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# Exploring Professional Identity

Scott G. Banghart

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Exploring Professional Identity

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### **Abstract**

This thesis examines the ways in which organizational members define what it means to communicate professionally, the extent to which enacting professional identity reflects organizational identification and individual identity, and the specific contexts in which professionalism is most encouraged. Data collected from participant interviews highlighted three intersectional components related to the enactment professional identity and perceptions of [un]professionalism—technical, behavioral, and social. Further, the results of this study suggest that professionalism as a communicative construct manifests itself in the midst of ongoing tension between individual agency and organizational constraint, conflating individual identities with norms, values, and expectations set forth by the organization in relation to the external environment. While each of these components can be considered separately in terms of their unique properties and dimensions, it is in their intersections that the most salient symbolic and material consequences for professional identities are manifested. Through analyzing the ways in which participants "do" professional identity in light of situated norms, this research offers a new model of professionalism that recognizes the intersectional relationship among individuals, organizations, and the overarching environment. Future work should investigate the construct of professional identity in nontraditional organizational settings, as well as how professionalism operates in relation to dominant discourses of identity (i.e., race, class, gender, sexuality, age, ability, etc.).

*Keywords:* professionalism, identity, organizational identification, tension, intersectionality

## CHAPTER I – Introduction

A significant body of organizational communication research centers on organizational identification and the individual identities of organizational members. Organizational scholars largely agree that identification serves as a response to the varied and differential stimuli present in contemporary life (Tompkins & Cheney, 1983). Cheney (1983a) defines identification as, “an individual response to the divisions of society [by which] a person *acts* to identify with some target(s), i.e., persons, families, groups, collectivities; and to a lesser extent, values, goals, knowledge, activities, objects” (p. 145). Even in this early conceptualization of identification, we see discourses of similarity, difference, and belonging at play, which premise the relationship between organizational identification and individual identity.

As individuals, we make choices regarding the social stimuli with which we identify that in turn influence our own behaviors, as well as our susceptibility to be influenced by organizations (Williams & Connaughton, 2012). To some extent, in choosing to identify with particular social collectives (i.e., organizations), we surrender our individual agency and give these collectives a degree of power over our own identities. As Scott (2007) alludes in the passage below, discourses of inclusivity and exclusivity often facilitate our identification with organizations as well as perceptions of our own identities:

Indeed, it is through communication with others that we express our belongingness (or lack thereof) to various collectives, assess the reputation and image of those collectives, that various identities are made known to us, and the social costs and rewards of maintaining various identities are revealed. (p. 124)

Thus, communication scholars’ attention to identification, individual identity, and the issues of power that arise from these social constructs in organizational contexts is both necessary and

important. Accordingly, this paper seeks to review current literature focused on organizational identity, identification, and power as well as pilot future research to build our theoretical and empirical knowledge in these related areas.

Specifically, this study focuses on the concept of “professionalism” as it relates to organizational identity, identification, and power. Organizational identity inherently involves a level of “professionalism.” For example, organizational members use phrases like, “be more professional” or, on the contrary, “s/he is very [un]professional.” Intuitively, it seems that these communicative acts serve to express some level of organizational identification, as well as project constructs of identity onto other organizational members. Yet, there is very little research that addresses these connections. This research seeks to address this gap in providing a case study that examines the ways in which employees enact professionalism as part of their identity in organizational contexts. It explores the extent to which organizational identification, individual identity, and power combine to form professional identities, and how individuals negotiate these identities in their day-to-day interactions (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007).

Studies of the “professional” in modern society have primarily come from a sociological perspective, and while communication scholars have explored such concepts as organizational identification and identity, specific accounts of how organizational expectations for professionalism are both reflected and enacted in everyday interaction are scarce among organizational communication research. As Cheney & Ashcraft (2007) note:

A communication-oriented analysis brings to light the fundamentally rhetorical character of these ongoing formations, as well as other consequential meanings and functions of the professional: inventing or coding a kind of activity and work or worker; indexing,

expressing, and evoking modes of performance; producing, maintaining, and (de)valuing occupational networks; and facilitating, yet obscuring intersectionality at work. (p. 168)

Hence, this study responds to the call for a communication-based exploration of how professionalism is enacted in organizational contexts and the implications for such enactment.

In chapter two, academic literature relating to organizational identification, identity tensions, power, and control is reviewed in order to preview the various conceptual underpinnings of this research. Further, the final two sections review literature surrounding professional identity and characteristics of professionalism, further contextualizing the research agenda of this study. Chapter two concludes by presenting the specific research questions explored through this study. Next, in chapter three, the qualitative system of methods used to conduct this research is discussed. The chapter begins by explaining the rationale behind using CarrierTech as the target organization for this research. Second, the range of participants – who represent a microcosm of the organization – are addressed, leading to a discussion of the procedures used in this study (i.e., participant interviews) and the interview protocol. Finally, chapter three concludes by presenting the coding and constant-comparison method by which data in this study was analyzed.

Chapter four presents and analyzes the findings of this study in five sections: (a) definitions of professionalism; (b) technical; (c) behavioral; (d) social; and (e) intersectional professionalism. In the first section, findings related to defining the scope of professionalism and professional identity are highlighted. The three sections that follow present the three interrelated components that emerged from this study, along with their associated properties and dimensions. In the final section, the ways in which these three components intersect and complicate one another are discussed and a model is presented to illustrate the relationship among the various

components of professional identity. In chapter five, the theoretical and practical implications of this research are considered, along with its limitations and future directions to be taken in the exploration of professionalism and professional identity. Finally, chapter six concludes with a discussion of the most salient contributions of this study, overall.



## CHAPTER II – Review of Literature

### Organizational Identification

The term *identification* first emerged in organizational communication scholarship in the work of Tompkins and Cheney (1983) to describe the connection between employees and the organizations for which they work. For example, Cheney (1983a) explored the rhetorical function of corporate publications, which often communicate organizational values, goals, and information. He argued that such materials serve as persuasive mechanisms that facilitate the alignment of interests and behaviors with “what’s best” for the organization, and ultimately induce identification in organizational members. Cheney (1983a) identified three strategies apparent in corporate communications: (a) the common ground technique (i.e., expressing concern for individual members, recognizing members’ contributions, espousing shared values, etc.); (b) identification by antithesis (i.e., encouraging disassociation with “enemies” by defining what the organization is *not*); and (c) the assumed “we” (i.e., presuming all employees as sharing commonalities by virtue of their membership). He also examined ways in which organizational identification influenced on the job decision-making (Cheney, 1983b). He found that company policies and actions taken by the organization significantly influenced members’ attitudes toward the organization, premises by which they made decisions, and their overall identification with the organization. Overall, Cheney’s (1983a; 1983b) seminal work suggested that organizational identification facilitates members’ abilities to make sense of their experiences, organize their thoughts, reach decisions, and solidify a sense of self.

Although Cheney (1983b) refers to identification as “an active process by which individuals link themselves to elements in the social scene” (p. 342), his early work largely assumed identification to be an element under the control of the organization, as evidenced by

discussions of strategies, tactics, and positive outcomes. Scott, Corman, and Cheney (1998) challenge this notion in applying structuration theory to identification in organizations. Their work positions the identification process as a duality, involving identities that both produce and are produced by identifications, which become apparent through social interaction. Scott et al. (1998) recognize the multifaceted and dynamic nature of identity, as their theoretical framework accounts for connections among multiple identities and identifications involved in organizational life. Furthermore, they view identity as a fluid construct that varies depending on the context in which it is situated. Different situations bring about different “regions” of identity; thus, certain identifications are more probable than others during particular activities (Scott et al., 1998).

To examine Scott et al.’s (1998) communicative model of situated identification, Larson and Pepper (2003) explored the various strategies and tactics used by organizational members in managing multiple targets, or sources, of identification. Through participant observation, interviews, and textual analysis, Larson and Pepper (2003) identified three categories of identification management strategies: (a) comparison, which refers to the process of choosing which identity option is most appropriate for the given situation; (b) logic, which refers to the reasons behind individuals’ identification choices; and (c) support, which refers to actual or perceived support from others that individuals use to rationalize their identifications. They also discuss various tactics within these larger strategies. In comparing or contrasting identity options, individuals may express benefits or problems relating to the identification target, provide “case in point” examples to defend and support their decisions, or reconcile conflicting identities through interaction (Larson & Pepper, 2003). In using logic to support identification choices, individuals justify their conditions with regard to forces in the external environment or use metaphorical statements as rational premise (Larson & Pepper, 2003). Under the strategy of

support, we see both direct and implied support, and again, the assumed “we,” which was discussed earlier in Cheney’s (1983a) work. Overall, this research supports Scott et al.’s (1998) theory by illustrating how individuals use specific strategies and corresponding tactics in different contexts to actively express their identifications (Larson & Pepper, 2003).

Scott and Stephens (2009) extend this research in exploring the extent to which individuals reported identification with multiple targets across three different communication situations. Using quantitative methods, they attempted to measure identification in relation to possible antecedents (i.e., work motives and communication competence) and outcomes (i.e., intent to quit/remain and job/work satisfaction). Results indicated a positive correlation among both the antecedents and outcomes, which supports the view of identification as situated, and also suggests that communicative activities and interactions might play a role in determining individuals’ levels of identification with an organization (Scott & Stephens, 2009). Recently, Stephens and Dailey (2012) expanded this notion in their study of organizational identification in newcomers. They sought to find out how “pre-entry” experiences (i.e., new hire orientation) with hiring organizations influenced incoming members’ organizational identification. Their work complements that of Scott & Stephens (2009) in showing how individuals’ prior experiences inform their perceptions of new hire orientation, and in turn, their situated identification.

Considered together, these studies centered on organizational identification provide significant insight to the ways in which organizational practices elicit member identification and members’ predispositions influence their situated identification. However, despite the structural theory proposed by Scott et al. (1998), which recognized individual identity as a dynamic and multifaceted construct, these studies have yet to address critical questions surrounding the impact of organizational identification on individual identity and

professionalism. Instead, they seem to position identification as a positive outcome resulting from individuals' participation in organizational life. In the next section, we see a more interpretive approach, which describes the individual identity tensions that can arise from organizational identification.

### **Organizations & Identity Tensions**

This theme in the literature highlights the tensions felt by organizational members when multiple intersecting identities conflict, often as a result of contextual factors relating to their organizational membership or the state of the organization in relation to the external environment. Scott et al. (1998) highlight four identities relevant to organizational life: (1) individual; (2) work group; (3) organizational; and (4) occupational. In considering these four identities, we can see that they span from a micro level to a macro level as each subsequent identity involves considering the self in relation to progressively larger groups. Whereas a work group might contain 3-15 individuals, thousands of individuals might belong to a given occupation. Because identities are situated in context, they vary over time and space and can often overlap, which in turn causes tension for organizational members (Scott et al., 1998).

Accordingly, research has also highlighted the ways in which tensions and contradictions are embedded in day-to-day organizational activities and situated in historical and industrial contexts (Ashcraft & Trethewey, 2004). Harter (2004) found that, "Communicators create and respond to contradictions of organizational life in particular historical-social-gendered discursive contexts that frame, and in turn are framed by, symbolic interactions" (p. 109). As evidenced by her study of the Nebraska Cooperative Council, organizational members are often faced with tensions (e.g., contemporary pressures versus historical ideologies), contradictions inherent to

participatory systems (e.g., efficiency versus participation, equity versus equality), and competing forms of masculinity (e.g., individual versus collective decision-making).

In a similar study, Tracy (2004) examined how members of a total institution responded to the organizational tensions of respect versus suspect, nurture versus discipline, consistency versus flexibility, and solidarity versus autonomy. She found that the existence of tensions in organizational settings alone is not necessarily problematic; rather, the various ways in which organizational members frame tensions have different implications. Based on her own findings and past research, she presented three potential ways organizational tensions can be framed: (a) contradiction, with reference to the impossibility of enacting opposing elements simultaneously; (b) complementary dialectic, wherein tensions are reframed as complementary; and (c) paradox or double bind, exemplified by logic such as “to obey is to disobey and to disobey is to obey” (p.135). Ultimately, Tracy (2004) suggests organizations should engage in metacommunication about tension and cultivate an environment in which employees can cope with tension in healthful ways (i.e., reframing tension as complementary dialectic) in order to avoid the negative ramifications associated with double binds and contradictions.

On the other hand, some research suggests that the very nature of members’ employment contracts can elicit identity tensions. For example, employees are hired for part-time, full-time, or temporary work, and whether their work is “bounded” by time affects the extent to which they identify with the organization. Gossett (2002) examined this factor in her discussion of temporary employees who were “kept at arm’s length,” rather than included in their respective organizations. She found that temporary employees were largely unable to identify with both the client firms in which they were placed and the temporary agencies that placed them (Gossett, 2002). While full-time employees may readily identify with their organizations, identification for

temporary workers is constrained by limited access to client firm resources, inability to participate in client firm decision-making, and infrequent contact with their temporary agencies. The question then becomes one of why organizations might limit member identification if it is thought to result in positive outcomes. Gossett (2002) suggests that limiting member identification allows organizational leaders to avoid including members in decision-making processes as well as neglect their responsibility to care for temporary employees' well being.

Extending this notion of limited identification, Frandsen (2012) explored how members of an organization with a negative image experienced disidentification. Her results indicated that, although the negative image of the organization impeded organizational identification, it did not impact the employees' wellbeing or self-concept. Rather, members engaged in "cynical distancing," through which they positioned themselves in opposition to the organization (Frandsen, 2012). Furthermore, members shifted their identification toward more appealing work identities, such as work-team identity or broader professional identity. In a similar study, Williams and Connaughton (2012) examined the nature of talk and identity tensions among members of a "struggling" organization. They found that, in light of organizational deficiencies, members continued to engage in positive talk about the organization rather than highlighting its negative aspects. On the other hand, some members indicated that they no longer spoke about the organization unless asked, indicating ambivalent voluntary membership (Williams & Connaughton, 2012). Again in this study, some members shifted their identification toward the local and/or national organization as a way of disidentifying with their organization.

Taken together, these studies imply that when members are faced with competing identities and the inherent contradictions of organizational life, the most productive responses involve reframing the tension or shifting identification toward a larger, more appealing

collective. Thus, the identity tension felt is renegotiated in order for the individual to identify positively with the source or target object. This notion raises a number of questions about power and control, and the extent to which organizations routinely seek to regulate members' identities, which will be explored in the following section.

### **Identity, Power, and Organizational Control**

While the research reviewed in the previous section sought to describe and understand the identity tensions felt among organizational members, the research reviewed in this section seeks to critique them. Interpretive studies provide a more complete picture of the phenomenon, but often overlook the way in which identity construction is discursive. Many communication scholars define the relationship between individuals and organizations as a balance of enablement and constraint, inclusivity and exclusivity, and other discourses of power and control. Discussed in this section are studies that highlight these elements of power and identity.

In a slight departure from the previous focus on organizational identification, two studies emerge that focus on how identities are routinely constrained by organizational policies. Murphy (1998) explored "hidden transcripts" of flight attendant resistance with regard to organizational procedures and policies. Her analysis reveals several examples of the ways in which organizations seek to control employee identities, even to the detriment of their physical bodies. Flight attendants were required to attend trainings on how to wear makeup, abide by weight regulations set forth by the organization, and undergo appearance evaluations conducted by supervisors (Murphy, 1998). Weight, in particular, was the primary factor in both defining and evaluating professional appearance. Though many flight attendants seemed to identify with the appearance standards set forth by the organization, others resisted privately through their hidden transcripts. Acts of resistance allude to tensions arising from multiple, competing or interfering

identities. In sum, it seems through resistance, flight attendants were rejecting the preferred identity set forth by the organization.

In a similar study, Tracy (2000) examined how identity is co-constituted through resistance and consent to emotion labor norms by observing employees on a cruise ship. In this context, emotional labor norms refer to the “rules that construct and appropriate the identities caught in their [the organization’s] web of control” (Tracy, 2000, p. 93). Emotional labor comes in many forms, but is most easily understood through the fake smile—a smile that would not otherwise be displayed if it were not mandated by organizational policies. Tracy (2000) found that this type of behavior was common among cruise ship staff members. Whereas some employees identified the difference between their true identities and the emotion labor norms set forth by their employer, employees with longer tenure were less likely to identify any discrepancy. Some even claimed that their true identities aligned with the emotion labor norms (Tracy, 2000). Furthermore, her personal experience of losing a family member while working on the ship exemplifies how employees sometimes must negotiate two discourses concurrently. In her case, this involved expressing deep sorrow over the death of a family member in *private* among her coworkers, while also putting on a smile and keeping her emotion under control as she performed her work *publicly* (Tracy, 2000).

As Sutton (1991) notes, employees’ abilities to express “required” emotions gives them some degree of control over others, which in turn contributes positively to their organizations’ goals. He found that, for bill collectors, expressed emotions sometimes clashed with internal feelings toward debtors depending on the “type” of debtor. For example, whereas organizational norms mandated that angry debtors be treated with neutrality and calmness, collectors’ often felt angry and irritated when dealing with these debtors (Sutton, 1991). In order to cope with this



emotional dissonance, collectors were taught to depersonalize the situation using cognitive appraisals. After hanging up the phone, however, collectors often joked, cussed, or pounded on their desks to release their frustration (Sutton, 1991). Thus, despite the emotion norms espoused by the organization, collectors continued to find outlets to express their true internal feelings. Sutton (1991) explains that emotion norms exist not because they are common or universal responses among employees, but instead because more powerful organizational members (i.e., managers, senior leaders, etc.) believe them to be the “correct” emotions for subordinates to embody and display. In a larger sense, such examples illustrate the ways in which organizations limit employees’ abilities to understand and express their identities.

Accordingly, Alvesson and Willmott (2002) propose a conceptual framework, as well as concrete examples, of how organizations regulate members’ identities. They explain the relationship between identity regulation, identity work, and self-identity, and how they work in tandem to form our understanding of identity. Identity regulation refers to the effects of discursive practices on the ongoing construction of identity. Identity work, on the other hand, involves processing of these discursive practices and appropriating meanings to them that in turn influences our self-identities. Finally, self-identity is defined as the “precarious outcome of identity work comprising narratives of self” (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002, p. 627). It is here that we finally understand the relationship between organizational identification and individual identity. Identity regulation by organizations is carried out through individual self-identity, but also prompts and/or induces identity work, which serves to rework individual self-identity, as they respond to or resist organizational identity regulation (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

Furthermore, they identify nine “targets of identity regulation,” which serve as specific strategies undertaken by organizations in an attempt to regulate members’ identities (Alvesson &

Wilmott, 2002). These strategies include: (a) defining the person directly; (b) defining a person by defining others; (c) providing a specific vocabulary of motives; (d) explicating morals and values; (e) constructing knowledge and skills; (f) group categorization and affiliation; (g) distinguishing hierarchical location; (h) establishing and clarifying a distinct set of rules of the game; and (i) defining the context for people acting in it (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002).

Ultimately, these strategies highlight the specific ways in which mundane actions enacted in the context of organizational life serve to regulate individuals' self-identities.

In a later study, Carroll and Levy (2010) explored how leadership development in organizations serves as a form of identity construction. They challenged Alvesson and Wilmott's (2002) notion of identity regulation in asserting that identity is socially constructed, as it is a project as well as a product in the context of leadership development (Carroll & Levy, 2010). They claim, "any space of action must be viewed as being constituted by alternative discourse or identity possibilities" (Carroll & Levy, 2010, p. 224). In their examination of three narratives surrounding leadership development, they identify three communicative responses enacted by participants in their negotiation of multiple identities required in leadership. First, we see reframing, which refer to communicative acts indicating assimilation of one's existing identity toward one of leadership. Next, recursivity involves giving meaning to the multiple, and sometimes conflicting, identity options available to leaders. Finally, one participant engaged in polyphonic dialogue in rejecting the notion that multiple identities can be enacted at the same time (Carroll & Levy, 2010). Overall, this study contributes to identity research by identifying common communicative responses to the tension felt when multiple identities become necessary in a particular situation. Furthermore, Carroll and Levy (2010) present identity as a social

construction, which somewhat opposes Alvesson and Wilmott's (2002) assertion of identity regulation as organizational control.

On the other hand, Tracy and Trethewey (2005) make the argument that individuals routinely speak of their identities through a dichotomy involving "real" and "fake" selves. They argue against this dichotomy by explaining four inherent consequences of conceptualizing identity as either real or fake. They argue that, when organizational members strive to identify with the organizationally preferred self through consent, they engage in self-deprecation, as they will never be "good enough" (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). Employees engage in strategized subordination; they adjust their behavior based the ideals set forth by the organization even when organizational leaders are not looking (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). Their identities become perpetually deferred, as they continually place personal interests on hold while they work toward the organizationally preferred self. In "real-izing" their identities, organizational members also engage in auto-dressage, in which they "turn the panoptic gaze on their own performances and identities and evaluate themselves in relation to a managerialist discourse they have made their own" (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). Furthermore, even when employees do fake it, they become "good little copers" that accept and reinforce their subservience and objectification (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005).

Ultimately, what Tracy and Trethewey (2005) argue for is the construction of multifaceted, "crystallized" selves. In their view, identity, much like a crystal, is a multidimensional construct that is neither real nor fake. Rather, the crystallized self is "stronger, more beautiful, and more productive for a variety of (political) purposes and downright better than a planar self, flattened by managerialist ideologies" (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005, p. 186). Essentially, they assert that individuals should recognize the fluidity of their identities—the

various roles they play make up their sense of self, but no *one* role should be the sole influence. This argument is important because it transcends the literature reviewed throughout this proposal. It recognizes identity as dynamic, fluid, overlapping, and sometimes contradictory, which provides a richer understanding than the real/fake dichotomy.

### **Professional Identity**

Despite this overwhelming body of literature, it is clear that there is much to be explored around the notion of “professionalism” in relation to organizational identification, individual identity, and the larger structures of power that influence these communicative expressions. Studies concerned with professional occupations, professionalism, and professionalization have primarily come from a sociological perspective, but discourses of professionalism are present in many studies across academic disciplines (i.e., communication, management, education, psychology, and cultural studies). In this section, foundational “professional” literature is reviewed in order to define profession[-al; -ism; -ization] and explain the contextual framework from which the present study is drawn. Moreover, studies across disciplines that directly sought to understand professionalism as a communicative variable are synthesized to lay the foundation for the discussion of professional characteristics that follows.

Meanings of the terms *profession* and *professional* are multiple and varied in both the academic literature and everyday discourse. For the purposes of this study, “profession” is employed loosely to refer to a full-time occupation in which activities are performed in exchange for compensation. While each profession has unique components that distinguish it from others, scholars (Ashcraft, Muhr, Rennstam, & Sullivan, 2012; Hearn, 1982; Lynn, 1974; Pavalko, 1998) have argued that some features remain constant among all professions. Collectively, these scholars suggest that professions share the following dimensions: (a) exclusivity; (b) presence of

theory or specialized knowledge; (c) relevance to social values; (d) purposive training in the field (i.e., apprenticeship) in which symbols and unique subcultural elements are learned; (e) service orientation; (f) autonomy; (g) long term commitment; (h) strong sense of community; and (i) a developed code of ethics. These key features are important to the extent that they lay the groundwork for related terms such as professional and professionalism.

Accordingly, a “professional” refers to an individual associated with a given profession. Professional is also used as an adjective and aligns with the notion of “professionalism,” which refers to the particular expectations for communication and modus operandi associated with professionals (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007). To clarify this distinction:

Professionalism is a state of mind. It is undoubtedly a moving force behind the components of a profession but labels will not insure professionalism. There must be an individual commitment to the values involved. We must think as professionals; we must practice professionalism. (Lynn, 1974, p. 13)

In other words, professionalism serves as the construct from which organizational members draw phrases such as “be more professional” or “s/he is very [un]professional.” When individuals communicate that they or others have particular skills or competencies related to task-based activities performed in their jobs, they often use the term “professional” (Pavalko, 1988).

Cullen (1978) discusses the structure of professionalism from a sociological perspective, and claims that individuals will do just about anything if ample benefits are provided. He argues that the term “professional” functions to validate and mark virtually any activity as deserving special attention, a mechanism by which certain groups of professionals gain more of the “good things in life” such as freedom, wealth, and status (Cullen, 1978). Extending this notion, Ashcraft et al. (2012) claim that evaluations of professions are based not on intrinsic merit, but

rather the beliefs about merit constructed by relative members of the profession. In their view, the process of professionalization amounts to a “jurisdiction contest,” or a competition of social construction in which professionals battle for control of work by promoting and arguing over the nature of their duties and the level of expertise required in their occupations (Ashcraft et al., 2012). Furthermore, Ashcraft et al.’s (2012) work compliments that of Cullen (1978) in recognizing the ways in which professionals are not only constructed alongside professions, but also against inferior Others. They note that, “without encoding gender and race hierarchy into its very profile, an occupation tends not to become or remain a profession” (Ashcraft et al., 2012, p. 471). Thus, it becomes clear that “profession” embodies both patriarchy and exclusion as defining characteristics.

Herrbach and Kosmala (2005) also describe this dialectic of inclusion and exclusion, and propose that any professional epistemology can be viewed as a fictitious social construction that serves the interests of certain groups. Beyond inclusion versus exclusion, they note the dialectical tension between structure and human agency. They argue, “balancing between existing structures for organizational conduct may promote production of individual freedom (human agency), whilst at the same time merging individual desires with the embodied and institutionalized aspirations of the organization (structure)” (Herrbach & Kosmala, 2005, p. D2). In other words, professionals are regulated to the extent that they must adapt to the standards of their profession and organization, but still have the agency to decide the degree to which they will self-regulate. Herrbach and Kosmala (2005) assert that such processes position the professional as both an object of improvement and the subject that engages in the improving. This improvement process involves adoption of the profession’s nomenclature and thereafter demonstrating the “appropriate” (i.e., expected) behavior in the interest of the profession and

organization. The bottom line here is that professionalism entails the familiar tension of enablement and constraint placed upon individuals by organizations, albeit voluntary to some extent on the part of the individual.

Lair, Sullivan, and Cheney (2005) also assert this self-regulation and improvement process in describing the rhetoric and ethics of personal branding. They claim that professionalism is learned through self-improvement, defined as a means to achieve with the aid of skill sets, motivations, interests, etc. (Lair et al., 2005). In this information age of technological advances and marketization, they argue that the improvement processes put forth by Herrbach and Kosmala (2005) involve an additional step, namely, personal branding. Lair et al. (2005) describe personal branding as a “self-packaging” activity in which the skill sets, motivations, and interests gained from self-improvement processes are effectively arranged, crystallized, and labeled (i.e., “branded”). Undoubtedly, personal brands created by professionals reflect their own ideas surrounding professionalism, and likely omit aspects of the self that might detract from their professional identities. Individuals in professional contexts are particularly apt to present themselves in ways that garner favorable impressions from others or produce particular outcomes toward their own interests (Giacalone & Riordan, 1990).

A number of studies have looked further into this notion of self-regulation and impression management among professionals. For example, Murphy (1998) found that female flight attendants were required to “weigh in” every morning during their initial training—referred to as “Barbie Bootcamp”—to ensure they did not exceed the maximum weight allowance mandated by company policy. In order to avoid being sent home, suspended, or in some cases terminated, female flight attendants regularly took laxatives and diuretics in order to publicly comply with the weight requirements, while privately resisting through “hidden

transcripts.” Ultimately, her findings illustrate that in the case of female flight attendants, professional appearance is defined by weight. In a similar vein, Trethewey (1999) conducted interviews with various female professionals to gain an understanding of how women perceive, arrange, and regulate their own and others’ professional bodies. Collectively, her results indicated that: (a) a professional body is a fit body; (b) a professional body [purposefully] emits signs and messages through bodily comportment, nonverbal behaviors, and performances (i.e., the body is a “text” to be read); and (3) professional women’s bodies are positioned as excessively sexual (Trethewey, 1999). Her findings suggest, at the individual level, the improvement, self-regulation, and/or impression management processes may be more rigorous for members of certain socioeconomic groups (i.e., women).

In a more recent study, Carr and Stefaniak (2012) assessed participant perceptions of professionalism in relation to messages sent via cellular devices. They found that, while message content (i.e., grammatically correct vs. incorrect) impacted recipients’ perceptions of professionalism, recipients’ negative perceptions were reduced when cues within the message (i.e., emails “Sent from my iPhone”) indicated the medium of transmission (Carr & Stefaniak, 2012). Another study conducted by Rettinger (2011) explored the construction and display of competence and professional identity in coaching interactions. She found competence to be a fundamental part of professional identity, and concluded that coaches’ professional identities are co-constructed on a moment-to-moment basis through their interaction with clients (Rettinger, 2011). Together, these studies suggest that for individuals seeking to manage their professional images, “contradictions manifesting between signs given and signs given off have strong implications for the creation and maintenance of identity” (Carr & Stefaniak, 2012, p. 405).



Overall, the body of research reviewed in this section addresses the “big picture” of professionalism in order to give adequate context to the present study. Through defining and distinguishing profession[-al; -ism; -ization] and discussing its functions in modern society, it becomes clear why the meanings of such terms are highly contested. Professionalism stems from distinctive information about a given individual, as well as contextual information surrounding the individual’s professional organization and the hierarchical structure therein (Carr & Stafaniak, 2012). While this may hold true, adaptation of professional ideologies often blurs the distinction between individuals and the organizations to which they belong. In his analysis of the self at work, Collinson (2003) highlights the ways in which “conformist selves” (i.e., professionals) become “preoccupied with themselves as valued objects in the eyes of those in authority, subordinating their own subjectivity in the process” (p. 536). Thus, products and services are not the only commodities organizations supply; they also produce people. Professionals are, to some extent, mandated to take on identities defined by their organizations and leave their autonomous senses of self behind (Collinson, 2003).

### **Characteristics of Professionalism**

Whereas the previous section attends to the “big picture” of professionalism and identity, this section seeks to address the micro aspects of the construct. If, as Collinson (2003) suggests, professionals are expected to embrace particular identity characteristics set forth by their organizations, it seems that some characteristics of a “professional” identity would remain constant across organizational, professional, and industrial lines. In this final section, I review scholarly literature that has implications toward an understanding of “professionalism” as a communicative construct comprised of particular characteristics. Although much of the scholarly work reviewed here does not explicitly address a connection between the authors’ findings and

the construct of professionalism, the discourses of professionalism among them are undeniable. Perrow (1979) asserts that professional authority is based upon “technical competence,” yet the specific competencies involved in this aspect of professional identity require further clarification. Surely some competencies vary depending upon the nature of the profession, but the absence of a common set of professional competencies applicable across professions seems questionable. Ultimately, this body of literature situates the current study, which seeks to understand the ways in which perceptions of [un]professionalism are formed, as well as how they impact the lived experience of organizational members.

Many scholars have investigated the particular skills desired by employers across various industries. For example, Waner (1995) explored the business faculty and business professionals’ perceptions of the business communication competencies needed by employees. She identified four categories of business communication skills (a) writing skills (i.e., writing clearly, concisely, correctly, and completely); (b) oral/interpersonal skills such as effective listening, eye contact, and effective use of telephones and intercoms; (c) basic English skills such as spelling, grammar, and vocabulary; and (d) other business communication skills, which included ethics, morals, values, time management, self reflection, and critical thinking (Waner, 1995). Results indicated that both business faculty and business practitioners perceived all four categories of communication competencies with similar degrees of importance.

In a similar study, English, Manton, and Walker (2007) surveyed 200 human resource managers across various industries to gain insight on their perceived value of selected communication competencies. They sought to rank these competencies in an effort to identify the most important qualities that business college graduates should possess as they enter the job market. English et al. (2007) found that the top ten communication competencies valued by

human resource managers were: (a) use of personal integrity in all communication (i.e., including all relevant information and not presenting any deceptive information); (b) maintaining appropriate confidentiality; (c) recognizing the importance of neat, organized, and attractive written documents; (d) correct spelling; (e) correct punctuation and grammatically written communication; (f) knowledge of general principles of writing effective business communication; (g) ability to effectively proofread, edit, and revise written communication; (h) positive, productive, and thoughtful interaction; (i) understanding of the importance of relational networks (i.e., among superiors, coworkers, subordinates, customers, etc.); and (j) ability to write effective resumes and letters of application. Lastly, in a study conducted for the Australian Department of Education, Science, and Training, Cleary, Flynn, and Thomasson (2006) proposed eight “employability skills” identified as salient among a large body of employers in various industries: (a) communication; (b) teamwork; (c) problem solving; (d) initiative and enterprise; (e) planning and organizing; (f) self-management; (g) learning; and (h) technology.

In the context of this research, the studies highlighted thus far suggest that a “professional” identity encompasses not only technical skills (e.g., writing and language), but also a mode of being that encompasses various interpersonal dynamics. Accordingly, Robles (2012) makes an important distinction between two sets of skills, describing “hard skills” as technical expertise specific to the job and “soft skills” as people skills, or personal attributes that individuals possess. Naturally, organizations desire employees to have both sets of skills, but in making this distinction, the notion that there are certain professional characteristics desirable across various professions is given reasonable foundation. Robles (2012) identified the top ten “soft” skills organizational leaders perceive as important in today’s workplace: (a) communication; (b) courtesy; (c) flexibility; (d) integrity; (e) interpersonal skills; (f) positive

attitude; (g) professionalism; (h) responsibility; (i) teamwork; and (j) work ethic. Similarly, Ulrich and Smallwood (2012) examined organizational leaders' perceptions of "high potentials." They found that high potentials are perceived to have the qualities of ambition, ability, agility, and achievement. Given Robles' (2012) distinction, it might be said that the characteristics Ulrich and Smallwood (2012) identified are also "soft" skills, rather than "hard" technical skills.

Together, these studies suggest that professionalism entails countless competencies, skills, and characteristics, but it seems there is a trend toward the idea that both intrapersonal and interpersonal competence, or the "softer" skills, weigh more heavily upon perceptions of professionalism. Other empirical studies indirectly support the notion as well. For example, in an examination of recruitment and selection practices of a United Kingdom call center, Callaghan and Thompson (2002) identified three categories of characteristics and competencies: technical, personality, and communication. When they asked managers what kinds of skills they perceived to be necessary for the job, they found that social, rather than technical, skills were noted most often (Callaghan & Thompson, 2002). Another study by Milliken, Morris, and Hewlin (2003) examined reasons organizational members give for not speaking up about concerns or problems. The primary reasons given by employees included: (a) being labeled or viewed negatively; (b) damaging a relationship; (c) futility; (d) retaliation or punishment; and (e) concerns about negative impact on others (Milliken et al., 2003). Again here, we see that social concerns are the primary consideration. Furthermore, it seems that "knowing when to speak up" may positively or negatively enhance perceptions of professionalism by others.

In comparing the characteristics of professionalism discussed here with the literature in the previous section, there seems to be a discrepancy between what defines a profession and what is most important for professionals to display, perform, and embody. In other words, a

“professional” identity not only performs a job (i.e., the technical skills related to one’s position), but also a specific set of mannerisms set forth by the larger professional community (i.e., “people skills”). In considering Collinson’s (2003) “conformist self” along with Tracy and Trethewey’s (2005) notion of the “crystallized self,” it seems that professional identity may at times be in tension with various facets of an individual’s identity. More research is needed in order to understand the particular communicative behaviors associated with professionalism, as well as the ways in which organizational members negotiate the tensions of conforming to a professional identity, in light of their crystalized selves. Accordingly, this study seeks to address this gap in exploring the following research questions:

*Research Question 1:* How do organizational members define what it means to communicate professionally?

*Research Question 2:* To what extent does the enactment of professional communicative behavior reflect organizational identification and/or individual identities?

*Research Question 3:* In what specific organizational contexts is professional communicative behavior most encouraged? By whom?

### **CHAPTER III – Methodology**

Data for this study was collected from participants in CarrierTech (CT), a mid-sized for-profit sales organization headquartered in a large metropolitan city in the Midwest. CT employs nearly 1200 people among its headquarters, 4 organic branches, and 16 independent “stations” across the United States. Aside from my own involvement with the organization over the last year, it was chosen because it is a relatively young company that is in the process of “branding” itself. In other words, the company (i.e., senior leadership) is attempting to establish an identity within its respective industry. Intuitively, this process involves establishing norms for “professional” behavior, as well as standards for internal and external communication.

#### **Participants**

Participants in this study are members of the CarrierTech’s learning and development team, a subunit of the organization comprised of one director and eight learning and development consultants. Among the participants, there are five male and four female ranging in age from 26 to 42; eight are Caucasian and one is African American. This particular subunit was chosen because it represents a microcosm of the larger organization. The average tenure among the participants was four years at the time the study was conducted, suggesting that these organizational members had adequate time to assimilate the culture and adapt to the professional standards of the organization. As part of the learning and development team, these individuals have regular contact with organizational members across all departments and hierarchical levels within the organization. In sum, this subset was chosen to create a purposive sample including organizational members whose jobs require a high level of intra-organizational collaboration, allowing them to address [un]professionalism from their own standpoint as well as that of the larger organization.

## Procedures

Semistructured interviews were conducted with all nine members of the learning and development subunit in order to gain a rich understanding of how [un]professionalism is perceived within CarrierTech. In order to secure participant anonymity and privacy, all interviews and data were recorded electronically and stored on a password-protected computer. Pseudonyms were used to identify participants in all transcriptions and analyses of interview data, as well as this report. Furthermore, the specific location and name of the participants' true employer will not be disclosed in this study. The following questions served to guide participant interviews:

- Could you tell me about your professional history and how you came to be in your current position?
- To what extent do you consider yourself a professional?
- What types of behaviors do you consider professional?
- On the contrary, what kinds of behaviors do you consider unprofessional?
- What do you think professionalism means in this organization?
- Could you provide an example of a situation in which professional behavior was encouraged?
- What about a situation in which you changed your behavior to be more or less professional?
- What do you believe influences your interpretation of what it means to be a professional?
- In what ways does professionalism in this organization differ from your broader understanding of professionalism?

- To what extent do you feel that your “professional” behavior reflects your identity, or who you are as a person?
- To what extent do you feel that your professional behavior aligns with the value for and vision surrounding professionalism in the larger organization?

While these questions facilitated discussion around proposed research questions for this study, their open-ended design allowed participants to guide the direction of the conversation and ultimately highlight what was most important and meaningful in their lives. Follow-up questions were used to “probe” interviewees to ask for more information, clarify meaning, and understand opinions (Schensul, Schensul, & LeCompte, 1999). These questions were grounded in participants' responses, but generally adhered to the following structure:

- You mentioned [*behavior*] as a behavior you consider [un]professional. Could you expand on what that might look like in practice?
- Could you clarify what you mean when you say [*unclear statement*]?
- You mentioned [*value*] as being important to you. Could you tell me more about why [*value*] relates to professionalism?
- Do you have an example of [*participant comment*] that sticks out in your mind?

Overall, this exploratory approach to in-depth interviewing allowed the domains of [un]professionalism deemed important for this study to be explored.

### **Data Analysis**

Interview data was analyzed using well-established qualitative methods (Strauss & Corbin, 2008). Interviews were first electronically recorded and transcribed. Subsequently, the data went through an “open coding” process in which comments made by interviewees were assigned conceptual labels and grouped thematically according to their similarities. Themes were



identified inductively through the words and expressions of participants, which highlighted their respective thoughts and experiences. Next, Strauss & Corbin's (2008) "constant comparison" method was operationalized to ensure the content was categorized discretely. Ultimately, the outcome of this process is a "grounded theory" of [un]professionalism emanating from the relationships observed and described amidst the categories discovered through participant interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 2008).

## CHAPTER IV – Findings & Discussion

It's almost like somebody somewhere created this norm and this expectation...[I'm] not sure where it came from, but people adhere to it because it's the norm. It's the way it is. You're not born with professionalism. Responsibility is owned by the individual as well as the organization—understanding norms, values, and expectations of [the] organization. Part is the organization's responsibility is recalibrating the person's understanding of professionalism and then that other person making the decision to or not to align with that norm of professionalism. (Blake)

### Definitions of Professionalism

At the beginning of each interview, participants were asked to describe their professional history, how they came to be in their current position, and indicate the extent to which they consider themselves professional. Given the complexity of the term noted earlier, it came to no surprise that many participants began by presenting their own definitions of profession[-al; -ism] in order to give grounds for their perceptions. Within those definitions existed primarily general assertions surrounding the professional and how one is perceived to be more or less professional by others. As illustrated in the participant quote above, it seems professionalism involves participation from two parties: the individual and the organization. On one hand, Blake suggested that individuals are expected to come into professional environments and act in accordance with certain “norms” of professional life. On the other, he claimed it to be the duty of the organization to align individuals with its particular norms, values, and expectations.

Participants seemed to agree that some characteristics of professionalism are unchanging, regardless of the specific organization. In describing their professional backgrounds, all 9 participants began by describing their first jobs out of college, which suggests that being

professional may be exclusive to those with a particular level of education—namely, a college degree. Elle affirmed this in sharing, “I consider myself professional because I’m in a professional work environment. I’m no longer a student and, being in the corporate world, I have a profession and I feel like that makes me professional.” At its core, Elle’s comment reduces professionalism to her presence in the corporate world, which is marked in contrast to her past role as a student.

This contrast between student and professional led to another, similar differentiation between what constitutes a “job” versus a “career.” Dave presented this distinction as he shared his general perception surrounding professionalism:

Loving what you do, thinking about the work outside of work, internalizing it, coming in to work everyday and knowing that you have a mission, you know you contribute to a bigger picture within the company, you know you can make a difference—that’s when you really become that definition of professional that we see out in the workplace. A lot of people feel like it’s just a job. Someone passionate about what they do on a day-to-day basis sees it as a career versus just a job, and that’s what sets it apart.

Other participants expanded upon this notion, defining a “career” as work about which one is passionate—work that aligns with one’s *life purpose*, contributes to an abstract *bigger picture*, and involves a *long-term* commitment (e.g., “I can see myself doing this for the rest of my life”). Alternatively, participants described a “job” as a *short-term* form of employment involving *monotonous* work, hated by the individual but engaged as a *means of survival* to pay the bills or to buy time as one carefully considers his or her “next move.”

Along with the idea that professionals embark upon careers rather than jobs, participants frequently discussed their idealized images of the professional. Television, movies, and

magazines were often referenced as influential mediums that contributed to participants' conceptualizations of professionalism. Collectively, participants imagined ideal professionals as people in business attire (black suits for men and 3-piece outfits for women), carrying briefcases and working with computers, fax machines, and other technologies. In one case, Blayne described an ideal professional as "someone who has it all figured out," and noted that he did not feel "old enough to consider [him]self a *true* professional" [emphasis added]. These visions were often followed by more pointed descriptions of what entails professionalism. Participants often related professionalism to a set of values, or a "brand" portrayed by the professional. Melissa explained professionalism as "the values for which I hold myself [accountable]. You are your brand. Who you are and what you're about is represented by your brand." In a similar vein, Blake asserted:

It has a lot to do with how you carry your brand. Your business card is your face and professionalism begins with how you maintain your grooming, how you dress, communication styles, communication ethics, whether it be [*sic*] written or public speaking, or whatever it may be, it's how you identify your brand.

Abstract definitions of what professionalism *is* or *involves*, as well as imagined ideals of the professional *being* provide an important point of departure to discuss the more intricate conceptualizations that emerged from this study.

While professionalism may invoke participants to establish a particular "brand," the notion of branding is itself complex and deserves careful scrutiny. Inherently, branding involves some form of promotion (i.e., marketing, selling, performing, etc.) in order to be identified as such. Lair et al. (2005) define branding as "the programmatic approach to the selling of a product, service, organization, cause, or person that is fashioned as a proactive response to the

emerging desires of a target audience or market” (p. 309). As evidenced in Blake’s quote above, it is not merely the *fact* or existence of the brand, but the way in which it is *carried* (i.e., sold) that largely determines its effectiveness. Thus, while equating professionalism with personal branding may have some merit, it fails to account for the micro-practices within the brand that inform others’ perceptions of professionalism.

Participants affirmed this notion by providing more precise accounts of the attributes connected to professionalism. Tim alluded to the construct’s complexity in describing professionalism as “almost like a sphere with a lot of different bits and pieces within [it],” and asserting that individuals “can be professional or unprofessional in whatever task [they are] doing.” Tim’s comment highlights a similar dialectic to that which Blake noted at the beginning of this chapter. To requote, “You’re not born with professionalism. Responsibility is owned by the individual as well as the organization—understanding norms, values, and expectations of [the] organization.” In both of these quotes, implicit reference is made to the familiar tension between individual agency (i.e., enacting professional behavior) and organizational constraint (i.e., expectations for professional behavior). In other words, professional identities both *produce* and are *produced by* identifications with particular communicative activities and interactions in organizational contexts (Scott, Corman, & Cheney, 1998; Scott & Stephens, 2009). In what follows, the communicative activities and interactions that emerged from this study are discussed in more detail. Specifically, three components of the professional “sphere” are highlighted: (a) technical; (b) behavioral; and (c) social. While each of these components have their own unique properties, some of their features overlap as they work in tandem to construct professional identities and the larger “sphere” of professionalism. Thus, the final section addresses the ways in which these components intersect and exist in tension with one another.

## Technical

The first component centers on the “technical” aspects of professionalism, or the knowledge and skills needed to fulfill one’s professional role. Among the properties that emerged within this component, both profession-specific skills (P) and general business skills (G) were highlighted (see Table 1 below). Profession-specific skills refer to those aspects of professionalism that are governed by the industry, or type of work involved in the profession. As Blake asserted, “professionalism is driven by the profession. It’s the organization’s job to hold people to a certain standard, have a certain systematic way of communicating internally and externally.” Thus, one of the primary dimensions of this property is fulfilling the responsibilities related to one’s job description. Participants frequently summarized their job descriptions by explaining their specific job title. For example, one participant described a previous title within the company, “Account Executive,” as a client-facing role that involved managing the day-to-day business of certain accounts. Others shared more specific responsibilities outlined in their job descriptions such as “hitting numbers,” “risk management,” and other tasks that “accomplish corporate goals.”

Furthermore, a number of participants described a difference between *meeting* and *exceeding* expectations at CarrierTech, the latter being preferable in relation to others’ perceptions of one’s professionalism within the organization. Basically, exceeding expectations encompasses the individual going “above and beyond” the job description, thinking outside the box, learning something new, and challenging oneself. For example, one participant shared that they were promoted as a result of their ability to complete projects in advance of deadlines. Ultimately, these profession-specific skills are unique to the types of work activities involved in

the profession. Though participants highlighted these aspects with regard to their jobs at CarrierTech, it is likely that some of these skills are relevant outside of the organization as well.

Table 1. Properties of the Technical Component of Professionalism

Property	Dimensions	Examples
<i>Profession-specific</i>		
Job description	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Fulfilling responsibilities specific to profession and/or professional role</li> <li>Having a job title</li> </ul>	“Hitting numbers, finding solutions, serving clients and figuring out how you can go above and beyond for them, having your phone on you at all times to answer clients’ questions...”
Exceeding expectations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Challenging oneself</li> <li>Thinking outside the box</li> <li>Going above and beyond</li> </ul>	“I thought I was getting A+ because I was doing my job based on what was on paper, but actually an A+ is what’s not on paper and what you can do better.”
<i>General business skills</i>		
Productivity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Adopting a bottom-line orientation</li> <li>Producing, high output</li> <li>Putting in extra hours</li> <li>Maintaining quick pace of work</li> <li>Implementing changes to save money</li> </ul>	“Here, it’s very much about getting in, [and] doing your job. If you’re producing, and you’re producing well, we’re going to leave you alone. Come in in [sic] sweatpants every day if you want, as long as you’re turning out numbers.”
Written Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Buttoning up”</li> <li>Communicating in scripts</li> <li>Using correct grammar</li> <li>Capitalizing appropriately</li> <li>Using proper punctuation</li> </ul>	“There are things I see where I’m like, ‘are you kidding me?’ Emails sent out grammatically incorrect, all in caps [sic], missing punctuation—I’m just like, ‘you have got to be kidding me! This is 2013. Take a business course!’”

General business skills comprised the second category within the technical component. Unlike profession-specific skills, general business skills were described as “transferrable,” or applicable in any work environment. Properties within general business skills included “productivity” and “written communication.” Basically, productivity refers to the idea that organizations are perpetually concerned with enhancing their bottom line (i.e., profit) and require members to add value in order to maintain their position. When participants mentioned activities

such as “producing” and “putting in extra hours,” they were referring to the productivity involved in fulfilling their professional roles. Furthermore, given their mention amongst multiple participants, practices such as change management, increasing efficiency, and maximizing effectiveness are also associated with this property because of their ultimate impact on the bottom line. Blake reinforced this notion in stating that being professional involves “offering some sort of service that’s rendering a monetary equivalent.” Overall, participants seemed to agree that being professional both inside and outside of CarrierTech involved attending to the organizations bottom-line.

The second emergent property within general business skills was written communication. Two participants described the importance of “making sure everything’s all buttoned up” with regard to emails, documents, and any other internal or external communication. Intuitively, “buttoning up” refers to perfecting one’s written communication. Quality writing was frequently mentioned as influencing perceptions of professionalism. As Shelley described, “if you can’t formulate in script, it’s going to be difficult for you to come off as professional to others.” When asked to clarify the term “scripts,” Shelley noted the importance of writing clearly, concisely, and objectively as opposed to writing in narrative form. Lori also mentioned the importance of written communication, but focused more on writing mechanics in expressing frustration with unprofessional individuals (see example in Table 1 above). Lori’s comment was unique, as it highlighted what *un*professional written communication entails. In considering the inverse of her comment, it seems “buttoning up” one’s writing not only involves proper “scripts” or syntax, but also proper grammar, capitalization, and punctuation.

Overall, these two properties together form the technical component of the professional sphere. Whereas the profession-specific properties align with “technical competencies” (Perrow,



1979), or “hard skills” (Robles, 2012), the general business skills properties could potentially apply in any corporate business environment. In this way, Robles (2012) notion of “soft” skills as people skills or personal attributes is complicated by the results of this study. While productivity may be considered a personal attribute in some contexts, participants in this study described it as a skillset or mindset that is necessary in order to be considered professional. Similarly, the dimensions within written communication form a clear set of skills that can be learned as opposed to personal attributes, which are largely considered inherent. These distinctions justify the inclusion of general business skills within the technical component.

### **Behavioral**

Whereas the technical component highlighted the knowledge and skills participants deemed necessary to be considered professional, the behavioral component concerns the manner in which professionals enact them. In other words, the properties of the behavioral component include the individual actions and bodily comportments that contribute to perceptions of professionalism. Table 2 (below) presents the general properties associated with the behavioral aspect, and indicates whether participants deemed their dimensions as increasing (+) or decreasing (–) their perceptions of professionalism. Some dimensions were discussed by multiple participants, but in different contexts. Thus, dimensions labeled with (+/–) indicate behaviors that can either enhance or diminish one’s professional credibility, depending on the context.

One property of particular interest to the objectives of this study was that of adaptation and contortion. A number of participants used metaphors to differentiate between their conduct at work and in their personal lives. For example, Shelley described her post-maternity leave difficulties in sharing:

Before the baby, it was second nature. It didn’t define who I was, but that’s where my

Table 2. Properties of the Behavioral Component of Professionalism

Property	Dimensions	Examples
Adaptation and contortion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Deciding to be more/less professional (+/-)</li> <li>Putting on the “poker face” (+)</li> <li>“Reducing oneself” to the level of others (+/-)</li> <li>Being flexible to change (+)</li> </ul>	“It’s very situational. Ultimately, if I was told that, to work [here] you needed to be A-B-C, I could be A-B-C. It wouldn’t be hard. It’s just about getting to know your surroundings and knowing your expectations.”
Emotion management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Expressing anger, yelling, or swearing (-)</li> <li>Appearing cool, calm, and collected (+)</li> <li>Negative attitude, whining, or crying (-)</li> <li>Talking about how one feels (-)</li> <li>Being positive, optimistic, seeing the glass half full (+)</li> <li>Showing empathy toward others (+)</li> <li>Being aggressive toward others (-)</li> </ul>	“You always look more professional when you’re the calm one in all of this versus going up and screaming and blowing up. That’s not the way you handle yourself...lose your cool in front of people, and they’re going to lose respect for you.”
Impression management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Having charisma (+)</li> <li>Being regimented (+)</li> <li>Adding “personal touch” (+)</li> <li>Giving clear action (+)</li> <li>“Buttoning up” self presentation (+)</li> <li>Lacking enthusiasm (-)</li> <li>Evading responsibility, “blowing off” (-)</li> <li>Being punctual (+)</li> <li>Bringing social life into workplace (-)</li> <li>Appearing rigid and intense (+/-)</li> </ul>	“Every conversation, every time you open your mouth, every email you send, every interaction you ever have with any individual—whether inside or outside CarrierTech—you’re either building your credibility or you’re slowly chipping away at it. If it’s give and take, then you’re already chipping away at it. It’s one or the other; choose the way you want to be seen.”
Effective communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Being proactive (+)</li> <li>Following up and following through (+)</li> <li>Speaking up (+)</li> <li>Being direct and forthright (+/-)</li> <li>Maintaining confidence (+)</li> <li>Speaking slowly with clear intentions (+)</li> <li>Talking fast without thinking (-)</li> </ul>	“I’m somebody who has no problem speaking up if I think something’s wrong, but I always try to spin it so that it’s not coming across as criticism or anything on anyone, but more of ‘hey, we thought of it this way...’”
Appearance	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Dressing for the job (+)</li> <li>Wearing casual attire (-)</li> <li>Grooming oneself to be “clean cut” (+)</li> <li>Appearing “thrown together” (-)</li> </ul>	“If you go in an interview, you dress in professional attire, not your casual attire...so how we dress, how we groom ourselves.”
Ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Doing the right thing (+)</li> <li>Serving one’s own goals but compromising others—“It’s my way or no way.” (-)</li> <li>Going above others’ heads without their knowledge (-)</li> </ul>	“People here are quick to call out specific groups or individuals when playing the blame game. At other companies, you would never call out a specific team. You might point it out, but spin it as, ‘hey, I’ve noticed these issues.’ [You would] tread lightly as opposed to saying, ‘it’s so-and-so’s fault.’”

(+) Professional (-) Unprofessional

focus was...a city girl working trying to make a career. Professionalism inherently became part of who I was because I wasn't doing much else. It's stressful, *taking off the hat* [emphasis added] you want to wear to be perceived as something that used to be normal and natural for you.

For Shelley, coming back to work after a four month maternity leave meant "taking off the hat" she wore as a mother and putting her professional hat back on, suggesting that her professional identity existed outside of her identity as a mother. Her experience both complements and complicates existing research surrounding emotion labor norms and individual identities. In Tracy's (2000) study, organizational members with longer tenure were less likely to identify any discrepancy between their individual identities and the identities they performed as they worked. In the present study, Shelley's narrative suggests that even tenured members can experience this dissonance under certain circumstances (e.g., giving birth and becoming a mother). In this situation, Shelley was forced to negotiate multiple discourses in parallel (Tracy, 2000). As a new mother she longed to be at home with her child, but while at work, she felt the need to take off that hat in order to manage her impressions and be perceived as professional. For Shelley, professionalism turned into "a perception sort-of, that you battle. You know it exists and know you've been there before...and certain people see that as who you once were and maybe aren't anymore. It takes on its own role."

Others used similar metaphors to describe the personal-professional divide such as "flipping on the switch," "putting on the poker face," and "understanding when to turn it on and turn it off." Such metaphors seem to confirm Cheney and Ashcraft's (2007) claim that professionalism involves a specific set of communicative behaviors. Most participants described

this tension between home- and professional-life neutrally and labeled it as a form of persuasion or a “selling” strategy. As Tim explained:

Putting on the hat involves being able to address the audience you’re with and know what their interest is and what their purpose is for being there. No matter who your audience is, making sure that you’re selling to that audience. Ultimately, giving them what they need without giving up everything or [having to] protect yourself.

On the other hand, it seems – for women especially – “flipping on the switch” and “putting on your work hat” involves rigorous emotion labor (Tracy, 2000) and impression management (Trethewey, 1999). Whereas male participants alluded to the tension between their professional and personal lives, they often described it as “just the way it is.” Only one male participant expanded upon this notion through the use of storytelling. Dave shared:

Being gay in the workplace, I feel like I would have a lot more to hide, or at least some people would think. Like, where I would be two different people...in the workplace versus outside. But, you know, I’m just as outgoing, just as flamboyant, but at the same time very professional. I’m really who I want to be.

Although Dave marks his sexuality as a part of his individual identity that *could* potentially conflict with his professional identity, the way he frames the discrepancy suggests fluidity among rather than tension between these two aspects of his identity. In contrast, Emily shared her perceived tension between professionalism and gendered emotionality in stating, “When a man gets angry in the workplace and all the sudden shows emotion he has ‘bravado,’ he’s being ‘a man’s man’ and taking charge, whereas a female getting upset and asserting her opinions, it’s all the sudden being emotional.” In another example, Lori alluded to the fact that there are

certain things you *can* and *cannot* say in the presence of executives, or management in general, which further reflects the property of impression management:

There are certain people who I'm in meetings with where, you know, I'm putting on my 'little miss perfect' face. If I'm in a meeting with a [male] executive, I'm not going to be 100% candid. But, you tend to find at CarrierTech that you can be candid with some people and others you can't...both at a higher level and upper management.

These two narratives of female professionals speak to Trethewey's (1999) claim that self-regulation and impression management processes may be more extreme for certain socioeconomic groups. Further, these examples provide additional evidence for Acker's (1990) theory of "gendered organizations," which posits that organizations are not gender-neutral; rather, men and heterosexual masculinity permeate all organizational activity, leaving women in the margins under the guise of asexuality. In contrasting David's story with those of Emily and Lori, it is clear that at CarrierTech, women and men are held to different standards with regard to emotionality, sexuality, and the types of conversations they are permitted to have. As "targets of identity regulation," female professionals at CarrierTech are subject to (a) being defined in relation to others; (b) group categorization and affiliation; (c) a distinct set of "rules of the game," and (d) having the context of their actions defined for them (Alvesson & Wilmott, 2002).

Ultimately, these examples illustrate the ways in which properties within the behavioral component intersect to form the lived experience of professionals. Though each property has its own unique dimensions, the narratives participants shared wove together the behavioral dimensions of adaptation and contortion, emotion management, and impression management. Thus, it seems these properties emerge as a set of discursive resources (Kuhn, 2006) for participants as they make sense of their lived experiences and negotiate the ways in which

competing facets of their identities are challenged by the prevailing standards of professionalism at CarrierTech. Furthermore, in considering the extent to which participants' professional communicative behaviors reflect organizational identification and their individual identities, these examples highlight the complexities that arise when issues of work-life balance and diversity are contested in the workplace.

### **Social**

The final component within the “sphere” of professionalism points to the relational atmosphere of organizational life, or the social aspects of professionalism. Whereas the behavioral component focuses on individual actions that contribute to perceptions of professionalism, the social component centers on the political aspects that often complicate the influence of the technical and behavioral components. Accordingly, properties of this component include mindfulness, respect, competition, and maturity. As with the behavioral, participants alluded to numerous dimensions within each of these properties that function either to enhance (+) or diminish (–) perceptions of [un]professionalism. Table 3 (below) outlines the prominent dimensions of each property within the social component.

Many of the dimensions within this component emerged from participants' stories, as they described who encourages professional behavior at CarrierTech, and in what contexts. The two primary themes in these narratives were management and culture. In this instance, management is being used to refer to the group of managers in senior level positions at CarrierTech and not the practice of management, or management styles used by them. For example, Dave highlighted the influence of senior managers in stating:

I'd say I align very closely to CarrierTech's values. That's probably the reason I moved up so quickly and into a role that I don't really have any experience in. They're investing

in my own training right now because I do have this kind of attitude where I'm respectful, I'm positive, I'm helpful, I'm very driven, I won't stop until I get something done. I've been told that as I moved throughout the organization. Like that award I received in beginning of year...it kind of says, "you align with what we want and we hope that you'll be able to mentor more people to be more like you" or "take a look at this person, we want similar people to have these attributes to be like this..."

Here, we see that the behavioral property of adaptation and contortion is complimented by the

Table 3. Properties of the Social Component of Professionalism

Property	Dimensions	Examples
Mindfulness	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Having awareness of self and others (+)</li> <li>• Reflecting upon behaviors (+)</li> <li>• Being supportive of others (+)</li> <li>• Appearing approachable (+)</li> <li>• Thinking before speaking (+)</li> <li>• Absorbing what is said before reacting (+)</li> <li>• Knowing one's audience (+)</li> <li>• Seeing different sides of issues (+)</li> </ul>	<p>"Even when you don't see eye to eye, it's about overcoming and finding the best way to get along with the understanding that you still have to work with this person."</p>
Respect	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Honoring the job and the organization (+)</li> <li>• Treating others how one wants to be treated (+)</li> <li>• Speaking cordially and respectfully (+)</li> <li>• Using profanity, slang, or jargon (-)</li> <li>• Maintaining eye contact (+)</li> <li>• Having a "good" handshake (+)</li> </ul>	<p>"I think it's all about respect, even if you hate someone it's still all about respect"</p> <p>"Delivering messages in an empathetic tone without being overly aggressive."</p>
Competition	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Giving or receiving recognition in the form of promotions, bonuses, and pay raises (+)</li> <li>• Conveying importance through "elevated" conversation (+)</li> <li>• Aspiring to be like others who are perceived as professional (+)</li> </ul>	<p>"In elevated conversations, you don't want to portray that you don't know. You kind of one up each other, [and] show how important you are."</p>
Maturity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gossiping and spreading rumors (-)</li> <li>• Bullying (-)</li> <li>• Lying (-)</li> <li>• "Passing the buck" (-)</li> <li>• Being petty (-)</li> <li>• Making fun of others (-)</li> <li>• Putting others down (-)</li> <li>• Overcoming differences (+)</li> </ul>	<p>"Forming relationships to a point that can be detrimental to other relationships in the office. You should be able to bring a relationship into the office without other people knowing. [The CEO] shouldn't know who I hang out with because then I'm being recognized for the wrong reasons and, to me, I don't see that as professional."</p>

(+) Professional (-) Unprofessional

social components of respect, mindfulness, and competition. Dave implies that he has received multiple promotions as a result of his social competencies, as well as behavioral properties such as adapting to CarrierTech's values and managing his emotions to convey a positive attitude. Further, he mentions his lack of technical skills (i.e., experience, qualifications) related to his current role and highlights his alignment with CarrierTech's values as a way of justifying his position. For Dave, it seems as though the social and behavioral components have trumped the technical, facilitating multiple promotions and garnering him recognition as a "top performer" throughout the organization.

In an opposing instance, a participant shared an experience with management in which she became frustrated over a "broken" process that had a negative impact on her team's productivity. Melissa explained:

I sent the [Senior Vice President] who used to manage them an email saying "this process is broken, it's incredibly frustrating, a waste of time and resources, and we need to get this fixed. Heated email, but not that I was projecting my feelings. Well, a little bit, but basically being like this process is broken and it's frustrating. Had a guy sent it, it would've been read as "yeah we need to do something," but this SVP forwarded it to my boss saying, "Melissa's emotions need to stay out of it."

As she retrospectively made sense of this situation, Melissa became somewhat frustrated and affirmed that she did not feel she was being emotional or overreacting, but rather identifying a problem in need of the SVP's attention. She concluded, "if I want to be successful as a female, I really can't be emotional or show emotion...and if I am I have to check myself." In this way, Melissa affirms both the mindfulness and maturity aspects of the social component and the behavioral properties of emotion management and impression management. Through sending the



email to the SVP, Melissa was socially chastised because of the way she spoke to someone above her in the organizational hierarchy, as well as her supposed inability to control her emotions. However, again here we see Melissa acknowledge the differential treatment of women at CarrierTech. In effect, she suggests that if a male coworker had sent the same email, their concern would have been validated instead of construed as an emotional outburst.

This leads to the second theme that emerged from participants' narratives within this component – culture. Whereas male participants described CarrierTech's culture as "very lenient" with regard to professionalism, dress code, and expectations, nearly all female participants used the term "boy's club" in their stories about professionalism at CarrierTech. One participant joked, "I'm not sure of the guy-to-girl ratio, but I've heard it's something like 70-30." This notion of the "boy's club" essentially refers to the patriarchal, and sometimes misogynist culture of this organization. As Emily described:

Especially once you get into upper management, female managers are few and far between. Being in middle management, most of everyone I deal with is male and so I think you are kind of forced to let things slide and a lot of times professionalism drops off when you're dealing with all males.

Thus, there exists a fundamental contradiction among participants' perceptions of professionalism at CarrierTech. On the one hand, organizational members are expected to abide by a certain code of conduct. On the other, some (i.e., female organizational members) are forced to abide by the unwritten norms of the "boy's club," which often conflict with the behavioral dimensions deemed as "professional." Lori confirmed this in sharing:

As a female, you have to be able to kind of let it roll off your back when there's certain jokes that may not be looked at as appropriate or that type of thing where you take it

personal... It's so stereotypical, where you walk into a conference room and it's like "oh look at Lori wearing a dress today," and you're like "thanks so much" and be like "yeah I did wear a dress..." You have to give it back, be part of that mentality. Ultimately, if you took to HR it would result in being written up.

In this case, we see the social properties of maturity, respect, and competition at play. Lori suggests that these comments are immature, as her male coworkers are making fun of her, but she sees it as an opportunity to compete since they are in higher-level positions than she is. As a result, she engages in a form of verbal jujitsu in which she "gives it back" to her male coworkers to make a point of their immaturity. At the same time, her response symbolizes the social property of respect, in that she wants her coworkers to treat her just as she treats them. This is further illustrated when she comments, "the blue doors signify, you know, senior executives and we don't have any females up there. It's kind of like a challenge of, 'well I want to be there' or 'I want to do that type of thing.'" Here again, we see the property of competition in that Lori wants to be behind one of the "blue doors," which materially symbolizes CarrierTech's "boy's club."

In a final example highlighting the implications of the "boy's club," Melissa mentioned relationships at work as a source of tension:

Guys, it has no effect on them. But if I were to start dating someone it'd no longer be "Melissa runs the claims department," but "Melissa dates Ted." That's why I just focus on being here for my job and keeping my job as my priority. Obviously having friends is important, but first and foremost the work that I do and my reputation as an employee is most important to me.

In essence, Melissa is stating the inconsistent standards that emerge in the "boy's club." As evidenced by the examples here, as well as those discussed in relation to the behavioral

component, the standards to which female and male employees are held at CarrierTech are vastly different. According to the behavioral property of impression management, bringing one's social life into the workplace is perceived as unprofessional. However, in this example we see that males are excluded from this rule in the social sphere. Melissa perceives that she would lose respect and be defined by her relationship rather than her work if she were to forge a romantic relationship with a coworker. On the other hand, her male counterparts could have romantic relationships in the office without any negative repercussions. As a result, we see Melissa choosing the most logical identity option (i.e., her professional self) given her experience at CarrierTech. Specifically, she uses the identity management strategy of support—or in this case, perceived lack of support—to rationalize her decision not to establish romantic relationships at work (Larson & Pepper, 2003).

These participants' examples provide clarity for how the properties within the social component operate in day-to-day interactions. Interestingly, none of the male participants gave mention to the existence of a "boy's club." To some extent, this makes sense given their privilege of being male in an ever-gendered, male-dominated organization (Acker, 1990). Related to Scott et al.'s (1998) four identities related to organizational life, male participants likely identified with such a culture on the individual, work group, organizational, and occupational levels, as the larger culture outside of this organization shares much in common with the "boy's club" at CarrierTech. In contrast, female participants seem to engage in identification management strategies such as comparing the "boy's club mentality" with their own ideology and explaining the logic behind their identification despite their differential treatment (Larsen & Pepper, 2003). In sum, the social properties within the sphere of professionalism emerge as complicated and sometimes problematic in relation to the technical

and behavioral components. Complications for the behavioral component are prevalent as they intertwine with certain social properties such as culture and hierarchy. On the other hand, as evidenced by Dave's narrative, certain social and behavioral properties have the potential to outshine technical shortcomings for certain organizational members. Moreover, it seems the "boy's club," as a powerful sociopolitical force, has the potential to shape certain dimensions within the behavioral and social components. These intersections are further discussed in the section that follows.

### **Intersectional Professionalism**

In the previous sections, the technical, behavioral, and social components were discussed independently as a means of presenting their unique properties and dimensions. However, as evidenced by multiple participant narratives, properties within the various components of professionalism work in tandem—but at times against one another—in forming perceptions of [un]professionalism and professional identities. Although it is useful to distinguish these components, it is important to recognize that their intersections do not occur in a vacuum. Rather, this study suggests that the context in which they are evoked is instrumental, as it shapes, contains, and legitimizes the construct of professionalism. For example, CarrierTech operates within the larger patriarchal culture of the United States but also reproduces certain elements of that culture within its own corporate culture, namely, the "good old boys" mentality underlying the differential treatment of male and female employees.

Between the larger culture and organizational culture, there also exists the occupational culture of the particular industry with which CarrierTech is associated. As Tim noted,

Industry drives the dress code and the level of professionalism, as well as the culture of CarrierTech. For example, a lot of things that drive CarrierTech are the nature of the type

of work that we do...90% non client-facing as it's all inside sales, 10% client-facing. So, the interesting thing is that if you take someone who – 90% of their job is non client-facing – their level of professionalism is one thing, but if you were to see them go out to their client, you probably wouldn't see them dressed the same way as they would Monday through Friday at the office.

Thus, the industry and the nature of the particular occupation further complicate the construction of professional identity. When referencing “their job,” Tim marks the set of technical skills involved in a sales position at CarrierTech. On the other hand, he notes the shift in behavior when employees engage with clients face-to-face, as opposed to mediated communication (e.g., phone, e-mail, etc.). In face-to-face contexts, the social dynamic of relationship building requires heightened awareness of and adherence to certain aspects within the behavioral component. Specifically, Tim mentioned the behavioral property of appearance as important, but in making the distinction between client-facing and non client-facing interactions, he implied that employees must be more mindful of how they present themselves (i.e., impression management) in order to show respect for the client, and elicit their respect in return.

Overall, the above example illustrates the intersection among the technical, behavioral, and social components of professionalism with regard to the cultural, occupational, and relational contexts involved. Further, it suggests that the formation of professional identity is largely dependent upon the environment in which the individual and organization are situated. As Blake indicated:

People don't classify something professional or unprofessional unless it really hits them home. They have to cross check it with something else. So, if you don't have a point of reference or baseline, then there is no such thing as professional or unprofessional. It's

when you're in an environment where there's a standard that's set and then you go to another environment and say, "Well, that didn't meet that standard."

In functional terms then, environmental and contextual factors serve as important "baselines" or "points of reference" from which professional standards, and thus professional identities, can be drawn. It is through this process that professionalism emerges as a nexus of environmental, organizational, and individual factors, which determines the technical, behavioral, and social elements involved in maintaining a professional image. As products of intersectionality at work, professionals must constantly "interpret and respond to such images as they maneuver their bodies through complex situations of everyday life" (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007, p. 163).

However, as illustrated in many of the female participants' narratives, this process may be more strenuous for some identities than others. Whereas female participants consistently mentioned the "boy's club" environment as problematic, none of the male participants even marked its existence. Still, the boy's club has a remarkable impact on organizational members' behaviors and social practices at CarrierTech. Elle noted this impact in sharing that she must "walk the fine line in just being a woman and wanting to be taken seriously." Melissa expanded on what it means to walk the fine line in sharing:

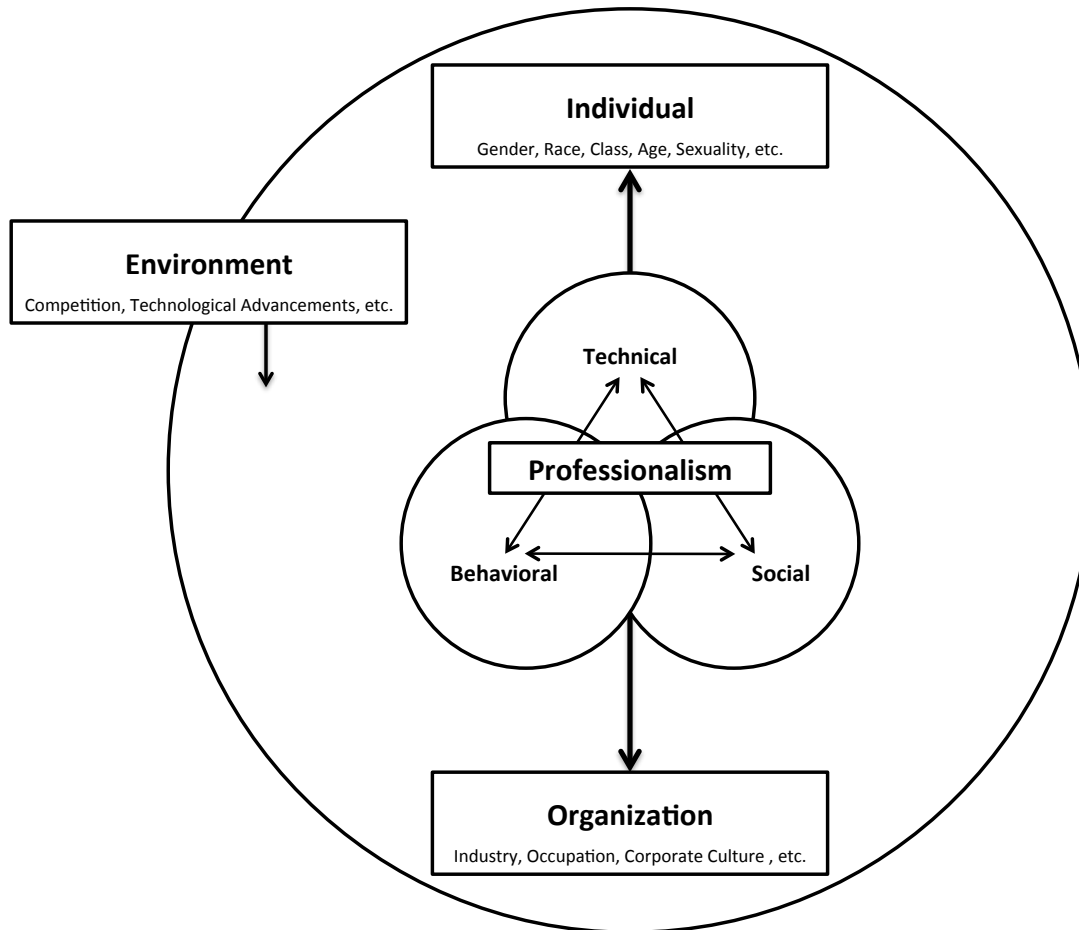
It's that balance of respecting yourself and knowing and creating that boundary, but letting people be relaxed. You don't want to be that whistle blower of like, "You can't say that to me!" It's a fine line, but you have to know where to draw it. You've got to think, "if someone ever said something like this to me at work, that line would be crossed." Like it's one thing to allow myself to be the butt of a joke, but not if it compromises who I am. I want to be known for the work that I do.

In these narratives, Elle and Melissa explicitly mark the tension they experience in the boy's club environment. Considering the properties within the social component, it seems males are able to transgress the social properties of maturity, respect, and mindfulness, while females are expected to "walk a fine line" (i.e., the behavioral component of emotion management) in all social interactions. Along with the previous example, we can see how the boy's club becomes a baseline in the formation of *gendered* professional standards and identities. For men, the boy's club environment makes it acceptable to joke, and even sexually harass female coworkers. In response, women must engage in rigorous emotion management and self-monitoring in order to cope with the largely chauvinistic environment at CarrierTech.

Ultimately, the example of the boy's club ties together the individual, organizational, and environmental factors that influence the construction of professional identity and perceptions of [un]professionalism. In addition, it demonstrates the complexity among the technical, social, and behavioral components of professionalism. Beyond the tension organizational members always and already experience between individual agency and organizational constraint, women in the "boy's club" are constrained by facets of their own identities (i.e., gender and sex) to the extent that their social and behavioral professionalism overshadows their technical skills and renders being "known for the work [they] do" (i.e., technical skills) impossible. This interplay among the various factors contributing to professional identity is important, as it has both symbolic and material consequences.

To illustrate the relationship among these factors, figure 1 (below) presents these elements in a circular diagram, which represents the environment within which professional identity and perceptions of [un]professionalism are constructed. The individual and organization are shown at opposite ends of a double-arrowed line, which symbolizes the dialectic tension

between them. Importantly, the larger environment (circle) within which they are situated is meant to encompass the numerous and varied elements that influence the individual-organizational dynamic. For example, potentially constraining contributions of market



*Figure 1.* Relationship among components of professional identity.

competition can put pressure on organizations to “re-brand,” and societal trends such as the current wave of technological advancement can fundamentally change the methods by which business is conducted. Furthermore, this study noted the ways in which individuals are influenced by larger discourses of identity (e.g., gender, race, class, age, sexuality, etc.), and how organizational factors such as corporate culture, occupation, and industry all serve as factors that shape the construct of professionalism. In turn, individuals and organizations are forced to



evolve along with the ever-changing environment in which they are situated. Hence, the model displays professionalism as a set of concentric circles representing the associated technical, behavioral, and social components, which emerge between the individual-organizational dynamic yet remain sensitive to the overarching environment. The arrows between these components (circles) reflect the tensions among them as they intersect, with professionalism emerging in the interchange. In the following chapter, theoretical and practical implications of this model are discussed along with the limitations of this study and future directions for organizational scholars to take in the exploration of professional identity.

## CHAPTER V – Implications, Limitations, & Future Directions

### Theoretical Implications

In deconstructing the interrelated components within the “sphere” of professionalism, this study presented the ways in which organizational identification, individual identity, and power combine to form professional identity, and how such identities are negotiated in mundane interaction. Specifically, this research serves as a case study of how organizational members employed by CarrierTech perceive and enact professionalism in light of situated norms. The results of this study suggest that professionalism as a communicative construct manifests itself in the midst of ongoing tension between individual agency and organizational constraint, conflating individual identities with norms, values, and expectations set forth by the organization in relation to the external environment. Individuals experience tension in performing professional identity, as multiple facets of their crystalized identities (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005) are pit against each other in particular contexts of their organizational lives. This tension may not always be problematic, as some individuals may enjoy and derive pleasure from performing a professional self, but nevertheless exists in any ongoing relationship between an individual and organization. In turn, perceptions of [un]professionalism are highly subjective and contested based on one’s “accumulation and crystallization of images and responses from past experience and a repository of cultural expectations” (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007, p. 156).

Despite the inherent subjectivity inscribed in individual appropriations and perceptions of [un]professionalism, this study has demystified the term’s complexity in forwarding three components, or sets of properties, by which the term is frequently invoked in everyday practice—technical, behavioral, and social. Although past research has distinguished between “hard” and “soft” skills with regard to job-related competencies (e.g., Robles, 2012), this study

moves the academic literature surrounding professionalism forward in recognizing the intersectional nature of these skills, competencies, actions, and interactions. To some extent, these findings support the existence of both “hard” technical skills and “soft” people skills, as each of these skillsets play a part in perceptions of professionalism. However, this distinction ultimately fails to capture the ways in which professionals apply technical skills through the use of social and behavioral competencies. In other words, as opposed to considering “hard” and “soft” skills as separate entities, scholars of professionalism should focus on the intersections, complications, and existent tensions among the technical, behavioral, and social components of professional identity.

Through analyzing the ways in which participants negotiate professional identities, this study offers a new model of professionalism that recognizes the intersectional relationship among individuals, organizations, and the overarching environment. Overall, this model builds on existing theoretical knowledge in three significant ways. First, it captures the tensions experienced by organizational members in both enacting professional identity and perceiving professionalism. In enacting professional identity, individuals’ identities are in constant tension with organizational norms, values, and expectations, as well as environmental factors that shape their organizational lives. In perceiving professionalism, individuals continue to experience this tension as they express and manage their various identifications (Larson & Pepper, 2003). While one might identify with a certain set of actions on an individual level, it is possible for that same set of actions to conflict with what is best for the organization, or vice versa. Furthermore, the technical, behavioral, and social components often complicate one another, causing further tension in one’s perception of a given person or situation as [un]professional.

Second, this model provides clarification for the absence of a common set of professional competencies applicable across professions within the academic literature. Because professionalism is largely dependent upon the environmental context and the resultant tension between the individual and organization, it will to some extent always be perceived differently depending on the unique nexus between these factors. Though some of the properties and dimensions presented in this study may be transferrable among many professions, industries, and organizations, it is unlikely that any one of these characteristics remains stable across *all* professional settings. However, the larger components—technical, behavioral, and social—facilitate a more nuanced understanding of what the construct entails. Accordingly, the third implication of this model is its modification of the term *professional*. As Cheney and Ashcraft (2007) described, *professional* has been a “taken-for-granted term—widely invoked and readily recognized but rarely interrogated or deeply understood” (p. 146). Thus, this model contributes to our deeper understanding of professionalism as set of distinct technical, behavioral, and social competencies determined by the unique intersection among individuals, organizations, and the environment in which they are situated.

### **Practical Implications**

Practitioners can also benefit from this research in considering the ways in which they evoke professionalism in everyday interaction. For all organizational members, it is important to understand the complexity of the professionalism, and the necessity of considering the technical, behavioral, and social components in light of their specific organization and the larger context in which they are situated. When employees hear phrases such as “s/he is very [un]professional” or “be more professional,” it would serve them well to attend to the technical, behavioral, and social elements in the subsequent discussion in order to build an understanding of how to “do”

professional in the context of their particular organization. For management, these components might serve as a structure from which standards for internal and external communication are developed and then implemented through socialization initiatives for new and existing employees (e.g., professional development programs, new hire training and orientation, etc.).

Furthermore, as Tracy (2004) suggests, managers and employees alike could engage in metacommunication about the tensions they experience among competing identity aspects as well as the complex intersections of the technical, behavioral, and social aspects of their professional identities. Such conversations might enable, rather than constrain, individual autonomy and promote mutual understanding among managers and employees. Specifically, for organizational members belonging to socioeconomic groups who experience tension between their individual identities and the dominant professional identity promoted by the larger organization, metacommunication might open up a productive space for positive organizational change. CarrierTech, for example, could benefit from managers engaging in conversation with female organizational members and collaboratively addressing the problematic aspects of the “boy’s club” culture. Overall, by marking and working through these tensions, employees’ might better understand their material circumstances and be more mentally equipped to negotiate their professional identities in light of situated organizational, professional, and cultural norms.

### **Limitations & Future Directions**

Despite the contributions of this study to both theory and practice, several limitations must be noted. First, due to constraints of both time and access, this research was conducted in a single organization with a limited number of participants. Future studies might include a greater number of participants from multiple organizations in order to further clarify the ways in which individuals enact professional identity and construct perceptions of [un]professionalism across

various professions, industries, etc. In addition, the majority of participants in this study shared similar socioeconomic features. Given the implications shown for members of particular socioeconomic groups, future studies should examine the influence of social location on the construct of professionalism. While this study began to address these connections, research across multiple organizations is needed to address the potential impact of these identity factors. For example, scholars might further explore the notion of “gendered professionalism” highlighted in this study, as well as how professionalism operates in relation to discourses of race, class, age, ability, sexuality, etc.

Second, this study only examined the construct of professionalism in a traditional (i.e., white collar) corporate environment. However, professionalism exists in many different contexts outside of corporate America. Thus, future research should examine professional identity and the construct of professionalism in different occupational, industrial, and institutional contexts in order to understand whether the nature of professional identity changes along with the type of work performed or other contextual factors different from those present in corporate organizational settings. Specifically, scholars might turn to high reliability organizations, international organizations, or nonprofit community organizations as alternative sites of study.

Finally, this study relied heavily upon self-reported data from participants of the target organization. Self-reported data is inherently difficult to independently verify, and thus must be noted as a possible limitation of this study. As a part-time member of the target organization, the researcher has been intimately connected with CarrierTech, as well as the participants of this study, and has no reason to believe that participants falsified data in this particular study based on his own experience. However, it is difficult to know the extent to which the researcher’s involvement with the organization affected the data collection process or the interpretation of

that data. Hence, future researchers should select sites of study with which they are not as intimately connected in order to eliminate subjectivity in whatever ways possible.

## CHAPTER VI – Conclusion

This thesis examined the ways in which employees enact professionalism as part of their identities at CarrierTech. Through qualitative methods, it explored the extent to which organizational identification, individual identity, and power combine to form professional identities, and how organizational members “do” professional in day-to-day contexts. Data collected from participant interviews highlighted three intersectional components related to the enactment professional identity and perceptions of [un]professionalism. Hence, when organizational members use phrases such as “be more professional” or “s/he is very [un]professional,” they are referencing a particular nexus of technical, behavioral, and social components determined by the unique intersection among the individual, organization, and the environment in which they are situated. Whereas the technical component refers to the knowledge and skills required by an individual’s occupational role, the behavioral component calls attention to the manner in which technical knowledge and skills are applied in organizational contexts. In turn, the social component accounts for the relational aspects of organizational life that politicize and often problematize properties within the technical and behavioral components. While these three components can be considered separately in terms of their unique properties and dimensions, it is in their intersections that the most salient symbolic and material consequences for professional identities are manifested. Hence, this research contributes to a nuanced definition of professionalism in clarifying three discrete, yet related components that make up the term, as well as recognizing the intersectionality among them.

As a dynamic and multifaceted communicative construct, professionalism is established in the middle of an ongoing dialectic tension between individual agency and organizational constraint. However, within professionalism exists a second, yet equally important tension



between the technical, behavioral, and social components emerging at the interchange of individual identities, organizational norms, values, and expectations, and factors in the external environment. Ultimately, this research presents a new model by which we can understand the relationships among these various components of professional identity. Such relationships and the tensions associated with them are important for both scholars and practitioners, as becoming a “professional” involves much more than simply “putting on your work hat.”

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