I’d rather make sure there’s some kind of ultimate Impact of the work I’m doing (2014-01-21_l).

The negative conclusions about work that members came to, often through the lenses of Social and Personal Impact, loosened the normative control that ConsultingCo had over these members. Normative control, after all, is about regulating the sentiments and cognitions that members have towards the organization and the work done there.

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

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

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

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

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

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

**Failures of Normative Control**

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

The ambiguous expression of Impact was implicated in the loss of normative control at ConsultingCo, as evidenced by individual consequences of members’ exits due to Impact. Many members reached conclusions through their interpretations of their work and Impact that they did not find the work at ConsultingCo meaningful enough (Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010). Various disillusioned members exited the organization in my observation window, citing divergent articulations of Social and Personal Impact as part of their exit rationale.

Several members drew on the divergent articulation of Personal Impact in describing their disillusionment and their motivation for leaving the firm. Analyst Audrey, said that “Personal Impact” was “something that I want in my jobs, for them to be fulfilling for me,” noting that from a perspective of Personal Impact, she was not satisfied at ConsultingCo (2014-10-08_1). Audrey left to work at a venture capital company, directly designing and launching portfolio companies. When I asked her why, she evoked an interpretation of Personal Impact, saying, “projects [at ConsultingCo] were just becoming [a] mundane thing that I could be less involved
with, and sort of [have] less Impact on. . . . So . . . I felt like my Impact was becoming trivial” (2014-10-08_I). Associate Alberta also evoked an interpretation of Personal Impact when said she did not feel like she was given the autonomy to have Impact, even though she had wanted “to help be a part of the solution” (2014-01-17_I). Later, Alberta exited the firm to work in internal strategy in the healthcare industry, on the basis that she “wasn’t being leveraged to [her] full potential” and was not allowed to “be a part of the Impact” (2014-08-12_I). In another example, Associate Blythe told me, “I’m pretty jaded about Impact. I’ve thought about other options for myself moving forward” (2015-06-19_I). Blythe later left the firm to work in internal strategy at a medical startup. After her decision to leave, she told me that she left because she was tired of being “far from Impact”, and making “slides that no one is going to see” (2015-07-27_I), invoking an articulation of Personal Impact.

Even senior members exited the firm on the basis of Personal Impact. When I asked a Partner, Leo, why he left ConsultingCo to go to work as a director of an investment portfolio at a professional services firm, he said, “Actually it was Impact, . . . the opportunity to apply myself directly to one of the portfolios we were helping to develop and then see it through to completion. Having that sense of direct ownership versus advising the owner is important [to me]” (2015-04-08_I). The fact that senior members like Leo left ConsultingCo with an exit rationale centered on Personal Impact is striking, suggesting that the institutionalized definition of Impact was supra-individual and supersedes any given senior leader. Even being a senior member of the firm, then, could not “save” Leo from his interpretive divergence from the institutionalized definition of Impact. Leo, recognizing that he had come to view Impact in ways that diverged from the firm’s intent, had found a reason to exit the firm, and exit he did.
Members also drew on the divergent articulation of Social Impact as part of their rationale for why they felt unhappy at ConsultingCo and why they chose to exit. Senior Associate Sable reflected on her decision to leave ConsultingCo through the lens of her passion for “social innovation” and Social Impact. She said, “I’m, like, I’m just not my best me anymore. I’m not me anymore, you know, on this job. Like, I’m not happy.” She continued ruefully, “There’s nothing you’re willing to—there’s nothing that can kind of fix that. Like, no amount of money or—when you feel like that, you just… it’s the worst.” (2014-07-16_I). Sable left ConsultingCo to found her own startup that produced a product around education. She invoked an articulation of Social Impact to justify this choice, saying, “On a given day, . . . two or three more people go use [my education] product or service that fundamentally changes their experience. . . Ideally thousands of people, you know. . . Something that really can make a positive social difference. . . That's kind of huge” (2014-07-16_I).

Senior members of ConsultingCo also exited the firm because of Social Impact. Principal Ellie, for example, used the articulation of Social Impact to explain her reasoning for leaving to go work at a large apparel company, focusing on the development of environmentally friendly solutions for a company division. She said, “I come from a family of activists, . . . [and] I feel like I’m actually going after my roots, which feels good, . . . It does feel like personally [a] more satisfying and a better fit, . . . specifically driv[ing] towards and somehow making some aspects in the world either better or less worse” (2015-03-10_I). Again, it was striking to see Ellie, who was the informant who told me about the organizational definition and intention behind Impact, leave the firm on account of a divergent articulation of Impact. Like Leo, being senior could not save her either from her interpretive divergence from the firm’s organizationally endorsed interpretation of Impact.
My qualitative data thus suggest strongly that the ambiguous Impact expression was linked to members’ exit. Associate Eric explained that it was quite common for consultants to leave ConsultingCo because of Impact. He summarized the situation thoughtfully, saying, “ConsultingCo becomes a hub where . . . it attracts a lot of people, but it’s never a destination. . . . I feel like at ConsultingCo, you want to find yourself, what Impact really means. . . . Because Impact is such a broad term, everyone comes out of ConsultingCo with a very different definition of what Impact means. They go searching for something else” (2015-04-05_I).

As supplementary evidence supporting the notion that the Impact expression—and particularly the divergent articulations of Social and Personal Impact—is linked to disillusionment and exits from ConsultingCo, I show in table 2 a count analysis of mentions of Impact among interviewees who mentioned Impact and who were full-time consultants. I designated as “convergent members” interviewees for whom more than half of Impact mentions were of the convergent articulation Client Impact. I designated as “divergent members” interviewees for whom more than half of Impact mentions were of the divergent articulations Social or Personal Impact. The table shows suggestive support that divergent members had more negative mentions of their work than convergent members. Across divergent members, the average proportion of negative assessments of work was 59 percent, as compared to convergent members’ average of 36 percent. In addition, the table shows that divergent members were more likely to exit in the observation window than convergent members. Of the 20 divergent members, 13 exited in the observation window, meaning 65 percent of divergent members exited. Of the 25 convergent members, 4 exited in the observation window, meaning 16 percent of convergent members exited. This supports the notion that interpretive divergence around Impact was associated with disillusionment and exit.
According to aggregate company turnover data, there were 25 exits during my two-year observation window, 19 of which were voluntary. The first year’s annual voluntary turnover rate was 14 percent and the second year’s was 9 percent, making the average annual voluntary turnover rate over the two-year period 11.5 percent. While this is not necessarily a high voluntary turnover rate, it is remarkable how many exits were influenced at least partly by the idea of Impact. I interviewed 19 people who exited voluntarily. And of these 19, 17 interviewees mentioned Impact, and 13 interviewees generally fit the pattern of exhibiting divergence.

In sum, the ambiguous expression of Impact was associated with the ultimate loss of normative control for many members who voluntarily exited the firm, against the firm’s intents. I claim that voluntary exits were against the firm’s intent because of my observations of strategy sessions among the senior leaders of the firm. The turnover at ConsultingCo was cited as problematic for project staffing because ConsultingCo was a relatively lean firm. Compared to larger firms, Principal Ulrich said, “exits hurt us more.” “Right,” added Partner Lucas, “and exits will continue to hurt us more,” because “we’ll be under-scaled for a long time” (2014-10-27_O). Later in this meeting, Lucas implicated the recruiting process. He pointed to what he believed were central issues in the spate of exits, noting that some of the “legacy big challenges” for ConsultingCo included the “standardization on recruiting and what we’re saying.” “And let’s be clear,” Lucas declared, “We have said things that are inconsistent with what we actually do and have.” He grimly added, “And it has caused enormous problems for us” (2014-10-27_O).
Yet, even though ConsultingCo leaders were aware of the exits and the cultural issues in the organization, the ambiguity of the term Impact may have inured it to deep scrutiny as a source of difficulty. In fact, there was a considerable deal of confusion around why there was disillusionment and turnover, which made it more difficult for leaders to understand how to regain normative control over disillusioned members. While members articulated the Impact expression into more specific ideas in interviews and in small-group settings, these discussions of articulated notions of Impact did not reach the leadership of ConsultingCo; the frame remained ambiguous at the organizational level. So, while leaders who stayed on at ConsultingCo could view work as being Impactful, perhaps in terms of Client Impact, other consultants, including those who left, may have viewed the work as not meaningful, in terms of Social or Personal Impact. The confusion generated by the expression of Impact, then, might explain why, as Lucas voiced in the meeting of ConsultingCo leaders, “One of the things that bothers us is that there is so much going well in the organization, but our people are so unhappy relative to what the business is. I don’t know how” (2014-10-27_O).

DISCUSSION

Theorizing the Double-Edged Sword of Organizational Culture

Insert Figure 1 about here.

Based on the findings of my inductive case study of ConsultingCo, I induce a more general theoretical model, summarized in figure 1, that describes the processes through which the key characteristic of ambiguity can produce downstream processes that allow a cultural expression to have double-edged effects.
The first edge of organizational culture—the production of normative control—is produced through resonance and deferral processes. In resonance, recruits experience feelings of connectedness between their interpretation of an ambiguous cultural expression and their existing worldviews. Recruits are drawn into the firm and enter the organization. In deferral, recruits defer on making their own sense of the cultural expression. Instead, they spend time socializing into linguistic norms of using the expression equivocally, are preoccupied with acclimating to the organization and negotiating roles for themselves (Reichers, 1987) as competent colleagues, or cite their inexperience with work at the organization.

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

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

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

**Theoretical Implications**

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

The first contribution, then, of the current study is that it draws attention to the potential for culture to be double-edged, to have unintended consequences directly contravening intended effects. Like contemporary cultural scholarship, the current study recognizes the agentic and strategic use of culture by actors (e.g., Bertels, Howard-Grenville, & Pek, 2016). But unlike the literature, it answers Merton’s (1936) call for the study of unanticipated consequences by focusing attention on the possibility for an organization’s agentic use of culture to go awry of its intended purpose. I showed that the Impact expression utilized by ConsultingCo to invoke normative control in its members had unintended consequences of undermining normative control among various members. By suggesting that culture can be double-edged, this study offers an intriguing alternative framing to existing studies consistent with the idea that cultural elements can have unintended consequences (e.g., Castilla & Benard, 2010; Kunda, 1992; Martin, Feldman, Hatch, & Sitkin, 1983; Martin, Knopoff, & Beckman, 1998: 460; Sonenshein, 2010; Tilcsik, 2010; Turco, 2012). The current study emphasizes that the double-edge of culture is a phenomenon worth theorizing, and the potential occurrence of double-edged culture in others’ studies suggests that there is some generality to the phenomenon.

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

Second, the current study not only recognizes the possibility of double-edged culture but also contributes further by offering a theoretical model that gives scholars a starting point for explaining how culture can be double-edged. I theorized the characteristic that stood at the root of the cultural element’s unintentional consequences—ambiguity—as well as the downstream processes that flowed from this characteristic and enacted the two edges of culture, producing and dissolving normative control. The downstream processes of ambiguity in this model thus offer possible “sensitizing concepts” (Blumer, 1969) for future research. The current study thus encourages future scholarship to build upon, test, or elaborate the model’s elements using different methodological approaches or complementary theoretical frameworks. A productive future study might, for instance, further specify the model by comparing, within a single setting, multiple potentially double-edged cultural expressions which are all ambiguous. One possible approach to such a study might involve characterizing the vocabularies of different social groupings in an organization (Loewenstein, Ocasio, & Jones, 2012), finding the multiple points of vocabulary and cultural overlap, measuring the cross-group ambiguity of those overlaps, and observing the communicative and cultural processes that occur.

A third contribution of the study is that the model shows how cultural ambiguity can be not an asset but a liability for users of culture. Cultural analysts have mostly argued that
ambiguity is beneficial for the cultural element’s utilizers. Because ambiguous cultural objects “sustain a relative divergence of interpretations” (Griswold, 1987: 1106), they can be culturally powerful, where “‘cultural power’ refers to the capacity of certain works to linger in the mind and . . . to enter the canon” (Griswold, 1987: 1105). Research has also shown, for instance, that ambiguous ideas mobilized strategically can enable perceived common ground between previously conflicting groups (Donnellon, Gray, & Bougon, 1986; Leonardi, 2011). However, scholars tend to neglect how cultural ambiguity might have dysfunctional consequences for users of culture. The current paper shows that a cultural element’s ambiguity might initially be beneficial for the organization using the cultural element because it mobilizes a broad variety of recruits, but that the element’s ambiguity also increases the chances for eventual interpretive divergence in the organization between members, which makes it harder for members to be managed.

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

**Practical Implications**

Managers have long yearned to “master” culture in order to effectively manage their workforce, despite warnings that culture is difficult to control (Schein, 2009). The findings from this study not only validate that culture is difficult to control but also posit how a utilization of culture might run amok of its initial purpose. There are several practical implications that could be drawn from this study and its theoretical model.

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

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

CONCLUSION

Scholars and practitioners have continued to be fascinated by culture and the ways in which actors attempt to use culture to achieve their goals. The deployment of cultural expressions, particularly those that have ambiguous, broad appeal, has been shown to be quite powerful and effective—an efficacious, strategically used force. Yet, culture might also be a double-edged sword. A cultural expression, purposively used, might run amok of the intended purpose. By theorizing the characteristics and processes that explain how a cultural expression can be the bearer of both the production and destruction of a key organizational outcome like normative control, this study aims to contribute to our understanding of organizational culture as a double-
edged sword. In other words, I hope to enhance our comprehension of the intentional use of culture and the unintended consequences that may result. By enhancing this understanding, the current study seeks—dare I say it—to have an impact.
### Table 1:
**Overview of Interviewee Sample and Stayer/Leaver Sub-Samples**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Sample (N=60)</th>
<th>Stayers (N=33)</th>
<th>Leavers (N=19)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>33 (55%)</td>
<td>17 (52%)</td>
<td>10 (53%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>27 (45%)</td>
<td>16 (48%)</td>
<td>9 (47%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Position</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Full-Time</strong></td>
<td>52</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consultants</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analyst</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6 (2%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>5 (5%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Senior Associate</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>5 (5%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project Manager</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>4 (3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>5 (3%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3 (2%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative Staff</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associate</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3 (0%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manager/Head</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2 (0%)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interns</strong></td>
<td>8</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Consulting Interns</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Analysts</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Associates</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>N/A</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### TABLE 2:
**NEGATIVE EVALUATIONS OF WORK AND EXIT RATES AMONG DIVERGENT AND CONVERGENT MEMBERS**

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

Note: This frequency count analysis was conducted on interview transcripts of the 45 interviewees who mentioned Impact and who were full-time consultants (not interns or administrative staff). I designated as “convergent members” interviewees for whom over half of Impact mentions were of the convergent articulation Client Impact. I designated as “divergent members” interviewees for whom over half of Impact mentions were of the divergent articulations Social or Personal Impact.
FIGURE 1:
MODEL OF AN AMBIGUOUS EXPRESSION ENABLING PRODUCTION AND DISSOLUTION OF NORMATIVE CONTROL

Ambiguous Expression \rightarrow Resonance \rightarrow Deferral

Production of normative control

Deferral \rightarrow Articulation

Cultural characteristic

Experiential Reflection

Assessment

Dissolution of normative control

Convergence

Disillusioned Exit

Divergence
**APPENDIX: ALTERNATIVE ACCOUNTS**

My account suggests that an ambiguous expression can produce double-edged effects of producing and dissolving normative control. I do not suggest in this paper that there were no other relevant factors in explaining the production and dissolution of normative control, but I do suggest that the ambiguous cultural element was a highly salient, relevant, and theoretically productive factor that did profoundly matter in explaining these outcomes. However, it is worth considering several alternative accounts.

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

A last alternative account is that the expression of Impact is invoked simply retrospectively as an ex-post account of events and therefore has little explanatory value. I would suggest, in line with prior scholars, that retrospective account-making can be explanatorily important; as scholars of sensemaking would acknowledge such retrospective accounts can serve “as a springboard to action” (Taylor & Van Every, 1999: 40). Furthermore, my data show that interpretations by participants can temporally precede their decision to leave. For example, my second interview with Blythe was conducted 21 months after she joined ConsultingCo; in this interview she was already using the articulations of Social Impact and Personal Impact to negatively assess her work (2015-06-19_I). My third interview with Blythe was conducted a month after that, where, at that point, she had decided to leave ConsultingCo by joining a startup, citing the same articulations of Social Impact and Personal Impact (2015-07-27_I). Thus, Blythe’s divergent interpretations in the second interview preceded and may have precipitated her decision to leave ConsultingCo.
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