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Sensemaking About the Organization–Occupation Relationship in Constructing Identification at Work: A Cross-Occupational Approach

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Abstract

Departing from the prior assumption that identification with organization and identification with occupation are constructed separately, we explore how employee identifications with these multiple targets are co-constructed at work, using a grounded-theory approach. An analysis of interview data collected from members of three occupations (engineers, human resource [HR] staff, and marketers) in a large global company reveals that organizational identity's impact on employee identification is not independent of but significantly influenced by occupational identity; specifically, occupational identity provides a lens through which individuals actively interpret the organizational identity. Using the occupational lens, individuals engage in sensemaking about the alignment between organization and occupation and, based on this sensemaking, construct their identification with both targets. We identify four types of identification configurations constructed under the nexus of these organizational and occupational identity inputs: holistic, prioritized, parallel, and conditional identification, which vary systematically across occupations.

Keywords

identity and identification, organization and occupation, sensemaking, qualitative research

Social identification occurs when an individual incorporates what he/she perceives as the defining characteristics of a social entity into his/her self-concept (Dutton et al., 1994; Hogg, 2016; Tajfel & Turner, 1985). At work, one may identify with multiple entities cutting across each other (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Atewologun et al., 2020; Dierdorff, 2019; Ramarajan, 2014), including one's organization and occupation. Early researchers suggested that identifications with these two targets occur in a subtractive manner such that as individuals identify more strongly with one target, they identify less strongly with the other (Greene, 1978; Rotondi, 1975), while recent research suggested a complementary relationship between them (Gibson et al., 2021; Greco et al., 2022; Z. Zhu et al., 2022). Regardless of the nature of the proposed association, however, these studies have generally investigated the degree to which individuals incorporate their organization and occupation into their self-concept by measuring and comparing the two identifications on separate, parallel scales. The underlying assumption of this approach is that organizational identification and occupational identification are understood and experienced by individuals as independent and bounded.

However, this assumption may not be true. The notions of identity holism (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Ashforth et al., 2016; Rogers et al., 2017) and intersectionality (Atewologun et al., 2020; Holvino, 2010; Salter et al., 2021) indicate that the meanings of one identity can be tightly associated with the meanings of other identities (Hall et al., 2019; Ramarajan, 2014). While this line of research has generally centered on the intersection of demographic identities (e.g., being an Asian female), one's perceptions of organizational identity and occupational identity may intersect as well. For example, being

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a "Google engineer" may have different meanings for an individual than simply being an engineer or being a Googler. Thus, identifications with organization and with occupation are likely to be *co-constructed* with more intertwined, integrated meanings. However, organizational scholars have tended to treat multiple identification constructions in isolation (Caza et al., 2018; H. C. Vough et al., 2020) and we question the prevalent assumption that organizational identification and occupational identification are separate constructions.

This study thus aims to build and enrich theory around the co-construction process of identification at the nexus of organization and occupation. To do so, we performed an inductive, qualitative study using interviews with members of three occupations (engineers, HR staff, and marketers) working in one large global organization known to have strong organizational identity claims. We explore how employees make sense of the intersection of organizational and occupational identities and, based on this sensemaking, how they construct identification configuration regarding both organization and occupation in tandem. Based on our empirical findings, we develop a conceptual model that links sensemaking about the alignment between organizational and occupational identities to four different configurations of identification—holistic, prioritized, parallel, and conditional identification. Further, we illustrate how the model varies systematically across the three occupations. To eventually guide the reader toward our findings and theoretical model, we begin by presenting a review of the prior literature that discusses multiple identities and identifications at work.

Literature Review

Identification Targets at Work

Organizations provide a prevalent and salient social identity at work (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Lee et al., 2015). Accordingly, identity researchers have primarily concentrated on organizational identification, which occurs when individuals define themselves by the organizational identity they perceive. Organizational identification is particularly likely when individuals perceive the organizational identity as distinctive and prestigious (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Dutton et al., 1994; Pratt, 1998). Occupation, as a salient identity cutting across organizations, also provides a substantial source of social identification at work (Caza et al., 2018; Walsh & Gordon, 2008). As occupation represents a group of people sharing similar roles and subcultures (Anteby et al., 2016; Murphy & Kreiner, 2020; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984), occupational identity is not necessarily ingrained in a specific organization (Dierdorff, 2019). Occupational identification occurs when "an individual internalizes the occupation's identity as a valid definition of self" (Ashforth et al., 2013, p. 2427) and can be activated across any context associated with any collective.

In understanding identification at work, two theories have predominantly provided conceptual grounding: social identity theory and role identity theory (role identity theory is often called "identity theory," but in this paper, we call it "role identity theory" to clearly distinguish it from social identity theory). Social identity theory, which is psychology-based, postulates that individuals incorporate the defining attributes of the social groups with which they feel membership into their self-concepts (Dutton et al., 1994; Hogg, 2016; Tajfel & Turner, 1985). In other words, social identity theory primarily focuses on collectives—*where one belongs*—in understanding identification. Through identification, group members embody and share the contextually relevant in-group prototype and thus depersonalize their self-concepts (Hogg & Rinella, 2018; Hogg et al., 1995). Identity researchers in organizational behavior have heavily relied on social identity theory (Ashforth, 2016; Miscenko & Day, 2016), dealing with a wide range of identification targets including organization and occupation.

Role identity theory, which is sociology-based, represents an alternative but less common theoretical explanation of identification in organizational behavior (Ashforth et al., 2008). This theory suggests that individuals do not necessarily view themselves as similar to other members in a collective (e.g., organization) as social identity theory suggests; rather, individuals perceive themselves as differentiated by their own interests and the resources ingrained in their roles as well as what others perceive their role requirements to be (Burke & Stets, 2021; Stets & Burke, 2003; Stryker & Burke, 2000). Thus, identification is tightly associated with *what one does*, and individuals pursue self-verification by enacting their role identities (Stets & Burke, 2000). In this sense, role identity theory is applicable to occupational identity because it is essentially a role (i.e., occupational role) (Pratt et al., 2006; Reay et al., 2017)—although, as mentioned above, occupational identity also reflects a group identity (i.e., occupational group) (Bayerl et al., 2018; Hekman et al., 2016; G. E. Kreiner et al., 2006). In sum, social identity theory and role identity theory provide alternative theoretical lenses to understand identity and identification. The two theories have traditionally been "treated as largely independent" (Sluss et al., 2012, p. 966) and "evolved as parallel streams of identity scholarship" (Tripathi et al., 2020, p. 889). However, in our study, we attempt to provide a comprehensive theoretical perspective that integrates the two theories at the nexus of organization and occupation.

Relationship Between Identification Targets and Sensemaking

Researchers have examined identification with multiple targets at work in terms of the relative strength of different identifications. They initially suggested that organizational and occupational identification are in conflict due to incompatible value systems, asserting that the need for occupational autonomy is at odds with bureaucratic forms of control in organizations (Greene, 1978; Rotondi, 1975). However, recent empirical evidence reported positive correlations between organizational and occupational identification levels (e.g., Gibson et al., 2021 [r = .50]; Greco et al., 2022 [meta-analytic correlation ρ = .52]; Z. Zhu et al., 2022 [r = .67]), indicating that the two identifications are more complementary than competing.

Whether they argue that the levels of the two identifications are negatively or positively correlated, both perspectives address organizational identification and occupational identification as separate and parallel constructs. This assumption is reflected in how the two constructs are measured. Researchers have generally used the same root items and rating scales, capturing the degree to which respondents identify with either their organization or their occupation, and examined the relationship between these separate scores. This quantitative approach is based on the assumption that identification reflects a psychological state that is independently and exclusively established in an individual's identity-based relationship with a particular target (e.g., organization), without any influence from another target (e.g., occupation). However, this approach may not capture the complexity surrounding identification with multiple targets because multiple targets at work—organization and occupation in particular—are dynamically structured.

Sociological works (e.g., Adams et al., 2020; Barley & Kunda, 2001; Muzio et al., 2020) hint at why organizations and occupations can be viewed as mutually influencing sources of identification. In particular, Barley and Tolbert (1991) classified the dynamics between organization and occupation in work organizing as "bureaucratization of occupations" and "occupationalization of organizations." The former indicates the process by which specialized occupational tasks are incorporated into the formalized division of labor bound within an organization. In contrast, the latter focuses on the process by which an occupational group obtains its authority within or across organizations when organizing and carrying out its work. Sociologists also suggested that with the increase of the workforce engaging in professional or technical work, the nature of work organizing in the organization–occupation dynamics shifted from the former to the latter and that organizational and occupational contexts have become interdependent and co-constituted (Adams et al., 2020; Barley & Kunda, 2001; Bechky & Chung, 2018; Wright et al., 2021). This stream of research implies that the identification literature's approach of viewing organization and occupation as separate overlooks the complexity of how these two identification targets interweave. Therefore, to fully capture the multiple identifications regarding organization and occupation, it is crucial to examine first how individuals understand, or *make sense* of, the interrelations between the two identification targets and then construct their identification with the targets based on this sensemaking.

Identification involves sensemaking in that individuals construe identity-relevant information concerning a target and incorporate it into the extant frame of their self-concept (Ashforth et al., 2008; Bednar et al., 2020; Heidemann & Holtbrügge, 2022; Pratt, 2000). In sensemaking about identification, individuals continuously engage in forming, repairing, or revising identities, as meanings associated with the identification targets are fluid, rather than static (A. D. Brown, 2017; Sillince & Golant, 2018); in the "structures" of multiple identities, individuals craft a sense of self out of the interpretations intertwined with them (C. R. Scott et al., 1998; H. C. Vough et al., 2020). Notably, H. Vough (2012) unpacked the sensemaking accounts that individuals employ when constructing their identification with the organization (e.g., sacrifices made to the organization, prestige of the organization) and those that they employ when constructing their identification with the occupation (e.g., professional archetypes, enjoyment of work). More recently, Hay et al. (2021) explored how employees make sense of the threat to their organizational and occupational identification in the context of organizational change failure. However, in these studies, sensemaking about identification with each target was construed mainly as occurring in isolation rather than occurring in a concurrent, interrelated manner. Thus, we delve into how individuals make sense of the dynamics between organization and occupation and how this sensemaking shapes their identification configuration regarding these targets.

Method

To elaborate theory about multiple identifications at work beyond the prevalent quantitative analyses based on separate identification scores, we employed a qualitative, grounded-theory approach (Charmaz, 2014; Edmondson & Mcmanus, 2007; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This approach is used "to extend previous theory and make it more dense by filling in what had been left out" (Locke, 2001, p. 103). As we aimed to theoretically advance the extant notion that organizational identification and occupational identification are separate constructions, we deemed a grounded-theory approach as highly appropriate. Based on in-depth interview data, we sought to better understand the organization–occupation identity dynamics and provide a novel theoretical model regarding the co-construction process of identification at the nexus of organization and occupation.

Research Context

Our study context is K-Co (a pseudonym), a large global company headquartered in South Korea. K-Co is a forerunner in the electronics and IT industry, and one of the world's largest producers of several electronic products. In addition, K-Co is well known for its active pursuit of a strong organizational identity, manifested through an espoused prototypical employee identity: the "K-Co man" (this term has been traditionally used, and the "man" does not necessarily have a gender implication—during the interviews with female employees, we did not observe any resistance to the term K-Co "man"). As organizational identity is often understood via the characteristics of prototypical members (Ashforth et al., 2008) as well as members' shared beliefs about the central, distinctive, and enduring features of the organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985), we use the terms "K-Co identity" and "K-Co man identity" interchangeably to denote K-Co's organizational identity. We chose K-Co as a context for understanding how people construct organizational and occupational identification due to this strong emphasis on organizational identity as well as the fact that K-Co was a pluralistic organization, employing individuals across occupational fields.

Data Collection

As a pilot study, we first contacted three HR staff members at K-Co using our personal networks and conducted preliminary one-on-one interviews with them to obtain an overall sense of K-Co's organizational identity. We asked them about desired and espoused employee attributes at K-Co, basic characteristics of K-Co's organizational identity, how the K-Co man identity is reflected in K-Co's organizational identity claims, and the like. In these interviews, the notion of "occupational variations" first emerged. The interviewees mentioned that although K-Co did have a distinctive and strong organizational identity, employees' perceptions of K-Co and the K-Co man identity might vary across occupations. Reflecting on both their observations of such differences and actual differences between HR practices applied to engineers and non-engineers, these HR interviewees suggested that we select the sample for subsequent main interviews based on this occupational distinction.

Therefore, in our main interviews, we followed a purposeful sampling approach (Patton, 1990) to identify informants—engineers versus non-engineers. We contacted the HR department at K-Co and they helped us to recruit the informants. In the main interviews, we designed each interview as open-ended to allow new themes to emerge through the processes of data collection and analysis. We began the interviews with broad questions concerning organizational identity and identification. As interviews progressed, we noticed that themes surrounding occupations began to emerge—as suggested in the preliminary interviews with the HR staff. Accordingly, as data collection continued, we included questions directly intended to understand employee perceptions of occupational identity and its relationship with organizational identity (for a sample of our key interview questions, see Appendix). In the recursive process of data collection and analysis, another occupational distinction emerged within the non-engineer group—between HR staff and marketers. Thus, we decided to address three, not two, occupations—engineers, HR staff, and marketers. In this way, our sampling logic moved from purposeful to theoretical sampling (Ligita et al., 2020; Strauss & Corbin, 1998), with our data collection directed by the theoretical understanding of the subjects that emerged from the data. The final sample comprised 50 employees (23 engineers, 16 HR staff members, and 11 marketers). Sixteen percent of the interviewees were women and organizational tenure ranged from 1 to 25 years (mean = 9).

Interviews typically lasted 90 min, ranging from 30 min to over 180 min. Most of the interviews (90%) were recorded and transcribed verbatim. When the interviewees did not allow us to record the interview because of privacy issues, we attempted to transcribe as much as possible during the interview and created a log of the interview as soon after the interview as possible. The interview transcripts totaled 610 pages of single-spaced text. To triangulate (Jick, 1979) K-Co's organizational identity claims with K-Co employees' perceptions of them, we also collected archival data including 14 books (concerning K-Co's history and philosophy, founder and chairperson, HR practices, etc.), newcomer training program textbooks, and websites.

Data Analysis

We analyzed our data in a way consistent with the grounded theory approach—by moving iteratively back and forth between data and theory to gain an emerging structure of theoretical arguments (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) concerning identification at the intersection of organization and occupation.

Our analysis followed three major steps (Gioia et al., 2013; Pratt et al., 2006), which involved identifying first-order codes, second-order themes, and then aggregate dimensions (for recent examples using this analytical technique, see Pamphile, 2022; Sutter et al., 2023), and the resulting data structure is depicted in Figure 1. First, we independently read through all interview transcripts word-for-word and developed first-order codes that arose from the informants' language (Charmaz, 2014; Gioia et al., 2013). Examples of first-order codes include "K-Co way: control," "organization-occupation (mis)-match," "organizational recognition," "emphasizing No. 1 status," and "sense of K-Co man." After identifying statements regarding the informants' perceptions of work life via first-order coding, we moved to the second step, categorizing codes (Gioia et al., 2013). In this step, through discussions, we grouped similar codes into higher-level theoretical themes. For example, "K-Co way: control," "organization-occupation (mis)match," and "organizational recognition" were combined into the second-order theme "role-verification" because these codes all involved perceptions of whether what employees see important in performing their occupational role is properly provided by the organization. During this process of analysis, occupational differences became clearer. Throughout the analysis and identification of the second-order themes, we kept comparing and contrasting them (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) across different occupations to refine them and ensure that they represented similar meanings across occupations.

The third step of the analysis was to synthesize second-order themes into aggregate dimensions (Gioia et al., 2013). We identified aggregate dimensions that underlie second-order themes to understand how those themes fit together into a coherent picture. For example, we aggregated "pre-existing role identity," "role-verification," and "role-mobility" into "sensemaking using a role identity-based lens." Based on those emergent themes and dimensions, we developed a conceptual model that describes how the aggregate dimensions relate to one another at the conceptual level and thus "makes clear all relevant data-to-theory connections" (Gioia et al., 2013, p. 22). Initially, we developed occupation-specific models, and through the discussions we continued to compare the experiences of each occupation group, systematically deriving similarities and differences. We then constructed a more general model. We revised the model several times to derive a theoretical story that is as closely connected to the data as possible and conceptually convincing (Locke, 2001).

Findings

Figure 2 serves as an orienting structure for our findings. As illustrated in Figure 2, the model contains the four main components: (1) organizational identity, (2) occupational lens: sensemaking using a role identity-based lens, (3) occupational lens: sensemaking using a group identity-based lens, and (4) identification configuration. In the quotes presented below, we identify interviewees by assigning them the initial letter of their occupation (E, H, or M) and a number. For example, the notation [H #3] indicates a quote from the third HR interviewee.

Organizational Identity

Organizational identity is understood from either a top-down or a bottom-up perspective (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). From a top-down perspective, identity reflects the messages that top management transmits to employees regarding the core, defining features of the organization. From a bottom-up perspective, identity is constituted by employees' shared understandings of such features. At K-Co, we found that these two approaches were highly consistent.

Salient characteristics of K-Co's organizational identity included excellence and perfectionism. The founder of K-Co strongly pursued a philosophy of excellence and perfectionism with a clear strategic goal of taking and holding a first-place position in the business, as illustrated in his statements: "To build an imperfect enterprise is the equivalent of a crime" and "To excel at doing big things, one must excel at doing small things first." To realize these claims, K-Co maintained strong organizational control over various management activities and employees' attitudes/behaviors. According to an HR staff member:

> K-Co pursues to manage and control by a system. Strictly structured processes of work and a thorough record management system have been firmly established through its long history. The keywords that best describe K-Co are 'systematic,' 'well-organized,' and 'minutely established processes.' The K-Co way has been established through continuous accumulation, confirmation, and reinforcement of perfectionism to achieve and maintain the No.1 position. This value system has shaped how K-Co employees should think and behave. (H #3)

In addition, the organizational identity was supported by the notion of "K-Co man," a clear prototype of what K-Co employees should be. Regardless of their occupations, our interviewees commonly stated that K-Co employees were expected to be a K-Co man that fits the systematic control of K-Co. Describing K-Co employees as a collective, the interviewees frequently used adjectives such as "gentle," "kind," "meek," and "compliant." Other descriptions such as "K-Co people are very well-normalized" (E #2) and "Sometimes I feel K-Co is operated by a mechanical system, not by human beings" (M

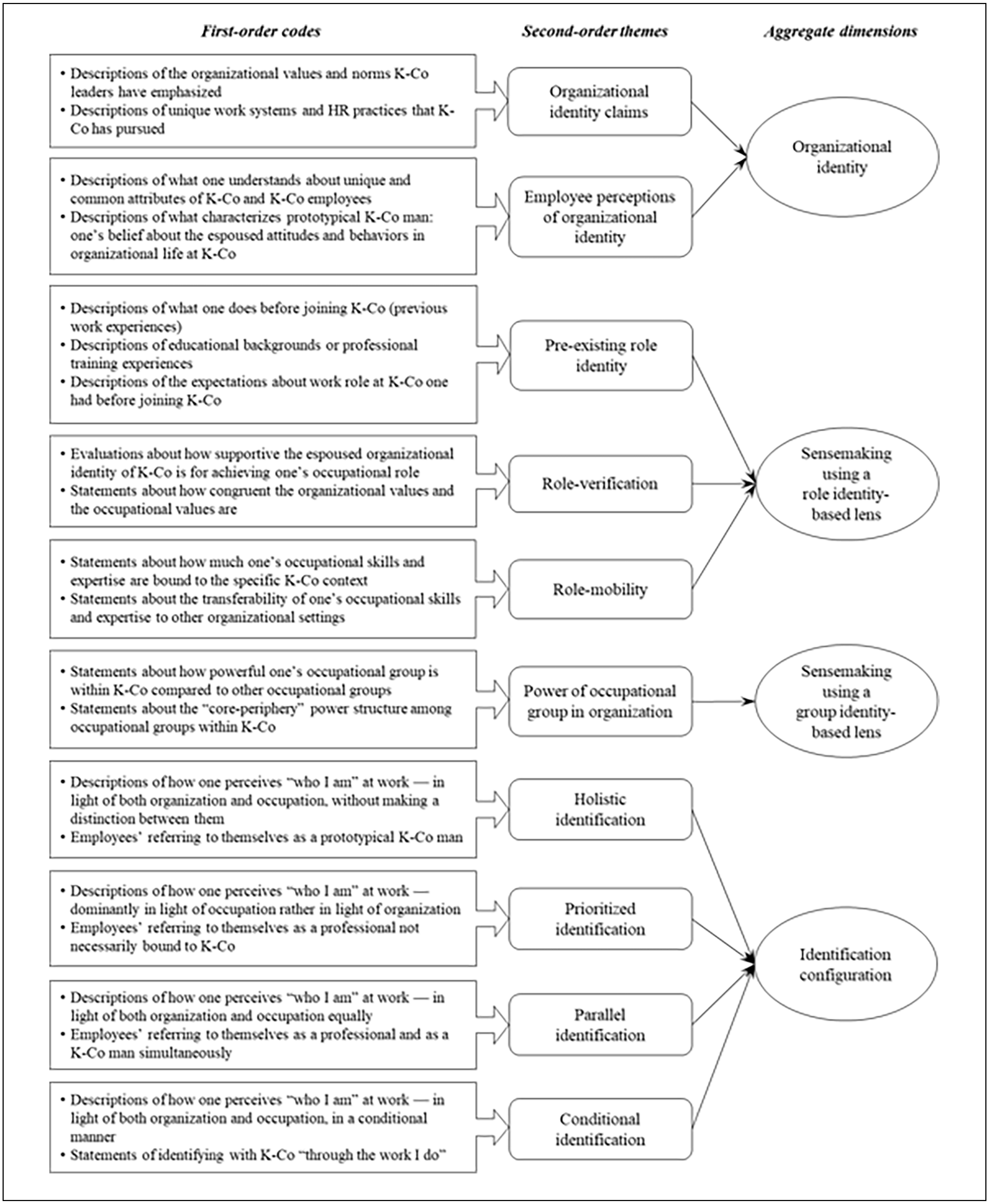

Figure 1. Overview of data structure.

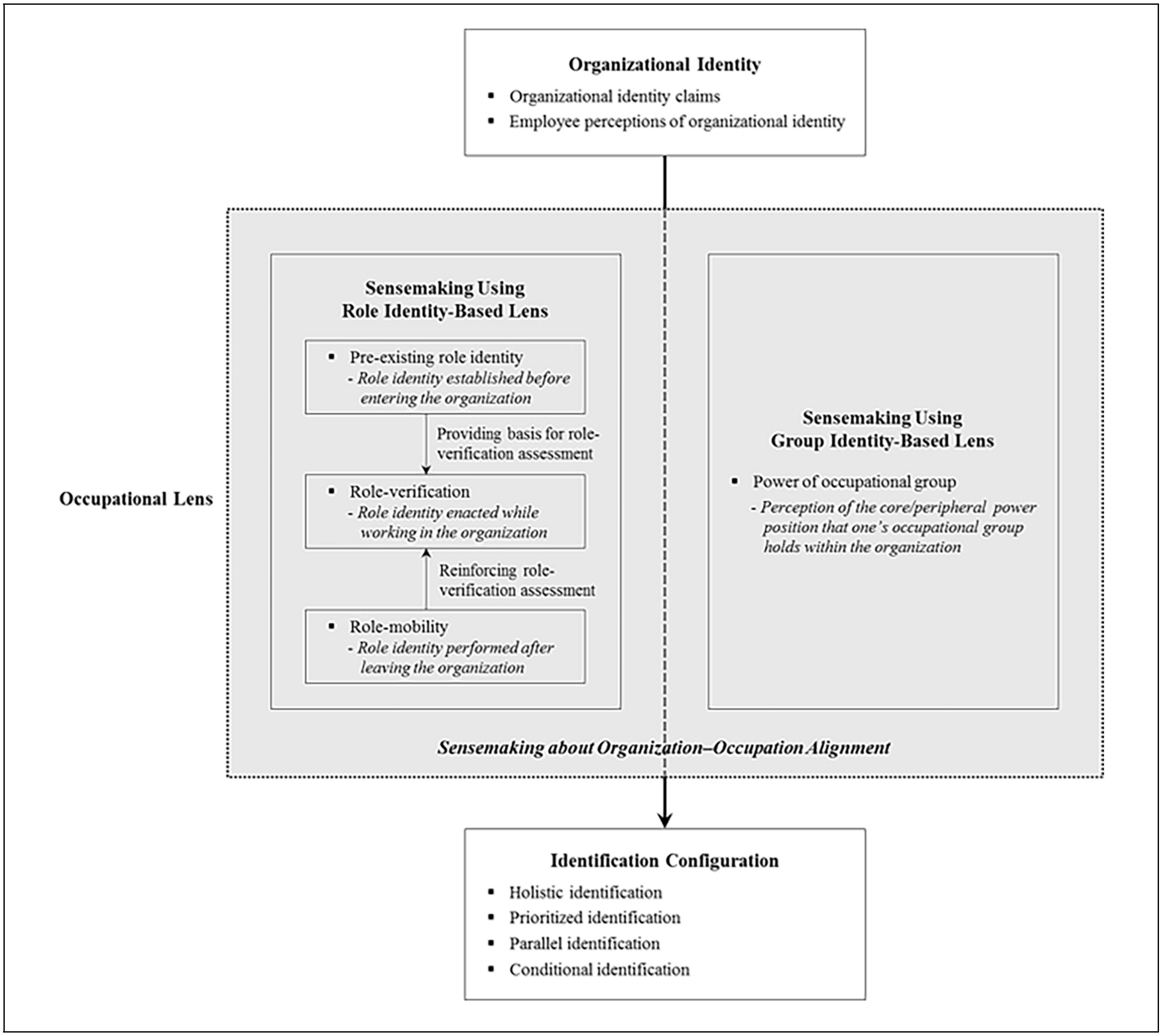

Figure 2. A model of co-construction of identification with organization and occupation.

#2) also reified their uniform perceptions of K-Co and the K-Co man identity.

K-Co's strong organizational identity and prototypical employee identity were based on K-Co's management philosophy of "a company is its people" and "people and talent first." K-Co emphasized the importance of human resources in realizing those organizational ideals and established systematic HR tools. Selecting employees, K-Co primarily stressed applicants' fit with its espoused organizational values over their technical knowledge. All newcomers must go through an intensive training program that intended to inculcate strongly espoused attitudes and behaviors into newcomers. At every promotion point, employees participated in a training program that repeatedly promotes K-Co's espoused values. Through these multiple layers of the strong HR system, K-Co aimed to give sense to and reinforce its organizational identity and distinctive employee identity of the "K-Co man."

Sensemaking About Organization–Occupation Alignment Using an Occupational Lens

Despite the similarities in their basic perceptions of the K-Co identity, K-Co employees revealed critical variations in how they evaluate the identity; that is, they

Table 1. Occupational Lens Across Occupations.

Occupational lens		Engineers	HR staff	Marketers
Role identity-based lens	Pre-existing role identity	High pre-existing identity	No pre-existing identity	High pre-existing identity
	Role-verification	Majority of engineers: Negative verification Minority of engineers: Positive verification	Complete verification	Moderate verification
	Role-mobility	High mobility	Low mobility	Moderate mobility
Group identity-based lens	Power of occupational group	Low power	High power	Moderate power

substantially differed in *interpreting* the relevance and meanings of organizational identity for themselves. We noted that these variations fell along occupational lines. Rather than passively portraying the organizational identity, employees actively engaged in interpreting it, through the identity meanings associated with their occupations. In other words, occupation functioned as a *lens* through which employees made sense of organization–occupation alignment: the degree to which individuals recognize an agreement between the meanings associated with the organizational identity and those associated with their occupational identity. Furthermore, this occupational lens took on two forms: role identity-based lens and group identity-based lens. For example, a statement about self-concept, such as "I am an engineer," had two different underlying meanings: (a) I am an engineer who performs an engineering *role* and (b) I am an engineer who belongs to the *group* of engineers. Accordingly, we distinguished between the notions of role identity (what one does) and group identity (where one belongs) to adequately capture the essence of occupational identity and its function as a lens. Below, we explain how the occupational lens varies across occupations in detail (for a summary, see Table 1).

Sensemaking Using a Role Identity-Based Lens

When engaging in sensemaking about the alignment between organizational identity and occupational *role* identity, employees considered three different aspects of their occupational role identity (see the left box in the shaded occupational lens box in Figure 2). The first aspect involved the role identity established *before* they enter the organization, which we refer to as "pre-existing role identity": whether employees already had a clear understanding of what they do as a specific occupation holder before they encounter K-Co. The second aspect concerned the role identity enacted *while* employees work in the organization: whether they are able to do the things that they consider critical to their occupational role enactment within the organization. This is denoted as "role-verification" because it essentially concerns whether what the organization sees as important for enacting one's occupational role is identical to one's perceptions of that role. The last aspect pertained to the role identity that could be performed *after* leaving the organization: whether the specific skills of an occupational role are easily applicable to organizations other than K-Co. We refer to it as "role-mobility" because the applicability of role specialties is associated with employability in the external labor market. We found that sensemaking accounts of the three aspects in the role identity-based lens substantially varied among engineers, HR staff, and marketers.

Engineers. Engineers are professional practitioners who research and develop solutions for technological systems and problems. The engineering role identity is rooted in professional technical expertise attained through engineering-specific education, training, and career patterns (Anderson et al., 2010; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). Our engineer interviewees indeed had very homogeneous educational backgrounds and career paths. Among the 23 engineers, 12 held a doctoral degree, 9 a master's, and 2 a bachelor's, all in engineering fields. All engineers with previous work experience had worked in engineering fields. This indicates that their engineering role identity had been already established before they joined K-Co. The following quote exemplifies engineers' salient notions of *pre-existing role identity*:

> I used to do similar work regarding UI, User Interface, in my previous workplace. That means I already had an engineer career before joining K-Co. Those role experiences never disappear. I utilize what I learned in my past career in my current work at K-Co. (E #12)

Based on their salient pre-existing role identity, engineers' overall perceptions of *role-verification* within K-Co were frequently negative. Many engineer interviewees noted that K-Co's strong identity claims of perfectionism, reified through strict and uni-directional organizational control, did not adequately verify, or even impaired their ability to enact, the engineering role which requires generating unique solutions to problems and challenging existing ideas and attitudes.

> Many engineers have a tendency to break the rules at work. With strong pride in their expertise, sometimes they aggressively compete and conflict. So, wholly categorizing engineers as typical K-Co men—mostly docile and obedient—may not make sense. Engineers often say, K-Co is reluctant to accept their new ideas and instead kills them. It seems like K-Co just preset a K-Co-specific frame, luring us into it. (E #11)

At the extreme, one engineer described K-Co as "the tomb of engineers" (E #23). Another engineer expressed that K-Co actually impeded the likelihood of innovation through engineering: "K-Co has always supported the norm 'look before you leap,' but breakthrough engineering ideas can emerge when we do 'not look'" (E #4). These narratives all revealed engineers' perception that the organization and their occupation were not aligned, as K-Co did not verify, thus unsupportive of, their occupational role enactment.

This perception of misalignment was further corroborated by engineers' high *role-mobility* perception. As their expertise is not organizationally bound, engineers tend to easily find a new workplace that fits their occupational role specialties (Kalleberg & Berg, 1987). Indeed, engineer interviews stated that they do not have to remain in an organization of which ideals are not well aligned with their occupational ideals, indicating their high employability: "Any organization that provides good engineering opportunities, we can move to. I can use my expertise outside K-Co. Where I work doesn't matter. K-Co doesn't matter" (E #16).

Overall, the majority of engineers sensed that the organizational identity is *misaligned* with their occupational role identity. However, a small number of engineers indicated that their occupational role was positively verified, thus supported, by the K-Co identity.

> That flash memory we developed was such a remarkable, world-first product. Several newspapers reported this achievement, and finally we received a very prestigious award for technological excellence. Throughout all the work processes regarding this project, we got very systematic technical and administrative support from K-Co. I was highly motivated. To me, the job meant that I was playing a role in a world-class engineering project available only at K-Co. (E #19)

As illustrated in the quote above, those engineers who provided positive evaluations regarding role-verification tended to acknowledge K-Co's identity of excellence—the prestigious high-tech resources they could utilize only at K-Co while performing their engineering role. They frequently described these resources as "the best in the world" or "the first in the world." The notion of organization–occupation misalignment dominating most engineers' sensemaking was not necessarily shared with this subset of engineers.

HR Staff. Although typically regarded as an administrative functional tool, HR management can be a "device that provides shared meanings about the corporate universe, thus being instrumental in sustaining the normative order" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p. 712). An HR staff member characterized his main occupational role at K-Co as "transmitting the organization's core values and management philosophy to other employees and evaluating people based on them" (H #16). Specifically, HR staff members were supposed to select job applicants who fit K-Co's management philosophy of excellence and perfectionism, train and educate employees to internalize the "K-Co way," evaluate, compensate and promote employees based on their contributions to K-Co's performance and growth. Two interviewees described their occupational role as follows:

> My role requires me to represent K-Co and deliver what the organization wants from job applicants. They may evaluate and form an impression of K-Co from their interactions with me. (H # 11)

> All training staff members believe—"we should be role models for other employees." While I engage in training work, all trainees are looking at me, and I should present what K-Co values. (H #1)

These quotes revealed HR staff's understanding that "what the organization espouses" constituted the crucial aspect of their role. This means that HR staff's role identity was constructed within the specific organizational boundary of K-Co and there was not a clear *pre-existing role identity* available for HR staff.

> When applying to K-Co, I just vaguely thought that working for a big company like K-Co might be good, but didn't have any specific career goal or plan. I had no clear expectation of what my work would be. I would say, I joined K-Co and then became an HR staff member by chance. (H #14)

Further, HR interviewees' college majors varied widely (e.g., computer science, English literature, political science, etc.), not necessarily HR-related, and none had previous work experience in other organizations: "HR doesn't recruit from external sources. Fresh college graduates are selected and nurtured as K-Co's HR staff" (H #11). This indicates that a clear understanding of "what I do as an HR staff member" did not exist before they joined K-Co; it was developed after being embedded in K-Co's organizational identity context.

In a similar vein, HR staff did not directly raise the *role-verification* issue. Lacking a pre-existing role identity, they had no basis for external comparison, thus regarding role-verification as a non-issue. In a sense, their occupational role was already completely verified by K-Co because they were performing the role that the organization asked them to perform. Although not exhibiting the notion of role-verification, HR staff offered narratives reflecting their sense of the perfectly aligned organization–occupation relationship:

> Without the organization, I cannot even think of my work. (H #1)
>
> HR's role is spiritual, conceptual, historical, and institutional. To guide, train, and develop people in the organization, HR people must have deep knowledge about K-Co. (H #15)

Regarding *role-mobility*, our findings were consistent with this logic of alignment. HR staff's occupational roles were "minutely customized for use at K-Co alone" (H #5) and this role characteristic was associated with their beliefs of low employability: "HR work is all about our company. Moving to other companies is not easy" (H #12). Also, the perception of low role-mobility reinforced HR staff's desire to remain at K-Co which ensured high organization–occupation alignment. Emphasizing the positive aspects of K-Co such as K-Co's strong and systematic HR system, HR staff rather justified their low role-mobility—"can't move" was often reframed as "don't want to move":

> At K-Co, thanks to the particular emphasis K-Co places on its HR practices and K-Co's big company size, HR staff can learn a lot about HR. Unlike other organizations where HR is just responsible for operations, here at K-Co, I can do everything—planning, operating, and giving feedback. You may think we can't move. But I believe we don't want to move to other organizations. (H #8)

In sum, underlying HR staff's sensemaking using a role identity-based lens, we found *perfect alignment* between the organization and the occupation. By nature, their occupational role was constructed within the K-Co context and in accordance with what K-Co specifically espouses.

Marketers. Marketing involves the process of planning and executing product pricing, promotion, and distribution to create and deliver value to customers (Kotler, 2003). K-Co marketers reported role identity perceptions similar to those of engineers—their occupational role is based on individual professional expertise and skills: "Basically, marketing skills about exploring consumer needs, linking them to product development and commercializing are professionally constructed and can be applied to any business situation" (M #7). Accordingly, we found quite distinct notions of *pre-existing role identity* among marketers, which were established throughout their previous educational or career paths.

> My career paths have centered on B2B marketing. When K-Co was trying to expand its marketing strategy to B2B beyond B2C, I was hired. I joined K-Co as an expert in this specific marketing field. (M #2)

Although not as homogeneous as those of engineers, our marketer interviewees' educational and career backgrounds were fairly homogeneous—80% of them held a bachelor's degree in management or a graduate degree in marketing, and 70% had previous work experience in marketing. This provided further evidence of marketers' pre-existing role identity.

Based on their pre-established understandings or expectations of what they do as a marketer, marketers made sense of how K-Co's organizational identity verifies their occupational role, and their perceptions of *role-verification* lay between those of HR staff and engineers. Similar to most engineers, marketers revealed the perception of insufficient role-verification, noting that the strict perfectionism-oriented organizational control often prevented them from effectively performing their roles:

> K-Co's tight, top-down control doesn't help people like me who want to enhance their professional capacity as a brand manager. Many times I hesitate to present my new ideas to my bosses, as I'm obsessed with the concern—what if they dislike my ideas? Having psychological ownership of my role is quite tricky at K-Co. (M #1)

However, marketer interviewees—including the marketer above who expressed her obsession with her bosses' opinions—also recognized the K-Co identity of excellence and perfectionism because it had enabled K-Co to generate best-in-the-world products and prestigious brand value which were important in fulfilling their occupational role.

> K-Co tends to be obsessed with the idea of moving in one direction and uses perfectionism as an excuse for this. It lacks diversity and creativity, which is obviously a drawback to creative marketing. But I also feel that this strong driving force from the top has made it possible for K-Co to produce the world-best products and brand value. (M #2)

Another marketer also exhibited this ambivalent perception regarding role-verification:

> As a marketer, I can think of both positive and negative aspects of K-Co. On the positive side, it runs a very large-

> scale business. It pursues mega-business strategies that smaller companies can never imagine. It's a great advantage for marketers who want to launch a large-scale marketing project. But, K-Co is cold-hearted. I mean, it doesn't allow for trial-and-error. So, here, you need to be, to some extent, defensive because you know that your outcome will be harshly evaluated. This means, your big dream project should be minutely planned with a very detailed picture, even before you jump into it. (M #3)

Overall, marketers simultaneously provided positive and negative responses regarding their perceptions of role-verification. Those findings indicate that marketers made sense of the relationship between K-Co's organizational identity and their occupational role identity as *moderately aligned*; their assessments were somewhere in between most engineers' sense of misalignment and HR staff's sense of perfect alignment.

We wondered why marketers, though sharing a feature—a salient pre-existing role identity—with engineers, exhibited different role-verification perceptions. Our further analysis revealed the reason: marketers' occupational role was more bound to K-Co than that of engineers. Compared to engineers, marketers were often motivated by the existence of direct competitors, beyond career aspirations as a marketer: "My work always centers on how we can outsell ABC Electronics (pseudonym of K-Co's strong competitor)" (M #6). Further, marketers' frequent interactions with outside stakeholders (e.g., customers, distributors, resellers) made their role, as boundary-spanners, dependent on K-Co's specific organizational attributes. A marketer described his occupational role, comparing it with others:

> I would say, marketers' occupational role is not necessarily dependent upon K-Co. It is closer to the engineering occupation than to that of staff. Marketers are specialists, rather than generalists. However, marketers' role is substantially different from that of engineers because it involves interactions with clients. In those interactions, differentiating K-Co products from others is very critical. (M #9)

This organizationally bounded attribute of the marketing role identity also involved marketers' perceptions of *role-mobility*. Like engineers, marketers believed that their employability was high: "I believe marketers have professional marketing skills that are generally applicable, not necessarily bound to a particular organizational setting" (M #9). However, this interviewee also added, "For effective marketing, marketers are required to have a certain level of background knowledge regarding differentiated technological features of the specific K-Co products" (M #9). This indicates that due to the need for company-specific marketing skills, marketers do not always have high employability in practice. Another marketer echoed this notion:

> I'm sure the marketing occupation is getting more flexible. For example, recently ABC Electronics headhunted an executive marketer from P&G. Similarly, K-Co headhunted an executive from L'Oréal marketing. But… this may not be always the case. Me, a marketer of semiconductor products… some marketing skills in this area are very unique. I might not be able to sell cosmetics. That's too far. (M #8)

The organizationally bounded character of the marketing role identity appeared to make marketers' employability lower than that of engineers. This feature was associated with marketers' perceptions of a more aligned relationship between organization and occupation, relative to engineers' misalignment perceptions; it reinforced marketers' perceptions of moderate alignment.

Taken together, in each occupation, the three aspects of the role identity-based lens were mutually reinforcing. Role-verification perceptions primarily involved employees' sensemaking about how organizational and occupational identities are aligned. A pre-existing role identity provided a basis for this role-verification perception; when they perceived a salient pre-existing role identity, employees actively engaged in assessing whether it is appropriately verified by the organization. Otherwise, they did not clearly express a role-verification perception. Finally, the role-mobility perception further reinforced the sense of organization–occupation alignment. When employees perceived organization–occupation misalignment, for example, a perception of high role-mobility further corroborated it.

Sensemaking Using a Group Identity-Based Lens

In addition to role identity-based sensemaking, K-Co employees engaged in group identity-based sensemaking (see the right box in the shaded occupational lens box in Figure 2). Occupations provided a lens relating to occupational group membership and inter-occupational group comparisons. Specifically, the group identity-based lens concerned "how *powerful* is my occupational group at K-Co?" Based on the perception of whether one's occupational group held core or peripheral power within the organization, employees made sense of how organizational identity and occupational *group* identity were aligned.

Engineers. Within the context of strong organizational control at K-Co, engineers believed that their occupational group was at the bottom of the occupational hierarchy: "No significant or core rights or responsibilities are given to engineers. Power is given to the staff, and I feel that HR always thinks engineers should be under their control and supervision" (E #22). Many engineers provided sensemaking accounts revealing their negative feelings concerning their peripheral power position—engineers at K-Co were supposed, or forced, to passively do what others (i.e., management and HR) had decided to make them do.

> Within K-Co, we are at the bottom of the food chain. We are blamed for their [the management's] faults as if they were our faults. Staff people even say that we engineers are a substitutable workforce. (E #6)

Even the geographic location of engineering departments was related to engineers' power perceptions. All engineering departments were located in somewhat isolated suburban areas distant from the core units of K-Co, which further reinforced their perceptions of being peripheral: "At the workplace, I feel, we engineers are the farthest from the mainstream of K-Co" (E #20).

Interestingly, certain engineers addressed the paradoxical nature underlying their position; they emphasized that engineers executed the core task using the core resources to contribute to the real performance of K-Co, yet they were at the periphery.

> We actually call the engineering department a 'direct' department because we make real products and money for the company. Staff department, HR, is called an 'indirect' department. We can't understand why the indirect actors play the role of the core actors. Why do we, who should be the core actors, feel that we're far from the core? (E #16)

Engineers' negative perception of the core–periphery paradox—the peripheral occupational group supposed to support the virtually core group assumed a more powerful position than the core group—further demonstrated their negative understanding of the organization–occupation relationship: a sense of *misalignment*.

HR Staff. HR staff frequently spoke of issues regarding the power structure within K-Co and appeared to believe they held important power: "We are supposed to transmit core values and norms to other employees. This also means we can control them, using HR tools, to maintain those organizational ideals" (H #1). HR staff members had frequent contacts with top managers to convey and execute their decisions through various administrative tools: "Through the HR functions, a CEO's philosophy is transmitted. With frequent interactions with him, sometimes I feel like I myself am a CEO! HR, as a link between the CEO and other employees, is structured to know and understand the CEO's opinions well" (H #9). This revealed HR members' perceptions of their core position, directly empowered by the organization's top authority.

Their strong power perception was in line with how K-Co managed its organizational identity claims. Embodying its strong identity in the forceful control and systematic usage of HR practices, K-Co bolstered the power of the HR group that directly implemented these practices. The core power given to the HR group provided another rationale for HR staff's sensemaking about the *perfectly aligned* organization–occupation relationship.

Marketers. Marketers exhibited a perception of a moderate amount of occupational group power. The organization's products were finally conveyed to the outside via marketers' strategic actions: "Marketers are gatekeepers. As we sell the company's products to outside people, we should play the role of the representative of K-Co" (M #10). Because of this role as organizational representatives, "Marketers should be 100% K-Co men at the moment of the transaction" (M #6). That is, while enacting the espoused employee identity, the marketing group was under the substantial influence of K-Co's value systems controlled by the strong power of the HR group. However, marketers also noted that they exerted power over others; by gathering information on external market environments, marketers were actively involved in and influenced product planning and development decisions, thus impacting engineering processes.

> In the past, regarding the basic engineering and production processes, people tended to think, producing first and then marketing. But now it's the opposite, marketing first and then producing. Therefore, ideas about products provided by marketers who directly interact with customers are getting more important. Marketing practices are not only about product selling. They cover product planning and production, and even strategic alliances. (M #9)

Accordingly, as a conduit between the inside and outside of the organization, marketers understood that their occupational group held a certain degree of power, influenced by the HR and influencing the engineering group. A marketer articulated this in-between nature of their power:

> HR staff is far at the top. They would feel responsible for the company and believe they have the core power to control it. I would say, marketers are kind of in the middle. Less powerful than the staff, but we are more powerful at least than those at the periphery, because we get more information and can view the company from a broader perspective than they do. (M #5)

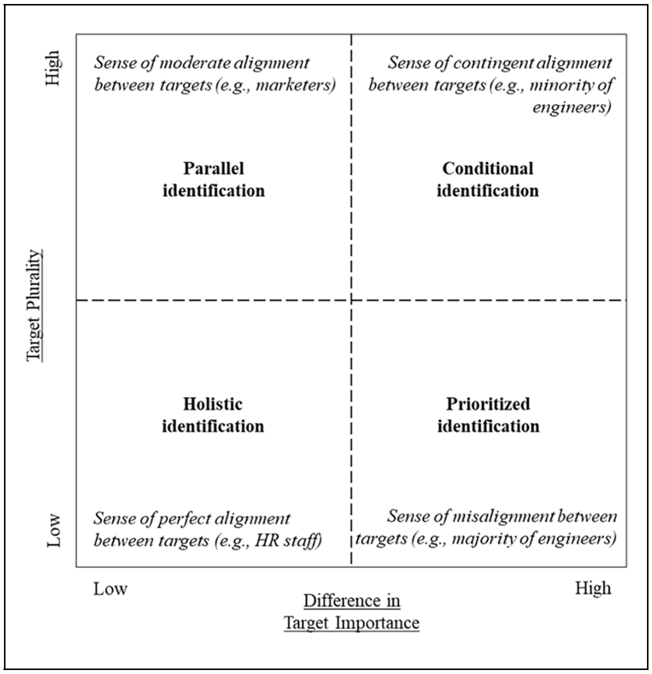

Figure 3. Configurations of identification with multiple targets.

This perception of moderate group power was another source that encouraged marketers' sensemaking about the *moderately aligned* organization–occupation relationship. Marketers provided neither the sensemaking accounts of organization–occupation misalignment rooted in the perception of peripheral occupational power nor those of perfect alignment rooted in the perception of core occupational power.

Identification Configuration at the Intersection of Organization and Occupation

Now, we delve into how sensemaking about organization–occupation alignment influences identification. In constructing identification at work, individuals perceived the two identification targets not as independent entities but as interrelated and, at times, inseparable. We map the identification configurations along two dimensions (see Figure 3): (a) target plurality (i.e., how many targets are involved in shaping identification) and (b) difference in target importance (i.e., whether targets have different or similar influences on shaping identification).

Engineers. Engineers exhibited two types of identification configurations. For the majority of engineers, one's occupational values and expertise, rather than the organization, served as a substantially more salient basis for their self-concept. We refer to this type of identification configuration wherein individuals primarily identify with one target as *prioritized identification*. As prioritized identification mainly focuses on "one important" target among multiple targets, we present it in Figure 3 as being low in target plurality but high in the difference in target importance. Engineers articulated the importance of occupation as a dominant identification target as follows:

> "The work I do, not the name of the company I work for, defines me. If the company name K-Co is deleted from my business card, that's fine. Regardless, I'm still an engineer specializing in semiconductors" (E #2).

> Belonging to K-Co doesn't much influence my working hard. Given K-Co's tight organizational environment, the most rational mindset I can take is just focusing on my work and interactions with my peer engineers and achieving my technical goals as an engineer. Once thinking this way, the K-Co boundary is not meaningful in defining who I am. I'm just an engineer not bound to K-Co. (E #22)

These features of engineers' identification were consistent with their sense of organization–occupation misalignment. Predicated on their negative interpretation of K-Co's identity through the occupational lens, most engineers enacted the prioritized engineer identity, separating and downplaying the K-Co man identity.

Although prioritized identification was prevalent among engineers, we found a different type of identification among certain engineers. For them, occupation was a salient identification target but organizational identity also became self-referential conditionally: *if* they perceived that the organization helped achieve the goals and aspirations of their occupational role. In this type of identification configuration, referred to as *conditional identification*, individuals primarily identify with one target, but also with another if they perceive that the latter is compatible with the former. Speaking of the organization as an identification target, these engineers frequently emphasized that they became identified with the organization "through the work" they do.

> I'm mainly motivated by and love my occupational work, but also feel identified with the company. My love for K-Co is substantially through my love for my work. This is different from blind loyalty to K-Co. I've become more identified with K-Co because I feel ownership and pride in my engineering work. (E #5)

This narrative implies that, although both occupation and organization became self-defining, more important, fundamental identity meanings were given to occupation. In Figure 3, we thus depict conditional identification as having high target plurality and high difference in target importance.

Conditionally identified engineers often cited the excellent engineering resources available only at prestigious high-tech companies such as K-Co. In their sense, organization and occupation were *contingently aligned* when they regarded the organization as supporting their occupational role enactment. They consistently paired descriptions of their identification with K-Co with statements concerning their instrumental satisfaction with what K-Co provided for their occupational role enactment, such as career benefits and organizational prestige/excellence:

> My identification with K-Co is all based on work. I'm satisfied with my work, and I like the high-tech resources and infrastructure of K-Co through which I can make individual technological achievements and develop myself as an engineer. If I ever move to another company, people in that company would expect me to be a competent engineer because I have the experience of being an engineer at K-Co. (E #8)

These engineers primarily enacted the engineer identity but also enacted the K-Co man identity if they sense a contingent alignment between organization and occupation such that their engineering role was properly verified by K-Co. In Figure 3, we thus depict a sense of contingent alignment as associated with conditional identification.

HR Staff. Explaining their identification at work, HR staff did not clearly differentiate between organization and occupation. We refer to this as *holistic identification*, wherein multiple targets are inseparable, constituting a single, blended holistic entity (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001), and thus identifying with one target entails identifying with another. As depicted in Figure 3, holistic identification is low in both target plurality and difference in target importance; the two targets are understood as one and have equal importance. Noting the ambiguous boundary between organizational and occupational identity inputs, HR interviewees explained the occupational meaning contained in their organizational identification.

> I always try to internalize K-Co's core values and philosophy, and have a good emotional connection to them. Actually, these concepts compose the core of my occupation and are directly linked to performing my HR role. Working as a K-Co recruiter implies that I'm always trying to become more K-Co prototypical. (H #9)

These characteristics of HR staff's identification accorded with their sense of the perfectly aligned organization–occupation relationship. They indicated that the identity meanings associated with their organization and their occupation were in congruence and inseparable: "Being an HR staff member means being highly identified with K-Co" (H #12) and "To do my HR role, I need organizational identification" (H #16). That is, they enacted a single, holistic identity: "the K-Co HR staff."

Marketers. When marketers described their identification, organization and occupation had distinct and equal influences. We refer to this type of identification configuration whereby individuals identify equally with distinct targets as *parallel identification*, and present it in Figure 3 as having high target plurality and low difference in target importance. Marketers indicated that while working, they enacted both the K-Co man and the marketer identity in a compartmentalized way:

> K-Co defines me a lot. For example, when I, as a representative of K-Co, stand in front of customers to give a presentation about our business, I just become a K-Co man. I bring out this identity of a perfectionist full of energy. However, I'm not always subject to this. I think the most crucial ability of a marketer is creativity and flexibility, and the hard-driving characteristic of K-Co sometimes doesn't fit this need. So, I simultaneously try to adjust the extent to which K-Co defines me. I need to be a marketer, to keep my uniqueness. (M #10)

In addition, in explaining their identity feelings associated with work motivation, marketers referred to both organizational and occupational desires. For example, a marketer interviewee said, "I'm doing work for K-Co, but not for the company" (M #5). She explained the underlying meaning of this seemingly contradictory statement as follows:

> We marketers frequently contact outside customers. When interacting with them, I keep thinking about what a K-Co man should be like, such that I should do this and I shouldn't do that because I belong to K-Co. But, I always keep in mind that I am a marketer. This work represents my ability and identity as a marketing expert, and I am responsible for it. I always think that through this work, I can learn more about marketing and accumulate my marketing knowledge. I've never thought that I do this only for the company's sake. (M #5)

The two targets' equal influences on marketers' identification were in line with their sense of the moderately aligned organization–occupation relationship. In marketers' perceptions, organization and occupation were neither in misalignment nor in perfect alignment; thus, the two entities served in parallel, as compatible identification targets equally providing identity meanings.

Discussion

We began this study by questioning the implicit assumption in the identification literature that organizational identification and occupational identification are developed in a discrete manner. Using qualitative methods, we demonstrated that employees' identification with organization and with occupation are co-constructed in an interrelated fashion. Further, we compared this co-construction mechanism across multiple occupations (engineers, HR staff, and marketers), unlike previous studies generally focusing on one specific occupation. Individuals interpreted the espoused organizational identity in substantially different ways depending on their occupational lens (comprising pre-existing role identity, role-verification, role-mobility, and group power). Through the lens, individuals made sense of organization–occupation alignment, and developed their identification regarding organization and occupation based on this sensemaking.

Theoretical Implications

Our first theoretical contribution is revealing that viewing multiple identifications as separate, parallel states (Gibson et al., 2021; Hekman et al., 2016; Z. Zhu et al., 2022) or processes (Hay et al., 2021; H. Vough, 2012) oversimplifies matters. Our evidence suggests that in multiple identifications, identification with each target does not occur independently but concurrently under the influence of other targets, because individuals engage in sensemaking not only about each identification target but also about the relationship between multiple targets. Thus, it is vital to reconsider or revise the prevalent approach—compartmentalizing identifications and assessing the relative strength of them or illustrating sensemaking about each identification separately—because it cannot properly capture the essential dynamics underlying multiple identifications. By demonstrating that multiple identifications are created through sensemaking about the dynamic interactions between multiple identities, our study also answers H. C. Vough et al.'s (2020) recent call for greater scholarly attention to identity plurality and how various types of identities may interact during sensemaking.

Demonstrating employee identification as constructed at the intersection of organizational and occupational identity inputs enables us to provide a new identification typology. Prior literature provided identification typologies based on a single identification target: positive-, dis-, ambivalent-, and neutral-identification regarding either organization (Ciampa et al., 2019; G. E. Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004) or occupation (Ashforth et al., 2013). Our typology focuses on the simultaneous and interrelated influence of multiple identification targets, thus advancing those previous typologies focusing on a single target. Based on two theoretical dimensions—the number (target plurality) and the meaning (difference in target importance) of identification targets—we suggest four types of identification configurations: holistic, prioritized, parallel, and conditional identification. From the prior quantitative perspective that compares the relative strength of the end results (i.e., identification levels), holistic, parallel, and conditional identification may appear to reflect the same; in these three types, individuals highly identify with both targets anyhow, which may simply indicate a complementary relationship (i.e., positive correlation) between organizational and occupational identification. However, our study explicates that these similar-looking identification configurations essentially, qualitatively differ; individuals perceive the two targets as inseparably intertwined in holistic identification, as separate and with equal importance in parallel identification, and as separate and with different importance in conditional identification. Furthermore, these heterogeneities come from different sensemaking about the relationship between the targets; holistic, parallel, and conditional identification are built upon the sensemaking of perfect, moderate, and contingent alignment between organization and occupation, respectively. In all, our investigation of the "co-construction" mechanism of employee identification substantially advances the previous approach which treated organizational identification and occupational identification as separate constructions.

Our second contribution is empirically differentiating two facets of occupational identity and illustrating how they generate different mechanisms that shape identification. Due to the dominance of social identity theory in identity research, organizational scholars have often conceptualized occupation as a collective (Ashforth et al., 2013; Hekman et al., 2016; Ishii et al., 2021). This approach corresponds to our finding of a group identity-based occupational lens. Through this lens, individuals assessed their occupational group's power position within the organization and reported greater willingness to identify with the organization when perceiving their occupational group held power. However, this social-identity-oriented approach only partially captures occupational identity, not addressing the "role" aspect of it.

Role identity theorists suggest that individuals differentiate themselves by their role identity (e.g., occupational role) within a social category of similar, depersonalized members (e.g., organizational membership) (Burke & Stets, 2021; Stets & Burke, 2000, 2003; Stryker & Burke, 2000). This approach corresponds to our finding of a role identity-based occupational lens. Through this lens, individuals used their occupation as a means of enacting their unique role identity and made sense of how appropriately their occupational role was verified in the organizational identity context. Individuals reporting a positive perception of role-verification, in turn, tended to identify with the organization. In all, our study presents a comprehensive picture of what constitutes occupational identity; occupation provides identity cues reifying *both* where one belongs and what one does, thereby generating different underlying mechanisms (group power vs. role-verification) in constructing identification at work. Therefore, we argue that neither social identity theory nor role identity theory alone can fully explain occupation-related identity phenomena, and the two theories, which have largely been studied in isolation (Sluss et al., 2012; Tripathi et al., 2020), should be considered in tandem.

Our final theoretical contribution concerns occupational power as a significant basis for employee identification. In our data, the notion of occupational power emerged from employee perceptions of the power distribution among occupational groups (i.e., the core–periphery power structure) and, more notably, its paradoxical nature. The core–periphery framework suggests that critical resources are concentrated in and protected by the powerful core sectors, whereas the peripheral sectors are disadvantaged in obtaining power, which makes them vulnerable and easily replaceable (Cappelli & Neumark, 2004; DiBenigno, 2020; Sapir et al., 2016). In high-tech companies, engineering departments typically play the most powerful role (i.e., the core) because technological competence determines a company's competitive position, placing the staff departments such as HR in a relatively marginal position (i.e., the periphery) (S. Brown & Eisenhardt, 1998; Harpaz & Meshoulam, 1997; K. W. Sandholtz & Burrows, 2016; K. Sandholtz et al., 2019). However, at K-Co, with strong organizational identity claims, the system of espoused organizational values/norms constituted a significant organizational resource, making the HR department controlling the system powerful. Thus, this occupational power structure revealed a core–periphery "paradox"—HR, supporting others who perform the core tasks, was at the core, locating engineers, performing the core tasks, at the periphery—which hindered the actual core members' organizational identification.

Social identity theory claims that the perceived external prestige of an organization enhances organizational identification (Dutton et al., 1994; Heidemann & Holtbrügge, 2022; J. Zhu et al., 2017). According to this logic, K-Co engineers, as core contributors to K-Co's prestigious image as a world leader in the electronics industry, are expected to develop strong organizational identification. However, we found the opposite because of engineers' paradoxically weak occupational power within K-Co. This may be because the perception of one's relative status within the organization as well as the organization's external image significantly affects organizational identification, as some identity scholars suggested (Blader & Yu, 2017; Fuller et al., 2006; M. E. Scott, 2020). Our study thus advances this perspective by specifically identifying where one's within-organizational status emerges: occupational power. Identities/identifications are constructed in relation to power relationships (Bardon & Pezé, 2020; A. D. Brown, 2022), and at K-Co, the paradoxically structured occupational power distribution substantially accounted for the underlying mechanism impacting identification at work. This cannot be explained solely by the organization-oriented perspective prevalent in the identification literature; organizational prestige was expected to enhance K-Co engineers' organizational identification, but it was not always true because of their weak occupational power. Taken together, we argue that occupation is imperative for fully unpacking relevant mechanisms underlying employee identification at work.

Practical Implications

Our finding that occupation significantly influences employee identification even within a strong organizational identity context provides managers with an insight that an exclusive emphasis on an overarching identity, neglecting other important identities, can be counterproductive (Ellemers & Rink, 2005; Horton & Griffin, 2017). For example, uniformly organization-focused HR practices may be unable to fully elicit the necessary competencies and incentives for certain employees (e.g., engineers). For those employees, performing well in an occupational sense (i.e., being a competent professional) may be more meaningful than performing well in an organizational sense (i.e., being a recognized organizational member). Therefore, an organization's HR system needs to be occupationally customized to appropriately reflect the variance in occupational identities and develop positive employee identification across occupations.

Limitations and Future Research

Our study has some limitations. First, because our data came from one organization, we cannot make claims of whether sensemaking and identification patterns are similar or different in other organizations. As we aimed at generalizing to theory not to contexts (Stake & Trumbull, 1982), we sought to elaborate new theory about how individuals construct identifications at work, rather than specifying the frequency or likelihood of such constructions. We thus hope future research to expand upon the theory we developed. One approach would be to compare our findings with how individuals with the same occupation but working in different organizations (e.g., Ishii et al., 2021) engage in sensemaking about the organization–occupation relationship and construct identification.

The second limitation concerns our limited empirical presentation of the typology of identification configuration. We found that K-Co employees exhibiting prioritized or conditional identification tended to emphasize their occupation over their organization, not vice versa. However, employees engaging in stigmatized occupations, so-called dirty work (G. Kreiner et al., 2022; Soral et al., 2022), may be inclined toward their organization, rather than their occupation, in constructing identification as a defense tactic. We thus encourage future research to investigate this organization-oriented prioritized or conditional identification, thereby providing greater external validity for our typology of identification configuration.

Conclusion

This study offers new insights into the co-construction of employee identification at the nexus of organization and occupation. We hope this paper stimulates organizational scholars to pursue a more integrative approach toward identity/identification issues that permeate both organization and occupation, adopting a balanced perspective between social identity theory and role identity theory.

Appendix: Sample Questions From the Interview Protocol

1. Please describe your current thoughts/feelings toward K-Co.
   - What are your thoughts/feelings toward the company itself?
   - What are your thoughts/feelings toward people in the company?
   - What do you think the particular characteristics of employees that K-Co espouses are? Why do you think so?
2. How do you feel about yourself as a K-Co employee?
   - How would you describe the relationship between you and K-Co? Why?
   - Do you feel more like part of the company than you did on your first day here? What do you think has changed since you entered K-Co?
   - Do you remember any situation or particular time when you felt that you were becoming part of the company? Or, do you remember any situation or particular time when you felt that you did not belong to the company?
   - How have other employees influenced your feeling this way?
3. Please describe your work and occupational role at K-Co.
   - What are the key characteristics of your occupation?
   - What do you think about K-Co as a place where you perform your occupational role? How does the fact that you are a K-Co employee affect performing your work?
   - When you work, how does your occupation influence your sense of self as a K-Co employee?
   - How have other employees influenced your feeling this way?
4. Can you think of employees who fit in the company?
   - How can you know the people fit in K-Co?
   - Why do you think the people fit in? What happened to the people?
5. Can you think of employees who don't fit in the company?
   - How can you know the people don't fit in K-Co?
   - Why do you think the people don't fit in? What happened to the people?
6. Do you see any occupational differences in people's sense of being a K-Co employee?
   - How different are they? Why are they different?
   - What causes the differences?
   - What are the consequences of the differences?

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