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COURAGE AS IDENTITY WORK: ACCOUNTS OF WORKPLACE COURAGE

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This study focuses on the intersection of identity dynamics and workplace courage. I examine accounts of courage submitted by business professionals and articulate the identity processes underlying the accounts. The narratives illustrate four storylines that reflect four distinct forms of courage and one storyline that reflects a lack of courage. In the accounts, identity tensions precipitate courageous acts, and courage-based identity work is used to reconcile the tensions. The findings suggest that in accounts of workplace courage, courageous behavior is viewed as an important form of identity work that helps individuals to minimize incongruities between their self- and social identities.

> I worked in a call center with a single mom who had three children. . . . This job was the sole income for her and her family. . . . One day she came to me with a very pale face; [she had] caught our floor manager watching child pornography on his computer in his office. He told her that if it got out, he would fire her because her sales numbers were not up to par. She told me she couldn't sleep at night while she tried to figure out the best thing to do. Obviously she could not lose her job, but she felt she had to say something about the situation. . . . After a couple of days I saw Security come out with our floor manager—they escorted him out of the office. Then I knew she did the right thing. (r10, f, 28)[1]

If people act their way into their identities (Weick, 1995) and if identities shape and are shaped by the organizations in which people work (Burke & Stets, 2009; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991), then acts of workplace courage have the potential to impact the identities of courageous individuals and the organizations that employ them. Courageous acts can change the people who observe them (Worline, Wrzesniewski, & Rafaeli, 2002), and because courage involves taking risks to serve the interests of others (Comte-Sponville, 1996), it can influence identity by earning a person both admiration and self-respect. By studying courage at work, therefore, a great deal can be learned about identity.

Accounts of workplace courage can reveal much about courage and identity processes in organizations. When asked to explain a past experience, a person must sort through the associated events, choose the most significant actions, and connect the elements to the outcome in a coherent way (Polkinghorne, 1988). The resulting story reflects the individual's implicit theories of how phenomena such as identity and courage operate in organizations (Sternberg, 1985). Narratives play a crucial role in "sensemaking," "sensegiving," and "sensebreaking" (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Boje, 1991, 1995; Weick, 1995), all of which are crucial in understanding work-related identity and workplace courage. Moreover, narratives themselves are an important form of identity work because they help individuals construct and revise their work identities (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). For these reasons, the use of narratives to investigate a wide range of organizational phenomena has increased dramatically in recent years.

This study explores the intersection of workplace courage and identity processes. Using narrative analysis supplemented by grounded theory procedures, I analyze accounts of workplace courage submitted by 89 business professionals. In the study, I identify the storylines of the narratives and examine the identity processes embedded in the accounts, but I also recognize that the accounts included in the study may not be entirely accurate.

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[1] Throughout the article, I use a coding scheme for respondents' verbatim, detailed quotes exemplified by the following: "r10" refers to respondent 10; "f" is "female"; and "28" means 28 years old.

Indeed, Schank and Abelson (1995) contend that most people who tell stories stray from the facts by omitting some information and adding or changing details in an effort to create a good story. Nevertheless, personal accounts allow individuals to make sense of past events in the context in which they occurred, so these accounts have the potential to provide rich information on the nature of workplace courage and its identity undercurrents.

In this study I define courage as acting intentionally in the face of risks, threats, or obstacles in the pursuit of morally worthy goals (Goud, 2005). I view a courageous act broadly as a cluster of behaviors, cognitions, and emotions. In this study, the term *courageous act* refers to the tension that precedes action, the choice to behave courageously, the act itself, and the reflection that follows the act. I focus on everyday acts of courage that are a normal part of organizational life (Lopez, O'Byrne, & Peterson, 2003) rather than limiting my analysis to extraordinary or life-and-death acts of courage.

The constructs of identity and identification are crucial in understanding how individuals and organizations are connected. Indeed, Ybema and colleagues note that identity "appears to articulate the relationship between the individual and society" (Ybema, Keenoy, Oswick, Beverungen, Ellis, & Sabelis, 2009: 301). Identity scholars have underscored the need for more research focusing on how identification occurs and the processes associated with identity work (Ashforth et al., 2008; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Ashforth et al. (2008) offer a "general sketch" of the process of identification, but they also concede that much is not known about the individual and organizational dynamics that solidify and alter identities. These authors argue that richer process models of identity are needed to better understand the fluid, situated nature of identity, and that the models should be based on specific instances of identity construction or modification. In the absence of such research, understanding of identity processes and identity work is oversimplified, fragmented, and inert.

In addition to the need for more nuanced process models of identity, more research is needed to understand how individuals manage the multiple facets of their identities. Scholars agree that members of organizations have many identities (Burke & Stets, 2009; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), but questions remain about how individuals determine which identities are most salient in a given context, how personal identities affect social identities, and how conflicts among identities are reconciled (Ashforth & Johnson, 2002; Pratt, 1998), particularly between higher- and lower-order identities (e.g., organization versus team). In particular, the methods used by individuals to manage the demands associated with incompatible identities are not well understood (Ashforth et al., 2008). Pratt (1998) and Cheney (1991) both contend that the management of multiple identities may be one of the most crucial issues in modern organizations. Therefore, research that focuses on the dynamics of multiple, shifting identities has the potential to produce a more comprehensive and realistic understanding of the identity construct.

The existing courage literature offers many insights on the content and processes of courage generally and on the benefits and consequences of courageous behavior in organizations. What is missing from this literature is an understanding of the identity dynamics underlying acts of workplace courage. Despite the fact that courage is often conceptualized as an individual character strength, virtue, or disposition (Comte-Sponville, 1996; Lopez et al., 2003; Peterson & Seligman, 2004), the role that courage plays in helping individuals construct, verify, or revise their identities has not been examined. In addition, in current models of the process of courage (Hannah, Sweeney, & Lester, 2007; Sekerka & Bagozzi, 2007), social identity plays only a minor role, and personal identity is not mentioned at all. Given that individual values and principles are often emphasized in discussions of courage (Kidder, 2005), identity is likely to play a major role in the process of courage.

This study helps to fill the theoretical gaps noted above by investigating the identity processes embedded in accounts of workforce courage and examining the dynamics underlying courage-based identity work. The study also fills gaps by focusing on both the management of multiple identities at various levels of identification and the processes used to reconcile discrepancies among self- and social identities. Addressing these gaps will shed light on the rich, holistic, and situated nature of identity work, the identity processes involved in workplace courage, and the courage-based identity work that is used to reconcile the demands associated with multiple self- and social identities.

In the study I conceptualize courage as a form of identity work, a conceptualization that, to my knowledge, has not been proposed in prior research. To address the theoretical gaps outlined above, I focus on the following research questions in the study: (1) How do identity tensions influence acts of workplace courage? (2) How does courage-

based identity work unfold in the storylines reflected in courage narratives? (3) How does courage-based identity work help to reconcile identity tensions in accounts of courage?

Why study *workplace* courage? Three features of workplaces coalesce to make courageous behavior both necessary for organizational effectiveness and risky for individuals. First, complex organizations require people with different backgrounds and perspectives to cooperate, which inevitably leads to power struggles and conflict (Clegg, 1989; Pfeffer, 1983). In work organizations, courage is routinely required to raise issues, advocate minority positions, and oppose individuals and groups, as well as to combat significant organizational maladies such as corruption (Lacayo & Ripley, 2002), catastrophic failure (Vaughan, 1999), and organizational decline (Collins, 2009). Second, courage is at the heart of the collaboration required for the innovative and entrepreneurial endeavors that allow organizations to thrive (May, 1975), particularly endeavors that involve high levels of risk and the possibility of significant financial loss. Third, work is a central feature in the lives of most adults, and it fulfills a host of instrumental, psychological, and social needs (Guevara & Ord, 1996). The perceived risks of courageous acts in the workplace can therefore be far-reaching, threatening people's livelihood, friendships, reputation, career, and personal identity (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). These distinctive attributes of work organizations—high potential for conflict, a need for collaboration and innovation, and a heightened sense of risk for individuals—create a distinctive context for courageous acts that occur in work organizations.

Below, I first review the literature on workplace courage and then discuss the literature on identity work. Next, I explain the methods and data analysis procedures used in the study. After that, I present my results and then propose a theoretical model derived from my analysis. The article concludes with a discussion of theoretical implications.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Workplace Courage and Its Components

Courage is viewed as the most universally admired virtue because it is grounded in self-sacrifice, serves the needs of others, and is needed to enact all of the other virtues (Comte-Sponville, 1996). Scholars have acknowledged that courage is a vital part of work organizations (Cavanagh & Moberg, 1999), and the construct appears regularly on lists of characteristics needed by leaders (Kouzes & Posner, 2008; Lombardo & Eichinger, 2003; Spreitzer, McCall, & Mahoney, 1997; Teal, 1996).

Monica Worline and her colleagues have made significant contributions to the study of workplace courage. She observes that all members of work organizations are subject to the pressures of conformity, social control, and obedience to authority. Consequently, her research indicates that courage in organizations is characterized mainly by oppositional behavior: constructive opposition undertaken in order to remedy duress (Worline, 2010). Worline and her colleagues further argue that work organizations are systems with established routines and control mechanisms designed to maintain the status quo. Actions that challenge existing procedures typically are met with resistance, even when such actions would improve an organization's performance. Therefore, courage is needed to interrupt routines, thereby improving organizational functioning and heightening the sense of agency among members of the organization (Worline, 2010; Worline et al., 2002; Worline & Quinn, 2003). An organization's design is also likely to influence the acts that require courage, because every organizational form promotes some actions and inhibits others. Therefore, "courageous principled action" and "positive deviance" are sometimes required to ensure that ideas and decisions receive a fair hearing (Worline & Quinn, 2003: 139).

The research summarized above explores elements of an organizational environment that impede or promote acts of courage, but it does not focus on the underlying dynamics that lead an individual to behave courageously. In addition, although several researchers have proposed theoretical models that apply to work settings (Hannah et al., 2007; Sekerka, Bagozzi, & Charnigo, 2009), more research is needed to understand the nuances that distinguish courage at work from courage in other settings.

In the courage literature consensus is emerging that courageous acts consist of three essential components: (1) a morally worthy goal, (2) intentional action, and (3) perceived risks, threats, or obstacles (Cavanagh & Moberg, 1999; Goud, 2005; Harris, 2001; Kilmann, O'Hara, & Strauss, 2010; O'Byrne, Lopez, & Peterson, 2000; Rate, Clarke, Lindsay, & Sternberg, 2007; Shelp, 1984; Walton, 1986; Woodard, 2004; Worline et al., 2002). It is generally agreed that all three components must be present

for an act to be considered courageous. I discuss each of these components below.

Morally worthy goal. A courageous act involves the pursuit of noble and worthy ends (Cavanagh & Moberg, 1999; Goud, 2005; Harris, 2001; Shelp, 1984; Walton, 1986). The act may be intended to achieve an ethical goal (e.g., combating an illegal policy), abide by a principle or ideal (e.g., speaking out against an injustice), or benefit another person or group (e.g., engaging in organizational citizenship). Behavior intended only to further an individual's self-interest or achieve an unimportant goal is not considered courageous, even if the behavior involves considerable risk.

Intentional action. A courageous act is deliberately chosen, and effort is expended to ensure the act is carried out (Cavanagh & Moberg, 1999; Goud, 2005; Harris, 2001; Walton, 1986). Because free choice and action both are necessary, risky acts that result from coercion or chance are not courageous, nor are bold decisions and plans that are not executed. Of course, courage may at times require that a deliberate choice be made to *not act* (e.g., when an individual resists pressure to engage in an unethical activity). Endurance and perseverance are often needed to ensure the goal is achieved; these two themes are particularly prominent in discussions of courage in the field of health care (Finfgeld, 1999; Shelp, 1984).

Perceived risks, threats, or obstacles. An act is only considered courageous if it involves known personal risks, threats, and obstacles (Cavanagh & Moberg, 1999; Harris, 2001). The risks must be significant, although they need not be life-threatening. In a work setting, risks can be physical (e.g., bodily injury), social (e.g., loss of friends), psychological (e.g., anxiety), or economic (e.g., career derailment). Psychologist Rollo May proposes a proactive form of courage, which he defines as "discovering new forms, new symbols, and new patterns" (May, 1975: 21). Thus, courage may be required to respond to threats and also to pursue risky or challenging opportunities.

The perceived risks, threats, and obstacles may or may not lead to feelings of fear. Most courage scholars acknowledge that fear and courage are closely linked (Kilmann et al., 2010; Rachman, 2004; Shelp, 1984; Woodard, 2004; Woodard & Pury, 2007). Nevertheless, Rachman's (2004) research in the military has shown that some individuals are predisposed *not* to experience fear, even in extremely threatening situations, and that for many individuals, repeated acts of courage result in a lower level of fear. Furthermore, considerable variation exists in the level of fear people experience when confronting an identical situation. For these reasons, scholarly definitions of courage commonly include fear as a typical but not essential component of courage.

Empirical studies supporting the three components of courage. Research specifically examining the components of courage is limited, but two studies support the three elements discussed above. First, in a carefully designed series of studies intended to investigate college students' implicit theories of courage, Rate and his colleagues (2007) found that four dimensions of courage emerged in the qualitative phase of their research: (1) intentionality of action, (2) presence of personal fear, (3) nobility of purpose, and (4) known substantial personal risk. The regression model for the final study indicated that all of the dimensions except *presence of personal fear* predicted ratings of courage. These findings are important because they substantiate the three components of courage previously discussed. They also show the tenuous nature of fear in implicit theories of courage.

Second, Woodard (2004) created a courage scale based on the three components discussed previously. In his quantitative analysis, four factors emerged. The first factor was consistent with the three components mentioned above and included fear; the factor was defined as enduring danger and acting for a meaningful cause despite fear. The remaining three factors focused on the context in which the courageous acts occurred (e.g., "dealings with groups" and "breaking social norms"). Taken together, these two studies offer support for the three components of courage: morally worthy goal, intentional action, and perceived risk, threats, and obstacles. The Woodard study also highlights the important role of context in the study of courage.

The process of a courageous act. Two theoretical models outline a process depicting the experience of a courageous act from an individual's perspective, and both models include individual and social factors likely to affect courageous experiences. First, in a model illustrating the subjective experience of courage, Hannah proposes that courage is influenced by an individual's personal values, beliefs, individual traits, and positive states, as well as social forces such as interdependence, social identity, cohesion, and informational influence (Hannah et al., 2007). Second, in their model of courageous moral decision making, Sekerka and Bagozzi (2007) posit that individual factors such as

self-efficacy and self-regulation influence the desire and decision to act morally and that social forces such as perceptions of group norms and social identity are also important. These two models have laid some useful groundwork for the individual and social factors that may influence the way individuals experience courage. Notably, identity dynamics are reflected in both models, even though they play a relatively minor role.

Identity processes were not a focus for this study originally. However, as the analysis progressed, identity-related themes emerged repeatedly, and ultimately identity work became a central theme in the study. Next, I briefly review the literature on identity work.

Identity Work

The *identity* construct focuses on how individuals define themselves. *Personal identity* refers to a person's distinctive characteristics and self-definitions, whereas *social identity* refers to who a person is in relation to a social entity (Pratt, 1998). In the workplace, individuals have multiple social identities, and because identities are always in flux, it is a constant struggle to shape and maintain a coherent self-identity (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2009). For this reason, the processes of identity construction and revision have become an active area of investigation for organizational studies scholars.

Identity work refers to the activities individuals engage in actively and continuously as they create, preserve, repair, revise, and strengthen their identities in social contexts (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Pratt et al., 2006; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). The goals of identity work are to create a coherent, authentic, and unique identity (Watson, 2008) and to manage the boundaries between personal and social identities (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006). In the workplace, transitions, unexpected events, contradictions, and tensions tend to elicit identity work because these situations increase emotional arousal, self-doubt, and openness to new possibilities (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). For example, identity work has been shown to be instrumental in creating a professional identity (Pratt et al., 2006), experimenting with a new identity (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010), transitioning to a new role (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010), and recovering from a workplace trauma, such as bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). Additionally, it's been found that individuals who perceive that they are over- or underidentified with a social identity engage in identity work to find an optimal balance (Kreiner et al., 2006) and that individuals who experience incongruities between their self- and organizational identities use identity work to resolve the inconsistencies (Creed, DeJordy, & Lok, 2010). Narratives are a particularly important source of information about work identities, and narratives themselves are a form of identity work in organizations (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). People use narratives to construct professional identities (Pratt et al., 2006), manage personal and organizational identities (Creed et al., 2010), and combat identity threats (Gendron & Spira, 2010; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). Indeed, "stories are media through which identities are negotiated" (Ewick & Silbey, 2003: 1341).

Identity theorists Burke and Stets (2009) offer a useful framework for distinguishing among levels of individual and collective identity. They propose that person identities (or self-identities) are tied to an individual and tend to be consistent across roles and situations, role identities are tied to a person's position (e.g., employee or engineer), and social identities are based on a person's membership in a salient group (e.g., a particular work team or organization). Sluss and Ashforth (2007) further argue that relational identities—identities tied to role-based interpersonal relationships such as supervisor-subordinate—are important. In this study, I label the levels of identity as "self," "position/role," "relational," "group," and "organizational."

To summarize, I seek to extend the identity and workplace courage literatures by exploring the identity dynamics that underlie acts of courage. The identity literature suggests that individuals have multiple social identities, some of which may be incongruous, and that individuals generally strive for coherence and balance among their identities. I therefore examine the role of courage as a form of identity work that enables individuals to reconcile their various identities at work.

METHODS

Sample and Data Collection

In this study, my goal was to closely examine narratives about courageous acts performed or observed by individuals holding a variety of jobs, trained in a variety of occupations, and working in a variety of business settings. Business professionals enrolled in an evening MBA program in a western US liberal arts college were a suitable popula-

tion, given that students in the program are all employed in a wide range of jobs, occupations, and industries and are accustomed to analyzing and writing about personal experiences.

My sample was purposive in that I sought respondents who had personally experienced or observed an act of workplace courage; individuals who had not had a meaningful experience with courage at work were not encouraged to participate. To explore the degree of courage perceived to exist in the narratives, I invited respondents to submit accounts about experiences involving a small amount to an extreme amount of courage, or experiences in which courage could have been demonstrated, but was not.

A limitation of the sample is that the participants all had college degrees, so low-skilled and uneducated workers are not represented. Additionally, participants' ages ranged from 21 to 53, but the average age was 30, and only a few respondents were near the end of their careers. Finally, participants' ethnicity mirrored the predominately Caucasian community in which the college is located, and the gender mix reflects that of most MBA programs: males are overrepresented in the sample. Despite these limitations, 89 respondents contributed accounts of courageous acts they performed or observed (each participant contributed one story about a courageous act), and many different types of jobs, occupations, and industries are included in the data. Some of the acts involve unskilled or uneducated workers; some acts involve mid- and late-career employees, and acts involving both genders and a range of ethnicities are included in the descriptions. Overall, the accounts represent a range of perspectives—although the sample does have limitations.

I chose to focus on respondents' accounts of courageous acts because narratives are particularly well suited for understanding social relationships (McGregor & Holmes, 1999) and for studying processes, sequences of events, and contextual cues (Pentland, 1999). Narratives aid comprehension of culture and values (Wilkins, 1984), and stories are a vital tool used by people to make sense of events (Weick, 1995). Despite the fact that some events in the narratives are likely to have been embellished (Schank & Abelson, 1995), my objective was to understand the meaning respondents ascribed to the acts—not to study courageous acts objectively.

I used written accounts of courageous acts for several reasons. First, the study required respondents to recall the events surrounding courageous acts, consider them thoughtfully and deliberately, and draw meaningful conclusions about them. The introspective nature of writing makes it conducive to this task. Second, although it is clear that researchers influence their respondents' narratives whether they are written or spoken (Riessman, 2008), a written account may be less subject to the researcher's interpersonal influences (e.g., the tone of questions asked or nonverbal reactions to respondents' answers). Finally, written accounts require respondents to choose from among many facts and events when deciding what to include in a story. The resulting skeleton of the story represents respondents' perceptions of an incident's most significant events and the meaningful links among them (Schank & Abelson, 1995). Of course, the limitations of written accounts are that they may lack the depth of a lengthy interview and that they preclude the possibility of follow-up questions from a researcher. Additionally, respondents wrote their accounts with the understanding that I (and others who might read my findings) would be the audience, so it's possible that when writing their accounts, they emphasized what they believed I or other readers wanted to hear. Nevertheless, for the reasons outlined above, written accounts were a suitable choice, given the purpose of the study.

To recruit participants for the study, I visited eight MBA classes during April and June 2009 and explained that I was conducting research to better understand the nature of courage at work. I said I was interested in accounts from individuals who personally observed or experienced courageous acts at work and noted that I was not concerned about when the acts occurred. I did, however, encourage respondents to think carefully about the courageous acts before participating in the study; my goal in doing this was to enhance the thoughtfulness of respondents' contributions. I indicated that the degree of courage shown could range from small to extreme and that accounts about incidents in which courage could have been shown, but was not, could also be included. Volunteers completed a consent form, after which I sent them a link to an online data collection tool.

On the data collection tool, I first asked respondents to describe in detail an incident they personally experienced or observed that involved workplace courage. Participants were encouraged to discuss the events that led up to the incident, the incident itself and how they felt about it, and its consequences. I then asked participants to indicate

the degree of courage that was demonstrated, explain why they considered the incident to be an example of courage (or a lack of courage), and describe how they were defining the word "courage" as they thought about and wrote about the experience. The questions included on the data collection tool can be found in Appendix A. Although the tool contains four questions, for the purpose of the analysis, I considered the answers to all four questions as one narrative. Participant responses were anonymous.

Most of the narratives are quite detailed; they range from 92 words to 2,672 words, with a mean of 470 words. In 56 percent of the accounts in this study, the courageous actor was the respondent; in 38 percent of the accounts, the courageous actor was a person other than the respondent, and in 6 percent of the accounts, the respondent and others were courageous actors. Appendix B summarizes the characteristics of the study respondents and the narratives.

Analytical Procedures

I analyzed the data using narrative analytic techniques (Riessman, 2008) supplemented by grounded theory coding methods and constant comparison (Corbin & Strauss, 2007). Although grounded theory and narrative analysis often serve different purposes (Webb & Mallon, 2007), using both methods in this study allowed me to retain the depth and richness of the narratives, while also identifying concepts that could be generalized across accounts—an approach that Riessman (2008) acknowledges can be effective. Researchers using narrative analysis typically analyze each account as a whole, closely examining the situational, social, and cultural context (Lawler, 2002)—but this approach can make it challenging to generalize across narratives. On the other hand, researchers using grounded theory and the constant comparison method typically fragment narratives into categories and concepts and then analyze them apart from their context, which allows them to generalize across respondents (Riessman, 2008)—but in the process may sacrifice contextual richness. Below I explain how I implemented both methods when analyzing the data.

In this study, a *narrative* is the unit of analysis. I define a narrative as an account that "contains transformation (change over time), some kind of action, and characters, all of which are brought together within an overall plot" (Lawler, 2002: 242). I use the terms "narrative" and "account" interchangeably in the analysis.

Phase I. I began by carefully reading the first 25 accounts in an effort to understand each narrative as a whole. Concurrently, I used microanalysis and open coding to identify initial concepts and categories in each story. The concepts that emerged in this phase of the analysis related to the content (*storyline*) and process (*event sequence*) of a story. I also noted that the three components of courage—*worthy goal; risk, threat, or obstacle*; and *intentional action*—were ubiquitous in the accounts, and I began to code the presence or absence of these components. Other concepts that stood out during this phase included a variety of issues related to the courageous actors and their relationships with others in the accounts and to organizational context. I prepared many memos, charts, and diagrams and referred back to earlier data as the coding progressed. I returned to the literature many times during this phase. For example, the themes of power, status, and identification appeared frequently early in the analysis, so I spent considerable time reviewing these literatures.

Phase II. After using microanalysis for the first 25 accounts, I developed a preliminary set of categories and concepts. The categories were *storylines, identity tensions, characters* (which included characteristics of protagonists and their relationships with others), and *organizational context*. Each category contained one or more properties and several dimensions. I coded the remaining accounts using these codes and continued to refine the categories and concepts. The categories were further refined during this process.

Phase III. After coding all 89 narratives, I reviewed my charts and memos and created operational definitions of the codes. I then returned to the beginning to recode all 89 accounts using the final categories and concepts. I also refined the definitions of the five storyline types, which included courageous actors who (1) *endured* difficult circumstances to achieve an important goal, (2) *reacted* to a threatening or risky situation presented to them, (3) *opposed* powerful individuals in their organization, and (4) pursued challenging but risky opportunities to *create* something. A fifth storyline featured individuals who could have behaved courageously but did not.

Phase III also included a reliability check; I asked a colleague with a Ph.D. in business administration and extensive experience in academic and business

settings to independently read and code the narratives, using the operational definitions I created for each category and concept. After completing the interpretation and coding for all 89 accounts, we discussed our perspectives on each narrative, reviewed differences in coding, and resolved differences through discussion. This process was extremely useful in interpreting the meaning of each narrative, clarifying the central themes in the five storylines, and gaining insights into the descriptions of protagonists, their relationships, and the context. It also helped to resolve ambiguities in the coding definitions.

Phase IV. During this phase, I separated the narratives into the five categories of storylines in an effort to examine how the concepts played out within each storyline type. My primary interest was in understanding the unique dynamics of the five categories of narratives, although I did identify two concepts (identity tensions and courageous actor characteristics) that did not differ across storyline type. As I reviewed the accounts a final time, I followed the general guidelines for narrative analysis suggested by Mishler (1986), Ricoeur (1991), and Riessman (2008). First, I grouped the narratives by storyline and created "story skeletons" (skeletal summaries) for each group. Next, I reread each narrative, comparing the story with the plotline's story skeleton (Schank & Abelson, 1977) and examining each story's identity tensions, characters (protagonist and relationships with supporting characters), and organizational context. Finally, I examined aggregate data for each of the five categories of storylines by reviewing the frequencies of codes identified earlier in the research. Tables 1–3 show the final coding categories and definitions for the storylines, identity tensions, and identity work reflected in each storyline.

Below I present and analyze my results. Although in my discussion I am careful to avoid regarding the narratives as facts, I also try to avoid the opposite problem—assuming that the accounts do not reflect reality at all. My analysis is therefore consistent with Yiannis Gabriel's observation that "organizational stories [are] poetic elaborations on actual events, wish-ful-filling fantasies built on everyday experience, and expressions of deeper organizational and personal realities" (Gabriel, 2000: 152).

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

In this section, I first present the results of the plot analysis. I summarize story skeletons for each storyline, and then elaborate on them by describing the narratives in relation to the three components of courage—the protagonist's morally worthy goals, risks, threats or obstacles, and

TABLE 1
Storylines in Courage Accounts

Storyline and Frequency	Story Skeleton	Content of Accounts: Examples from Narratives			
		Morally Worthy Goal	Risk, Threat, or Obstacle	Intentional Action	Moral of Story
Endurance 4%	Courageous actor endures significant hardship and perseveres in order to reach an important goal.	To accomplish important outcome. To retain valued job. To provide income for family.	Unreasonable workload Distasteful tasks Fatigue	Sacrifice Perseverance Fortitude	*It is honorable to withstand adversity to achieve an important goal; suffer with dignity.*
Reaction 19%	Courageous actor is faced with a threatening or risky situation caused by an error, problem, or crisis and chooses to address the problem.	To be honest. To be altruistic. To be fair. To prevent harm to others.	Guilt Embarrassment Physical harm Job loss	Responding decisively Admitting fault Correcting problem	*Respond decisively to problems or crises that your expertise can address, even at the risk of personal harm.*
Opposition 56%	Courageous actor takes initiative to confront powerful individuals in his/her organization in order to remedy a problematic situation.	To maintain integrity. To be fair. To show respect. To prevent harm to self, others, or organization.	Job loss Career derailment Social isolation Retaliation	Voicing opinion Reporting misconduct Disobedience Circumvention	*Where important principles are concerned, stand up constructively to those in power, even if the personal impact is likely to be negative.*
Creation 5%	Courageous actor seizes challenging, risky opportunities in order to innovate, grow, and improve.	To achieve meaningful goal. To grow and improve. To create new enterprise.	Financial loss Damage to reputation Failure to reach goals	Enthusiasm Concerted effort Determination Creative thinking Optimism	*Pursue opportunities for growth, innovation, and improvement, even if they are risky.*
No courage 17%	Actor has an opportunity to behave courageously and chooses not to.	All of the above.	All of the above	All of the above	*Don't be a coward.*

TABLE 2
Identity Tensions in Courage Accounts

Tensions	Definition	Examples from Accounts
Self-identity vs. position/role identity	Expectations or demands associated with a position identity (e.g., a job) threaten values associated with individual's self-identity.	In an effort to retain talent, managers who worked for a company that had been purchased by a competitor were expected to "paint a rosy picture" and assure employees that their positions were secure—all while the company executed a series of reductions in force. In response, one manager decided to "communicate honestly about the vulnerability of [employees'] positions." Executives viewed his honesty as disloyalty to the new company. (r24, m, 29)
Self-identity vs. relational identity	Expectations or demands associated with a relational identity (e.g., a subordinate of a boss) threaten values associated with individual's self-identity.	A project manager was asked by his supervisor to change the results of a status report that indicated his project was headed toward a cost overrun. The project manager said, "Was this a moment in time, ethically speaking, where I was being asked to break a small rule that would . . . make it easier to break bigger and bigger rules over time? . . . I was not about to become a fraud." (r4, m, 33)
Self-identity vs. group/organizational identity	Expectations or demands associated with a work group identity (e.g., team member) threaten values associated with individual's self-identity.	An employee of a design firm was in a team meeting when one member made a derogatory comment about homosexuals. He said, "Some people laughed at the comment, but I thought it was extremely inappopriate. No one said anything about the comment (including myself, unfortunately)." (r31, m, 28)
One social identity vs. a different social identity	Expectations or demands associated with one social identity (e.g., a friend) threaten values associated with a different social identity (e.g., individual's position as a manager).	A restaurant manager found that a server, who was also her friend, had been voiding tickets that customers paid in cash, and keeping the cash for himself. She said, "I couldn't believe that my friend had put me in that position. Being middle management means that you are the 'go-to' guy. . . . I didn't know what to do. But I went home that night and realized that regardless of my relationship with my friend, I couldn't let this happen." (r9, f, 28)
Opposing values within individual's self-identity	Two or more values associated with individual's self-identity are in conflict (e.g., being an ethical person vs. a fierce competitor).	A sales professional observed that a colleague was not following the "engagement rules" of the sales organization. The respondent said, "It personally caused turmoil internally and externally. The chasm between the cheater and the rest of us was palpable and my own integrity was challenged because I saw his success and many times had to fight the urge to act as he did. (This is hard when you are a competitive person in sales.)" The respondent resisted the urge to behave unethically, and ultimately reported the cheater to the manager. (r57, m, 26)

intentional actions—because these components were central to each story's plot. For each storyline, I propose a main message or moral, and then summarize the identity work represented in the narratives. I conclude the discussion of each storyline with a review of the relational and organizational themes that emerged.

Plot Analysis

A plot is a central feature of a narrative because it synthesizes disparate events into a unified story (Ricoeur, 1991). A story's plot can be summarized using a story skeleton, defined as a "cluster of motivated events and states, sequential in time"

TABLE 3
Identity Work in Courage Accounts

Storyline	Type of Identity Work	Identity Work Tactics from Accounts
Endurance	Preserving an identity by withstanding situations that can't be changed or controlled.	Endure challenging circumstances if they can't be changed Persevere, as requested, until a solution can be found
Reaction	Repairing an identity following an error by admitting fault and accepting responsibility, or strengthening an identity by responding to a difficult challenge or crisis.	Admit fault or accept responsibility in response to a problem Accept difficult challenge at the request of others Agree to perform dangerous/risky/challenging task
Opposition	Strengthening, revising, asserting, or reaffirming an identity by opposing more powerful individuals or organizational forces.	Share concerns, provide data, voice opinion Dissent (disagree/oppose/challenge) Report problem to manager or staff group Circumvent (go around manager) Disobey (defy rules or policy) Resign in protest
Creation	Creating a new identity or strengthening an identity by seizing risky opportunities and overcoming serious challenges.	Proactively recommend change or improvement Pursue new business opportunity
No courage	No identity work performed.	

(Schank & Abelson, 1995: 51). Individuals remember story skeletons, not complete stories, and people are particularly inclined to pay attention to and remember story skeletons they've heard before (Schank & Abelson, 1995). Finally, stories have a frame of reference or *moral* that implies what is right or wrong, and this message is conveyed explicitly or implicitly (Pentland, 1999).

I identified five storylines in the 89 courageous acts described in this study. All of the narratives fit into one of the five categories of storylines, although several narratives had secondary storylines. With two exceptions, both coders independently assigned the narratives to the same category. The five storylines centered on the themes of *endurance, reaction, opposition, creation*, and *no courage*. The five storylines, examples of their courage components taken from the narratives, and proposed moral of the accounts are summarized in Table 1. Examples of each storyline are provided in Appendix C. Each storyline is discussed in more detail below. Three topics emerged throughout all of the storylines: the three components of courage, identity tensions, and identity work. I discuss these topics separately, before presenting the storyline results.

Three components of courage. The three components of courage represent the content of the courageous acts, and all three components were present in varying degrees in all but two narratives in the study. One was missing a clear description of risks, threats, or obstacles, and another did not have a clear goal. This finding indicates that respondents' implicit theories of the elements of courage correspond to the prevailing view among scholars that all three components are present in courageous acts. The morally worthy goal component was particularly prominent in the narratives. Phrases such as "do the right thing," "stand up for what's right" and "make the right decision" appeared 85 times in the 89 narratives. Other phrases with strongly moral or ethical connotations appeared an additional 76 times, including "choose the ethical path," "maintain my integrity," "be honest," and "tell the truth." In total, 76 percent of all narratives included explicitly moral phrases or references.

Identity tension. Identity tension appeared throughout the narratives, and I did not detect systematic differences in the types of tensions by storyline type. Identity tension occurred when expectations or demands associated with one salient self- or social identity threatened the expectations or demands of another. The tensions were described as producing uncertainty, confusion, and often, a great deal of stress for the courageous actor in a narrative. On occasion, the tension produced excitement. Identity tension usually represented the "plot thickening" aspect of a story, in which the protagonist finds himself or herself in a predicament.

Table 2 summarizes five different types of identity tensions observed in the courage narratives and provides examples of each type. The types of tensions include self-identity versus position/role identity, self-identity versus relational identity, self-identity versus group/organizational identity,

one social identity versus a different social identity, and opposing values that are both a part of one person's self-identity. The accounts often included tensions among multiple identities at several various levels (individual, relational, group, and organizational).

A common identity tension occurred when a strong personal belief conflicted with a position-related demand. For example, in one account a small company hired a controller with the expectation that he would audit the company's financial records and allow the firm to qualify for a badly needed loan. During the audit, the controller discovered that the company had been significantly overstating its revenues and assets. When he explained to the CEO that the books would need to be corrected, he was instructed to make any adjustments that were needed to allow the company to qualify for the loan. Ultimately, the controller was faced with the choice of violating his personal code of integrity or giving up an important position that he enjoyed.

Another type of identity tension occurred when expectations or demands from two different social identities became incompatible (e.g., friend vs. boss or engineer vs. subordinate). To illustrate, in one narrative a human resources official received a report that his direct boss, the company president, had been accused of making inappropriate advances toward a female employee. The respondent's position as the top human resources officer obligated him to investigate the incident, but he was concerned that his relationship with his boss—a significant relational identity—would be irreparably damaged if he proceeded with the investigation. Identity tensions such as these were prevalent throughout the narratives and accounted for much of the drama that took place.

In an early phase of this study's analysis, the *attributes of courageous actors* were identified and coded. Three characteristics of courageous actors emerged repeatedly, and they may explain why identity tensions were so pronounced in these accounts. First, in 93 percent of the accounts in which courage was demonstrated, the protagonist was described as having strong, salient personal values. Second, in 85 percent of the courage accounts, the protagonist was perceived as identifying strongly with his or her occupation, work group, or company. Third, in 96 percent of the courage accounts, courageous actors were described as high in self-efficacy. These three attributes suggest that study respondents perceived courageous actors to be guided by (1) strong internal values that persisted across social situations, (2) high concern for the social and organizational entities they belonged to, and (3) the personal confidence and ability to tackle challenging situations—seemingly, a three-way recipe for identity tension.

The identity tension reflected in the accounts of this study seemed to represent the protagonists' central dilemma: In the context of all of the self- and social identities that are important to me, who am I?

Identity work. In this study, I conceptualized identity work as the choices made and actions taken by courageous actors as they tried to reconcile the identity tension described in the accounts of courage. Distinctive forms of identity work appeared in accounts with different storylines and they are described by storyline below. Table 3 presents a summary of the types of identity work observed.

Respondents described courageous acts as defining moments that signaled and shaped the identity of the courageous actors. Acts of courage therefore can be viewed as a form of identity work, as illustrated by quotes such as these, which appeared throughout the accounts: "This incident makes [the courageous actor] somebody who can be trusted to make the right choices" and "It was ultimately a test of my integrity and has helped to strengthen my character." Although respondents were often described as nervous or fearful prior to engaging in the courageous identity work, conviction, calmness and resolve were often present during and after the act, as evidenced by the frequent use of terms such as "I decided," "I realized," and "I knew" when referring to the act of courage. Emotions such as relief, pride and joy followed the act in accounts in which courage was demonstrated—suggesting that identity tensions had been resolved. Emotions such as shame, regret, and frustration followed the acts in which courage was not demonstrated—suggesting that identity tensions were not reconciled. I discuss the specifics of each storyline next.

Endurance Storyline

Narratives reflecting this type of identity work feature a courageous actor who perseveres in a situation that can't be changed in order to achieve an important goal. In these accounts, the morally worthy goals include accomplishing important work for an organization, retaining a valued job, or providing an income for one's family. Risks, threats, or

obstacles take the form of distasteful, difficult tasks and unreasonably high workloads. The salient aspects of the intentional action are sacrifice and perseverance; actors display fortitude, sometimes for an extended period, rather than giving up. Endurance storylines were the least common and appeared in just 4 percent of the narratives.

An example of a storyline centered on endurance featured a man who was promoted from controller to CFO, but due to a weak labor market, his employer was unable to find a qualified controller to replace him for over a year. Despite long hours and considerable stress, the individual continued to do both jobs without complaint. When explaining why the act was courageous, the respondent said:

> I don't think there are many others that would be able to perform as well as [the CFO] in these circumstances. . . . Others might complain or refuse to do the job of two individuals, but [the CFO] has chosen to push through with his head held high. [He was courageous because he was] working against extreme odds, and not yielding to the great burden placed upon him. (r2, m, 28)

In another endurance narrative, a respondent explained that the suggestions he made to improve his company were repeatedly "shot down." After determining that further attempts to change the organization would not be productive, he decided that the courageous thing to do would be to remain silent and just do his job as well as he could.

> I think it's courageous to work for a company that has great products where I can overlook the problems management has in implementing its directive. I have a family to provide for, [which] is my main motive, as well as the customers that I serve. [Courage is] standing up for what is most important in my life: My family, my God, and my customers (which happen to be sick patients). (r87, m, 42)

Explicit references to moral principles or ideals were particularly pronounced in the endurance narratives. Indeed, sacrificing one's own needs to help others was a dominant theme. The motivating force behind endurance courageous acts often was the protagonist's (the actor's) relationships with others. The coding process indicated that none of the accounts with this storyline were intended to benefit only the courageous actor. The target of the protagonist in these accounts was an obstacle, not a person. The defining feature of the narrative is an individual with limited options who makes a choice to endure hardship bravely. The moral seemed to be that it is honorable to endure difficult circumstances in order to accomplish an important goal.

Relational and organizational themes. The most common relational theme in endurance narratives was strong concern for a salient relational identity. The accounts suggested that courageous actors were motivated by loyalty to engage in self-sacrifice, because their bosses or coworkers were counting on them. In one account, a courageous actor volunteered to take a leave of absence, despite a poor economy and an uncertain job outlook, because she believed it would prevent her employer from laying off one of her coworkers. In another narrative, an employee worked long hours for an extended time to fulfill his obligation to his employer. In these instances, the narratives suggested that the courageous act served to preserve a relational or group identity and assist others.

Identity work tactics in endurance accounts. The identity work reflected in the narratives with endurance storylines did not involve changing others or changing a situation. Instead, courageous actors made a decision to withstand adversity. Two common endurance identity work tactics were *enduring circumstances that can't be changed* and *persevering, as requested, until a solution can be found*. An example is seen in the account above regarding the employee who decided to stop trying to change his company and instead perform his job as well as he could. The account suggested that he was highly motivated to preserve his identities as a health care provider, friend, and provider for his family, and less motivated to assert his identity as a change agent in his company. His decision to persevere in a dysfunctional culture rather than continue to try to change it helped him regain a coherent self-identity.

Reaction Storyline

Narratives with reaction-oriented identity work feature a protagonist who is presented with a threatening or risky situation caused by an error, problem, or crisis, and the courageous actor uses his or her knowledge or expertise to respond to the situation. In accounts with reaction storylines, the morally worthy goals include upholding principles such as honesty, altruism, or fairness, and achieving tangible outcomes such as preventing harm to others. Threats, risks, or obstacles take the form of guilt, embarrassment, or physical harm. The salient aspects of the intentional action are decisive, morally correct responses that address the problem at

hand, such as admitting fault or responding helpfully to a crisis. Reaction narratives were the second most common storylines in the study; 19 percent of the accounts were classified as reaction-oriented accounts.

Several of the accounts in this category involved employees who addressed problems that they themselves had caused. In these narratives, the courageous actors made mistakes, admitted their errors, and corrected the problems. In one such account, a financial services representative moved an incorrect sum of money from a client's account. The respondent explained:

> The courageous act was instantly telling my managers what had happened without holding anything back. I admitted my mistake and was given the chance to correct it. . . . I was nervous about doing [this], mainly because I knew I had made a mistake. It takes courage to be honest sometimes. [Courage is] the act of defining yourself in all situations. (r46, m, 23)

Another narrative featuring a self-caused problem involved an employee in a metal shop who forgot to remove a cover from a heater after turning it on, causing the heater to burn itself out. Initially he denied knowing how the problem occurred, but he later confessed, explaining that as a convicted felon on parole, he had been afraid of losing his job. He said he felt that he needed to be truthful in order to "change his life and his ways." Reaction narratives of this type focused heavily on accepting full responsibility for problems and then making things right again, even when embarrassment or reprimands were likely.

A second type of reaction narrative involved responding to problems or crises that were caused by others or by external factors. A dramatic example involved a squad boss whose crew of fire fighters was battling a fire on a mountain. When the fire changed direction and began to move toward his crew, he decided to take them back down to safety. As the crew was heading down the mountain, they encountered another crew whose boss was still up on the mountain, out of radio contact, and unaware that the fire was moving toward him. The squad boss explained that against his better judgment, he decided to head back up the mountain.

> I raced back up to the area where we were. The fire had picked up . . . and was racing down the mountain. . . . I decided that I should turn back. Right before I [did] I noticed a flash of yellow nomex shirt in the smoke ahead. I was pretty sure it was the crew boss and I yelled and ran after him. . . . He said he was separated from his crew and did not know where they were. . . . I told him [where they were and that] we needed to go, quick, and we proceeded to run down to the safety zone. . . . We reached the bottom and everyone was accounted for. It was not more than five minutes later that the fire was all around us, but we were safe in a large open area. . . . My gut had told me not to go look for this crew boss because it put another life at risk [but] I was glad that I did find him. (r58, m, 32)

Although responding quickly in a fire crisis might be considered a normal job expectation for a fire fighter, the story implies that the squad boss could have, and perhaps should have, responded more cautiously. The point of the story seemed to be that the act was courageous because he did not follow a logical decision-making process, choosing instead to risk his personal safety to help a fellow fire fighter. In another narrative with a similar theme, a hotel valet intervened when a transient described as "incredibly high on drugs" began to assault an employee working at the hotel's front desk. The valet "dragged [the transient] outside and told him never to come back." This respondent never disclosed the incident to his supervisor; he was afraid he would be fired for intervening.

Most reaction narratives were less dramatic than the accounts above. One story featured a restaurant manager who realized that an unwarranted number of meals were being given away free to customers and decided to investigate, and another focused on a bank employee who had an opportunity to make "fast money" for the bank but advised the client in this case against making the purchase. The common predicament experienced by protagonists in the reaction accounts is that they were confronted with an important problem or crisis that they had unique knowledge about or expertise to address. They had to decide whether to accept responsibility for the problem and expose themselves to danger, ridicule, or other risks, or ignore the issue. In these narratives, the target is a problem or crisis, rather than an opponent. The moral of this type of workplace courage account seems to be that one should respond decisively to problems or crises in which one's expertise and assistance can address the problem at hand, even at the risk of personal harm.

Relational and organizational themes. Many of the reaction accounts (58%) featured power imbalances, and most also contained references to relationships (88%). As in the endurance accounts,

relationships in the reaction narratives were often a motivating force behind the courageous acts. A reaction account featuring a supervisor in a gypsum mill illustrates this point. The supervisor had been instructed to repair a fire box. He was told that, rather than wait for the box to cool down for the usual 24 hours, his team would need to make the repairs after just 12 hours, despite the safety risks involved. An observer of this act explained:

> Not wanting anyone in his team to be exposed to the possible danger of going into the box too early, [the supervisor] made the decision to go into the box himself. After just a short time in the fire box, cool air hit a pocket and exploded across the floor of the fire box. [The supervisor] received third-degree burns up one leg from the hot liquid. When I asked [him] why he was willing to do what he did, he gave answers like that was his job and "I was better dressed than the others so if something happened I knew I wouldn't get hurt as bad." (r27, m, 46)

Identity work tactics in reaction accounts. The identity work in reaction accounts was more proactive than in the endurance accounts. In one common form of reaction identity work, workers repaired their professional identities by admitting fault or accepting responsibility for a problem. Often, they themselves had caused the problems, and this form of identity work helped the courageous actors recover from their mistakes. A second form of reaction identity work occurred when a courageous actor accepted a challenge after being asked to do so by others, or agreed to perform a dangerous, risky, or challenging task. In this way protagonists were able to strengthen their self- or social identities or construct new ones—especially when the courageous behavior in a story was somewhat out of character for its courageous actor.

Opposition Storyline

Narratives in this category feature courageous actors who take the initiative to confront more powerful individuals in order to remedy problematic situations such as unfair requests or inappropriate behavior. In accounts with opposition themes, the morally worthy goals center on upholding moral principles (e.g., fairness, respect, integrity) or preventing harm to oneself, others, or one's organization. The harm can be social, psychological, or physical. The risks, threats, and obstacles in these narratives take the form of punishments that could be imposed by more powerful others, such as job loss, damage to one's career, and social isolation. The salient aspects of the intentional action include a full range of oppositional behaviors—voicing one's opinion, reporting misconduct, disobedience, circumvention, and resigning in protest. Narratives with opposition storylines were the most common in the study; 56 percent of the narratives were classified as oppositional.

Many accounts in this category featured an employee who opposed his or her supervisor. In one such narrative, a respondent who worked as a car salesman contradicted his boss after hearing him lie to a customer about the condition of a car:

> I knew that there were problems with the automobile being sold, and the manager claimed that there was not a single problem. He knew as well as I did that there was a problem. . . . I then went to the customer and told him the problem. I knew that I would never want that done to me as I'm sure the customer didn't want a problematic car. . . . I had to stand up to my manager. . . . I dang near lost my job. (r1, m, 24)

Although most narratives in this category involved a confrontation between a protagonist and a hierarchical superior, some involved a confrontation with coworkers, often perceived to be more powerful or of higher status. In one account, a receiving department employee refused to allow parts from an unapproved supplier pass through, despite complaints from several coworkers. In another narrative, an employee confronted an intimidating team member who was not doing his share of the work. In a few of the accounts, the protagonist opposed a group of powerful individuals, as illustrated by a narrative about a compliance officer who disagreed with the opinion of the company's executives and their "very capable New York attorneys" about advertising materials that were to be sent to the firm's clients:

> The day the advertising was to be sent to clients, [the compliance officer] reviewed the advertising material and became adamant that it could not be used because the material contained information not allowed under SEC regulations. The New York attorneys disagreed. . . . [The compliance officer] voiced her concerns directly to our mutual boss, the fund managers, the CEO, and the attorneys. . . . The firm decided (after very lengthy conversations) to side with [the compliance officer's recommendation] and withdrew the advertising piece. My colleagues and I so admired [the officer] for standing up for what she believed in, especially under these

> intense circumstances. I have no doubt the firm's executives held her in high esteem after that incident as well. (r77, f, 47)

As the examples above demonstrate, the predicament faced by the protagonist in opposition storylines was whether the principle or belief being pursued was important enough to incur the punishment that likely would be exacted from the protagonists' opponents. Ultimately in opposition narratives, the courageous actor targeted opponents, took risky actions, and lived with the consequences. In courage narratives with opposition storylines, the moral of the story seemed to be that where important principles and goals are concerned, individuals must stand up to those in power, even if the personal impact is likely to be negative and severe.

Relational and organizational themes. Power imbalances were pronounced in oppositional accounts, as shown by remarks such as "I knew full well what a powerful position this man held, so I opted to keep the situation to myself and not ruffle any feathers" and "I knew she had the power and influence to remove me from my position." Indeed, 97 percent of the opposition accounts featured power or status imbalances. Respondents perceived power imbalances to increase the degree of risk of a courageous act, as evidenced by the concerns they expressed about retaliation, career derailment, and making others angry.

References to how the acts of courage would impact protagonists' relationships appeared in 100 percent of the opposition accounts. Unlike the reaction accounts, in which relationships fostered courage, in opposition accounts, relationships often inhibited courage. Relationships were particularly problematic when the person being opposed was the courageous actor's boss. Anxiety over how an act could impact a relationship is illustrated by a story about a video arcade employee whose supervisor had promised him a raise just before the supervisor transferred to a new job. The employee went directly to the owner to secure his raise, bypassing the director of operations, who he believed would treat him unfairly.

> I got my raise eventually, but at the expense of my relationship with the director of operations . . . he felt I had overstepped my authority. I got a very stern warning to approach him with issues such as pay instead of going to the top. I never felt comfortable working with the director of operations after the experience. (r18, m, 26)

Finally, in the opposition accounts there were frequent references to organizational norms or standards. Respondents commented often on the risks of violating "common practices," failing to "go along with the current protocol," and "breaking the norms." The accounts suggest that respondents perceive violating organizational norms to be inherently risky.

Identity work tactics in opposition accounts. The identity work that occurred in accounts in this category featured the full range of oppositional behavior, including sharing concerns and voicing opinions, dissent, reporting problems, circumvention, disobedience, and resigning in protest. These behaviors often were viewed as causing courageous actors extreme distress; references to "sleepless nights" and concerns about "joining the ranks at the unemployment office" were common in these accounts as respondents described the risks of standing up, sometimes alone, to powerful individuals and groups. Because the identity work performed in the opposition accounts was more proactive rather than reactive, it seemed to serve mainly to strengthen or alter an identity.

Creation Storyline

Narratives with a creation storyline feature courageous actors who seize high-risk opportunities to improve their organizations, innovate, or pursue new business opportunities. The morally worthy goals are positive organizational growth, innovative new products, or new enterprises. Risks, threats, or obstacles take the form of financial loss, damage to reputation, or failure to reach goals. The salient features of the intentional action are concerted effort, determination, and unconventional thinking. Storylines centered on creation occurred in 5 percent of the accounts.

The narratives in this category conveyed a sense of adventure and confidence and were decidedly more upbeat than accounts with other storylines. One narrative with a creation storyline featured an architectural materials firm that pursued a business opportunity that involved a high degree of risk but the potential for considerable payoff.

> [My employer] recently pursued an opportunity with an end user that has the potential to bring in over $40M in revenue over the next four years and display our product in over 3,500 locations around the world. This is an opportunity unlike any opportunity we have ever been involved with before. This opportunity required that we come up with a cus-

> tom room dividing system utilizing our hardware and panel options. On only about 40 percent of the design, we used our standard design; the remaining 60 percent was custom and something we never sold or made before. We [had] a very short lead time and some huge expectations. (r47, m, 27)

Other creation accounts featured an administrative employee who took responsibility for planning a VIP event without having had prior accountability for such a large, critical assignment, and the owner of an innovative physical therapy practice who was invited to join a hospital system but was unwilling to do so unless he could continue using his unconventional, but successful, practices. The themes running through these accounts were challenge, growth, and improvement that affected individuals and organizations. The target was not a problem, but an opportunity. The defining feature of narratives with a creation storyline is a person or group that sees an opportunity to achieve something significant and meaningful and seizes the opportunity despite considerable risk. The moral of the story seemed to be that opportunities for growth, innovation, and improvement should be pursued, even if they are risky.

Relational and organizational themes. The tone of the relational and organization themes in the creation accounts was much more positive than in the other courage accounts. Respondents mentioned risks and obstacles, but they mainly focused on the exciting opportunities and challenges in store for the people associated with a new venture or initiative. In these accounts, relationships seemed to bolster, rather than inhibit, courageous behavior; respondents described their colleagues in admiring terms and were confident in their ability to be successful. Rather than violating organizational norms, respondents described workplace norms that favored hard work, growth, and trust. One creation account featured two owners of a successful company who made a large sum of money after selling the business they built and nurtured for 20 years. After the sale, they opted to create a new company rather than retire. The respondent observed that the owners "had so much trust and courage to be able to put millions of their own money into a new venture when they could have easily walked away and retired."

Identity work tactics in creation accounts. In the creation accounts, the identity work took the form of proactively recommending a change or improvement or pursuing a new business opportunity. Several creation accounts involved courageous actors who constructed a new identity (e.g., as an entrepreneur, by starting a new company, or as an innovator, by developing a ground-breaking product) or strengthened an identity by suggesting changes or improvements to a firm.

No Courage Storyline

Seventeen percent of the narratives featured individuals who were faced with situations in which courage could have been displayed but was not. Most of these accounts featured a person or group who encountered unacceptable behavior or unfair treatment or decisions but failed to act courageously to rectify the situation. The type of courage that could have been displayed mirrored situations similar to those in the other four courage storylines, but the dominant theme in these accounts was disappointment at the protagonists' lack of courage.

One account with a no courage storyline involved a group of employees who survived a large layoff, after which they were promised by management that there would be no further layoffs. However, in the months following the reduction in force, the company continued to terminate employees routinely for minor or nonlegitimate offenses. The respondent noted that "no one dares to show courage and challenge this problem because they are afraid of losing their jobs." In another no courage narrative, a company involved in a rebranding effort sent senior executives to a field office to discuss the new branding strategy. Executives and managers throughout the local office strongly disagreed with the new branding effort, but no one was willing to oppose the senior executives.

> Nobody said one word when asked for their opinion. I felt like a mute weakling, and I am usually very frank and objective with my position. But when I saw the body language of my superiors, I knew that it was pointless and potentially career damaging to question the branding effort. (r6, m, 41)

Most of the no courage narratives included reasons to explain why courage was not displayed, but I found none that condoned the noncourageous behavior. Indeed, these accounts were filled with references to resentment, frustration, and regret. Remorse was particularly pronounced in the narratives in which the respondent was the noncourageous actor—a surprising result, given that a self-serving bias would be expected in such instances (Weiner, 1986). A respondent who said she personally showed a lack of courage when she failed to

refuse to engage in a practice she felt was unethical commented this: "Even though it happened over six years ago, I still think about it. I will forever remember when I did not act according to my conscience." Similarly, noncourageous actors in the narratives were consistently described by observers in disparaging terms (e.g., "He showed that he was weak and willing to be pushed around," "He folded under the pressure," and "He did not stand up for what was in the best interest of the client and the bank"). The simple moral of these accounts seemed to be that cowardly behavior should be expressly avoided.

Relational and organizational themes. The relational and organizational themes in the no courage accounts mirrored the themes in the other accounts. The primary difference was that in the no courage accounts, the relationships and organizational norms were described as discouraging or preventing courageous behavior, rather than prompting others to act courageously. In other words, relationships and organizational norms served mainly as excuses for noncourageous behavior.

Identity work in no courage accounts. Identity work entails actions that help individuals construct or maintain a coherent, authentic identity. Courageous acts were not performed in the no courage accounts, and therefore no identity work occurred. It is noteworthy that the narratives with the other four storylines tended to lead to a resolution; for example, relationships were strengthened and identities were solidified. In the accounts with no courage storylines, no satisfactory resolution was evident, as evidenced by concluding statements such as "this whole problem has caused a huge problem with morale" and "the consequences of this behavior over time [will be] devastation to our leaders and the business . . . they will lead the sheep over the edge." In no courage narratives, the identity tensions that precipitated the situations described seemed to continue without being reconciled.

A MODEL OF COURAGE-BASED IDENTITY WORK

My analysis of the narratives in this study indicates that courage-based identity work helps people negotiate the boundaries of their most salient identities. I define *courage-based identity work* as a courageous act that creates, verifies, strengthens, or alters the multiple facets of an individual's identity. The theoretical model derived from my analysis is shown in Figure 1 and discussed below.

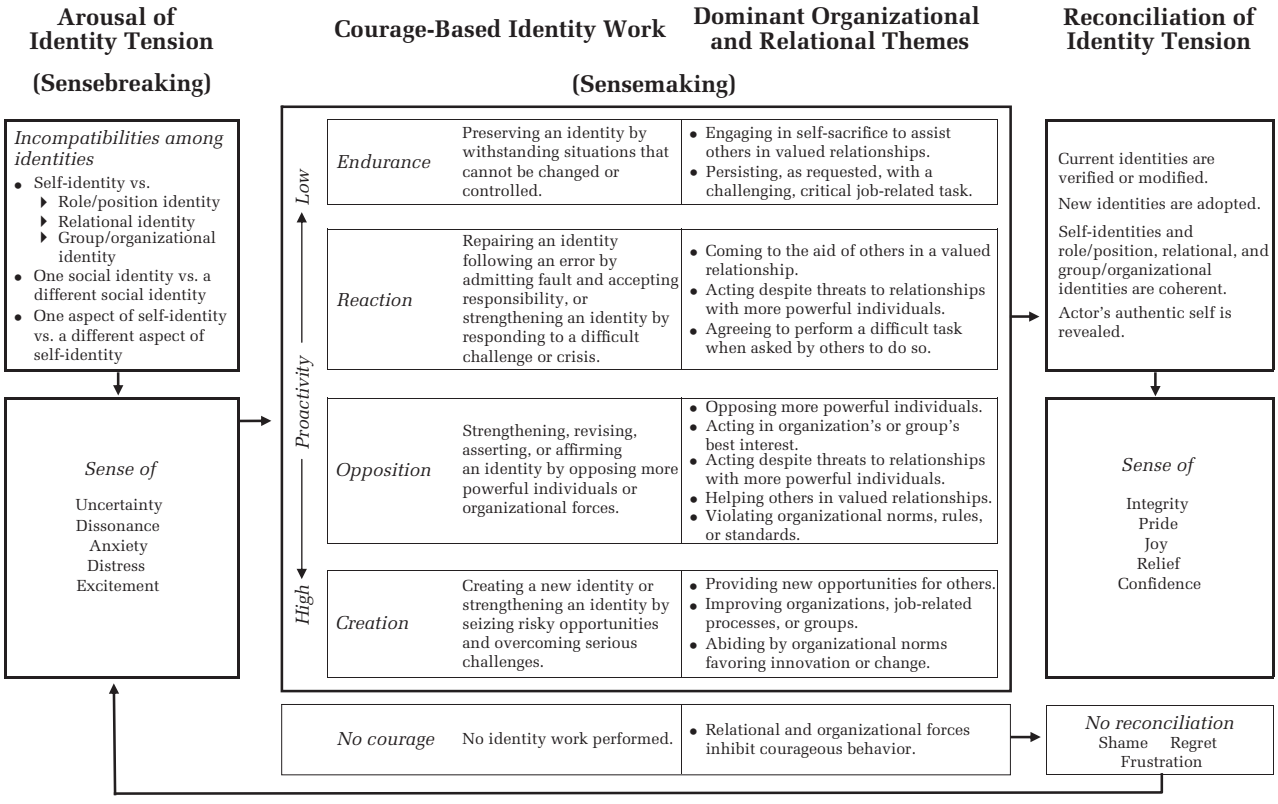
Theoretical Model

Overview. Acts of workplace courage can be viewed as "episodes of identification" (Ashforth et al., 2008: 341) that arise from tension caused by incongruities among an individual's self- and social identities. The tension produces uncertainty, dissonance, anxiety, distress, and in some cases, excitement. Individuals use identity work, in the form of a courageous act, to weigh contrasting alternatives, select the most salient identity, and reduce the tension. The study's narratives suggest that courageous acts reveal the aspects of a person's identity that are most central, thereby allowing the person to verify, adjust, or strengthen current identities; adopt new identities; and reveal his or her authentic self. This, in turn, leads to a sense of integrity, pride, joy, relief, and confidence. In contrast, acts of no courage lead to feelings of shame, regret, and frustration, do not decrease identity tension, do not involve identity work, and do not alleviate the distress associated with incompatible identities.

In the model, identity tension is a sensebreaking mechanism (Ashforth et al., 2008; Pratt, 2000) because it creates dissonance, accentuates incompatibilities among identities, and leads individuals to question the aspects of their identities that are most central. Courage-based identity work is a sensemaking mechanism (Weick, 1995) because individuals respond to the tension by enacting an identity narrative in the context of personal, social, and organizational circumstances. Sensemaking reduces identity incongruities. Courage-based identity work can therefore be viewed as a distillation process in which more salient identities are separated from those that are less salient, in the pursuit of a coherent identity. The theoretical model reflects the processes involved in a discrete courageous act as described in a narrative, but identity work is assumed to be an ongoing and dynamic process that occurs as an individual's personal and social identities change over time. Next, I discuss each element of the model.

Arousal of identity tension. In this study, identity tensions were evident in the quandaries courageous actors described as they weighed the importance of various identity demands. A narrative focusing on embezzlement clearly illustrates these tensions. (This narrative will serve as an exemplar

FIGURE 1
Identity Processes in Workplace Courage Narratives



throughout this section to illustrate each element of the model and the relationships among the elements.) The respondent had previous experience as an auditor but was employed as an administrative assistant while finishing his undergraduate degree. Out of curiosity, the respondent began to review the amount of money deposited by the company, and in the process, he noticed discrepancies in the amounts deposited each day when compared to prior years. The account captures the identity-related uncertainty and apprehension that preceded many courageous acts in the study:

> I know I should have mentioned [the discrepancies in daily deposits] to my boss, but I was afraid that he would not like me doing this. The cashier in question was with the company for three years, and was a person whom everybody in our small organization liked. Without any knowledge from my boss, I started digging a little bit deeper. . . . I continued with this "research" for almost one month, to find out that she was embezzling almost $1,000 a month for the last 14 months. I did not know what to do. I was afraid my boss would not like me doing this "behind his back," and to a person that was a well-liked employee. (r67, m, 39)

Throughout this account, the respondent refers to demands associated with several of his significant identities: (1) a responsible employee, obligated to act in the best interest of his employer, (2) a friend to the suspected embezzler, (3) a dutiful subordinate whose manager was unlikely to approve of his research, (4) an honest person, and (5) a provider for his family. Conflicts among identities were pervasive in this study, and they weighed heavily on courageous actors. Indeed, one respondent whose manager instructed him to include false information in a report observed that "this moment had the power of a thousand pounds of granite bearing down on carbon that would become either coal or diamonds."

Identity scholars contend that incompatibilities among identities are inevitable in the workplace, because most people take on multiple identities in their personal and work lives (Thoits, 2003). Identity control theory (Burke & Stets, 2009) and iden-

tity discrepancy theory (Marcussen, 2006; Marcussen & Large, 2003) hold that when discrepancies among an individual's identities occur, distress is likely, because people generally desire to behave in ways that are consistent with their salient identities (Stryker, 2004). My analysis suggests that this tension provides the fuel for courageous acts as individuals sort through their priorities and strive to decrease the tension. Of course, given the retrospective nature of the narratives used in my research, it is possible that some respondents fabricated identity tensions as a way to explain the reasons for courageous acts. However, the fact that this pattern appeared so consistently in the accounts suggests that at the very least, people who are trying to make sense of acts of courage consider identity-related conflicts to have played a key role.

Courage-based identity work. Prior research has shown that periods of disruption such as those caused by identity tensions are likely to give rise to identity work (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). In this study's narratives, the choices made by courageous actors served to reveal the most central aspects of a person's identity. Descriptions of protagonists whose actions "showed their true values and their true colors," who chose to "do something about what they believed in and felt passionately about," and who "knew what [they] had to do if [they] wanted to sleep at night" were prevalent in the narratives. Such comments suggest a close connection between courageous acts and identity. The embezzlement narrative introduced above illustrates how courage-based identity work helps to reduce identity tensions:

> After days of personal reasoning and some incentive from my wife, I decided to prepare a professionally written report and present it to my boss. It was really difficult to do this. I feared losing my job, having a negative reference on my resume, and personal retaliation from the cashier. (r67, m, 39)

The respondent's decision to present his findings to his manager in a formal report verified and strengthened his identities as a responsible employee and honest person. At the same time, he placed his identities as a dutiful subordinate and provider for his family at risk, and he sacrificed his identity as a friend to the embezzler entirely. The narrative shows that acts of courage can help individuals create a hierarchy of identities (Burke & Stets, 2009) that elucidate those that are most essential. This narrative also demonstrates that just as courage-based identity work can strengthen some identities, it can weaken or eliminate others.

The courage-based identity work reflected in the narratives consistently involved risk, intentional action, and worthy goals—the essential components of courage—but the identity work varied according to the level of proactivity demonstrated by the courageous actor in each narrative. In accounts at the low-proactivity end of the continuum (endurance), individuals responded courageously to situations that confronted them. In accounts at the high-proactivity end of the continuum (creation), individuals engaged in anticipatory behavior, demonstrated initiative, and created opportunities to behave courageously.

The endurance narratives featured the lowest level of proactivity. In these accounts, individuals withstood difficult or unpleasant situations they perceived as unchangeable and persevered until the situations were resolved. The reaction narratives involved a somewhat higher level of proactivity, as individuals agreed to perform risky tasks when asked or responded courageously to circumstances that they were faced with. The opposition narratives involved an even higher level of proactivity, in that individuals took initiative to address issues assertively and strategically. The creation narratives involved the highest level of proactivity, as individuals seized opportunities to improve or change organizations or create new organizations.

The fact that courage-based identity work varied according to a courageous actor's level of proactivity highlights the intentional action component of a courageous act. By definition, all courageous behavior is freely chosen, but some acts in this study involved more agency than others. At one end of the continuum, courageous actors choose to suffer with dignity, and at the other end, they take initiative to change, improve, or create something of value. Courageous acts involving lower levels of proactivity may be characterized by stronger situations (Mischel, 1968), in which the desirability of certain behaviors (such as courage) are relatively clear, whereas acts involving higher levels of proactivity are characterized by weaker situations, in which courageous actors have a wider range of desirable behaviors from which to choose.

Organizational and relational themes. In this study's narratives, organizational and relational themes served to both foster and inhibit courage-based identity work. This should not be surprising, given that identities are constructed and redefined through social interaction (Weick, 1995) and that

new identities usually require social validation (Ashforth et al., 2008). The most prominent themes were relationships, power imbalances, and organizational norms or standards.

References to *relationships* appeared in 93 percent of the narratives, and the relationships facilitated as well as hindered the courageous acts. In the embezzlement account, for example, the respondent was concerned that his boss wouldn't approve of his research, and he noted that the suspected embezzler was well liked in his organization. However, in this narrative the respondent also said he had talked the situation over with his wife, who encouraged him to proceed despite the risk that he could lose his job. The narrative suggests that the respondent considered the consequences of the act on his relationships, ordered his relational identities, and determined that his identity as a husband who desired respect from his wife was paramount.

It is noteworthy that relationships fostered courageous acts when they were undertaken to protect or help others with whom protagonists had a valued relationship—a common occurrence in this study. For example, in the endurance accounts, actors engaged in self-sacrifice and persisted with challenging tasks in order to assist others, and in the reaction accounts, actors took risks to help others despite threats. It is also noteworthy that in 80 percent of the accounts, the courageous act was intended to benefit others, rather than just the courageous actor—further evidence that relational identities are important in courageous acts. Sluss and Ashforth (2007) observe that role relationships such as manager-subordinate are unique because the people in them are connected by their roles. Therefore, managing these relationships may be more complex than managing non-role-based relationships. The fact that role relationships are pervasive in most work settings may explain why relationship themes were so pronounced in this study's narratives.

Power imbalances appeared in 81 percent of the courage narratives and were particularly prevalent in the opposition accounts, when actors opposed more powerful individuals, often in an effort to help others. Power imbalances usually served to inhibit courage. This was illustrated in the embezzlement account when the respondent explained that he was "a new hire, no political clout in the organization, and young." He feared he would lose his job and receive negative employment references from his boss if he continued with his research. Power imbalances were often used to rationalize inaction in the no courage accounts, as respondents explained that the likely outcome of a courageous act was poor and the cost was too great.

In this study's narratives, large power imbalances usually raised the risk of a courageous act, and in turn, the need for compelling reasons to act courageously. These reasons often were rooted in an individual's self- or relational identities. In one account, for example, a young female professional was being sexually harassed by a powerful vice president in her company. She provided written evidence of the harassment to the company's president and general counsel, but both responded that she was misinterpreting the vice president's actions. She affirmed her identity as a self-respecting, ethical individual when she decided to resign rather than allow the harassment to continue. In the accounts in this study, power imbalances appeared to amplify both the risks and the tensions among identities, thereby enabling courageous actors to consider their priorities more deliberately.

References to *organizational norms, rules, and standards*, which appeared in 77 percent of the narratives, also both fostered and inhibited courageous acts. These references were particularly pronounced in the opposition accounts, in which actors were acutely aware of the consequences of violating organizational norms. In some narratives, organizational norms or rules created the need for courage-based identity work when the norms conflicted with an individual's self-identity. For example, one respondent said her coworkers routinely engaged in a practice she perceived as dishonest, and another respondent felt compelled to disclose a potential safety problem to an outside inspector, even though he knew such disclosures were not acceptable in his organization.

In other narratives, organizational norms and rules simply increased the risks associated with *any* courageous behavior. For example, when contemplating acts of courage, respondents commented on the dangers of violating "common practices," failing to "go along with the current protocol," and "speaking up and going against what was decided from above." In these narratives, organizational norms or rules served as obstacles that made the courageous act more daunting. Indeed, in many of the no courage accounts, fear of violating strongly held organizational norms was described as the reason for not demonstrating courage. For example, when explaining why she continued to engage in an unethical practice, a respondent said, "I knew it didn't feel like the right thing to do, but

I was too afraid to stand up against the current system and I wanted to fit in with my coworkers." The respondent in this account said she regretted not acting in accordance with her conscience; her failure to violate organizational norms caused her to negate an important aspect of her self-identity.

In some of the narratives, organizational norms, rules, and standards promoted courageous behavior. This was particularly true in the creation accounts, several of which featured organizations that had norms favoring innovation, improvement, and change. In these narratives, the nature of the courage-based identity work was to provide new opportunities for others and create new products and services, despite the risks or challenges they entailed.

Worline and her colleagues explored the interplay between courageous behavior and organizational cultures and designs (Worline, 2010; Worline et al., 2002; Worline & Quinn, 2003). The findings above add another layer to this discussion by showing that organizational norms and rules can produce identity conflicts, serve as obstacles to courageous behavior, and enable new expressions of identity—all of which can lead to different types of courageous acts.

Reconciliation of identity tension. After engaging in courageous acts, respondents who performed a courageous act consistently reported feeling a sense of confidence and integrity and positive feelings such as joy, pride, and relief. For example, the respondent in the embezzlement incident explained, "I feared losing my job, having a negative reference on my resume, and personal retaliation from the cashier. But today I see that I did the right thing, and I would do it again if needed." In another account, a respondent said, "though it involved a confrontation that was scary to me and required courage on my part . . . it turned out to be a very positive situation." Another respondent observed that "there was a sense of fear prior [to my act of courage], but relief afterwards." The outcome of the tension reconciliation was that the actors' identities were verified or changed, new identities were adopted, and coherence among self- and social identities was achieved.

In the narratives in which respondents observed a courageous act, they consistently reported feeling admiration and respect for courageous actor. Observations such as the following were typical: "I held [the courageous actor] in high regard. I admired her confidence and her willingness to express her opinion" and "His act of courage, in the face of severe negative personal consequence, was a strong example to the rest of us and earned him a level of trust that will benefit him long after his days at the bank are done." For both respondents and observers, courageous acts were viewed as revealing the actor's authentic self.

Whereas incongruities among identities caused tension, courageous acts resolved the tension. This reconciliation was particularly evident in narratives in which courageous actors experienced negative outcomes such as damaged relationships, career derailment, or job loss. For example, one respondent said, "going against our executive team with such passion was probably not the best thing for my career, but it was the right thing to do." Another respondent, who was fired after confronting her boss, said, "I could have resigned and avoided the whole confrontation, [but] I'm glad I stood up for what I felt was right." These comments suggest that courageous actors were willing to make significant trade-offs, including sacrificing a valued relational or position identity, in the interest of being true to themselves. Of course, it's possible and even likely that some of the positive feelings that followed courageous acts in this study were rationalizations driven by a need for self-enhancement, intended to show that courageous actors made the right choices. Nevertheless, the fact positive feelings accompanied courageous acts so consistently indicates that courageous acts are commonly viewed as relieving distress because they help people express their true character.

Identity theorists (Burke & Stets, 2009; Stryker, 2004) argue that people are motivated to behave in accordance with their most central identities. When an individual's salient identities are verified and coherent, positive emotional reactions result (Cast & Burke, 2002). When they're not, negative emotional reactions are likely to continue (Burke, 1991; Burke & Harrold, 2005). This study's narratives suggest that courageous acts may be an important vehicle for identity reconciliation by enabling individuals to enact their core identities.

DISCUSSION

In this study, I investigated the identity dynamics underlying accounts of workplace courage. My goal was to discover how identity is perceived to influence courage by examining three main research questions: (1) How do identity tensions influence acts of workplace courage? (2) How does courage-based identity work unfold in the story-

lines reflected in the courage narratives? (3) How does courage-based identity work help to reconcile identity tensions in the accounts of courage? Below I discuss the study's theoretical contributions to the identity and courage literatures, focusing on these research questions.

Theoretical Contributions

Courage as an identity distillation process. The main contribution of this study is a model depicting the identity dynamics reflected in accounts of workplace courage. As discussed in the previous section, the model indicates that acts of courage are an important mechanism for defining the salience and boundaries of an individual's identities and for managing and reconciling the demands of multiple identities. This finding adds to a growing body of research on identity processes by highlighting the significance of identity tensions in triggering identity work and the important role of courage in shaping an individual's identity and gaining coherence among the multiple facets of that identity.

The model described here illuminates a three-step distillation process by which courageous acts reveal, solidify, or alter an individual's identity. Situations that are perceived to require courage are those in which two or more important identities are at stake. In the first step of the process, identity tension is aroused. The tension preceding a courageous act signals that there are incompatibilities among an individual's identities, and this allows individuals to consider explicitly the meaning of the incompatibilities. This step is crucial because it creates distress and uncertainty, which leads to sensebreaking, which in turn triggers sensemaking (Pratt, 2000; Weick, 1995).

In the second step, courage-based identity work is performed. By definition, courageous acts are freely chosen in the pursuit of worthy goals (Goud, 2005), so they allow individuals to assess the relative value of their identities, consider a range of alternative actions, and make a deliberate choice about how to behave. The choice and the act are significant because they bind individuals to their identities (Weick, 1995). In the third step, reconciliation of identity tension, actors describe feeling relief, pride, and joy, indicating that the courageous behavior created feelings of authenticity and coherence (Weick, 1995). This step provides positive feedback to the individual that reinforces the decision and the act and leads to a sense of integrity and confidence. Overall, the model reflects a particular kind of sensemaking episode in which courage plays a vital role.

This identity distillation process is reminiscent of Anteby's (2008) contention that "moral gray zones" act as distillers of workers' occupational identities. Courageous acts appear to serve a similar purpose; as the salience and boundaries of an individual's identities are contested through courageous acts, the identities that are most central are identified and reinforced. This study's findings, therefore, suggest that courageous acts play a crucial role in distilling an individual's identity.

Courage as a tactic to shape identity. Most identity work described in the extant literature involves activities that do not involve courage. For example, Kreiner and his colleagues (2006) describe tactics used by priests to negotiate the boundaries among their personal and occupational identities, Pratt and his colleagues (2006) describe strategies used by medical residents to construct their professional identities, and Alvesson (1994) describes tactics used by advertising professionals to manage their identities. The current study describes a distinctive and more intense type of identity work that is used when two or more highly valued identities are in conflict. Courage-based identity work can therefore be added to the array of identity work tactics used to construct and shape an individual's identity.

Courage as a method of managing incompatibilities among multiple identities. This study also contributes to research on identity work by demonstrating how courageous acts help individuals to manage discrepancies among self- and social identities. It is well established that members of organizations have multiple identities and that conflicts among them are inevitable (Ashforth et al., 2008; Dukerich, Golden, & Shortell, 2002; Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997). It also is clear that identities have different levels of salience or centrality (Ashforth & Johnson, 2002; Settles, 2004), and that the absence of serious conflicts among identities leads to a more positive identity overall (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010). What is less clear is *how* incongruities among identities are reconciled. The model described in this study suggests that courage-based identity work plays a key role when conflicts among highly valued facets of identity arise. Identity tension is particularly crucial in this process, for it creates distress and amplifies the incompatibilities among identities, thereby allowing individuals to explicitly consider the salience and centrality of each identity. When individuals act courageously—that is,

when they make difficult choices they believe to be most consistent with their core identity—they regain a sense of coherence and integrity.

In this study, individuals' self- and social identities competed with one another, and a courageous act was the tool that helped to produce an acceptable fit among the identities. This finding highlights the strong identity themes embedded in a courageous act. It is obvious that courage would be required for a person to combat unethical demands made by organizational leaders, as described by Worline (2010), or to help a peer in a threatening situation. It is less obvious that courage is also required when a person faces conflicting demands from several valued identities; courageous acts are not always battles of good versus evil. For example, in this study individuals sometimes had to choose between identities as friend versus manager, engineer versus subordinate, and family provider versus change agent. Many narratives involved individuals whose courageous act required them to sacrifice one identity in order to strengthen another. This finding contributes to the courage literature by showing that social identities can influence courageous acts in nuanced but potent ways.

Courage-based identity work can therefore be added to the processes described previously in the literature for managing conflicts among identities, which include renegotiating demands associated with the identities and reordering, inhibiting, forgetting, and deleting the identities (Ashforth et al., 2008; Hugenberg & Bodenhausen, 2004; Pratt & Foreman, 2000).

The social impact of courage-based identity work. The large majority of narratives about workplace courage in this study contained references to relationships, power imbalances, or organizational norms or standards. This finding demonstrates how powerfully social forces can serve to facilitate or inhibit courage. However, the narratives in this study also show how courage-based identity work can influence the social consequences of courage. Courage scholars have suggested that courageous behavior can be contagious (Pury & Lopez, 2010; Rachman, 2004), can change other organization members' work routines (Worline et al., 2002), and can awaken a sense of possibility in others (Worline & Quinn, 2003). This study suggests that courage-based identity work may be one mechanism by which this social influence occurs. It is noteworthy that 44 percent of the accounts in this study involved courageous acts that respondents *observed*. The fact that these acts of courage were consistently reported in admiring and appreciative terms shows how crucial the audience is in a courageous act. Courageous behavior clearly influences the identity of the actor, but it also influences observers, who derive meaning from the act to verify and shape their own identities. It is widely understood that personal and social identities are constructed through interaction with others, as individuals communicate about who they are and who they should be (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). Therefore, a courageous act may strongly influence the identity of an observer who shares a social identity with the courageous actor. This process mirrors Pratt's (1998) emulation strategy, and Ibarra's (1999) notion that individuals experiment with provisional identities by observing respected role models. This finding extends theory on workplace courage by showing that courage-based identity work may be an important vehicle for influencing the social consequences of courageous acts.

One final observation about the social impact of courage is that in this study's narratives, disidentification with the identity of "coward" was marked and pervasive. It has been argued that a person's identity can defined by what he or she is, as well as what he or she is *not* (Elsbach, 1999; Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). In this study, nobody wanted to be defined as a coward. Individuals who failed to demonstrate courage were ridiculed, and there were no accounts in which cowardice was excused or even forgiven. Respondents who did not demonstrate courage personally expressed remorse and regret, and respondents who observed noncourageous acts felt resentment and frustration. This finding provides insight for the courage and identity literatures by showing that just as courageous acts can inspire observers to adopt a more courageous identity, noncourageous acts offer observers equally compelling reasons to avoid being a coward.

Four forms of courage-based identity work. The results of this study extend the workplace courage and identity literatures by showing that courageous acts are an important form of identity work. In the study's narratives, I identified four different forms of courage-based identity work—endurance, reaction, opposition, and creation. Although current conceptualizations of workplace courage often focus on oppositional forms of courage, in which actors confront powerful others to remedy a problematic situation (Worline, 2010; Worline & Quinn, 2003), the narratives in this study suggest that a broader range of courage forms exist in the work-

place. Although many of the accounts did involve oppositional forms of courage, about one-third of the courageous acts did not.

Just 4 percent of the narratives had endurance storylines, although the fact that they occurred less frequently shouldn't negate their significance (Pratt, 2009). In Western cultures individuals tend to perceive problems as controllable (Hamid, 2004), so it's not surprising that accounts focusing on efforts to change a difficult situation would appear more often than accounts about enduring hardship. Storylines centered on creation occurred in just 5 percent of the narratives, but again, their relative infrequency in this study should not be taken as a lack of significance. A few scholars have begun to explore the importance of courage for entrepreneurs (Naughton & Cornwall, 2006), and the accounts in this category seem to fit Rollo May's definition of creative courage as the discovery of new forms, symbols, and patterns (May, 1975). Given the importance of innovation to organizational success and the attention that entrepreneurship and other creative endeavors are receiving in business, it is likely that courage focused on creation is an important type of workplace courage that warrants more attention. Overall, the key finding is that four distinctive types of courage-based identity work exist, and in them, the three components of courage—morally worthy goal; risks, threat, or obstacles; and intentional action—interact to produce several forms of courageous behavior at work.

It is noteworthy that the storylines identified in this study mirror Peterson and Seligman's (2004) conceptualization of the character strengths underlying the virtue of courage. The endurance accounts emphasize the character strength of persistence; the reaction and opposition accounts emphasize the character strengths of bravery and integrity; and the creation accounts emphasize the character strength of vitality. The endurance form of courage has been explored in the health care literature (Finfgeld, 1998, 1999) but not in the workplace courage literature. The creation form of courage has been understudied generally, even though May discussed it in the 1970s (May, 1975). Narratives with the creation storyline show concretely how vitality is related to courage—a connection that has not been discussed in prior research. The endurance and creation forms of workplace courage deserve closer examination. Overall, the results of this study suggest that, in keeping with Peterson and Seligman's conceptualization, persistence and vitality are integral in certain types of courageous acts at work.

Three components of courage. For the courage literature, the most straightforward finding is the ubiquity of the three components of workplace courage in the accounts—morally worthy goal, risk/threat/obstacle, and intentional action. These three components were present in all but two accounts in the study, suggesting that the elements that define courage in other settings are also captured in business professionals' implicit theories of workplace courage. The study also provides many detailed examples showing the distinctive manner in which the components are enacted in work settings. This finding provides empirical support for conceptualizations of courage that include these three elements (Cavanagh & Moberg, 1999; Goud, 2005; Harris, 2001; Kilmann et al., 2010; O'Byrne et al., 2000; Rate et al., 2007; Shelp, 1984; Walton, 1986; Woodard, 2004; Woodard & Pury, 2007; Worline et al., 2002). It also adds to the courage literature by showing the distinctive way the elements are displayed in organizations.

Identity as a key construct in the process of courage. This study extends theory on the process of courage by proposing that self- and social identity are crucial constructs in the process of a courageous act. Although several models depicting the process of courage have been proposed (Hannah et al., 2007; Sekerka & Bagozzi, 2007), personal identity is not an element of the models, and social identity plays only a tangential role. In the model proposed in this study, identity tension provides the fuel for a courageous act, identity work in the form of a courageous act addresses the tension, the courageous act verifies or modifies the actor's identities, and a sense of coherence and authenticity result. This study's findings suggest that identity dynamics strongly influence the motivation behind a courageous act, the way the act unfolds, and the consequences of the act.

The use of narratives to study courage and identity. This study focused on respondents' narratives about courage at work. The findings shed light on how people make sense of courageous acts, but they do not necessarily represent how courageous acts occur objectively in the workplace. Nevertheless, narratives offer promise as a method of gaining insight about both courage and identity. Sensemaking is integral to an understanding of both phenomena, and narratives are ideally suited for studying sensemaking. Three key insights emerged from the use of narratives in this study.

The first insight is that narratives about courage reveal a person's core identities—those that are

most central to the individual. In the accounts, courageous acts helped individuals sort, order, elevate, and sometimes discard aspects of their identities. Evidence of this insight is found in the identity themes that were pervasive throughout the accounts and in the identity-laden descriptions of difficult choices made by protagonists. In this study's narratives, individuals were defined by the courageous acts they performed.

The second insight is that courage narratives themselves serve as self- and social verification of the identities they feature. Identity scholars argue that self-narratives are an important form of identity work because they express a narrator's identity, thereby increasing the likelihood that others will validate the identity (Ashforth, 2001; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). In this study, evidence of self- and social verification of identities can be seen in the uniformly positive emotions expressed by those who engaged in and observed courageous acts.

The third insight regarding the use of narratives to study courage and identity is that even if the narratives in this study don't reflect reality precisely, the consistent patterns that appeared in the narratives reveal striking regularities in the way people perceive courage at work. In this study, courageous acts were triggered by tensions that required individuals to make decisions about the identities that matter most in their work and personal lives.

Implications for Organizational Leaders

Courage-based identity work has particular relevance for organizational leaders, who generally prefer to have employees who identify with their organization and have personal identities that coincide with organizational values and goals (DiSanza & Bullis, 1999; Pratt, 1998; Riketta, 2005). Yet the narratives in this study often involved courageous actors who faced organizational demands that were incongruent with their personal values and beliefs. The actions these individuals took to resolve the incongruity were recognized as courage. Courageous acts can therefore serve as a signal to organizational leaders and members that identity boundaries have been crossed. This study showed that when those boundaries were crossed significantly or repeatedly, negative outcomes were perceived to result, including individuals seeking new employment, no longer identifying with their organization, or actively disidentifying with the organization (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001). It is also important to note that courageous acts may help to prevent overidentification with an organization (Dukerich, Kramer, & McLean Parks, 1998) by keeping identity boundaries in check. Finally, the narratives suggested that respondents generally viewed courage-based identity work as a healthy response to organizational demands perceived as inappropriate. The clear implication of these findings is that organizational leaders should welcome, support, and even promote courageous acts at work.

This study explored how people make sense of courageous behavior at work. The findings suggest that courageous acts tie individuals to their identities. The distress that often triggers courageous behavior alerts individuals to conflicting demands associated with two or more valued self- or social identities. The choices made and actions taken in such situations are viewed as revealing the courageous actor's true character. The narratives in this study may not reflect reality exactly, but they do suggest that people perceive courage to be an important tool for negotiating the boundaries of their identities, and for maintaining a coherent and authentic identity at work.

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APPENDIX A
Exhibit A1: Data Collection Tool

	Thank you for participating in the courage at work study. Please note that your responses are anonymous, but direct quotations may be used in the final report. If you have any questions about the study or would like to receive a report of the results, please contact the principal researcher.
1.	**Describe an experience in which courage was (or was not) demonstrated in a work setting. Choose an experience you were personally involved in, or one that you personally observed**. Please describe the experience as specifically as you can; details will be useful in understanding the experience. The full range of courage is being investigated in this study, so your experience can involve a small, moderate or high degree of courage, or a lack of courage. Useful details include the following: (1) Explain when the experience occurred, the circumstances that led up to the experience, the organization you were working for, and the people involved. (2) Describe in detail what happened during the experience and how you felt about it. (3) Discuss what happened after the experience. What were the consequences or results?
2.	**In your opinion, what *degree* of courage was demonstrated in this experience?** ☐ No courage (a lack of courage) ☐ A small degree of courage ☐ A moderate degree of courage ☐ A high degree of courage ☐ An extraordinary degree of courage Briefly explain the reasons for your response to this question:
3.	**Why do you consider the experience above to be an example of courage (or a lack of courage)?**
4.	**What is your gender?**
5.	**What is your age in years?**
6.	**What is your ethnicity?**

APPENDIX B
Table B1: Respondent and Narrative Characteristics

(a) Respondents[a]	
Age	
Mean	31
Median	30
Range	21–53
Gender	
Female *n* (%)	25 (28)
Male	64 (72)
Ethnicity	
Caucasian *n* (%)	81 (91)
Other *n* (%)	8 (9)

(b) Narratives	
Length in words	
Mean	470
Median	385
Total	41,830
Protagonist	
Self *n* (%)	50 (56)
Other *n* (%)	34 (38)
Self and other *n* (%)	5 (6)
Beneficiary of courageous act	
Self *n* (%)	9 (10)
Other *n* (%)	55 (62)
Self and other *n* (%)	25 (28)
Respondent rating of degree of courage shown in narrative	
Extraordinary *n* (%)	12 (14)
High *n* (%)	34 (38)
Moderate *n* (%)	18 (20)
Small *n* (%)	7 (8)
No courage *n* (%)	15 (17)
Missing data *n* (%)	3 (3)

[a] $n = 89$.

APPENDIX C
Table C1: Examples of the Four Storylines

Storyline	Excerpts from Accounts of Courageous Acts
Endurance (4%)	"[An employee, asked to do two jobs, thus incurring significant overtime] does not complain about the extremely long hours he must work . . . and never misses a deadline in either position. [He] has demonstrated the courage to take on that which is thrown at him and succeed, while keeping cheerful, optimistic, and quick to crack a joke in long, boring meetings. [The employee] has shown a great deal of courage in working through the circumstances, despite the heavy load." (r2, m, 28)
	"[After realizing that confrontational tactics would not work in this setting, I decided that] my job is important to me in providing for my family. I have great friends at work and have built incredible rapport with my customers. I value and stay at my job for these reasons. . . . I think it's courageous to work for a company that has great products where I can overlook the problems management has in implementing its directive. I have a family to provide for [and this] is my main motive as well as the customers that I serve." (r87, m, 42)
Reaction (19%)	"[A metal workshop employee told me, a manager, that] one of the heaters had malfunctioned and had started to burn itself. . . . We went out to look at the heater and sure enough, it was ruined and burned on the inside. The employee said he did not know what happened and why it happened. So [we managers] went back into the office to plan on getting a new one or see if we could possibly fix that one. The employee came to our office after a couple minutes and said he had to be honest. He . . . forgot to take off the protective cover to the heater and that was what caused it to burn itself. He said he was so sorry for lying, that it was his fault and he knew it, and he was so afraid of losing his job that he could not tell us the truth at first." (r72, f, 21)
	"[The supervisor managed] a group of eight employees at a gypsum mill. . . . The gypsum boilers were down for a fast maintenance repair and that was costing the company money. Before the repairs could be made the clinkers in the fire box under the boilers needed to be cleaned out. When normal maintenance is done the box is allowed to cool for at least a 24-hour period before anyone enters the box. The team was given only 12 hours to make the repair. [The supervisor] knew that hot pockets of clinkers could build up in the corners of the box; these would appear cool but still be liquid hot in the middle. He expressed his concern to management but was told to get the repairs done. Reluctantly [the supervisor] returned to his team to tell them. . . . Knowing the risk and not wanting anyone in his team to be exposed to the possible danger of going into the box too early he made the decision to go into the box himself. After just a short time in the fire box cool air hit a pocket and exploded across the floor of the fire box. [The supervisor] received 3rd degree burns up one leg from the hot liquid. When asked why he was willing to do what he did, he gave answers like that was his job and 'I was better dressed than the others so if something happened I knew I wouldn't get hurt as bad.'" (r27, m, 46)
Opposition (56%)	"I work in a jet engine manufacturing facility. . . . A few weeks ago some parts came in from a supplier that uses another supplier to perform a special process on the metal surface. Although we have been receiving these parts for several months, the receiver noticed that the supplier performing the surface operation was never approved to do the work, which is a big deal because it [can] affect the quality of the braze joint in the engine assembly. Upon investigating the situation, it was discovered that this was known for some time, but others have turned their heads the other way because we are almost finished with these parts, so they thought it wouldn't matter. Also . . . we are on a strict time schedule and going through the process of getting this supplier approved takes at least a few weeks and requires multiple tests and approvals. The man who caught it this time came forward and would not allow the parts to pass through receiving, even though a few others complained and tried to convince him otherwise." (r 38, m, 24)
	"I discovered a serious problem that adversely affected our product. It took me a week to collect the details and ensure I was not overreacting. The scope of this issue could make or break our reputation or our company. In making the seriousness of the issue known, I had to make my case all the way up the chain of command and challenge our director of engineering. This took a lot of courage for me, as he is my big boss. Naturally, he was defensive, but I stated my case despite my fears of doing so." (r78, m, 27)

Continued

APPENDIX C
(Continued)

Storyline	Excerpts from Accounts of Courageous Acts
Creation (5%)	"I observed a CEO that had a successful business for 20 years put the business up for sale three years ago. . . . Once the company sold, the two owners, betting on their trade secrets, decided to not cash out and retire but roll the sales money into another division of their previous company that would focus on a similar product but geared and marketed toward a new audience. The two owners spent millions building a new facility and continued their R&D department to find a new niche in the market. I felt like these two people had so much trust and courage to be able to put millions of their own money into a new venture when they could have easily walked away and retired." (r49, m, 26)
	"The physical therapist I worked for owned his practice independently and the hospital was trying to get him to join them. . . . My boss told the hospital he would join their organization but he had many terms and conditions that they had to agree with or he wouldn't join. He loved his practice and all of the surgeons in the area referred their patients to him because his therapy program was the best around. . . . I visited his therapy office five years later and the hospital had seen his brilliance and gave him all the tools and facilities he needed to do further research on therapy techniques. . . He was 1 of only 50 therapists in the country that knew how to practice some of the techniques he learned while studying in Norway and the hospital has now reorganized their program around his study. Patients are recovering faster and for a longer period of time. His legacy with therapy will definitely outlast his time there." (r70, f, 34)

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