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The Repository: A Qualitative Study on Organizational Transition and the Process of History Production at a Mountain City Public Library

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The Repository: A Qualitative Study on Organizational Transition and the Process of History Production at a Mountain City Public Library

by

Natalie C. Grecu

B.A., Purdue University, 2003

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The Repository: A Qualitative Study on Organizational Transition and the Process of History Production at a Mountain City Public Library
written by Natalie C. Grecu
has been approved for the Department of Communication

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The final copy of this thesis has been examined by the signatories, and we find that both the content and the form meet acceptable presentation standards of scholarly work in the above mentioned discipline.

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Abstract

Grecu, Natalie Christine (M.A., Department of Communication)

The Repository: A Qualitative Study on Organizational Transition and the Process of History Production at a Mountain City Public Library

Thesis directed by Professor Stanley Deetz

In this thesis, I examined how staff members of a public agency, a public library, experienced transitions due to cutbacks, limited resources and technological changes, illustrating how people experience and make sense of these organizational uncertainties. Karl Weick proposed that people cannot come to fully understand what they have done until they have done it and can retrospectively make sense of the transition or occasion of ambiguity and/or uncertainty. In a year-long qualitative field study, I examined how staff members at a public library experienced overwhelming uncertainties and equivocalities such as leadership turnover, technological advancements, threats to identity, the election, and the everyday stresses of heavier workloads, down hours, and unfilled positions. Staff was unable to make sense of the transitions because of the overwhelming feeling of absolute “stuckness.” Staff responded through reconstructive activities including the reconstruction of themselves as agents, and the reestablishment of routine, and community.
Table of Contents

Chapter 1: Introduction ................................................................. 1
  Problem Statement ................................................................. 1
  The Library as Exemplar .......................................................... 3
  Transitions: The Current Culture of the Library .......................... 5
    Technologies ........................................................................... 6
  User needs .................................................................................. 6
  Culture Clash and Staff Turnover .............................................. 7
  Thesis Outline ........................................................................... 8

Chapter 2: Conceptual Tools ......................................................... 12
  Sensemaking as a Theoretical Framework .................................. 12
    Ambiguity and Uncertainty ...................................................... 14
    Identity .................................................................................... 18
    Retrospection .......................................................................... 19
  The Culture of the Library Studies .......................................... 21
  Statement of Questions ............................................................ 22

Chapter 3: Study Methods ............................................................ 24
  Methodological Commitments .................................................. 24
  The Site ..................................................................................... 25
  The Mountain City Public Library .............................................. 25
  Data .......................................................................................... 26
  Position as Researcher ............................................................. 31
  Ethical Concerns and Considerations ....................................... 32
**Chapter 4: Description of the Site**

- Mountain City ................................................................. 35
- The Library: Organizational Structure ........................... 36
- The People ........................................................................ 37
  - The Employees .............................................................. 38
  - The Library Commission ............................................. 39
- Observations and Meetings ............................................. 40
- Library Commission Meetings ...................................... 40
- The Spaces ...................................................................... 41
  - The Reference Desk Area ............................................. 41
  - The Board Room .......................................................... 43
  - The Slope Room .......................................................... 43
- The Transitions ............................................................... 44
  - The Election ................................................................. 45
  - Leadership Turnover .................................................. 45
  - Patrons’ Needs ............................................................. 45

**Chapter 5: Occasion for Sensemaking** ........................................ 47

- “I Apologize for Not Getting Back to You”........................ 47
- “The Front Lines” .............................................................. 48
- Equivocality .................................................................... 52
  - “I Should Go” ............................................................... 53
  - “Our Plate is Already Full” .......................................... 55
- Uncertainties ..................................................................... 56
“I Don’t Remember Being as Nervous About It” .................................. 56
“I’m Not Sure Which “L” Comes First” .............................................. 58
“What Do They Need Us For?” ........................................................ 59
“Keeping Up with All That” .............................................................. 61
Chapter 6: Stalled Enactment and Reconstructive Sensemaking .......... 63
“How Long Have You Been with the Library?” ................................. 64
“I Love It, But I Can’t Be Effective Anymore” .................................... 66
An Uncertain “Timeline” ................................................................. 68
“We’re Customer Service People” ..................................................... 70
Service Discourse: Helping the Patron and Each Other .................... 71
Meetings and Collaboration ............................................................. 73
Routine ......................................................................................... 75
The Establishment of Routine: The Line .......................................... 76
Space .......................................................................................... 78
Time ............................................................................................ 79
Chapter 7: Conclusion ................................................................. 82
Summary of Findings .................................................................. 82
Stalled Enactment and Reconstructive Sensemaking ....................... 83
“I Love It, But I Can’t Be Effective Anymore” ................................. 84
“We’re Customer Service People” ................................................... 84
Service Discourse: Helping the Patron and Each Other ................. 85
Meetings and Collaboration ........................................................... 86
Routine ......................................................................................... 86
The Establishment of Routine: The Line.........................87

Space.................................................................88

Time.................................................................88

Implications and Application.....................................89

Limitations............................................................93

Lessons Learned......................................................94

Further Research....................................................96

References.......................................................................98
Chapter 1: Problem Statement

“The advent of the Internet, digitization, and the ability to access library and research materials from remote locations had also created dramatic changes by the end of the twentieth century.”
-Ostrow, 1998

“Social life is dubious enough and ludicrous enough without having to wish it further into unreality.”
-Goffman, 1974

Organizations are emergent and self-organizing in which change is constant, evolving, and cumulative (Weick & Quinn, 1999, p. 366). Change, in this context, is a pattern of endless modifications in work processes and social practice (p. 366). While organizational change seems inevitable there is the realization that a plethora of changes may be occurring at any given moment in time. For instance, an onslaught of technological and digital advancements, organizational reorganization, employee turnover, a managerial exodus, may all be significant transitions for organizational members experiencing one or all of these organizational changes. The focus of this study is change, or transitions, that are catalysts for uncertainty experienced by organizational members, and one specific type of transition, that which is associated with economic constraints.

Uncertainties in the workplace can often be associated with economic transitions. Fiscal modifications is just one of several ways organizations are tension filled; however, this type of transition is pressing and must be examined further as fiscal limitations are becoming more commonplace in organizations. Economic constraints, budgetary belt-tightening, and unemployment can be conceptualized as just one of the infinite types of transitions organizations may be facing. These uncertainties may be exacerbated by daily statistics on layoffs, job losses, and austere financial conditions for companies and workers.
The current economic environment has lead to interesting developments in regards to employment and unemployment in the United States. For instance, the rate of unemployment has dropped to its lowest level in 19 months and more people were hired in the previous months than the government had originally estimated. However, statistics such as these regarding the current unemployment status and the state of the economy are at times mystifying. Reports regarding the unemployment rate do not account for people who have accepted part-time positions who were previously employed full-time, or those people who are no longer looking for work. Sometimes reports appear on the experiences of those individuals who have lost their jobs; however, less is known about how people make sense of these transitions. Less is known about the dynamics internal to organizations during periods of retrenchment. A wide-range of organizations has experienced cutbacks or layoffs, especially institutionalized organizations such as public agencies. And this is likely to continue. This type of organizational transition is applicable public service agencies, and particularly public libraries.

Issues surrounding organizational members’ sense making of transitions are not likely to slow down, but will continue to be exacerbated by the fluctuation of economic predicaments and the unpredictability of job stability in a fragmented and dynamic social environment. I argue, as ambiguity and uncertainty become exponentially more commonplace, understanding how people make sense of transitions, particularly in public agencies, will be crucial for a variety of organizations to consider. In this study, I will be speaking to this very issue, responding to the general question of: *how do organizational members make sense of ambiguity and uncertainty in the workplace, and how do people respond to this type of change?* Specifically, this study examines how staff members of a public agency, a public library, experience transitions due to cutbacks and limited resources, illustrating how people experience and make sense of these
organizational uncertainties. Overarching questions I will address in this study include: *how do organizational members construct and reconstruct the past as a sense making process? How do organizational members make sense of their circumstances at a particular time and space through discourse? What do coping strategies look like as organizational members struggle to make sense of transitions?*

The public library is just one place to explore these questions, but a good place to do so. This ethnographic study contributes to sensemaking literature by illustrating how people experience occasions of uncertainty in the workplace. I will be exploring how librarians’ and staff members’ experience a multitude of transitions during a time of uncertainty. This presents a valuable opportunity to contribute to library literature, primarily library change literature. Foremost, by exploring uncertainty and how people make sense of significant organizational transitions, one key benefit of this study is its generalizability to public agencies and organizations that may be coming up against a wave of budgetary crises, technological advancements, and uncertain working environments.

Libraries present a unique opportunity as a site of research to contribute to our understanding of how people make sense of organizational transitions or phases. Organizational members, especially librarians, may currently be struggling to make sense of a plethora of transitions.

**Budget Constraints and Change in Public Organizations:**

The Library as Exemplar

State budget pressures have not declined and in actuality are increasing. Additional cuts to public agency funding are evident and the reorganization of many public institutions may be
inevitable. Other public agencies across the nation are under the threat of major budget cuts resulting in layoffs.

The municipal library as a public institution is at risk for further budget cuts and the elimination of vital programs and staff. Public agencies such as the library are prime examples of institutions resorting to part-time employment, unfilled positions, and the hiring of temporary workers. More importantly, libraries across the United States are unique from other public agencies in that organizational members may struggle to make sense of additional transitions occurring in the wake of technological changes and the varying and expanding needs of patrons.

“In the grip of one of the most severe recessions since the Great Depression, more Americans are turning to their libraries not only for free access to books, magazines, CDs and DVDs, but also for a lifeline to technology training and online resources for employment, continuing education and government resources” (American Library Association (ALA) Report, 2009, p. 1).

Libraries are undergoing much transition pushed by budget cuts, technologies, user needs and cultural clashes, contributing to in some instances, staff turnover.

The degree to which an individual library accepts or resists technological innovation may be hypothesized to be impacted by the library’s organizational culture. Thus, a reciprocal and interactive process of culture formation may be hypothesized to both affect and be affected by the introduction of technology to libraries (Ostrow, 1998, p. 8).

In the following sections, overarching transitions that may be experienced by library staff members are reflected upon to give us an idea of the potential cultural shifts at this particular sociohistorical context. Although these transitions may be specific to both academic and public library culture, in the wake of budgetary crises and uncertainty in the workplace, these transitions may be all too familiar to varying degrees of organizations.
Transitions: The Current Culture of the Library

Libraries are undergoing much transition pushed by or related to budget cuts, technologies, user needs, and staff turnover. With limited funds, libraries are faced with a dilemma: how to adapt to online and technological research innovations to stay relevant to the public, while having the capability and budget to make that move from a print world to a digital world. That capability also lies heavily on the effectiveness and ability of the library staff to accomplish goals of innovation and up-to-date technologies while staying on top of the emerging and mounting modernization of expertise on these developments.

Fluctuations in the economy directly affect the library’s growth, the services it can offer, its staffing levels and its ability for strategic development. Conflicts between budgetary constraints and the desired level of financial resources must lead to a move towards providing services that will generate income an improve funding, as cost-effectiveness and efficiency become increasingly important to the library’s survival. E-commerce may empower the traditional process of library work, and may provide opportunities for new partnerships (Tam & Robertson, 2002, pp. 370, 371).

With efficiency and relevancy issues at the heels of the library and its staff, funding is a serious concern to the constitution of the establishment, contributing to understaffed predicaments. “Libraries have to deal with external funding agencies, accreditation agencies and governments who want to make sure that outcomes are positive and measureable. Increasingly, they are dictating the measures they want to see and they tie outcomes to funding” (Lakos & Phipps, 2004, pp. 345, 346).
Technologies

“Demand for information (particularly business information) will increase, and speedy delivery and high productivity will be essential in order for the library to compete with other services that are now available” (Tam & Robertson, 2002, p. 370). If libraries are to remain relevant in an increasingly global and technologically- and information-oriented society, libraries cannot continue “business as usual” (Corbin, 1992, p. 349).

More online resources need to be available to patrons, but the budget is tight. Library resources and programs give the public equal access to information that assists many people, including those who may be unemployed. With statewide public agency budget cuts, libraries are at risk for further budget cuts, limiting public hours and access, which means a decrease in hours for staff members and the possibility of further positions eliminated.

User needs

Simultaneously, the expectations of patrons are mounting and libraries must somehow adapt to the additional pressure to deliver. “These pressures include the shifting ways by which people view information and how it can be accessed or acquired; the impacts resulting from use of internal computer-assisted systems and their interaction with each other; the interaction of the library’s internal systems with external systems and networks utilized by its clients, other libraries, vendors, and other organizations; and tighter library budgets resulting in “leaner” library organizations” (Corbin, 1992, p. 349).

Pressures on the librarian may be exacerbated “[a]s the learning needs of library users change, the library’s relationship with its clients will become more important” (Tam & Robertson, 2002, p. 371). The learning curve to acquiring knowledge of new technologies, converting current print works to digital, while maintaining relationships with patrons by
attending to various inquiries throughout the day may contribute to a “burn out” (Miller, Ellis, Zook, & Lyles, 1990) quandary as libraries are faced with budgetary constraints and understaffed departments. Expectations and the roles of librarians and library staff seem to be morphing into “a jack of all trades” and ambiguity is percolating at the boundaries of responsibilities and roles of organizational members. The added pressures of emotional labor (Tracy, 2000), and exceeding and maintaining services and patron relationships may be an additional page to the book of demands library staff must comprehend and make sense of on a daily basis.

Patron inquiries are varying, and many librarians, of both old and new schools of librarianship are expected to answer technological questions concerning devices and programs patrons may be using while visiting the library. These inquiries include questions in regards to VPN systems, computer complications, and eresource and ebook assistance. The increasing diversity of users will require wider subject specialization on the part of information workers, which means librarians must acquire new competencies and skills, in addition to acknowledging more complicated legal, ethnic, technical and advocacy issues (Tam & Robertson, 2002, p. 371). When we put these things together: budget cuts, technologies and user needs, it leads to a culture clash, uncertainty, and identity work.

*Culture Clash and Staff Turnover*

Many argue that faced with the necessity to expand technology and digital books and resources, a *culture clash* (Bertram & Olson, 1996) is emerging between the traditional and an entrepreneurial librarian. “The service culture, soft-edged and traditional, represents the historical culture of librarianship, carrying with it our traditional social commitment and service responsibility. By contrast, the entrepreneurial infotech culture is future-oriented, scientific, material, and hard-nosed” (Bertram & Olson, 1996, p. 36). With discrepancies between the two
varying styles of librarianship, the divergent ideologies may contribute to wobbly relationships between staff members and potential phases of turnover.

Thesis Outline

The following two chapters provide the foundational premises for my thesis research project. In Chapter 2: Conceptual Tools, I discuss the theoretical framework and conceptual tools for this study. In examining how organizational members make sense of organizational transitions, I turned to Weick’s (1995) theory of sensemaking. Seven properties distinguish sensemaking from other frameworks or theories. Sensemaking is: grounded in identity construction, retrospective, enactive of sensible environments, social, ongoing, focused on and by extracted cues, and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick, 1995). Retrospection, a significant characteristic of sensemaking is problematized in this study. Other aspects of sensemaking, including two specific occasions for the sensemaking process, ambiguity and uncertainty are examined. These two distinctive occasions for sensemaking present interesting opportunities to talk about action in regards to how organizational members make sense during periods of retrenchment.

In examining the fundamentals of sensemaking as a theoretical foundation, I turned to research concerning the dynamics and culture of the library and how sensemaking as a framework has been utilized in library research. Chapter 2 concludes with the goal of this project and my primary research question. The goal of this study is to contribute to sensemaking research in understanding how organizational members may use history production and retrospective sensemaking processes in order to make sense of transition. The primary research question and focus of this study is to understand the emergent and socially constructed process of how, through history production in discourse, staff members of an institution make sense of
organizational transitions, specifically during episodes of budget cuts and limited resources in an evolving and progressing technological environment. Subcategories of additional areas of inquiry include: As organizational members make sense of transitions, what does retrospective sensemaking look like? What, if any, are the coping strategies of organizational members and how do they function?

In Chapter 3: Study Methods, I describe why qualitative research methods are useful in addressing my study questions and introduce my methodological commitments. In addressing the research questions specific to this study, an interpretive lens is most congruous as a methodological strategy for this research project. My methodological commitments are followed by a description of the characteristics of an ideal site. In this section, I attend to the characteristics of an ideal site for answering my research questions, my research purposes, which entail somewhat cumbersome circumstances for an organization at this sociohistorical moment in time, as well as potentially ponderous conditions for organizational members.

Following the depiction of an ideal site in which to pose and answer my research questions, I discuss how The Mountain City Public Library is a reasonable approximation to this ideal and why I selected it for my study. I contend that the fluctuation of transitions at this particular time at the Mountain City Public Library is complex. This rich site was an opportunity to investigate how librarians and staff members deal with the ambiguities and uncertainties of a multitude of transitions.

Subsequently, I will explain the process of access into the site, the logistics of the study, and data concerns. “Data concerns” encompasses considerations for what constitutes data. Data for this qualitative study includes participant observation and interviews, and the analysis of other possible approved documents including emails, memos, and meeting notes.
In Chapter 3, I conclude with my position as a researcher and ethical concerns for this study. These sections examine my awareness and sensitivities toward staff members’ and librarians’ daily concerns that may be expressed in conversations I observed or in interviews with organizational members. In considering the ethical concerns of this study, I discuss how periods of organizational transitions may present a time of emotional ambiguities, contributing to feelings of discomfort, confusion, and insecurity for staff members of the Mountain City Public Library.

Chapter 4 details the site and what is currently occurring there. First, I explain the background on Mountain City and the budgetary relationship between Mountain City and the Public Library. Next, I describe the employees of the Mountain City Public Library and provide one interpretation of the Mountain City Public Library hierarchal organizational chart. Third, I describe the Library Commission and the structure of these meetings. I then move to the description of the Library spaces, concluding with brief descriptions of the transitions Library staff was experiencing at the time of this study.

Chapter 5: Sensemaking, chapter focuses on the lives of members through these transitions. I show how these transitions are experienced as constant, reoccurring and unmanageable. Staff members have experienced an overwhelming sense of uncertainty, in which varying degrees of ambiguity, or equivocality (Weick, 1995), and uncertainty have threatened their identities. Uncertainty and equivocality are common organizational occasions for sensemaking. Here I begin to show how they worked to make sense and how in many cases they were not able to complete normal sensemaking processes. The next chapter I will detail how they have responded to this.
In Chapter 6: Stalled Enactment and Reconstructive Sensemaking, I illustrate staff members’ reconstructive activities that reconstructed agency by Library staff retelling their life story, reclaimed community through discourse regarding service, and the reestablishment of a religious-like routine. I explain how these activities were in response to leadership turnover, technological advancements, threats to identity, the election, and the everyday stresses of heavier workloads, down hours, and unfilled positions that threatened Library staff’s identity and agency.

In the concluding Chapter 7, first, I summarize my findings of this study, and how the absolute “stuckness” experienced by Library staff forced them to respond through reconstructive activities including the reconstruction of themselves as agents, and the reestablishment of routine, and community. Second, I describe applied implications for organizational members and management who may be experiencing workplace uncertainty and equivocality. Third, I summarize the valuable lessons I learned as a new researcher following the completion of my first qualitative study. Lastly, I conclude with future research I that extends this studies finding by further exploring the topic of human resiliency regarding uncertainty in the workplace.
Chapter 2: Conceptual Tools

"Historical breaks always include some overlapping, interaction, and echoes between the old and the new."
-Foucault (The History of Sexuality, 1980, p. 361)

The overarching purpose of this study addresses the question, how do organizational members of a public agency make sense of an onset of transitions such as budget cuts, emerging technologies, user needs, and staff turnover? Sensemaking is about rationalizing what is occurring and turning circumstances into comprehensible discourse as organizational members search for meaning (Weick, 2005). As organization members struggle to make sense of transitions, sensemaking, as theorized by Weick, “…is essential because it is the primary site where meanings materialize that inform and constrain identity and action and involves the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing” (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409). In the following sections, I provide the foundational premises of sensemaking as a theoretical framework, discuss the literatures with a research emphasis on libraries and sensemaking, and conclude with a statement of questions for this study.

Sensemaking as a Theoretical Framework

My initial observations at the case study site in addition to preliminary research on sensemaking informed my decision to examine the study from a sensemaking lens. Following early observations and interviews at the site, the stories and everyday experiences disclosed by participants had a sense of the past to them as they expressed their understanding of uncertainty and change. This led me to investigate history production as a key concept of Weick’s (1995) theory of sensemaking. The combination of these intuitive reactions to the site and initial research interests supported the decision to pursue Weick’s (1995) theory of sensemaking.
As Tracy, Myers, & Scott (2006) suggest, sensemaking is most necessary in moments of tension, paradox, and ambiguity when a sense of self and environment are disrupted (Weick, 1995, p. 288). These moments of ambiguity and uncertainty are common organizational sensemaking occasions (Weick, 1995, p. 92), characterized by, for example, multiple, conflicting interpretations, different value orientations such as political and emotional clashes, unclear, conflicting goals, and roles that are vague in which the responsibilities are unclear (p. 93). Sensemaking as theoretical framework is key to understanding how organizational members make sense of uncertainty.

This study is primarily focused on the experiences of librarians and staff members in which initiatory research questions were related to issues of identity and uncertainty in the workplace. “These struggles with identity are important to understand because they appear to involve the root act of sensemaking” (Weick, 1995, p. 77). Most relevant to this study, librarians’ and staff members’ identities are threatened whether it is related to circumstances surrounding the status of their jobs or the jobs of coworkers, or the ambiguities concerning job descriptions and roles.

Affected by my own experiences with downsizing and layoffs, I have developed a keen interest in how people make sense of organizational transitions, particularly when jobs, programs, and livelihood are on the chopping block. As organization members struggle to make sense of transitions, sensemaking “is essential because it is the primary site where meanings materialize that inform and constrain identity and action and involves the ongoing retrospective development of plausible images that rationalize what people are doing” (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005, p. 409). Seven properties distinguish sensemaking from other frameworks or theories. Sensemaking is: grounded in identity construction, retrospective, enactive of sensible
environments, social, ongoing, focused on and by extracted cues, and driven by plausibility rather than accuracy (Weick, 1995). According to Weick (1995), each of these seven distinguishing properties incorporates two key aspects of sensemaking, action and context (p. 17).

In the following section, I examine the primary principles of sensemaking. Characteristics of sensemaking (Weick, 1995) I emphasize in this chapter include ambiguity and uncertainty as the occasions and foreground for sensemaking, and the meanings of action and retrospection from a sensemaking perspective. These sensemaking concepts represent the lens in which I initially interpreted the data and constitute the primary focuses most relevant to the concerns of this study.

**Ambiguity and Uncertainty: Occasions for Sensemaking**

During the sensemaking process, beliefs of a particular occasion are constructed and reconstructed by organizational members through their experiences, in which they cannot come to fully understand what they have done until they have done it and can retrospectively make sense of the transition or occasion of ambiguity and/or uncertainty. These moments of ambiguity and uncertainty are common organizational sensemaking occasions (Weick, 1995, p. 92), characterized by, for example, multiple, conflicting interpretations, different value orientations such as political and emotional clashes, unclear, conflicting goals, and roles that are vague in which the responsibilities are unclear (p. 93). However, there are important distinctions between these two occasions for sensemaking.

Ambiguity as an occasion for sensemaking exemplifies a juncture at a particular time and space in which organizational members are engaged in because they are confused by too many interpretations rather than too few. “Ambiguity refers to an ongoing stream that supports several
different interpretations at the same time” (Weick, 1995, pp. 91-92). Characteristics of ambiguity, more specifically, “characteristics of ambiguous situations” (McCaskey, 1982) most relevant to this study include: different value orientations, or political/emotional clashes; time, money, or attention are lacking; and roles are vague and responsibilities are unclear (Weick, 1995, p. 93). Different value orientations suggests different values have the capability to emotionally or politically charge a situation or occurrence when people rely on personal and/or professional values to make sense of the circumstances (McCaskey, 1982, as cited in Weick, 1995, p. 93). The lack of time, money, or attention, is slightly more complicated with its implications. The lack of one or more of these resources has the ability to escalate a difficult situation to one of chaos with the severe shortage of any of these resources (p. 93). The last characteristic of ambiguous situations that is significant to this study is unclear responsibilities and vague roles. This characteristic can best be described when activities expected to be performed by participants are not clearly defined, and the responsibilities of participants in the decision making process are vague, especially as they pertain to important issues (p. 93).

Due to the multiple and conflicting meanings of the word ambiguity, it is important to conclude this description of ambiguity with the clarification that Weick preferred the use of “equivocality” in lieu of the term ambiguity. Equivocality (Weick, 1979) is important to retain because it “explicitly points to the presence of two or more interpretations as a trigger to sensemaking,” as ambiguity. Equivocality and Ambiguity will be used synonymously for the remainder of this project with the understanding that they denote the interpretation of the words presented by Weick (1979).

On the other hand, uncertainty, from this sensemaking perspective, is conceptualized as a circumstance in which people do not have multiple and conflicting interpretations, but rather, are
ignorant of any interpretations. Weick (1995) engages Frances Milliken’s (1987) notions of uncertainty based on prevailing definitions of the concept and the three possible locations of uncertainty. Uncertainty according to Milliken (1987) can be located in one of the following locations: “People lack understanding of how components of the environment are ever changing (state uncertainty), or of the impact of environmental changes on the organization (effect uncertainty), or of the response options that are open to them (response uncertainty)” (Weick, 1995, p. 95).

It is important to this study to pay attention to these occasions as a guide to understand experiences of library staff members. “Variations in lines of action which one has access, the content of beliefs about the future, the intensity with which these beliefs are held, and information about specific possibilities should produce variations in ignorance and a stronger or weaker tendency to construct and pursue an occasion of sensemaking” (Weick, 1995, p. 112).

Returning to the importance of mentioning the context of the library, and the interesting interplay of the public in library decision-making and structural processes, there a potentially interesting link between occasions for sensemaking and action.

These two distinctive occasions for sensemaking present interesting opportunities to talk about action in regards to how organizational members make sense during periods of retrenchment. For instance, depending on how organizational members make sense of ambiguity or uncertainty, the sensemaking model does not rely on accuracy, but rather plausibility to bring order and prompt action. Weick (1995) suggests that leaders or managers need to instill confidence in organizational members and get them moving in some general direction. This action allows people to create cues as a result of their actions so they learn where they were to
get some better idea of where they are and moving in the direction of where they would like to be (p. 55).

*Enactment* also becomes a key concept in the sensemaking process in regards to action. Weick (1995) uses the word enactment to preserve the process in organizational life that is constituted by the production of the environment people face and how they create new features of the environment that did not exist before by taking action and categorizing and labeling experiences (pp. 30, 31). “[T]he emphasis is on the fact that brackets and punctuations shape, modify, and give substance to whatever other activities the person confronts” (Weick, 1995, p. 36). Enactment is first and foremost about “action in the world and not about conceptual pictures of the world” (p. 36).

While I found the concept of loosely and tightly coupled organizations interesting and possibly quite useful for the purposes of this study, I was not able to attend to this concept. Loosely or tightly coupled organization plays a role in how the process of action may emerge and transpire. Organizations that are considered to be “open systems” should be concerned with sensemaking. “Their greater openness to input from the environment means they have more diverse information to deal with and from the fact that their looser system structure means that the entity doing the sensemaking is itself something of a puzzle” (p. 70). Because of the nature of a public agency, there seems to be conflicting occasions for sensemaking, and also opportunities for action. For example, as the library hold meetings with local governments, city councils, or library commissioners, action takes on varying forms depending on the actors. It is these very issues that are the focus of sensemaking, asking what is “out there,” what is “in here,” and “who must we be in order to deal with both questions” (p. 70), which leads subsequently into identity from a sensemaking perspective.
Identity

Sensemaking as a theoretical research framework has often focused on the academic library, the users of the library, and organizational restructuring. Connaway, Radford, Dickey, Williams, & Confer (2008), utilized sensemaking (Simon, 1955, 1957) as one theoretical framework in a study addressing the challenges faced by libraries in accommodating the varying needs of users, focusing on “Baby Boomers” and the “Millennial” generation. “[A]cademic libraries are being called upon not merely to adjust to changes within the confines of the library, they are increasingly being called upon to champion information technologies to faculty, students, and administrators…” (2008, p. 7).

In examining how librarians and library staff make sense of technological transitions, examining how organizational members utilize prototypes and generalizations in discourse may contribute to our understanding of how the “cultural clash” plays out in the context of the library. Weick (1995) argues, “[t]o understand sensemaking is to pay more attention to sufficient cues for coordination such as generalized other, prototypes, stereotypes, and roles…” (p. 42). Additional questions I considered in the data analysis process included: What are bracketed roles, generalizations, and stereotypes, if any, being used by staff members; how are they playing out in discourse; in what ways, if any, are they contributing to the process of sensemaking, specifically retrospection; and how, if at all, do these roles, prototypes, and generalizations play into the “cultural clash”?

In an exploratory study at a film lending library, in lieu of the argument that management action is based on preconceived goals and objectives, Boland (1984) illustrated how sense-making (Weick, 1979) “…assumes management action is a continuous, equivocal stream of experience that can only be understood (or made sense of) when it is viewed in retrospect” (p.
Boland (1984) concludes that sensemaking can offer a unique perspective to planning problems, providing a useful organizational diagnosis to participants in his study with the assumption that our understanding of the social world is based on retrospective reconstruction (p. 881). Additionally, in addressing organizational understandings, Fulton (2001) contributed to sensemaking (Weick, Gioia) literature by exploring the relationship between leader cognitive processes and the strategic directions that resulted by looking at leaders’ decisions concerning restructuring and organizational visions.

Retrospection

I initially directed my observations to the sensemaking concept of retrospection, possibly the most distinguishable characteristics of the current conceptualization of sensemaking (Weick, 1995, p. 24), as a tentative indication of sensemaking as I conducted this study. One particular consideration of sensemaking my conclusions challenged is this organizing process of history production, or retrospection. “Sensemaking unfolds as a sequence in which people…engage ongoing circumstances from which they extract cues and make plausible sense retrospectively, while enacting more or less order into those ongoing circumstances” (Weick, et. al., 2005, p. 409).

Sensemaking is about labeling and categorizing to stabilize the streaming of experience. Labeling works through a strategy of “differentiation and simple-location, identification and classification, regularizing and routinization [to translate] the intractable or obdurate into a form that is more amenable to functional deployment” (Chia 2000, p. 517). It is significant to point out that bracketing, or differentiation, is not in reference to the interaction that has been transcribed by the researcher, but rather the episode, or event, that has been retrospectively constructed by the organizational member. Viewing history production as an organizing process,
“[t]he combination of a past moment + connection + present moment of experience creates a meaningful definition of the present situation” (Weick, 1995, p. 111).

To further explain, beliefs of a particular occasion are constructed and reconstructed by organizational members through their experiences, in which they cannot come to fully understand what they have done until they have done it and can retrospectively make sense of the transition or occasion of ambiguity and uncertainty. “So too, there are occasions when we must wait until things are almost over before discovering what has been occurring and occasions of our own activity when we can considerably put off deciding what to claim we have been doing” (Goffman, 1974, p. 2). In time, the interpretations that seem to provide a sensible version of the transition become socially constructed and are received and believed (Boland, 1984), as opposed to other available perceptions. “Received histories are constructed selective memories, a produced condition that works against social attempt to recall alternative understandings” (Deetz, Heath, & MacDonald, 2007, p. 235).

Retrospection can best be captured by the idea that only after we have done something, can we know what we are doing. Anything that can be conceived is therefore in the past and when an event, or an “episode” is differentiated from the “stream of experience” as William James would explain. “It is only possible to direct attention to what exists, that is, what has already passed” (Weick, 1995, p. 25). Additionally, whatever is occurring in the present has bearing on how we perceive, or give meaning to the past, or a differentiated, distinct, and bounded episode. “Meaning is not ‘attached to’ the experience that is singled out. Instead, the meaning is in the kind of attention that is directed to this experience” (p. 26).

More importantly, meanings are constantly transforming as multiple goals and projects change, and while people share experiences, those experiences will most likely not share
meaning among organizational members. Therefore, retrospective sensemaking is “…an activity in which many possible meanings may need to be synthesized…” (p. 27). It is not the case that people make no sense at all of experience; it is an issue of equivocality because it makes many different kinds of sense (Weick, 1995).

For instance, organizational members are not in need of more information due to uncertainty, the problem is one of equivocality and confusion, in which people need clarity on what projects are most valued and prioritized accordingly (Weick, 1995). In fleshing out retrospection as a key distinguishing property of sensemaking, essential research questions included: What are the “experiences” or “episodes” carved out by organizational members; how are “episodes” retrospectively being produced—what does that process look like; and, how are meanings of specific “episodes” differentiated among organizational members?

The Culture of the Library Studies

Much research on libraries has been focused on the academic library and the “culture” of these institutions (Ostrow, 1998). “Academic librarians find themselves increasingly in a position not only of adapting to technological changes but also of introducing those changes to a potentially reluctant administration, faculty, and student body” (Ostrow, 1998, p. 7). Just as public agencies are threatened by budget cuts, academic libraries are under pressures to stay legitimate and worthy of funding in an informational- and technological- age. Interestingly, public libraries often turn to the academic library as a resource for advancement (Ostrow, 1998).

Other library research has focused on the pressures being exerted on university budget structures (Roberts, Kidd, & Irvine, 2004), the role of the library in the age of networked technology, focusing on the transformation of scholarly communication (Lynch, 1993), relationships and interactions between academic library users and the reference desk, including
non-verbal communication (Radford, 1998) and communication theory in relation to the context of the library (Radford, 2005).

In examining public agencies that are faced with the probability of further budgetary losses and constraints, I am concerned with understanding the experiences of organizational members and interpreting how history production manifests as a sensemaking process. In other words, I am interested in how organizational members construct and reconstruct the past to make sense of the present.

Statement of Questions

To understand the process of retrospection as a sensemaking process, it is important to understand that for organizational members, the goal is action, and to stay in action. The question moves from “What’s the story” to “How do we keep moving forward?” In order to make sense of the interruption, people look first for reasons that will enable them to resume the disrupted activity allowing them to stay in action (Weick, 1995). It is through the observation and study of this action that allowed me to understand how organizational members utilize history production, or retrospective sensemaking processes, to stay in action, as they struggle to make sense of transitions.

The following section will explicate the methodological approach in this qualitative study in addition to providing specific research purposes and logistics, concluding with the research questions framing the purpose of the study. The goal of this project is to contribute to sensemaking research in understanding how organizational members may use history production and retrospective sensemaking processes in order to make sense of transition. In exploring the process of history production in discourse, it is my objective to contribute to existing literature concerning the sensemaking process. The purpose of this study is to understand the process of
history production in discourse as organizational members struggle to make sense of transitions, specifically during episodes of budget cuts, limited resources, new management in an evolving and progressing technological environment. The primary research question and focus of this study is to understand the emergent and socially constructed process of how, through history production in discourse, staff members of an institution make sense of organizational transitions, specifically during episodes of budget cuts and limited resources in an evolving and progressing technological environment. Subcategories of additional areas of inquiry include: As organizational members make sense of transitions, what does retrospective sensemaking look like? What, if any, are the coping strategies of organizational members and how do they function?
Chapter 3: Study Methods

“Only ethnographically informed analyses of discourse are likely to be useful to say anything about organizations.”

- Deetz, Heath, & MacDonald, 2007

With a focus on sensemaking as a theoretical framework, an interpretive approach was implemented as the primary methodology for this study. An interpretive approach is crucial to understanding the everyday discourse, interactions, and processes of organizational members, attending to the “how” aspect of my research question. Utilizing qualitative research methods in this ethnographic study, I observed the subject population in their everyday, natural activities with the ability to study varying scenes that are commonly shared areas to organizational members and the public. In the following section, I address my methodological commitments in this study in relation to my research questions. I then describe the characteristics of the ideal site for my research interests and how the determined and approved site for this project is ideal and measures up against characteristics of an exemplary site. Following this reasoning, I address what constitutes data collected at the site and analysis strategies, concluding with my position as a researcher and ethical concerns of this study.

Methodological Commitments

In addressing the research questions specific to this study, an interpretive lens is most congruous as a methodological strategy for this research project. “What is unusual about the topic of sensemaking is that it is grounded as much in deductions from well-articulated theories

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1 I have noted the public in the prior statement to signify the implications for accounting for the context of the interactions. Although organizational members of the site are the main focus of this study, the setting in which work takes place is an element of the site that should be recognized even though the public will not be the focus of this study.
as it is in the inductions from specific cases of struggles to reduce ambiguity” (Weick, 1995, p. 13). In investigating people’s struggles to reduce ambiguity by looking through an emic lens, I described “…scene[s] through the meanings that the members attribute to their own communication actions” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 80). As Carbaugh (1996) reiterates, “…[I]f one wants to understand the action persons do, from their point of view, one should listen for the terms they use to discuss it” (p. 64). Because I am interested in sensemaking processes and the talk and interactions of organizational members, an interpretive lens allowed me to explore the ways in which organizational members utilize local discourse and meanings to make sense of a multitude of transitions.

The Site

The characteristics of an ideal site for my research purposes entailed somewhat cumbersome circumstances for an organization at this sociohistorical moment in time, as well as potentially heavy circumstances organizational members may be experiencing. The ideal site required management or leadership of an organization to have implemented budgetary cuts or has, for instance, planned a contingency strategy that may have included layoffs, or further job eliminations. The ideal site for this study was originally conceptualized as a sizeable for-profit corporation that has substantially been affected by the current economic conditions, in which organizational members may be struggling to make sense of the uncertain or ambiguous conditions in the workplace due to downsizing, budget cuts, or the threat of critical transitions.

The Mountain City Public Library

While a for-profit corporation was my initial focus in the preliminary “site searching” and “site seeing” stages of my project, a public institution became an additional area of interest. Many public agencies are under the microscope in terms of funds and the use of allocated dollars
to programs, positions, and productivity of those dollars. Therefore, the library became an interesting and volatile research site that represents an organization in which staff members may be experiencing a multitude of transitions as proposed in Chapter 1.

The Mountain City Public Library was an ideal site to investigate sensemaking. The fluctuation of transitions at this particular time at the Mountain City Public Library allowed me to explore how librarians and staff members deal with the ambiguities and uncertainties of a multitude of transitions. The timing of this ethnographic study presented a unique opportunity for several reasons. During this study, the State voted on ballot initiatives could have substantially affected the library and its budget, including the stability and status of some staff members’ jobs. The Director of the Mountain City Library that had approved this study resigned and three significantly seasoned library employees had decided to retire by the end of the year, which meant there was to be a new Director hired in the coming months. Further and more detailed descriptions of the Mountain City Public Library will be provided in Chapter 4.

Data

Achieving entry approval for this site was an extensive and prolonged process. Final approval to continue research was sanctioned by the Mountain City Public Library Director and Managers, in addition to approval from the Mountain City Council and Attorney. Following the entry process, types of data collected are approved and negotiated by a point person of the site. My point person as well as Administration executives preapproved observations, interviews, and participation in meetings.

Data for this qualitative study included participant observation, interviews, and the analysis of other possible approved documents including emails, memos, and meeting notes. Meeting notes were comprised of both internal meetings, such as Managers’ Meetings and Committee
Meetings, as well as Library Commission Meetings that occurred monthly and were open to the public and staff members of the Mountain City Public Library. Other forms of data incorporated in this study were media such as television and Internet news segments that featured the Mountain City Public Library, as well as online news stories from local news outlets.

Observations were permitted in the varying locations of the library, with the permission of those who are working in the designated areas. Interviews were coordinated through myself, as well as the point person, who sent an email to all library staff members, who then communicate to me their interest in the study, and interviews were scheduled accordingly. Visits to the scene were flexible for observation. Management has approved interviews and access was dependent on the willingness of organizational members to participate in observation and interviews.

Participants of this study included varying staff members of the Mountain City Public Library. These include Reference and Administrative staff members, as well other staff members in varying departments who may be in attendance of meetings or who were willing to participate in interviews. In this research study, 17 total subjects were interviewed.

I had been engaged with the site for approximately 14 months, collecting data following IRB Approval for this study. During this period of time, data was collected through interviews and participant observation, accounting for allotted time committed to data analysis and the ability to return to the site verifying accuracy of data and analysis. The expected duration of study on each individual subject was dependent on his or her level of participation. Interviews were approximately an hour long, and the duration of the study on each individual subject did not exceed three hours per individual overall, which included multiple interviews. I conducted 17 interviews, attended 4 Library Commission Meetings, attended internal manager and
departmental meetings, collected online articles pertaining to the library, and observed, for a total of approximately 70 hours of data collection.

Interviews were conducted and recorded upon consent from the participant. These interviews were transcribed, in addition to the transcription of fieldnotes during observation opportunities. The duration of time for interviews ranged from 20 to 90 minutes, depending on the individual. Interviews were recorded with the consent of the participant and took place in designated offices and rooms to ensure confidentiality. Upon consent from the subject, a designated time of no longer than one hour was negotiated and scheduled as a meeting time for the interview, although some participants did talk to me for over an hour. The interviewee was aware that I am a University of Colorado Graduate Student of the Department of Communication, interested in organizational communication and organizational change. Organizational meetings were also recorded with the clearance and permission of all participants attending the meeting; consent forms were signed prior to the recording of the meeting. Meetings that were open to the public were recorded by the Mountain City Public Library, and were accessed through the Administrative Department.

Participating organizational members were asked questions concerning their experiences at the Mountain City Public Library. Specific questions included the following: How long have you worked at the library? Have you seen the library develop in any particular way? How has the library or your job changed in the last few years? How do you feel about changes that have occurred in the library? What do you think the library will look like in 10 years? What would the ideal Mountain City Public Library look like?

These questions began to flesh out organizational members’ perspectives of change in the library. These questions assisted me in teasing out what changes were considered “the new
norm” and what changes were explicated through the use of retrospective history production to make sense of transitions the participant was experiencing. As notes by Ostrow (1998), “No one, it seems, has paused to examine just what this mysterious entity, “library culture,” actually is and whether or not it needs to be made more amenable to change” (p. 1). While my focus was not necessarily framed from an organizational culture lens, what is considered change, and how it was constructed and reconstructed by organizational members was the initial focus of this study.

In addition to interviews, participant observation allowed me to examine how organizational members interact with other library staff as well as patrons. Interestingly, Mountain City Public Library staff often commented on when the day was busiest and when my observation would be ideal. Interactions at varying levels of activities were observed. Self-reflection was also accounted for in this study, and my position as ethnographer and researcher was taken into account in fieldnotes and data analysis.

In addition to my own interview questions, the following inquiries provided a guide to the analysis of data by emphasizing theoretical foundations to sensemaking:

Organizational sensemaking is first and foremost about the question: How does something come to be an event for organizational members? Second, sensemaking is about the question, What does an event mean? In the context of everyday life, when people confront something unintelligible, and ask “what’s the story here?” their question has force of bringing an event into existence (Weick, et. al., 2005, p. 410).

To make sense of the disruption, people look first for reasons that will enable them to resume the interrupted activity and stay in action. “Sensemaking is about the interplay of action and interpretation rather than the influence of evaluation on choice. When action is the central focus,

At the Mountain City Public Library, there were discrepancies between instances that were considered to be a change or transition and instances of change that are considered to be “the new norm” by organizational members. As a regularly used term by organizational members, I paid particular close attention to what staff members view as change, and instances of when history production could have occurred and what the retrospective account pertained to, such as a transition. Therefore, what I believed to be initial themes included: illustrations of retrospection and the cues or punctuation of events explained by participants in interviews and conversations; identifiable explanations of action and identity in answering interview questions such as How has your job changed over the past five years, and how do you feel about changes that have occurred in the library?

These questions and themes were specific to the experiences of library staff members. If library staff members share anything, they share actions, moments of conversation, projects, and actions which they then make sense of using idiosyncratic categories (Weick, 1995, p. 189). “If people want to share meaning, then they need to talk about their shared experience in close proximity to its occurrence and hammer out a common way to encode it and talk about it” (Weick, 1995, p. 189). What these stories do allow, is a space for staff members of public agencies, such as the library, and other people in varying organizations that may be experiencing a multitude of transitions, to interpret and find ways to talk about the experience, moving beyond individual meanings stemming from the events.
Position as Researcher

Having experienced organizational downsizing and layoffs in my own professional experience, how people make sense of uncertainty has been a key interest of mine. As a researcher of this site, I was aware of my sensitivities toward staff members’ and librarians’ daily concerns that were expressed in conversations I observed and in interviews with organizational members. Additionally, in many ways, I believe my pursuit to understand how people make sense of an onslaught of transitions and change stemmed from my own experiences and my own curiosities of how I had made sense of similar experiences in my life. “If people know what they think by seeing what they say, then the variety, nuance, subtlety, and precision of that saying will affect what they see, question, and then pursue” (Weick, 1995, p. 198). Were the findings of this study shaded by my own experiences of downsizing, layoffs, and uncertainty? Or, having embodied downsizing, layoffs, and uncertainty, and have lived in areas in which job uncertainty often percolates in the discourse, did I have a keener eye in such circumstances, such as those I interpreted at the Mountain City Public Library? By reflecting on the opening quotation from Weick, my limitations are also my strengths—a paradox and an inquiry I continued to return to as a concern in regards to my position as researcher and participant observer.

As a participant observer and a white female, I was also aware of my abilities to move relatively easily throughout the library and have more readily available opportunities for interactions with staff members. For instance, in observing the staff members’ interactions in the children’s area of the Mountain City Public Library, who I was as a researcher allowed me to sit at a small table and take fieldnotes while children, parents, and librarians were in the area. Through self-reflexivity, it occurred to me, that if I was an older male, quite possibly of any color, I might have been approached by parents or the staff as to what was my purposes of
watching or observing that particular area. I am aware that at this particular site, as a female researcher, access to areas of observations had been relatively unproblematic due to the fact that many staff members were also female. Any ethical concerns or considerations I had as a researcher surrounded the fragility of staff members’ emotions and daily distresses and anxieties that I hoped to stay sensitive to and not exploit in any way in the findings of this study.

In reflecting on my position as a researcher and sensemaking as the theoretical foundation for this case study and thesis, I became more aware of the implications for sensemaking in my everyday life. We are often interrupted by what Schroeder et. al. (1989) characterized as “shocks,” but the day continues, and we finds ourselves back in the flow of our routine. Time seems to move so swiftly, and in my own reflections concerning disruptions that have stopped me in my tracks, I have returned to daily journaling. Through retrospection, what seems to be mundane or taken for granted, by stopping and journaling, I find this activity enriches the experiences that have transpired throughout the day, a day in which otherwise would flow as smoothly into the next day. These extracted cues are a story to be told, and as Weick (1995) reminds us, sensemaking is all about a good story. Although this reflection may seem obsolete to the importance of my study, I had a sincere appreciation for the disclosure and narratives of the Participants involved in this study.

Ethical Concerns and Considerations

I conclude this chapter with ethical concerns and considerations for this study. Throughout this study, I was aware that periods of organizational transitions may present a time of emotional ambiguities, contributing to feelings of discomfort, confusion, and insecurity for staff members of the Mountain City Public Library. As noted by Weick (1995), “Brickman (1987) suggest[ed] that situations that induce hesitation, alienation, or despair in anyone should be experienced as
confusing because they make it harder for people to take actions around which meanings could crystallize” (p. 174). As the primary researcher of this site, there was a risk for emotional discomfort for participants in this study. In interviews, there were instances in which Participants disclosed strong or negative feelings toward their job or the ongoing fluctuation of transitions. “Sensemaking is tested to the extreme when people encounter an event whose occurrence is so implausible that they hesitate to report it for fear they will not be believed” (Weick, 1995, p. 1). For example, when participants hesitated to share experiences or concerns with coworkers, their interviews with me presented an opportunity for them to reflect on their experiences and organizational developments.

Additionally, during the interview process, participants might have experienced discomfort with interview questions, such as the following: How has the library and/or your job changed in the last few years? What further changes do you anticipate? How do you feel about these changes? Why have these changes occurred? How do you deal with the changes on a daily basis? Do you find your day any more or less stressful through this process? Before addressing or answering these questions, some Participants asked me to verify that interviews were confidential, in which I assured them they were. In the event of a breach of confidentiality, there was a risk to the employability and financial standing of subjects should their comments be negative. As a participant observer of organizational members’ everyday interactions and as researcher interested in the experiences and stories of people making sense of leaden circumstances, these considerations were important to acknowledge and reflect on throughout the data collection process.

In the following chapter, I describe the people and spaces that constitute the Mountain City Public Library. I provide a brief overview of the Mountain City Public Library employees,
which includes an overview of the employees, the organizational structure the Library Commission and meetings. First, I explain the organizational structure and employees of the Library, followed by an in depth description of the employees I interviewed and the people and interactions I observed. Second, I explain the Library Commission and the logistics and dynamics of Commission meetings.
Chapter 4: Description of the Site

Arrange whatever pieces come your way.
-Virginia Woolf

Importantly, at the time of this study, Library employees were experiencing two forms of transitions: those that been occurring over the past several years, such as leadership turnover, and those that emerged out of or were exacerbated by retrenchment. These transitions played a significant part in understanding the site and the everyday experiences of staff members. In the following sections, I provide a description of the site, first briefly explaining the town Mountain City. Second, I provide one interpretation of the Mountain City Public Library hierarchical organizational chart, followed by a description of the employees I interviewed and observed, which includes the Library Commission and various organizational meetings. Third, I describe the spaces that shaped interactions by how the area was utilized by staff members. Lastly, I explain the fiscal relationship between Mountain City and the Public Library, and the transitions Library staff were experiencing at the time of this study.

Mountain City

Mountain City is a predominately white, highly educated, technologically advanced, and physically active town. Although it is a college town, its identity is not based solely on the University. Many people who reside in Mountain City are educated, and the town consists of research institutions and government agencies that employ many of its residents. Mountain City is a destination town and has a high cost of living and real estate values compared to surrounding communities.

In the following sections, I provide a brief overview of the people that constitute the Mountain City Public Library, which includes, an overview of the employees, the organizational
structure the Library Commission and meetings. First, I explain the employees and organizational structure of the Library, followed by an in depth description of the employees I interviewed and the people and interactions I observed. Second, I explain the Library Commission and the logistics and dynamics of Commission meetings.

The Library: Organizational Structure

In interviews with staff members, the actual titles, and even responsibilities, of Administration were often unclear because of the ways in which these terms were changed as directors changed. While the titles and responsibilities were confusing to Library staff, the organizational structure was hierarchal based on interviews and Library staff’s descriptions of how each “level” of the organization reported to a higher “level” of management. The Mountain City Public Library sustained a hierarchical organizational structure during my time at the Library. For example, staff members who worked “on the floor” in the Reference Department, had a Supervisor he or she would report to, and in turn, that Supervisor reported to a Department Manager. This Department Manager is managed by Administration, such as the Director, or Assistant Director.

In the initial phases of my study, I was unable to track down an “official” organizational chart for the Library. As a budding researcher, I decided to take the initiative to create one myself, and I was left empty-handed as my research developed and I began to understand the difficulties of creating this document. Below, is one of my attempts to capture the hierarchal structure of the organization, particularly the sector of the organization, which I was in direct and consistent contact; however, this dilemma will be further problematized in Chapter 5.
The People

Library employees are comprised of predominately white, middle-aged women. Most of the staff on the floor are on a “fixed schedule,” and work for various departments including Reference, Children’s, and Media. Many of the staff members have been with the library for numerous, consecutive years. Staff members who had been with the Library from anywhere between four and eight years were considered to be relatively new to the Library. Many staff has been with the Library for twenty to forty years. The longer-term staff was more likely to have a library background, and had acquired their MLS, Master’s in Library Science. Shorter-term staff members were more likely to have non-library college degrees. Beyond this brief overview of the Library employees, in the following section, I explain in greater depth the people I interviewed and observed in this study. I first explain the Library staff that I interviewed, followed by a description of the Library Commission. Next, I explain the people I observed and
the meetings I had the opportunity to attend with appropriate clearance by my point person, Cindy, the Reference Manager of the Library.

**The Employees**

Over the course of a year at the Library, I had the opportunity to interview Library employees, or “staff,” who worked at various levels of the organization. It is important to note the term “staff” is used from this point on to describe “employees” of the Library because it is an emic term used by “staff.” “Staff” is a term used by Library employees to refer to themselves and others within the organization and includes full-time and part-time people, and “subs,” who have been called in as temporary employees in lieu of the Library hiring full-time employees to fill the vacant positions of retirees, laid off staff, and resignations. The Library staff I interviewed worked at the Administrative, Managerial, Reference, and Shelving Departments. I interviewed staff at these varying levels of the organization in my best efforts as researcher to capture a diverse range of voices and experiences among the Library staff.

At the Administrative level, I had the opportunity to interview several of the directors that either resigned, retired, or were “active” directors, which was an emic term used to describe an interim director position. Christopherson, the Director who approved my proposal for this study and who coordinated the necessary consent from the City Council and City Attorney, submitted his resignation approximately midway through this study. Following his resignation, Ann, a Department Manager within the Library and who I also interviewed, was appointed interim Director. Ann retired at the end of the year, and Ruth was then moved into the “active” Director title, and who would later be replaced by a new outside Director, which took place after the completion of this study. Other Administrators that participated in this study included Don,
the Financial Manager, who retired at the end of the year of this study, as well as Lisa, who also retired at the same time, and held the position of Assistant Director of the Library.

At the Managerial level, I was able to interview two Managers, one of which was of the Shelving Department and the other of the Reference Department. Kathy, the Supervisor of the Shelving Department, had worked in academic libraries and publishing before returning to the public library system. The Reference Manager, Cindy, also participated in this study and was my point person who assisted me in navigating the Library and attaining approval and clearance for my attendance of departmental and interdepartmental meetings. Cindy was my first contact in the initial stages of this study.

Reference and Shelving Department staff that I interviewed included a part-time staff member, Francis, and full-time staff including Wendy, Reba, and Flora. Both Francis and Reba had begun as volunteers in library systems prior to their employment at the Mountain City Public Library. On the other hand, Wendy came from an illustration background, while Flora did not disclose her library experience as in-depth as other participants. It is important to reiterate the sensitivities I maintain to those interviewees who participated in this study, but who wished to remain anonymous. These staff members worked at the Administrative and the part-time levels of the Library.

*The Library Commission*

Established in the early 1900’s, The Library Commission became a part of the Mountain City Charter, directed by the City Manager. The Commission consists of five members, appointed by the Mountain City Council. The term of each position, which includes Chair, Vice-Chair, Secretary, and two members, is for five years. According to the Charter, under the direction of the Mountain City Manager, the Commission controls the operations of the
Mountain City Public Library, library building leases, administration of books and resources, and the management of other properties for the library.

Observations and Meetings

In attending interdepartmental and departmental meetings, I observed glimpses of how Library staff interacted with each other, with patrons, and how these dynamics and interactions may be telling in understanding how staff members make sense of uncertainty. With prior approval from my point person and the appropriate management and staff, I observed high-traffic areas that experienced ebbs and flows of patron and staff interactions, in addition to meetings I had approval to attend. The “high-traffic” areas that I observed included the Reference Desk Area, the Children’s Department, and the Main Front Desk. In attending meetings, I observed staff from various departments who attended departmental and interdepartmental committee meetings. Those staff in attendance were often the managers and full-time staff of the departments.

Library Commission Meetings

By also attending monthly, public Library Commission meetings, I was able to observe another “layer” of the dynamics between people associated with the Library, such as the relationship and tensions between Library Administration and the Library Commissioners. Library Commission Meetings are held the first Wednesday of every month, with the exception of two meetings that were scheduled due to conflicting schedules around a holiday. Commission Meetings are open to the public, which includes Mountain City Public Library staff members. The meetings often run one and a half to two hours. A typical Commission Meeting frequently consists of four Commission Members, the interim Director, Assistant Director, Administrative Assistant, the Strategic Planning and Administrative Service Manager who will be the standing
Interim Director by the end of the year, occasionally one or two library staff members, one to three citizens of Mountain City, which varies from meeting to meeting, and myself, a participant observer. Meetings take place in one of two places, the Conference Room or the Slope Room.

Interactions between staff, patrons, and Library Commissioners took place in varying locations throughout the Library. In the following section, I describe the spaces of the Mountain City Library, which include the rooms and areas that a significant amount of the observations, and many of the meetings, and interviews took place. These spaces include Reference Desk Area, The Slope Room, and The Board Room.

The Spaces

The spaces I will describe shaped interactions by how the area was utilized. The spaces and rooms of the Library that were central to this study include the Reference Desk Area, The Slope Room, and The Board Room. Many of the interviews and meetings I had clearance to attend occurred in these spaces over the course of the study. In the following section, I will provide a description of each of the primary spaces of the Library where I collected majority of my data for this study.

The Reference Desk Area

Prior to the onset of this study, I believed the Reference Area on the second floor of the library to be a good starting point to observe interactions between organizational members. In the first day of fieldwork, I found the Reference Area to represent an ideal location for observation because of its position between the Administrative Department and the Reference Department of the library. Additionally, the area happens to be high-traffic for staff, as well as an interesting location to view, or observe, interactions with the “public.” The map below
provides an illustration of the location of the Reference area in which preliminary observations have begun.

This particular location of the library is at the intersections between the Administrative Department, which includes staff such as the Director, Assistant Director, Finance, and PR, and the Reference Department, which includes my point person for this project, the References Department Manager. I found conversations to be occurring between staff at this location, as well as a pattern of staff members often walking through this area in order to get to and from the varying departments located on the second floor. Patrons utilizing the staircase to the second floor are often recognized by the staff at the Reference station, which presents a great location to see additional interaction, as well as hone in on discourse taking place on a regular basis. This station is inundated with phone calls as well as requests from other staff members and patrons. While other observation locations were incorporated into the case study, the Reference Area was an ideal starting point in the navigation of the organization.
The Board Room

The Board Room, often used for Library Commission Meetings, is on the first floor of the Library. The following excerpt illustrates my experience of the Board Room and the first Library Commission Meeting I observed at the Mountain City Public Library.

There is a sign on the door of the Board Room specifying the meeting to be held this evening at 7:15pm. As I walk into the room, two rows of six chairs are situated at the front of the room. Behind the two rows of chairs, the tables are set up in a u-shape and there are two nameplates at the head of the “u”—Christine Davis and Virginia Smith, who are later introduced as the Library Commission Chair and Secretary. To my surprise, I felt comfortable in the space, initially expecting Library Commission Meetings would be in a more formal room. I’m immediately recognized as what I would consider to be an “outsider.” The Library Commission members with an introduction and a handshake greet me.

The Slope Room

On the second floor of the Mountain City Public Library is the Slope Room, an additional location of Library Commission Meetings. Both patrons of the library as well as staff members often utilize this room for private and public meetings. The space is quite open, and although it may be used for private meetings, its level of seclusion could be called into question due to acoustic as well as visible characteristics of the space. As opposed to the Board Room, the Slope Room consists of one large wood table, with chairs around the table and at the peripheries of the room. Much of the data I collected occurred in these spaces. However, what occurred and transpired between staff, patrons, and even Library Commissioners, in these spaces lead to my initial understandings of the transitions experienced by many of the Library staff.
The Transitions

The Mountain City Public Library system has an approximately $7 million annual budget and employs approximately 78.5 full-time equivalent positions. According to Don, the Financial Manager of the Library, costs for the Library are going up four percent a year and the revenues are estimated to go up three percent a year. He explained, “It turns out that one percent matters a lot after about twenty years.” The financial state of the Library was very uncertain at the time of my study, and many administrators and Library staff mentioned the possibility of the Library becoming a district, instead of relying on the City to fund their institution.

Library employees were experiencing primarily two forms of transitions: those that been occurring over the past several years, such as leadership turnover, and those that emerged out of or were exacerbated by retrenchment and the inability of staff to move forward with pending developments. These transitions include the following: budget cuts and financial uncertainty, technological changes, the varying and evolving needs of patrons, library cultural conflicts between the more innovative, entrepreneurial styles of librarianship and the traditional librarian, and staff turnover. Exacerbated by the uncertainty of elections that could further disrupt funding and the viability of library staff’s jobs and the ability to support innovations and programs that are necessary for the library to stay up-to-date and relevant to its patrons, these particular transitions, in addition to four high-level Administration employees at the Mountain City Public Library retiring at the end of the year, have become points of contention between the Mountain City Public Library Interim Director and staff members and the Library Commission Members during publicly held Commission Meetings.
The Election

During the year in which I was conducting this study, an Amendment on the State ballot was to be voted on that would dramatically alter funding for the Library. This Amendment would require the Library to pay property taxes, and would prohibit the Library boards to levy the property tax. The Amendment would also limit borrowings to a maturity of ten years. If the Amendment passed, a contingency plan would be instated, and layoffs at the Mountain City Public Library would be unavoidable. Prior to this statewide election and before I began this study, the Library had experienced a series of budget cuts in the previous year. Branches were at risk to close. In lieu of cutting programs and limiting or cutting back hours at the Main Library location, Mountain City Public Library, Administrators addressed the budget crisis by not filling open positions.

Leadership Turnover

In a span of only a few months, six of the top administrators were resigning or retiring from the Mountain City Public Library. This included the surprise resignations of Christopherson, the Director, the Information Technology Manager, and a member of the Library Commission Member. Retirements included those of the interim Library Director, the Assistant Library Director, and the Library’s Finance Manager. Over the past six years, there have been three different directors. One Library staff member, Debra, described each of the previous three directors’ signatures on the Library as “The Arts,” “The Transitionary,” and “The Visionary.”

Patrons’ Needs

Mountain City is populated with a highly educated demographic, which may help explain the tension between the Library Commission and the Mountain City Public Library. In an interview with a library staff member, Peggy, she explained that public libraries often look to the
“academic library” for guidance in regards to innovations, trends, and general ways of “doing business.” While the academic library has been seen as an institution that educates its patrons, such as Baby Boomers, on technological advancements (Connaway, Radford, Dickey, Williams, & Confer, 2008), the public library seems to be at odds between technological advancements, funding, and educating the public. For instance, the Mountain City Public Library must attend to the needs of its patrons, but rather than have the fiscal ability to explore and keep up with current technologies, which may be more accessible to the academic library, the public library reacts to the evolving innovative patron, rather than the evolving library innovating the patron. This is especially the case in Mountain City where the library commission is concerned with improving the technology of the library to be “in line” with the identity of Mountain City which is known to be high-tech and progressive, even in a time of retrenchment.

How do staff members make sense of these transitions? In the following chapter, I will illustrate how these transitions constitute the occasion for sensemaking. Transitions for Library staff of the Mountain City Public Library were constant, reoccurring, and unmanageable. Staff members had experienced an overwhelming sense of uncertainty, in which varying degrees of ambiguity and uncertainty threatened their identities.
Chapter 5: Occasion for Sensemaking

This chapter focuses on the lives of members through these transitions. I will show how these transitions are experienced as constant, reoccurring and unmanageable. Staff members have experienced an overwhelming sense of uncertainty, in which varying degrees of ambiguity, or equivocality (Weick, 1995), and uncertainty have threatened their identities. Uncertainty and equivocality are common organizational occasions for sensemaking. Here I will begin to show how they worked to make sense and how in many cases they were not able to complete normal sensemaking processes. The next chapter I will detail how they have responded to this.

The following description is a representation of the worrisome and burdening everyday experiences of staff members. First, I address the obstacles I encountered as a researcher in an organization where staff members are experiencing retrenchment. Second, I describe these challenges as characterized by the Library staff, such as their use of the term “the front line” to capture everyday work on the “public desks.” I will then describe the equivocalities regarding ambiguities of roles and responsibilities at varying levels of the organization. Lastly, I provide an interpretation of what it is like for Library staff to experience uncertainties regarding the “election” and advancements that threaten their identities as librarians.

“I Apologize for Not Getting Back to You”

One of the most notable obstacles as researcher of this site was the difficulty in coordinating meetings for interviews with staff members. This obstacle was additional insight for me in understanding the constraints and difficulties of Library staff to incorporate any more tasks into their day. During my time as participant observer at the Library, I was often greeted with apologies, whether face-to-face or through email. Participating staff members frequently had to reschedule or cancel a planned meeting with me because of their limited availability or
schedule changes. Staff was incredibly apologetic for the inconvenience. Meetings were often coordinated following observations of everyday interactions or attending approved meetings. I would arrive to the meeting locations five to ten minutes early to take additional fieldnotes on the space, and when possible, set up interviews with willing staff members. Meetings were booked several weeks in advance, usually after the exchange of several emails.

Email, which is the dominant form of intra-organizational communication between staff members, did present its own obstacles for setting interviews. Many staff members took several weeks to get back to me. One interim Director apologized profusely for the length of the time it took her to return one of my emails, which was approximately a month later. In reflecting on my position as researcher, I knew very well that I was not a priority in terms of Library staff accomplishing their daily work. Throughout my research, I gained insight into the workload and pressures experienced by staff. I became even more aware of the daily difficulties of “staying on top” of everyday tasks, such as email. In conversations with staff members, email was another form of overflowing and piling workload. This was particular true for staff that worked on the floor. In the following section, the staff that worked on the floor was more apt to assist patrons and take on additional tasks beyond their responsibilities prior to the budget cuts. Staff members called those who worked on the floor the “front line.” I explain how the “front line” is an area, or aspect of organizational work where this type of backlog is acutely experienced by Library staff.

“The Front Lines”

The “Front line” was used as a metaphor to describe Library staff on the “public desk” that acutely experienced the backlog of their daily tasks and responsibilities. In this section, I first illustrate how staff members of the “front line” had to juggle an increased time on the desk,
which meant for some staff a sense of frustration that he or she could no longer deliver adequate service to patrons and other activities, such as lunch, were often tabled. Second, I describe how the event of lunch for the “front line” staff was often talked about in interviews and was reaffirmed in interactions between Library staff as an option to take if time permitted, rather than a necessary time to eat, further demonstrating the staff members’ experiences of organizational work backlog.

Staff members were relied on to make up the “lost hours” and positions. In an interview with Peggy, she explained that those staff members on the “front line,” unlike Administration, are involved in the day-to-day business. Because of the lost hours and positions, “efficiencies go.” “Public expectations can no longer be met” as planning gets eliminated. She also asserted, “Staff gets frustrated! Small things add up.” The routine of the “front line” staff members was difficult to manage. Cindy, Reba, and Francis describe this overwhelming experience of day-to-day work at the Library.

In an interview with Cindy, who has been with the Mountain City Public Library for over thirty years, she explained how she often had to choose between “getting organized” and assisting patrons. In the interview, I asked her what a “routine” day was like. She reflected, “I was wondering that this morning myself. <Laughter>. A week of crazy weeks this one really has been and I’m going to go over to the school district this morning and try to talk to a particular person, so every day is different. So in a way there’s no time for boredom, you know, I blink and the day is gone. And it’s frustrating. I stayed really late last night just ‘cause I couldn’t handle the mess on my desk anymore, so I just, you know it was quiet and no one was interrupting me, I get interrupted a lot and, um which, is part of the job too. I want to be totally accessible to people…” In describing what it is like to be on the “front line” she elaborated,
“And if you’re busy doing multitasking, you know you’re going to a desk and the next hour you’re going somewhere else or you’re working in the stacks or whatever you’re doing. It’s just hard. All of the staff is working with the public a lot, it’s their job, they’re customer service people, but they don’t have time to sit down and get organized, so I think it’s always hard.” The “hours down” has infiltrated into several, if not all, departments, in some way or another. “Down hours” was a term used by Library staff to explain the loss of bodies in positions that remained unfilled because of financial constraints. In addition to lost hours, Library staff are also picking up duties of other departments, such as the Shelving Department, in order to “help out” with the piling work. Reba, also a staff member on the “front line” described the constant struggle of providing service to patrons while taking on additional tasks to compensate for “down hours.”

In speaking to staff concerning this dilemma, I had asked one Participant, Reba, in an interview, “So if there aren’t people being hired for shelving say, then not only do you do your job but then also needing to do other things. How does that work?” Reba explained, “Well, it is tough. They say, for instance they’ll bring a cart up to the reference desk of new nonfiction and say that we have to shelve that or shelve the magazines in the morning or bring a cart to the fiction desk, it’s harder on the fiction desk. On the reference there’s two of us, so one person can say, ‘Ok I’m gonna go shelve for twenty minutes.’ But if somebody leaves the reference desk to go take someone into the stacks to find something then there’s nobody at the desk. So then you’re always kind of looking over and saying, ‘Ok is there somebody over there waiting for someone?’ And it’s especially hard at the fiction desk where there is only one person.” The “front line” staff was not the only members who felt the pressures of heavier workloads.

Francis, who has been working at the Mountain City Public Library for the past fourteen years and works in the Shelving Department, explained, “We’ve had some turn over in our
department, nothing unusual compared to the early years when I hired in here, but in past, at least last calendar year, we’ve not been able to fill those positions. So there is a sense that things are backing up, the load is heavier…” The “heavier load” was also exemplified in the ebbs and flows of the everyday demands and the perplexities that emerged by observing the staff that were assigned the “public desks.”

While many staff members explained they liked the variety of their day, in which “no day is ever the same,” enjoying “variety” and juggling an overwhelming workload were two very different experiences for Library staff. Staff members are in constant motion between assisting patrons, work at the desk, and taking on additional tasks from other departments, such as shelving. Due to the nature of the topic of interest, some Participants requested completed anonymity, including their sex. An Administrator reflected on constancy of work for the “front line” staff stating, “Most of the people who are working on the floor are on a fixed schedule, so you have to be at this particular public service point from this time to this time and it’s not like it’s optional. With me, you know, I can go out for a walk at lunchtime, you know, I can go visit people in other departments, I’m not tied to the building the way that a lot of people are. And I, I know if it’s time for you to go to lunch and there’s nobody available to relieve you it creates frustration.” The event of lunch was often talked about in interviews and was reaffirmed in interactions between Library staff as an option to take if time permitted, rather than a necessary time to eat.

Through participant observation and fieldnotes, lunch for Library staff was an interesting event that seemed to reveal the struggles of juggling the workload. In fieldnotes, I had noted a

2 As a researcher, I am adhering to these requests throughout this paper. Following the resignation and retirement of several administrators and directors, some participants also requested no use of recording devices.
fascinating interaction between two staff members of the Children’s department that illustrates the tremendous workload staff members experience on a day-to-day basis. Joan insisted that Kathy take a break to eat lunch. Following the insistence of Joan, Kathy comes back to the area with hat on and bag in hand to head for lunch. Prior to her leaving for break, she sees that a patron is in need of assistance. Kathy [sits down at the computer with the patron to help her]. This kind of service-orientation toward patrons will be explored further in Chapter 6; however, it is a (re)presentation of the constraints that disallow many library staff to take lunch breaks when departments are “down” hours and bodies.

“Front line” work for staff members was unpredictable, and while frustrations may have percolated with the lack of ability to take a lunch, for example, library staff relished in their explanations of “no day is ever the same.” While observing the Children’s Department, this statement was of particular interest following an event that went beyond the call of duty of a librarian. A young boy had “peed his pants” while at a computer station. The situation left the librarians stationed in the department with a story to share; but this episode also reflects the ebb and flows of service to patrons and the particularities and variations of each day working at the Library, whether positively or negatively experienced.

Equivocality

Equivocality was experienced by Library staff, which further intensified staff’s experiences of the “shock of confusion,” an expression used by Weick (1995) to describe equivocality. The relationship between the Library Commission and the Mountain City Public Library exemplifies a situation of equivocality. In the following sections, I illustrate how the roles of the Library Commissioners are unclear, different value orientations surface during Library Commission Meetings, while time and money are lacking. The role of the Library
Commission was ambiguous for Library staff, as well as to the Library Commissioners themselves. Furthermore, time and money hindered the abilities of the Library to move ahead on projects, which resulted in frustrations and confusion for Library Administration.

“I Should Go”

In attending Library Commission meetings, I had noted in fieldnotes that Library staff did not often appear at these meetings. When I asked questions concerning the relationship between the Library staff and the Library Commission, Participants were unable to clarify what the role of the Library Commission was, often responding with the statement, “I should go [to Library Commission meetings].” I was initially surprised by my own reaction to staff members’ responses, because I had made the assumption that staff members often attended these meetings; however, that was not the case. In speaking with my point person at the Mountain City Public Library, she was adamant that I should attend the Library Commission meetings. Following through with this suggestion, I was quite surprised when I did not see Library staff attending the meeting, which violated the expectation that I would see them there. Many staff members could not find the time, or the energy, to attend these Meetings that often lasted two to three hours, even though they expressed their consideration that they “should go.”

In an interview with Gwen, the retiring Interim Director of the Library, her response to the same inquiry further reflected the ambiguities surrounding the responsibilities of the Commission. Gwen explained that in previous years, the Mountain City Attorney had sat down with the Commission and Library Staff to clarify what the obligations of the Commission involved in order to clear up such ambiguities and interpret the Mountain City Library Commission Charter. In multiple Commission Meetings, Commissioners continued to bring up their uncertainties of their roles as Library Commissioners.
The roles of the Library Commission Members became a point of contention when one Commission Member voiced his concern in regards to the position and responsibilities of the Commission over several Commission Meetings. When the job description was released for the hiring of a new Library Director, Library Commission Members were dismayed with the lack of their input in the description, as they believed it was part of their role to be involved in that process. The following excerpts were taken from two various public records of the meetings and compared with my own fieldnotes taken while I attended the October and November meetings.

Excerpt 4, October 6th, 2010

Commissioner A: The Commission is here to deliberate what seems to work and doesn’t from the public’s perspective.

Excerpt 5, November 22nd, 2010

Commissioner B: Was the exercise from the last meeting designed to be the Commission’s input? Did I miss the point of our input? Why were we not asked?

Commissioner C: We should have had some sort of input. I am disappointed and upset the job description was complete.

Commission B: Legally, there’s more basis and input, and that is what the Charter says what we are commissioned to do.

Library Staff Rep 1: We have had an attorney come in for the interpretations of the Charter.

Commissioner A: This doesn’t seem unclear to me.

Commission C: This issue is rather unclear. It would be nice for us to be involved.

Ambiguities of the Library Commission’s role were intensified by the lack of time and resources for Library staff and Library Administration. Tension-filled Commission Meetings often resulted in the Library Administrators defending their actions, which called up emotions of frustrations and confusion regarding concerning the equivocalities of roles. An emotional clash was prompted as Library Commissions looked to “move forward” in an organization that was
spread too thin, and what the Financial Manager, Dale, explained as, “the little train that could, and eventually though, unfortunately to continue that analogy, we’re going to run out of steam.”

“Our Plate is Already Full”

Between Library staff and the Library Commission, equivocalities regarding what was considered to be “innovative” also heightened stress and weight of additional projects at the Administration level, especially for Ruth, the second Interim Library Director at the time of this particular Commission meeting. With the resignation of the IT Manager, the Library Commissioners were hard-pressed to move the Library “forward” during this particular October Meeting. As one Commissioner stated, “We are way behind. Being in Mountain City, we need to be more advanced.” Another Commissioner reiterated, “It seems to me, what we continue to come back to over and over again in these meetings is that, whenever we talk about the library, the library is changing. That a lot of how we deliver services needs to be innovative and forward. And I’m very concerned about that…I guess, to me…having a bigger picture as to where the library is going with innovation…but having someone in charge of making sure we are as close to the cutting edge and delivering library services as we can be to citizens of Mountain City, I think is important, especially when we are in fiscally conservative environment.” In response to these concerns, Ruth’s eyes welled, as she simply stated in a cracked, elevated voice, “Our plate is already full.” In the following section, I address how uncertainties including the

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3 Having had been at the site for over eight months, I had a visceral reaction to this particular moment in the meeting. In fieldnotes, I had remarked on my own embodied frustrations of observing the interactions and talk between Library Commissioners and Library staff while attending Commission Meetings. I was slightly taken back by my reaction during this meeting, because I had not expected to have an emotional reaction to interactions between Library staff and the Library Commission. This was an interesting moment for me. By reflecting on this moment, I had violated my own expectations of myself as participant observer, in which I found myself in this moment to be more participant and less observer.
“election,” reorganization of the Library with the appointment of a new director, and technological advancements fostered anxieties and concerns for Library staff, inhibiting staff to move forward.

Uncertainties

“Unsettling” and “crazy” were words used by Library staff as they described their everyday experiences working at the Library. The uncertainties of the upcoming “election,” reorganization of the Library with the appointment of a new director, and technological advancements fostered anxieties and concerns for Library staff. Staff members lacked an understanding of how these transitions would transpire, or what impact these transitions would have on the organization. In the following section, I present what the situation of uncertainty looked like for staff regarding the “election,” reorganizations of the Library, and advancements in technology for the Library and concerning patrons’ needs. In addition to equivocality, these uncertainties inhibited staff members from moving forward and making sense of the transitions, rather than enduring the “unsettling” and “crazy” everyday work experiences.

“I Don’t Remember Being as Nervous About It”

In an interview with Reba, the uncertainty of the path forward intersected with the “election,” which would take place during the duration of this study. A vote on the city’s budget would dramatically alter funding for the Library. The Director and Library Administration worked closely with the Library Commission on a contingency plan that would include layoffs and further reorganizations of the Library staff and resources. As Reba explained,

“You know the first couple of years I don’t remember being as nervous about it. I think it’s been, yes, in the past couple years it’s gotten to where last year seemed especially nerve wracking. And other than talking to this one person, I haven’t really talked too
much to my other coworkers; I guess I just don’t want to talk about it right now (laughter). I kind of just want to wait and see what happens. Um, to friends outside the library though, I will mention to them about the amendments [to the State’s Revised Statutes] and I’ll say, “Well if you vote for these this is what I see is going to happen.” So, I feel that I can do that on my, as a person on my own time, talk to friends about things. We can’t… talk at the reference and a patron comes up and asks. We can’t talk about certain things, politic wise, because they might consider that since we’re a city employee that we’re speaking for the city when really we’re talking. They make it very clear what we can and can’t do during election season. Which is right.”

As illustrated by Reba’s account of her experience during a period of retrenchment at the Mountain City Library, the “election” contributed to uncertainties and anxieties of the future of one’s position. The inability to speak to others in the department concerning specific issues that may fall under the “political” umbrella meant that staff members could not talk to patrons about budgetary concerns or of how their vote could essentially result in layoffs of additional Library staff. The concerns of staff members were often communicated to friends and partners, rather than fellow co-workers. The anxieties of staff members concerning the election were recounted at the varying levels and departments of the Library. Francis recalled,

There’s a certain consternation, I think, among employees about: will we ultimately get to the point where we have to start laying off people? And so that weighs pretty heavily, I think, on some of my colleagues…Um, at this point there’s been no signals of layoffs and I think everybody’s trusting that we can see it through without that, but it does mean we are not filling positions and in that sense we’ve suffered some loss of um, people
power within the library, generally. Um, so that’s part of the overall atmosphere and it
does get reflected down into shelving as well.”

“I’m Not Sure Which “L” Comes First”

The recent turnover of top Administrators has lead to a constant reorganization of the
Library. As leadership of the Mountain City Public Library has evolved over the course of
twenty years, so has the organizational structure. Each director comes with a vision, often
divergent from the previous Director, reflecting the goals and aspirations of the newly appointed
person. This has meant a perpetual reorganization of structural elements such as staff members’
job titles, especially in regards to management and administration. The most recent Director to
resign from the Mountain City Public Library, Christopherson, reorganized the structure of the
library, leading to confusion with job titles.

As a part of researching the site and the structure of the organization, I was unable to find
or pin down an organizational chart for the Library. When I asked staff members about the
organization chart, they were also unable to find an updated document, and many staff members
were uncertainty of the exact job titles, especially concerning those of Management and
Administration. In an interview with Lisa, the Assistant Director, she was also unclear of the
reorganizations instated by Christopherson, after I asked her for clarification of a department.
She explained, “And he came, and he just saw a different structure how he would like to see
something. So he made me Assistant Library Director, and put most of the things that are
considered classic public library functions under my supervisory role, except for children’s and
he put that in another department that dealt more with outreach, we’re sort of inreach, and that’s
sort of outreach. I continued, “Okay. Is that the creative… the Children’s is that under the, under
the creative department, or…?” Lisa replied, “It’s called the community learning and literacy or
community literacy and learning I’m not sure which “l” comes first. I think learning.” Through member checking, there was consensus with staff members that the actual job title changes, under the direction of Christopherson, were confusing and often lead to further misunderstandings concerning the structure of Administration. As Directors, such as Christopherson, reorganized formal job titles, other positions were folded into each other.

One aspect of the constant reorganization that Library staff found frustrating and lead to further uncertainty was the “lack of communication” between them and the Administration. Flora, who has been with the Library for eight years explained, “I think that, what I’ve noticed over a few trying periods is the more you hear from administration the better. Even if it’s, “we have no news.” The more comfortable everybody at least is that they feel like they’re being told. If they feel like people are withholding it’s worse all the way around. Where if they know something or they’re scheming and planning or if Reference did this and didn’t even tell us, you know, that kind of stuff. The more you can tell people, the better. No matter what it is really, you know, be open and honest. Especially for things like the budget’s going to be cut.” Many of the Participants expressed their dismay with the communication between Administration and themselves; however this dilemma was aggravated by the constant turnover of Administrators as previously described.

“What Do They Need Us For?”

Beyond uncertainties concerning the next leadership, reorganizations, and job titles, the future of job responsibilities was also uncertainty for librarians of the Mountain City Public Library. Uncertainties of the future were reflected in staff members’ discourse regarding the changes in technology for and of the Library, and patrons’ evolving needs.
As one interim Director, Ruth, explained, the Mountain City Public Library is “sort of on the cusp of implementing some things that…will significantly change how we do business.” As Ruth’s depiction illustrates, the Library has been “saving” for projects, such as radio frequency ID tags, that would significantly change how they “do business.” As Ruth explained, the radio frequency ID tags would allow Library staff to handle more materials more efficiently at one time, making the material processing run much smoother while keeping better track of inventory. For example, the radio frequency ID tags would allow materials to be handled more efficiently, which means library staffs’ responsibilities would shift from more manual work to “one-on-one” patron interactions that are considered “value added” services for patrons of the Library. The advancements in systems such as new radio frequency ID tags means technology training for staff members, but also a threat to identity in two ways. First, the manual aspect of some Library staff members’ jobs would no longer have the substance of the yesteryears of traditional librarianship. Second, more time with patrons as an added-value service to the experience of visiting the Library places more responsibility on the staff and librarians to have a grip on the emerging technologies patrons of the Mountain City area have become accustomed to, and technologies that may be more foreign to more traditional librarians.

Reba was just one librarian who discussed the uncertainty of her role if substantial changes were made to her everyday responsibilities. “Well, if people don’t check out books then what do they need us for? People want to, sometimes people come in a use a book but not check them out. There’s a whole other questions about what the library can do, so just trying to improve the collection of data and make it more inviting so that people will want to use the collection…” Wendy, a Reference Desk staff member, also reaffirmed that technology is not
only changing the way the library “does business,” but also that Library staff must become accustomed to the changing technological habits of patrons.

Wendy explained the need for “techies” which she described as staff that are able to assist with technology products patrons are using, even though the Library may not be as advanced regarding innovative technologies. To her, A “techie” is “a person, I mean, they know the ins and outs of the computers and, um, different systems and they can deal with somebody’s Mac and now it’s getting very easy, you just read the screens and everything but there’s some, um…” I interjected, “Not easy?” She elaborated, “Well, I can say I had one experience with a patron on Friday who had his, he wanted to get on the wireless with his laptop and it wouldn’t let us. And he came and I was trying to do it and I called Kathleen to help me, to see if she could do it and none of us could do it. And he’s saying, yeah, yeah, well I went to Starbucks and none of them could help me but one person there knew what to do, and she just knew how to do it, so, it’s like you have to be a techie to work here. That’s what I call a techie.”

“Keeping Up with All That”

Library staff that may be more reluctant to learn the technologies may also experience additional identity threats to their more traditional librarian roles and routines. As Wendy explicitly states, there may exist “struggles” to figuring out the technologies, but also longer-term librarians are less likely to actually own the products as previously addressed, which may exacerbate anxieties regarding these particular changes.

In order to “educate” patrons, there is an assumption that librarians are familiar with such devices such as iPads and iPods, Kindles and Nooks. Many staff members did not own many of the technologies that seemed to create the most anxiety when answering patrons’ questions, much due to their unfamiliarity with the technologies. Staff members frequently alluded to
needing to be more “tech savvy,” which meant knowing more about how to get into the databases, downloadables, and ebooks “coming down the pike,” which changes so quickly. As one staff member explained, “It can be a challenge trying to keep up with all of that.” These concerns can threaten the identity of many librarians who have become accustomed to the “traditional” librarian role, even Administrators who seem to be more progressive and open-minded, acknowledging the direction the Library is or needs to be heading. For example, Lisa, the Assistant Director described her own experience with technology, explaining, “I pick up a book, and I drop it, or I fall asleep…A mac or an ipod or whatever, you can’t whatever, you lose it, and you’re heartbroken, you lose a book, and you’re not happy, but you can replace it.”

Through a sensemaking lens, the uncertain and equivocal experiences of Library staff set the stage for an occasion for sensemaking. However, the overwhelming experiences of the uncertainties and equivocalities such as leadership turnover, technological advancements, threats to identity, the election, and the everyday stresses of heavier workloads, down hours, and unfilled positions have stalled enactment and the ability to make sense of the transitions because of the overwhelming feeling of absolute “stuckness.” In the following Chapter, I will illustrate how staff members are forced into reconstructive activity. These activities reconstructed agency by Library staff retelling their life story, reclaimed community through discourse regarding service, and the reestablishment of a religious-like routine. I explain how these activities were in response to leadership turnover, technological advancements, threats to identity, the election, and the everyday stresses of heavier workloads, down hours, and unfilled positions that threatened Library staff’s identity and agency.
Chapter 6: Stalled Enactment and Reconstructive Sensemaking

For Mountain City Public Library staff, enactment is stalled, and staff members are forced into reconstructive activity. In a place of absolute stuckness, the occasion for sensemaking drives Library staff to respond and act through the reconstruction of themselves as agents, and the reestablishment of routine, and community. The overwhelming experiences of the uncertainties and equivocalities such as leadership turnover, technological advancements, threats to identity, the election, and the everyday stresses of heavier workloads, down hours, and unfilled positions have stalled enactment and the ability to make sense of the transitions. Interestingly, staff members are willing to embrace the changes and are excited about the future, and yet they cannot imagine themselves there.

In this chapter, I will illustrate staff members’ reconstructive activities that reconstructed agency by Library staff retelling their life story, reclaimed community through discourse regarding service, and the reestablishment of a religious-like routine. I explain how these activities were in response to leadership turnover, technological advancements, threats to identity, the election, and the everyday stresses of heavier workloads, down hours, and unfilled positions that threatened Library staff’s identity and agency.

For example, the Interim Director, Ruth, explained, some of the technological advancements, such as updated scanning systems have been discussed and in the pipeline since 2004. On the other hand, staff members cannot deal with the transitions because they don’t want to. For Library staff, this means they do not have the ability to deal with changes, and opportunities and possibilities for sensemaking are stalled. A sense of “stuckness” at this time and place in the organization, and the lack of budget and resources, has forced staff into
reconstructing action. In response to this pressure to make sense of the uncertainties and equivocalities, Library staff has turned to reconstructive activities including the production of a life story to reconstruct the whole person as agent to respond to identities being challenged, reclamation of community through discourse regarding service, and the reestablishment of a religious-like routine.

“How Long Have You Been with the Library?”

My time with staff members was revealing in unanticipated and touching ways, especially as one question I asked participants elicited a life story. The Library staff that I had the opportunity to interview was longing to tell their life stories. In all interviews with participating Library staff, each person walked me through his or her past at the Library following the question, “How long have you been with the Library?” Some participants even shared their life and work experiences prior to their employment at the Mountain City Public Library.

Through the reconstructive activity of retelling one’s life story, Library staff reclaimed their agency as a way to respond to the stalled, overwhelming uncertainty and equivocality. The uncertainty and equivocality that challenged staff members’ identities compromised their agency as “librarians” and “effective” workers. In this section, I will explain how the retelling of one’s story allowed Library staff to reconstruct themselves as agents. Staff members reclaimed their agency at a time when their more “traditional” roles and everyday tasks were threatened by the forthcoming decisions regarding hanging developments, such as the implementation of new technologies, the appointment of a new director, and the changing needs of patrons.

I have chosen excerpts from interviews with Lisa, the Assistant Director, and Ruth, one of the interim Directors, to provide the best examples of how agency was reclaimed through the
retelling of one’s life story. Lisa, who has been with the Library for over forty years, had experienced identities pressures as a more “traditional” librarian. Her position and title of Assistant Director was given to her by Christopherson, “the revolutionary” librarian, to take care of the “classic functions” of the Mountain City Public Library. As the uncertainties of technological advancements and the appointment of a new Director loomed, Lisa reclaimed her identity as “librarian” and gained agency through the retelling of her story at a time when major transitions for the more “traditional” librarian roles are impending. On the other hand, Ruth, who has been with the Library for eight years, gained agency through the retelling of her life story at the Mountain City Public Library at a time when her identity as Director was uncertain because of the Council’s impending decision to appoint to next Director of the Library. At the time of the interview with Ruth, it was indeterminate what her next position from Interim Director would be, should she not get the job for Director of the Mountain City Public Library. Ruth was a more “innovative” librarian who did not have a library background, but has moved up in management at the Mountain City Public Library.

In the following sections, I offer two exemplars of what reconstructive activity looks like. Lisa and Ruth’s accounts illustrate how, in a place of absolute “stuckness,” enactment and the ability to make sense of the transitions is stalled, Library staff are forced to respond and act by reconstructing themselves as a whole person and reclaiming agency by retelling their life story. Their stories illustrate how agency is reconstructed at a time when their identities are threatened by the forthcoming decisions regarding hanging developments, such as implementation of technologies and the appointment of a new Director. I will provide a segment of Lisa and Ruth’s life stories, illustrating how each staff member reclaimed her agency in response to the varying indeterminate transitions.
“I Love It, But I Can’t Be Effective Anymore”

Lisa’s identity as a librarian is threatened by the technology “on the cusp” of being implemented and the upcoming appointment of a new Director. Lisa retells her life story in order to make sense of the overwhelming transitions that have disrupted her identity of a “traditional” librarian and reclaim her agency as an “effective” worker. Lisa had experienced many transitions, especially as each of the directors had transformed varying structures and practices in the Library, and even more specifically, Lisa’s roles and job titles as she moved up the management ladder. More significantly, Lisa retired at a juncture in the Library in which she foresaw major changes for librarians and “how they do business.” Lisa’s life story is significant in illustrating how she “had made it” at the Mountain City Public Library, and how she reclaimed agency by retelling her story of accomplishments when she no longer believed herself to be “effective”.

In my first interview with Lisa, I asked her an introductory question, “How long have you been with the Library?” She followed this question with the following account.

“Since…1971…Certainty not a lot of people go into library work, um, or sort of, they grew up in the library, and I certainly didn’t. And when I got my degree in library school, I didn’t know half the acronyms, like LC stands for Library of Congress but I thought, what are they talking about, what is LC, and I couldn’t go to Google. <laughter> I took a clerical position and probably stayed in it for a year, and then um, worked close to the reference desk, and so, to start, got my first job in reference, and a year later it was a professional job, and I stayed in that…up until ‘98. My boss left, and I took her position. And then, ah, all that time, there was one director. Then she left in 2003. And the person who did finance for the library she changed things around, and made my supervisory role bigger than just the reference department. We also
got to do development acquisitions part. And then I had children’s and some outreach programs. And just this year, we have a new director, that’s just come in 2008…And he came, and he just saw a different structure how he would like to see something. So he made me Assistant Library Director, and put most of the things that are considered classic public library functions under my supervisory role…”

In a second interview with Lisa, she disclosed her plans to retire after forty years with the Library. She revealed that she could not endure another major transition with the Library, nor withstand the developments, reorganizations, and goals of a new Director who would want to move forward with a vision that would essentially prompt a multitude of changes for the Library in the coming months following the City’s hire for the position. In our final meeting together, Lisa shared with me that, “It’s a strange place to work right now. I love it, but I can’t be effective anymore.”

Lisa’s story, that seems to summarize her accomplishments, is an attempt to reclaim agency as “librarian” and as an “effective” worker who had “earned her stripes,” moving from the “front lines” to her current position as Assistant Director. Lisa described her hard work and captured how these “stripes” were earned through her example of decoding the lingo. Unlike librarians today, she “couldn’t go to Google” and access online resources to figure things out. Interestingly, in her final disclosure to me, she no longer felt of the she could be “effective.” Her life story further supports that in a time of overwhelming uncertainty and equivocality, she could reclaim agency that reconstructs her identity as librarian to be effective and worth the hard work and accomplishments that allowed her to move up the management ladder in her forty years with the Library.
In the next section, Ruth’s story provides an additional illustration of how she responded to the inability to make sense of the uncertainty and equivocality regarding her position as Interim Director. Ruth responded by retelling her story of her life at the Mountain City Public Library. This reconstructive activity allowed Ruth to reclaim agency as an “effective” and qualified librarian and director, at a time in which the future of her position was uncertain.

An Uncertain “Timeline”

Ruth’s identity as a librarian is threatened by the upcoming appointment of a new Director, in which she is in the running to be selected. Ruth, the Acting, or Interim Director, elicited told? her life story and reclaimed agency when her future as Director is uncertainty. In response to the stalled hiring of the new director, Ruth retells her life story, reclaiming agency as an experienced and effective librarian and director who had been “promoted” since her employment with the Mountain City Public Library. Importantly, Ruth did not have a library background, which would further explain her desire to retell her story as an effective and competent librarian. This reconstructive activity reclaimed her abilities as librarian and capabilities as director at a time of overwhelming uncertainty concerning her next “timeline” with the Library. Each account of these “timelines,” as Ruth referred to describe her moves throughout the Library, reclaims agency as a competent “Acting” Director, capable of the next Administrative position.

In an interview with Ruth, following my question of how long she had been with the Library, she retold her story, capturing the transitions she had experienced while working at the Library. Following the question, “How long have you been with the Library?” Ruth explained, “Yeah, I started as the shelving supervisor and I worked in that position for four years and then I was promoted into a position that no longer exists called the Access Services Manager. And in
that I was responsible for supervising Circulation, Shelving, Tech Services departments, the Systems Librarian and a position that we had a few years back called the Donations Librarian. We no longer have that position… And in February of last year, I was, um, my position was changed to the Strategic Planning and Administrative Services Manager. That was also a new position for the Library and, um, through the course of last year I took on supervision of the IT department when [he] left and worked closely with the former acting Library Director when she was doing this and as of just after Christmas last year I became the acting Director.”

At a time when Ruth was unable to make sense of the uncertainty of her next position at the Mountain City Public Library, she was forced into reconstructive activity. From my interview with Ruth, she was adaptive to change, moving from various positions, also similar to Lisa’s experience, but had moved to the Acting Director position after eight years at the Library. While her identity as competent director is threatened by the Council’s decision regarding the hire of the new Director, Ruth retold her story of her proficiencies, knowledge, and ability to hold the Director position.

As Library staff retold their life story and shared with me their experiences at the Mountain City Public Library, staff members not only reclaimed agency through their stories, but they also reestablished community through their discourse regarding service and interdepartmental collaboration. In the following section, first, I will illustrate how this reconstructive activity of Library staff reestablished community for them at a time when enactment was stalled and the occasion for sensemaking drove Library staff to respond and act through the reestablishment of routine. Second, I will illustrate what it looks like for Library staff to reestablish their sense of community in order to reclaim agency as efficient librarians and
staff. *Service* is not only something they do, or a means to their job, but *service* is an end, and who they believe they *are*.

“We’re Customer Service People”

In response to the stalling of technologies that could significantly alter the way many of the Library staff “do business,” staff members made sense of this uncertainty through an interesting recovery of community through discourse regarding *service* to patrons and interdepartmental collaboration. Discourse reflected an “in it together” mentality in which they were in service to each other, and even more prevalently discussed, in service to patrons. Additionally, staff members took pride in the inter-departmental collaboration that occurred, creating a further sense of community, providing staff members with an opportunity to reconstruct community as well as agency in response to a threatened identity. Library staff worked hard to produce an effective and knowledgeable identity at a time when the future and continuity of their knowledge in a discontinued situation. *Service* was an end itself, in which one serves because he or she *is*.

In the following sections, I will first explain how staff members reestablished community through their discourse regarding *service* and their actions of *service* to each other. Second, I will describe how Library staff also reestablished community as a reconstructive activity, through the establishment of meetings and interdepartmental collaboration. Through these interactions, staff members also reclaimed agency by reestablishing spaces, such as meetings, in which their voice could be heard. This particular reconstructive activity gave staff agency by reclaiming their voice as knowledgeable, efficient, and relevant librarians and staff. The reestablishment of community was necessary at a time when staff members did not believe they had voice concerning Administrative decisions, strategies, and plans, and in a much more
unnerving sense, did not know when their expertise would become obsolete with onset of new technologies.

*Service Discourse: Helping the Patron and Each Other*

When Library staff preferred storytelling to account for how they arrived to often long-term employment with the Library, many of the staff interviewed explained how he or she began as a volunteer. Discourse regarding service reestablished community among staff, but also allowed staff members to reclaim agency as “customer service people” who are relevant and efficient librarians and staff at a time when these services could very well become obsolete. For example, Reba explained that she had volunteered at one of her children’s school libraries before making the move to earn her MLS. Francis also began as a volunteer, explaining, “I started volunteering in the reference department originally…you know, I always said, and I still believe, I like this place, and I like the purpose, and I like the people. It’s a good place to work; people take seriously their mission here and it’s been very good for me. The doctor’s advice was sound because after about a, uh I’m not sure, year or more of volunteering, we thought, ‘Oh we could supplement my salary a little bit,’ so I started to look around. The story I always spin is, try to decide what job would be good for an introvert, and I decided that shelving would be a perfect job for me.”

Community for Library staff became even more important at a time when tensions between Administration and staff were intensifying, and staff members reaffirmed their identities as “service” people to further differentiate themselves from the Administration and gain agency as efficient workers. For example, Don, a Finance Administrator, generalized the librarian *other*, insisting that the Library Commission should not give management positions to Librarians. According to Don, librarians “help you find things” and are incapable of managing and
enterprise. As a researcher of this site, this statement took me aback, as many of the Library staff members are women. However, librarians were more apt to agree with Don’s statement, steadfast and grounded in their perceptions of themselves as “uncompetitive” “customer service people.” Cindy once noted in an interview, “We are a group of people who are not competitive, by and large, people who work in libraries are not competitive people. A lot of times we are overeducated for what we’re doing, you know, we have Phd’s shelving…And so it brings up different power struggles and things that are important to people, mostly they just want, mostly I think they want to be acknowledged (noise) I just think it’s so important to do it.”

*Service* is what they *are*, which was an anchor for Library staff and a reconstructive activity to reestablish community when tensions between Administration and staff were escalating. Staff members took pride in their work and reclaimed community by making sense of their identities as service-oriented, “customer service people” and that this aspect of their work is added value, which is “not something you get every place when you walk in.” Cindy reiterated, “It’s just hard. All of the staff is working with the public a lot, it’s their job, they’re customer service people…” In an interview with Lisa, she explained, “…People bring in their machines, and ah, and we’re really really service-oriented, so it’s not like… it’s like when you come in and ask for help here, you should be getting it. And, and that’s not something you get every place when you walk in.” Wendy and Reba echoed the service aspects of the job responsibilities more implicitly by indicating that regardless of the direction with technological wind blows, they will be continually attending to the inquiries of patrons. Service for patrons does not rely on the changes that are in the pipeline, but rather, they *are* service. This service aspect that is reproduced in discourse is one aspect of their job that seems to be more fixed, or one anchor of their volatile position that is “on the cusp” of being transformed.
Service does not only refer to Library staff’s discourse regarding the commitment to patrons, but also their commitment to each other. Even with the overwhelming burden of taking on additional tasks, such as assisting shelving as much as possible, there was pride and an additional form of reclaiming community for Library staff. Community is reconstructed through reoccurring interactions such as staff members reminding each other to take lunch and time for themselves “to go outside” just to relieve themselves from the “heavier atmosphere” and “burn out from dealing with patrons”.

Library staff reconstructed community in these moments of service to each other and patrons to reclaim themselves as whole people and agents when enactment is stalled. Staff members also created meetings and took part in interdepartmental committees, which also reestablished community for staff. In the following section, I will illustrate how staff members reestablished community by creating committees to help divvy up work that would be impossible for departments to accomplish alone further and attending meetings that reclaimed staff members agency as people with valuable voices.

Meetings and Collaboration

Library staff also reestablished community as a reconstructive activity, through the establishment of meetings and interdepartmental collaboration. Through these interactions, staff members also reclaimed agency by reestablishing spaces, such as meetings, in which their voice could be heard. This particular reconstructive activity gave staff agency and a voice at a time when they did not believe they had concerning Administrative decisions, strategies, and plans, and in a much more unnerving sense, did not know when their expertise would become obsolete with onset of new technologies.
Many staff members took pride in this collaboration between departments, even though the extra tasks were a cause of additional stress. Francis explained, “The other thing that just happened, and I’m grateful to my colleagues in other departments, and other departments have shared some of our original responsibilities...So there have been additional contributions by other areas, other work groups, that have kept the burden and the efficiency of shelving going pretty well even though we’ve lost a number of positions.”

Since the “down hours” and unfilled positions, committees that were once departmentally created, became inter-departmental, and staff members were proud of this collaboration. Flora commented, “When we change some of our collections and what we do with them oftentimes there’s a big committee that talks about what could be the drawbacks, should we, shouldn’t we and there’s usually a representative from every department, you know for things like that just to see like, we just moved the new bookshelves here, those two shelves that are there...I’m on a lot of committees, they’re inter-departmental and things like that, and I think that that’s sort of how we’re helping each other because people are down positions, um, but it’s gonna be a long time before positions are added back, period.” “Helping each other” and a pride in the “creativity” between departments reproduced collaborative and supportive interactions and events.

As Kathy from the Reference Department mentioned in an interview, and was previously addressed in Chapter 5, there is no longer time for planning, which is frustrating to Library staff. The creation of these meetings and committees also gives agency, and even time, to staff members to creatively plan around the lack of time and money. A pivotal event occurred during Christopherson’s leadership when he has cancelled a meeting between himself and Library staff that occurred once a month. When the meeting was cancelled, many Library staff explained this once a month meeting was important because they could voice their concerns. The cancellation
was not received well, and disallowed some Library staff to feel and believe he or she has agency in the Library, especially as it pertains to decisions made by the Director. This further supports the notion that meetings created by Managers and Library staff inter-departmentally provided participating staff with the ability to gain agency at a juncture at the Library in which some staff members did not perceive their voices to be heard. Collaborative meetings provided a space for Library staff to support and “help each other out” as a service to each other, but also to provide a space to reconstruct and gain agency in which they perceived all voices could be heard at a time in which it is impossible to make sense of the transitions they were experiencing.

While Library staff reestablished community as a reconstructive activity, through the establishment of meetings and interdepartmental collaboration, staff members also reestablished routine by reconstructing a “sequence” of their days. Routine was grounded by Library staff’s manipulation of shared work spaces, such as the Reference desk area, and holding themselves accountable to time commitments. In the following sections, I illustrate how, through the reestablishment of routine, Library staff reconstructed a sense of predictability when nothing seemed to be predictable and certain.

Routine

Through the reestablishment of routine, staff members actively reconstructed the “sequence” of their days in order make sense of the overwhelming workloads, tasks, and uncertainty of how and when their more traditional roles and responsibilities would be transformed by new technologies. Library staff enjoyed the variation of each day, in which “no two days are the same”; however, the primary tasks became ritualized to create a routine. Even though Library staff appreciated the challenging aspects of their work, routine became necessary because of staff members’ inability to make sense of the unpredictability of each day and the
overwhelming sense of their piling tasks. The reestablishment of routine is could also be attributed to the reorganizations of positions, departments, and even job titles. Library staff reestablished routine, which became an attempt to go about daily work in a relatively organized, more predictable manner. The reconstruction of organization became a religious-like routine for Library staff.

Routine was also shaped by spaces and time, in which staff members were able to reconstruct stability and predictability at a juncture when instability had become “the new norm.” In addition to the reconstruction of routine by Library staff in terms of space and time, the day in and day out tasks were described by staff members as routine, even though everyday presented its challenges, a consequential circumstances brought upon by “down hours” and unfilled positions.

In the following sections, I will illustrate how Library staff reestablished routine. Second, I will explain how shared physical space, such as the Reference desk area, was manipulated in interesting ways by Library staff to ground this routine. Lastly, I will describe how staff members also held themselves accountability to time commitments and were “clockwatchers” in order to anchor the routine that was reestablished by Library staff to create a sense of predictability when nothing seemed to be predictable and certain.

The Establishment of Routine: The Line

Staff members reestablished routine of their daily tasks, reconstructing a predictable “sequence” in response to the unpredictable transitions that would dramatically alter their traditional and familiar approach to accomplishing everyday tasks. As previously discussed in Chapter 5, many staff members are uncertainty of how advancements in technologies will alter their everyday jobs. Through discourse, Library staff, such as Francis, has reconstructed routine
through their everyday talk describing his routine job. Staff members often discussed a daily routine, even though the everyday experiences of the work presented its challenges brought on by “down hours” and unfilled positions. One department, in particular, was at a high risk of being outsourced; however, the day in and day out grind was discussed by Library staff as “unchanged,” reestablishing a routine that could be broken by a decision to outsource the department’s responsibilities or through the implementation of new technology that would significantly alter and limit the manual aspects of his or her job.

Francis, in describing his everyday, daily tasks, explained, “We have what we called a line, ok, where the books come in, they’re either checked in by hand or by machine. We fill up carts, we push them out into this line. So the line consists of as small as four or five carts at the end of the day or as many as probably twenty-five to thirty carts at the end of the day. So to work for a while when that line is long it does start to weigh on you and, as almost always happens when we get subs [temporary workers] in, we get caught up and just the psychological boost that has, there’s no getting around it.” Interestingly, the routine of the carts and the everyday tasks of staff in this particular department are not disrupted by the cutbacks, but rather reinforced through the discourse of the daily routine. Also, this manual work had been taken up and shared with other departments in order to help the department out, which contributed to the need for routine for staff members in the varying departments in response to these additional tasks and responsibilities. Not only did staff members reestablish routine by reconstructing predictability through a “sequential” daily task schedule, Library staff also manipulated physical space to reinforce the reconstructed routine.
Space

Shared physical space, such as the Reference Desk area, was manipulated in interesting ways by Library staff to ground their reestablishment of routine. The management of the space was necessary for Library staff to reinforce routine when the Library was in constant reorganization concerning several forms of restructuring, including the ever-changing leadership and their visions for the structure of the Library, the possibility of changes to the physical structure of the Library, and even the likelihood of new job titles. The management of the desk space, especially in the Reference Desk Area that was appropriated for Library staff on the “front lines,” reflected the organization and structure necessary to keep a routine and schedule in response to the number of hours each department was down.

The shared “public spaces” for the “front line” librarians and staff were arranged for the ease of routine. In a description of the setting during participant observation, I noted [The desks at the Reference area are clean, and only contain the essentials: computer, tape, stapler, tissues, pencils, and a calendar…There is an interesting change in people at the Reference desk area. Everyone seems to know what is going on, and it is “natural” for this alteration at the desk]. The cleanliness and tidiness of the space reflected the impeccability of shift changes between staff, and contributed to the ease of this transaction. Each staff member who was taking over the shift, for instance, at the Reference Desk, often brought his or her own materials, work, and coffee mug or water to the desk or area in which he or she would be working. The interchange between Library staff was nearly flawless. The routine of this transition between the staff members was mechanistic, even ritualistic, as an observer of staff interactions. A staff member would look at the time, and in a matter of moments, another staff member would appear. Talk often did not take place between the staff member leaving the Desk area and the staff member arriving to take
over the shift. As an observer, in my interpretation of this process, it appeared as though it was a delicate and well-rehearsed dance between the Library staff that reflected the routine they had reconstructed to reestablish a daily order. What seems to be a fairly mundane, daily performance, allowed staff to have routine and organization in an environment that has been described by staff as variable, unsettling, and consistently “reorganized.” In addition to the management of space, the Library staff’s organization of time was also a reconstructive activity to guard this routine through their diligence regarding time.

*Time*

Library staff organized their time and held themselves accountable to timeliness in order to guard their reestablished routine and “sequence” that grounded them when tasks were infinite and the future was arbitrary. The Reference Desk provided a space for the daily and hourly schedule of Library staff. The schedule was in paper form and was displayed on the Desk and was repeatedly reviewed and checked by staff members, especially those on the “front line.” This recurring practice of Library staff allowed them to reestablish routine with ease, similar to the ease of interchanges between staff members. One staff member even shared her own characterization of herself, “a clockwatcher,” when describing her daily routine. Wendy captured this practice of routine by explaining, “Uh, I come in, I usually work mid-day, I start at ten or twelve, look at the schedule and see where you are every hour…I’m a clockwatcher.

*<Laughter>* Um, typically from two hours to four hours of desk time when you’re on a desk and you’re not scheduled all five hours in a chunk because you would get very, uh, burned out dealing with patrons. So one or two hours a time at a desk and I also do uh, all the publications come in, the serial magazines, newspapers, so when I’m off desk I’m working on that collection
and making sure everything is processed right and things are coming in and things aren’t falling behind. So between that and that’s basically my job, is periodicals and the deskwork.”

Meetings such as the Library Commission Meetings and Committee Meetings were also interesting sites to further comprehend how routine was reconstructed to make sense of transitions and uncertainties at the Mountain City Public Library. Although I was able to briefly chat with Library staff prior to meetings, it often depended on who was in attendance. When time for small talk and conversations were available, it was often with Administrators, unless a meeting took a few minutes to begin. Library staff often arrived to meetings right on time. Prior to a few of the Commission Meetings, I was the only one in the room five minutes prior to a meeting, with the exception of the Administrative Assistant who would prepare the room for the Meeting. She would assure me people were coming, and we would converse about, for instance, the lengthiness of meetings. In attending committee meetings, when I was permitted to do so, many staff members had to leave right away following the meeting, and more often times would have to leave early in order to get to their next task.

Keeping a schedule was religious-like, and during interviews, participating staff members often checked their watches and clocks to make sure they were not running late for their next meeting or assignment. In my attempt to coordinate interviews, one particular staff member would frequently run into me and comment on the fact that she would like to participate in the study, but she didn’t know if she had time. Interestingly, we had checked her schedule together on numerous occasions to try to coordinate a time to meet. Following this extensive coordination, we were unable to meet because the interview with me was impeding her daily routine that was protected beyond modification. In order to keep the daily routine intact, some participants preferred alternate locations and/or times in order to not take away time from their
routine and daily responsibilities, even though Management and the Director approved this time with me.

These findings supported two basic claims. First, the Mountain City Public Library staff experienced stalled enactment, and in response to the inability to *make sense* of the overwhelming and unpredictable transitions, staff members were forced into reconstructed activity. And second, their absolute stuckness, the occasion for sensemaking, drove Library staff to respond and act through the reconstruction of themselves as agents, and the reestablishment of routine, and community. In the following concluding chapter, I revisit my primary research question and focus, and how, through qualitative research methods and a sensemaking theoretical framework, the Library staff’s *reconstructive* activity was a development that was an unexpected turn for me, as the primary researcher. Following the summary of findings, I argue Weick’s theory of sensemaking is limited by the necessity for *enactment* to occur in order for people to *make sense* of uncertainty and equivocality, and how this study may be further applied to organizations. I concur that action is more important than accuracy, as Weick suggested. Next, I address design limitations regarding the punctuation of the study, and limitations to generalizability of the findings because of the context-specific transitions and developments of the Library as a site. I conclude with further research concerning this study by investigating human resiliency and uncertainty in the workplace.
Chapter 7: Conclusion

My own experiences with retrenchment lead me to study how organizational members make sense of ambiguity and uncertainty in the workplace, and how do people respond to this type of change? In this study, I examined how staff members of a public agency, a public library, experience transitions due to cutbacks, limited resources and technological changes. The study illustrated how people make sense of organizational uncertainties and equivocalities through reconstructive activity. In the following sections, first, I summarize my findings of this study, and how the absolute “stuckness” experienced by Library staff forced them to respond through reconstructive activities including the reconstruction of themselves as agents, and the reestablishment of routine, and community. Second, I describe applied implications for organizational members and management who may be experiencing workplace uncertainty and equivocality. Third, I summarize the valuable lessons I learned as a new researcher following the completion of my first qualitative study. Lastly, I conclude with future research I that extends this studies finding by further exploring the topic of human resiliency regarding uncertainty in the workplace.

Summary of Findings

My study was informed by my primary research question and focus, which is to understand the emergent and socially constructed process of how, through history production in discourse, do staff members of an institution make sense of organizational transitions, specifically during episodes of budget cuts and limited resources in an evolving and progressing technological environment? While this research question informed and guided my study, I was surprised by my findings. Through qualitative research methods and a sensemaking theoretical framework, the Library staff’s reconstructive activity was a development that was an unexpected
turn for me, as the primary researcher. I had “expected⁴” to see retrospective sensemaking at the forefront as I began data analysis. However, the absolute “stuckness” experienced by Library staff when enactment was stalled, forced Library staff to respond through reconstructive activity, rather than retrospective sensemaking alone.

The study supported two basic claims. First, the Mountain City Public Library staff experienced stalled enactment, and in response to the inability to make sense of the overwhelming and unpredictable transitions, staff members were forced into reconstructed activity. And second, their absolute stuckness, the occasion for sensemaking, drove Library staff to respond and act through the reconstruction of themselves as agents, and the reestablishment of routine, and community.

**Stalled Enactment and Reconstructive Sensemaking**

For Mountain City Public Library staff, the overwhelming experiences of the uncertainties and equivocalities such as leadership turnover, technological advancements, threats to identity, the election, and the everyday stresses of heavier workloads, down hours, and unfilled positions have stalled enactment and the ability to make sense of the transitions. Enactment is stalled, and staff members are forced into reconstructive activity. In a place of absolute stuckness, the occasion for sensemaking drives Library staff to respond and act through the reconstruction of themselves as agents, and the reestablishment of routine, and community. Interestingly, staff members are willing to embrace the changes and are excited about the future, and yet they cannot imagine themselves there. In response to this pressure to make sense of the uncertainties and equivocalities, Library staff has turned to reconstructive activities including the production of a life story to reconstruct the whole person as agent to respond to identities being

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⁴ Realizing that “expected” has a quantitative undertone, the use of the word reflects my intuition at the onset of the study that lead me to utilizing the Weickian sensemaking lens following the first months of participants observations and initial reviews of interviews and fieldnotes.
challenged, reclamation of community through discourse regarding service, and the reestablishment of a religious-like routine.

“I Love It, But I Can’t Be Effective Anymore”

Through the reconstructive activity of retelling one’s life story, Library staff reclaimed their agency as a way to respond to the stalled, overwhelming uncertainty and equivocality. The uncertainty and equivocality that challenged staff members’ identities compromised their agency as “librarians” and “effective” workers. My time with staff members was revealing in unanticipated and touching ways, especially as one question I asked participants elicited a life story. The Library staff that I had the opportunity to interview was longing to tell their life stories. As Library staff retold their life story and shared with me their experiences at the Mountain City Public Library, staff members not only reclaimed agency through their stories, but they also reestablished community through their discourse regarding service and interdepartmental collaboration.

“We’re Customer Service People”

In response to the stalling of technologies that could significantly alter the way many of the Library staff “do business,” staff members made sense of this uncertainty through an interesting recovery of community through discourse regarding service to patrons and interdepartmental collaboration. Discourse reflected an “in it together” mentality in which they were in service to each other, and even more prevalently discussed, in service to patrons. Additionally, staff members took pride in the inter-departmental collaboration that occurred, creating a further sense of community, providing staff members with an opportunity to reconstruct community as well as agency in response to a threatened identity. Library staff worked hard to produce an effective and knowledgeable identity at a time when the future and
continuity of their knowledge in a discontinued situation. *Service* was an end itself, in which one *serves* because he or she *is*.

*Service Discourse: Helping the Patron and Each Other*

Discourse regarding service reestablished community among staff, but also allowed staff members to reclaim agency as “customer service people” who are relevant and efficient librarians and staff at a time when these services could very well become obsolete. Community for Library staff became even more important at a time when tensions between Administration and staff were intensifying, and staff members reaffirmed their identities as “service” people to further differentiate themselves from the Administration and gain agency as efficient workers. *Service* is what they *are*, which was an anchor for Library staff and a reconstructive activity to reestablish community when tensions between Administration and staff were escalating. Staff members took pride in their work and reclaimed community by making sense of their identities as service-oriented, “customer service people” and that this aspect of their work is added value, which is “not something you get every place when you walk in.”

Service does not only refer to Library staff’s discourse regarding the commitment to patrons, but also their commitment to each other. Even with the overwhelming burden of taking on additional tasks, such as assisting shelving as much as possible, there was pride and an additional form of reclaiming community for Library staff. Community is reconstructed through reoccurring interactions such as staff members reminding each other to take lunch and time for themselves “to go outside” just to relieve themselves from the “heavier atmosphere” and “burn out from dealing with patrons”. Staff members also created meetings and took part in interdepartmental committees, which also reestablished community for staff, a reconstructive activity to reclaim agency.
Meetings and Collaboration

Library staff also reestablished community as a reconstructive activity, through the establishment of meetings and interdepartmental collaboration. Through these interactions, staff members also reclaimed agency by reestablishing spaces, such as meetings, in which their voices could be heard. This particular reconstructive activity gave staff agency and a voice at a time when they did not believe they had concerning Administrative decisions, strategies, and plans, and in a much more unnerving sense, did not know when their expertise would become obsolete with onset of new technologies. Meetings created by Managers and Library staff inter-departmentally provided participating staff with the ability to gain agency at a juncture at the Library in which some staff members did not perceive their voices to be heard. Collaborative meetings provided a space for Library staff to support and “help each other out” as a service to each other, but also to provide a space to reconstruct and gain agency in which they believed their opinions and ideas were taken seriously at a time in which it was impossible to make sense of the transitions they were experiencing.

While Library staff reestablished community as a reconstructive activity, through the establishment of meetings and interdepartmental collaboration, staff members also reestablished routine by reconstructing a “sequence” of their days. Routine was grounded by Library staff’s manipulation of shared work spaces, such as the Reference desk area, and holding themselves accountable to time commitments. Library staff reconstructed a sense of predictability when nothing seemed to be predictable and certain.

Routine

Through the reestablishment of routine, staff members actively reconstructed the “sequence” of their days in order make sense of the overwhelming workloads, tasks, and
uncertainty of how and when their more traditional roles and responsibilities would be transformed by new technologies. Library staff enjoyed the variation of each day, in which “no two days are the same”; however, the primary tasks became ritualized to create a routine. Even though Library staff appreciated the challenging aspects of their work, routine became necessary because of staff members’ inability to make sense of the unpredictability of each day and the overwhelming sense of their piling tasks. The reestablishment of routine is could also be attributed to the reorganizations of positions, departments, and even job titles. Library staff reestablished routine, which became an attempt to go about daily work in a relatively organized, more predictable manner. The reconstruction of organization became a religious-like routine for Library staff. Routine was also shaped by spaces and time, in which staff members were able to reconstruct stability and predictability at a juncture when instability had become “the new norm.” In addition to the reconstruction of routine by Library staff in terms of space and time, the day in and day out tasks were described by staff members as routine, even though everyday presented its challenges.

*The Establishment of Routine: The Line*

Staff members reestablished routine of their daily tasks, reconstructing a predictable “sequence” in response to the unpredictable transitions that would dramatically alter their traditional and familiar approach to accomplishing everyday tasks. Through discourse, Library staff has reconstructed routine through their everyday talk describing the routine of the job. Staff members often discussed a daily routine, even though the everyday experiences of the work presented its challenges brought on by “down hours” and unfilled positions. One department, in particular, was at a high risk of being outsourced; however, the day in and day out grind was discussed by Library staff as “unchanged,” reestablishing a routine that could be broken by a
decision to outsource the department’s responsibilities or through the implementation of new technology that would significantly alter and limit the manual aspects of his or her job. Not only did staff members reestablish *routine* by reconstructing predictability through a “sequential” daily task schedule, Library staff also manipulated physical space to reinforce the reconstructed routine.

*Space*

The management of the space was necessary for Library staff to reinforce routine when the Library was in constant reorganization concerning several forms of restructuring, including the ever-changing leadership and their visions for the structure of the Library, the possibility of changes to the physical structure of the Library, and even the likelihood of new job titles. The management of the desk space, especially in the Reference Desk Area that was appropriated for Library staff on the “front lines,” reflected the organization and structure necessary to a keep a routine and schedule in response to the number of hours each department was down. The shared “public spaces” for the “front line” librarians and staff were arranged for the ease of routine. In addition to the management of space, the Library staff’s organization of time was also a reconstructive activity to guard this routine through their diligence regarding time.

*Time*

Library staff organized their time and held themselves accountable to timeliness in order to guard their reestablished routine and “sequence” that grounded them when tasks were infinite and the future was arbitrary. For staff members, keeping a schedule was religious-like. The Reference Desk provided a space for the daily and hourly schedule of Library staff. The schedule was in paper form and was displayed on the Desk and was repeatedly reviewed and checked by staff members, especially those on the “front line.” This recurring practice of
Library staff allowed them to reestablish routine with ease, similar to the ease of interchanges between staff members.

These findings are the foundation for this study’s implications. Library staff responded to their experience of overwhelming uncertainty through reconstructive activities. In the following section, first, I explain how this study contributes to sensemaking literature by considering how certain conditions experienced by organizational members stalled enactment and different patterns emerged in which sensemaking did not seem to occur. Second, I explain as a variety of organizations are faced with fiscal uncertainty, especially public agencies that are currently cutting budgets but also eliminating jobs, this study may help these organizations consider the ramifications of stalled enactment, which can significantly distress organizational members. Lastly, I address the implications for my study and the necessity for management of hierarchical organizations to act at times of uncertainty, and furthermore, for organizational management to acknowledge the various experiences and more importantly, voices, of staff members.

Implications and Application

My contribution with this thesis is to the sensemaking literature. Weick’s theory of sensemaking benefits from additional consideration of how certain occasions and conditions of ambiguity and uncertainty organizational members may be experiencing may not result in sensemaking. When a multitude of transitions are simultaneously occurring and enactment is stalled because of the inability to act, people may be driven to other actions, which extends Weick’s theory of sensemaking. Sensemaking, or what was to be expected did not happen, but rather, staff members responded to the “core conditions” I presented in this study through reconstructive activity. Weick’s insights worked within the site by providing a lens in which I
found staff responded to the experience of absolute “stuckness” through the reconstruction of themselves as agents, and the reestablishment of routine, and community. This is a significant extension to Weick’s theory because his theory of sensemaking focused on small transitions. In comparison, I examined how people experience and make sense of numerous transitions, which is becoming a more common phenomenon. In the following section, I explore how these finding may contribute to organizational life at times when people may be experiencing major transitions and uncertainty in the workplace.

As Weick (1995) suggests, at times of uncertainty and equivocality, it is adventagious for management to act, rather than to stifling action because action may allow organizational members to make sense of uncertainties in the workplace. Wieck also suggest that plausibility, rather than accuracy, is more important in these cases. It is more important for organizational decision makers to consider reducing uncertainties for its members by not hindering the implementations of technologies or system changes. Accuracy, or whether a decision is good or bad, is much less important than the decision being made.

The unpredictability of job stability in a fragmented and dynamic social environment is not likely to slow down. Understanding how employees make sense of transitions will be crucial for a variety of organizations to consider as ambiguity and equivocality become exponentially more commonplace at a time and space of retrenchment. For instance, managerial Action, or decision making, becomes pertinent when employees may be experiencing a multitude of transitions. Weick (1995) explains accuracy takes a backseat in analyses of sensemaking; “…stimuli that are filtered out are often those that detract from an energetic, confident, motivated response. Accurate perceptions have the power to immobilize” (p. 60). The contradiction seems to lie in retrospective sensemaking of previous actions, and in fact, stifling
any action—action that could inhibit rather than prohibit sensemaking for organizational members.

As a variety of organizations are faced with fiscal uncertainty, especially public agencies that are currently cutting budgets but also eliminating jobs, this study may help these organizations consider the ramifications of stalled enactment, which can significantly distress organizational members. Beyond the reports, numbers, and *objective* understandings of retrenchment, this study captured the experiences of staff members at the Mountain City Public Library, illustrating the dynamics internal to this organization during periods of budget cuts and the unpredictability of job stability. The uncertainties and equivocalities that Library staff was unable to make sense of were experienced as “crazy,” “overwhelming,” “unsettling,” in which Library staff responded through reconstructive activity. This study helps employees of organizations facing these types of transitions related to budget constraints understand the ramifications of increased work and emotional loads, and the consequences of “stuckness” when decisions or resolutions are stalled.

Rather than Library staff making sense of uncertainty and equivocality through retrospection, and possibly relying on or employing “other” coping strategies, it was the “coping strategies,” or what I considered to be “reconstructive activities” that had much more to do with the *process* rather than an *end*. One of the most interesting developments in this study was to find that one of the subcategory questions I initially wanted to investigate, *What, if any, are the coping strategies of organizational members and how do they function?* was much more related to *how* organizational members responded to stalled enactment. For example, what I may have considered to be “coping strategies” in initial data analysis actually developed into, or *functioned* as, Library staff’s reconstructive activities at a time when they were experiencing an absolute
“stuckness.” In the following section, I address the implications for my study and the necessity for management of hierarchical organizations to act at times of uncertainty, and furthermore, for organizational management to acknowledge the various experiences and more importantly, voices, of staff members.

As previously discussed, action, is more important than accuracy, or whether a decision is considered good or bad, as Weick suggested. Actions drive sensemaking, and organizational management and administration should understand the ramifications for stalled action that inhibit sensemaking for organizational members. “Situations that induce hesitation, alienation, or despair in anyone should be experienced as confusing because they make it harder for people to take actions around which meanings could crystallize” (Brickman, 1987, p. 174).

It is also crucial for management to consider alternative understandings at overwhelming junctures in an organization. This becomes even more relevant at times of organizational transitions when staff members may be threatened by major changes that are occurring, or may be in the works, but action is stalled. For organizations, especially with a hierarchal structure, administration should be even more aware of the implications for employee input for two reasons. One, employees, other than management and administration, will have varying perspectives on for example, steps forward, or even “how to deal with these transitions, now.” For example, Library staff collaborated and reconstructed community without the mandate of management. Second, through the creation of interdepartmental meetings, these occasions provided opportunities for staff to reclaim agency and believe they had a voice in the midst of transition.
Limitations

There are three limitations to my study including the need for me to be more situated and knowledgeable of organizational change and transition literatures, in addition to time and generalizability limitations. In the following section, I will first address how additional research on change and transitions in organizations would allow this study to contribute to these literatures. Second, unlike many studies, I was at a site in which I was able to capture people and the organization experience a multitude of transitions for a yearlong study. However, one limitation for this study is my inability to study the consequences of the coping strategies implemented by Mountain City Library staff. Third, I address the limitations to a descriptive qualitative study. These limitations concern the generalizability of this study’s findings because of the subjectivities of context-specific knowledge such as the transitions and uncertainties and equivocalities experienced by Library staff, while I attempt to avoid the reification of these experiences and “levels” of uncertainty and equivocality.

One limitation to my study is my inability to contribute to the change and transition literatures, as I previously presented. For instance, in my initial inquiries, I argue that as a wide-range of organizations have experienced cutbacks or layoffs and will continue to do so, understanding how people make sense of transitions will be crucial for a variety of organizations to consider. More specifically, I presented the question, *how do organizational members make sense of ambiguity and uncertainty in the workplace, and how do people respond to this type of change?* In order to contribute to change and transition research, I will need to further examine additional change and transition literatures, especially those regarding retrenchment and economic constraints.
Time and generalizability are two limitations specific to this study. The confines of this study’s punctuation is a limitation to understanding further what are the consequences of Library staff’s reconstructive activities as they responded to such ambiguities and uncertainties as a new library director and technological advancements. The length of the time at the Mountain City Public Library and the boundedness of the events and occurrences at the Library presented limitations to this study’s design. While Library staff experienced an “absolutely stuckness,” this study was ended prior to the hiring of a new director, which would most likely result in other “uncertainties” and “equivocalities” to be eliminated. My limited time at the site and my inability to conduct further research at the Mountain City Public Library because of geographic constraints are challenges reflective of the boundedness of managing this study. Other limitations to this study include the generalizability of the findings because of the subjectivities, such as context-specific knowledge, of the Library.

Lessons Learned

As a first qualitative study of my academic career, I learned from the experience of embodying the phenomenon of uncertainty and the complexities that emerge because I had experienced retrenchment in my professional life, in addition to reflecting on my experience of grappling with the intricacies of the concept “participant observer.” Along this jarring journey, I had the opportunity to reflect on my experiences and the lesson learned, and I’m grateful for having had the opportunity to listen to the stories of Library staff. In the completion of my first qualitative research study, I also left the site and the project grateful for the insights and lessons I learned about the research process, but also about myself as researcher. In the following section, first, I attend to revelations I experienced regarding the research process. This includes what it meant to navigate site in which the staff members were experiencing a tremendous
amount of anxiety regarding their jobs and everyday work life. In navigating a volatile site, I embodied an unexpected heaviness, as well as gratefulness for the stories Library staff shared with me over the past year. Second, as a researcher of this kind of phenomenon, there was a pivotal moment in which I had the opportunity and physical inclination to react to an interaction between Ruth and the Library Commission, and I chose not to. Following the description of this moment, I explain how my own uncertainty as a new researcher stalled my own action at the Library Commission meeting. In the time following this occurrence, I reflected on the delicate dance that seems to take place between the concepts of participant and observer.

In navigating a volatile site in which many staff expressed and disclosed their personal anxiety regarding their work life, I was eager to listen, which was often reciprocated by the participant’s eagerness to share his or her story. However, I was confounded by my own embodiment of the heaviness that was expressed by participants. The heaviness I experienced as a researcher of this phenomenon disrupted my expectation of not being affected because I had also experienced uncertainty in the workplace myself; however, I believe my wounds of my experiences with retrenchment were reopened, therefore, at times, it was as if I was reliving the hurt from my previous professional life. It was as though I was revisiting my own experiences with the layoffs and uncertainty I had endured as a professional. I was grateful for the moments with the people I interviewed and the conversations with staff that would take place spontaneously when taking fieldnotes while observing or walking out of meetings. Throughout the project, I realized how each person’s stories and even interactions in meetings that I had the opportunity to attend reminded me of my own experiences of workplace uncertainty.

I believe these experiences as a researcher of a volatile site lead me to the moment in which I felt discomfort because I did not respond to a visceral reaction I had in a Library
Commission meeting in which Ruth became upset while explaining the Library’s “plate was already full.” In reflecting on this moment, I embodied the frustrations, empathizing with Ruth, with her experience of having too much work and not enough time to do accomplish it all, while simultaneously, uncertainty of the future of my professional job at the time. This frustration seemed to be juxtaposed to my uncertainties of myself as a new researcher, still fleshing out the complexities of what seemed to me to be the delicate dance that takes place between the concepts of participant and observer. In the Library Commission meeting, I do not regret deciding not to engage in the meeting; however, it was an occurrence that has stayed with me, and in future studies, I would like to thoughtfully “tinker” with my position as a participant observer, in which participation becomes an even more significant piece to my project.

As previously noted, this study reaffirmed my own identity as budding ethnographer and my appreciation and gratefulness to the Library staff that “let me in” in their world. In the following, and final section, I present further research I would like to pursue beyond this study. The experiences Library staff shared with me awakened my understanding to reconstructive activity and the resiliency that seemed to emerge at an overwhelming time and space at the Mountain City Public Library.

Further Research

Through a sensemaking lens, in this study I found Library staff to respond to the overwhelming experience of “stuckness” through reconstructive activity. As previously noted, this finding was unexpected because of my initial inclinations to “see” staff members make sense of uncertainty and equivocality through the process of retrospective sensemaking. However, this “surprise” that I experienced is constituted by my freshness to qualitative research, but also to this “other side” of retrenchment. The “other side” that I am referring is reflected in the
collaboration and community-oriented piece concerning Library staff’s reconstructive activity. For example, when enactment was stalled for Library staff, staff members reconstructed occasions that reclaimed agency and community. Reconstructive activity in response to overwhelming uncertainty is an interesting phenomenon because of the Library staff’s proactive approach making sense of a difficult time and space at the Mountain City Public Library. This resiliency to organizational adversity is an interest I would like to investigate. I would like to further research the human resiliency side of retrenchment, uncertainty, equivocality, and unpredictability in and of organizations and organizing.

If organizations are emergent and self-organizing in which change is constant, evolving, and cumulative (Weick & Quinn, 1999, p. 366), what does human resiliency look like if change is a pattern of endless modifications in work processes and social practice (p. 366)? How can we understand human resiliency in regards to uncertainties in the workplace, which may often be associated with economic transitions? Fiscal modifications is just one of several ways organizations are tension filled; however, this type of transition is pressing and must be examined further as fiscal limitations are becoming more commonplace in organizations. Economic constraints, budgetary belt-tightening, and unemployment can be conceptualized as just one of the infinite types of transitions organizations may be facing, and human resiliency as a future focus of study would build on this study’s contribution to sensemaking and workplace change literatures.
References


