

# Exploring Nested Identities: Voluntary Membership, Social Category Identity, and Identification in a Community Choir

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## Abstract

Although scholars theorize that identities are layered or nested within one another, little is understood about whether, how, and what layers are expressed by individuals. Such understanding could offer insight into organizational membership decisions, particularly within voluntary organizations where financial incentives are not involved. This study used semi-structured interviews to explore how individuals articulate identities and identification sources when discussing their desire to join and continue participation in a community choir, a voluntary leisure organization. The findings highlight how specific individual activities and higher order nested family and music identities, in addition to the more traditional organizational identifications, all play into membership decisions. The results also suggest that identity researchers and voluntary organization managers may benefit from focusing more attention on (a) higher order and cross-cutting social category identities, (b) individual activities in the organizations, and (c) the isomorphism among different layers of identity and identification.

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Turnover and declining membership rates cause concern for organizations that rely heavily on voluntary work, and nonprofit organizations experience significant annual volunteer turnover (approximately 37% from 2010 to 2011, Corporation for National and Community Service, 2012). These turnover numbers include individuals who engaged in unpaid work in a variety of nonprofit organizations, ranging from social or community services to religious, sports, and arts organizations (Frumkin, 2002; Salamon & Abramson, 1982). This voluntary participation and membership also speaks to broader concerns about civic engagement in contemporary society (Ganesh & McAllum, 2009). Thus, researchers and practitioners are very interested in voluntary membership decisions when financial incentives are not a reason for participation.

While providing useful insights into voluntary action, existing studies of voluntary activity patterns (e.g., Garner & Garner, 2011; Mesch, Rooney, Steinberg, & Denton, 2006; see Wilson, 2000, for a review) rarely examine the type of voluntary action being measured. In a call to further nuance volunteer studies, Van der Meer, Grotenhuis, and Scheepers (2009) have argued for and found differences in the causes and outcomes of volunteering among people participating in three different voluntary association types. First, leisure organizations primarily offer socializing and recreational opportunities. Interest organizations represent and sometimes defend the interests of the organization's members. Finally, activist organizations advocate for change in the behavior and attitudes of individuals and societies. As a result of their findings, Van der Meer et al. suggested that scholars should distinguish among leisure, interest, and activist organizations in research on voluntary activity. Yet, communication research has not focused on pursuing such distinctions. The current study does so by addressing issues of voluntary membership in a specific type of voluntary organization.

A number of communication scholars have highlighted connections among volunteering and identity formation (e.g., Cruz, 2009; Ganesh & McAllum, 2012; Herrmann, 2011; Lewis, 2005) that may also be helpful in understanding membership choices in voluntary organizations. Identity can be communicatively defined as "the conception of the self reflexively and discursively understood by the self" (Kuhn, 2006, p. 1340). Connecting to volunteering, Ganesh and McAllum (2012) posited that "volunteering involves sustained identity investments by volunteers performed and realized in organizational settings" (p. 152). From this perspective, identity is a central feature of volunteering that

may play into membership. Some scholarship has even begun talking about a potential volunteer identity (e.g., Ganesh & McAllum, 2009). However, little research has addressed what kinds of identities are playing into voluntary membership decisions (for an exception, see Cruz, 2009).

Although the enactment of multiple identifications has been explored among paid workers (e.g., Kuhn & Nelson, 2002) and measured in voluntary settings (Scott & Stephens, 2009), this study expands on these lines of research by examining not the extent to which, but how individuals enact multiple identities and identifications when talking about membership decisions regarding a voluntary leisure organization. As community choir members create public goods through unpaid and uncoerced labor in an organization, and yet seem likely to draw on a number of identities beyond volunteer identity, they represent a valuable locus for consideration of identity issues relating to volunteering and voluntary membership in philanthropic organizations, including how such members do or do not enact a volunteer identity. Specifically, this project explores how individuals engage identifications and enact identities as they are asked and talk about joining and participating in a community choir, an example of a voluntary leisure organization.

In so doing, the project contributes to understandings of organizational communication and voluntary organizing research in several ways. First, it begins answering recent calls to consider separately individuals participating in distinct types of voluntary organizations and to problematize what volunteering is. Second, it provides insight into how identities and identification sources intersect in membership decisions within a voluntary leisure organization. The current results expand existing identification studies that determine relative levels of identification with distinct organizational sources, by showing how, for these voluntary leisure organization members, identifications with multiple sources are communicated as intertwined. In particular, this project demonstrates the value of highlighting the nested nature of identification sources that are broader or higher level than the organizational level that is the focus of most existing identification research. Third, this project delves into the role of an individual's activity within an organization when considering voluntary membership decisions. Fourth, the findings offer insights about the enactment of volunteer identities. Finally, the project suggests potential membership recruitment and retention plans for managers and membership directors of such organizations.

## **Enacting Identities and Identifications**

Identity represents a sense of the self that is socially constructed through various relational and linguistic processes (Carbaugh, 1996). Ybema et al. (2009)

surmised that identity formation involves “the discursive articulation of an ongoing iteration between social and self-definition” (p. 301). As such, identity is conceptualized as a continuous project of answering “who am I” questions, of making sense of the self through communication. Recent communication scholarship has considered how social identities, particularly occupational and professional, are negotiated amid societal discourses and material realities (e.g., Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Meisenbach, 2008; Norander, Mazer, & Bates, 2011; Wieland, 2010). However, only one of these studies addressed individuals who work in nonprofit organizations (Meisenbach, 2008), and none of them has focused on voluntary members’ identity constructions.

Some scholars have focused though on intersections among multiple identities, leading to consideration of what Scott, Corman, and Cheney (1998) called the regionalization of identities and what Ashforth and Johnson (2001) discussed as nested identities. First, Scott et al. addressed how various identities (e.g., individual, group, organizational, and occupational/professional) may overlap with and contradict each other in an individual’s experience and communication. At various points, an individual may discursively present (identify with) one or more identities in the front or back regions of their public presentation of the self. Identities can be conceptualized as resources upon which individuals may draw as they (re)produce identifications. Scott et al. also noted the important role of individual activity (such as a particular work-related action) in the structural intersections of identity and identification. They argued that “Activities influence [and are influenced by] the identities that are appropriated and reproduced in identification” (Scott et al., 1998, p. 323). However, little communication research based on this work has focused on the activity element.

Relatedly, Ashforth and Johnson (2001) theorized how different levels and types of identity might nest within each other in organizational settings. They were interested in understanding what affects the salience of multiple social identities, suggesting that identity salience depends on the centrality of an identity to the self and its situational relevance. They suggested that nested identities can be described as higher or lower order in relation to each other and that these identities vary along at least three key criteria: inclusivity, abstractness, and distance. Lower order identities, such as work groups, are described as being at the center or lower level. They are (a) more exclusive because their membership is more restrictive, (b) more concrete because they tend to be defined more precisely and are tied to more specific behaviors and (c) more proximal because they generally have a fairly direct and immediate impact on the individual. In contrast, higher order identities are conceptualized as being the outer or top layer of the nest. Higher order identities are

described as (a) inclusive due to their inclusion of lower order identities into their description, (b) abstract because their definitions and descriptions tend to be broader, and (c) distal because their impact on an individual is perceived as relatively indirect and delayed. For example, an organizational identity might be understood as a higher order identity that encompasses lower order identities, such as department and work group identities. The authors also discuss identities (unions, friendship groups) that may cross-cut the organizationally nested identities.

More recently, Ashforth, Rogers, and Corley (2011) have begun theorizing about how nested identities link with each other. Interestingly, they too turn to structuration theory to explain the potential connections. This scholarship, like that of Silva and Sias (2010), theorizes the organization as the highest order identity, leaving open the possibility of exploring identity sources that are even higher than the organization.

Also relevant to the current project is the concept of isomorphism in nested identities. Ashforth et al. (2011) posited that “identities are relatively isomorphic across levels because organizational goals require some internal coherence,” but noted that “isomorphism is often impeded across levels, and identities tend to become somewhat differentiated” (p. 1144). Isomorphism is here understood as similarity of content and relationships among identity levels. An opportunity exists for research to explore both how isomorphic tendencies are impeded and the implications of such differentiation.

Identification research offers an avenue for addressing the enactment and potential isomorphism/differentiation of regionalized and nested identities. Identification represents an individual perceiving a connection between the self and another entity, such as an organization, social element, or as Larson and Pepper (2003) noted, with “a particular value-based identity” (p. 532). Most commonly in research, that other entity has been an organization, with a resulting focus on organizational identification (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Researchers have expanded focus to other sources or targets of identification such as professions, occupations, and work groups (e.g., Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Scott et al., 1998). The term *target* typically has been used when scholars are focusing on the messages that are being created by an organization that hopes to be a target of identification among publics (e.g., Scott, 1997). Some of these studies consider multiple identification targets and their messages simultaneously (e.g., Apker, Ford, & Fox, 2003; Kuhn & Nelson, 2002). In contrast, the term *identification source* is more commonly associated with projects that are highlighting how individual members of those publics do or do not enact an identification with the various entities (e.g., DiSanza & Bullis, 1999). The current project aligns more with this latter attitude of focus on the perspective and agency of the individual in the

identification process by exploring why and how community choir members enact related identifications as they communicate about their voluntary membership decisions.

Although one of the earliest identification research projects focused on the Catholic Church (Cheney, 1991), only recently has this scholarship highlighted potentially unique issues of identification in nonprofit voluntary member settings (e.g., Scott & Stephens, 2009; Tidwell, 2005). First, Tidwell (2005) tested the impact of organizational identification on volunteerism and found that high levels of identification with a voluntary organization were associated with higher commitment, satisfaction, volunteering, and donating levels. Recently, Kramer, Meisenbach, and Hansen (2013) also found that identification was associated with satisfaction, as well as with a willingness to support a community choir and recruit new members for it.

Similarly, Bisel, Ford, and Keyton (2007) found that one's identification with a voluntary community leadership organization related to the acceptance or rejection of that organization's overall premise. Particularly helpful is the specificity offered by this research in terms of its operationalization of identification. The authors described identification as

any statement that referred to any group (a) in an individual's personal definition (e.g., we are), (b) as having oneness with or belongingness to (e.g., we believe), (c) as a valued personae (e.g., being an alumna is important to me), (d) in accomplishments (e.g., we did it), and (e) as a self-esteem enhancing membership (e.g., it's an honor to be a member). (p. 145)

These researchers noted the value of conducting more research on issues surrounding future membership intentions.

In another study, Scott and Stephens (2009) discussed how volunteer theater ushers reported enacting different identifications when speaking with different people. Most salient is how they adapted Cheney's (1983) original organizational identification questionnaire to create measures of identification targets relevant to the nonprofit sector. They created nonprofit-community and performing-arts-community identification measures to evaluate alongside a typical measure of the participants' identification with the specific performing arts organization at which they volunteered. Scott and Stephens found that participants had differing levels of identification with different targets, with their organizational identification being the strongest of the three across all communication situations.

A useful next step in this line of research is to examine how individuals talk out and enact these identifications in ways that relate to decisions to voluntarily join such organizations. Such new studies can clarify the relationships

among identity, identification, and activity as called for by Scott et al. (1998). Understanding how multiple identifications are enacted in talk about voluntary membership decisions can provide insight into both identity negotiation and voluntary membership decisions.

Finally, the preponderance of nonprofit identification research has focused on identification with the organization (for an exception, see Scott & Stephens, 2009). Yet, just as for-profit research has been expanding to consider the role of nonorganizational identifications such as professional and group identifications, research on nonprofits should consider the intersecting enactments of multiple identification sources. Therefore, the current study asks,

**Research Question 1:** How do individuals enact multiple identifications and identities as they negotiate their voluntary membership in a community choir?

## Method

To explore these research questions, a qualitative research approach was used (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). The second author contacted the director of a local University Community Choir (UCC) and requested permission to conduct the study. Sponsored by this local university, UCC has a history of more than 35 years in the community. In recent years 120 to 150 singers, about 3/4 community members and 1/4 students, present major choral works accompanied by either the university or community orchestra. Dr. Aaron Jensen (pseudonyms are used for all participants), the third director in the group's history, had been directing UCC for about 8 years. As part of a larger research project, we received approval from him and our university's Institutional Review Board for both authors to interview various choir members and for the second author to conduct a participant observation study involving participating in the choir for an entire semester, including approximately 33 hr of observation during rehearsals and the final concert.

## Participants

For the interviews, we systematically selected community members from each section of the choir to interview to understand the participants' perspectives on their identifications. As a voluntary leisure organization, community choirs provide voluntary members the opportunity to socialize as a recreational activity while also providing cultural activities to enhance the community, one of the six major activities performed by nonprofit organizations

(Frumkin, 2002; Salamon & Abramson, 1982). In considering how such activity may constitute volunteering, it becomes clear that definitions of volunteering are sometimes assumed rather than carefully delineated. However, Cnaan, Handy, and Wadsworth (1996) suggested that volunteering involves uncoerced activity that creates a public good through a structured setting, wherein that public good created is larger than the benefit created for the individual. Voluntary membership in arts organizations and their activities constitutes such unforced activity that contributes to the public good through a structured setting. Arguments could be made to question the value ratio of public to individual good (given the benefits musicians often generate for themselves through the activity). Yet, such organizations and their voluntary members do benefit many as they serve several philanthropy roles for their communities as identified by Tempel (2003): reducing human suffering, enhancing human potential, building community, and providing human fulfillment.

Study participants had been voluntary members of UCC from 1 to 27 years (average tenure = 10.33 years) and had an average age of 59 (range = 37 to 82). Students were not used for this portion of the project because they receive college credit for choir participation. The participants included 6 males and 15 females.

## *Interviews*

Potential participants were contacted via email or phone to request their participation. For those who responded positively, phone interviews were arranged at their convenience. Interviews ranged from 20 to 40 min in length, with an average of about 30 min. We conducted 21 interviews with community members, generating approximately 10.5 total hours of interviews. At this point, we had reached theoretical saturation, the point at which no additional insights about the relations among concepts seemed to be gained from data gathering (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). These semi-structured interviews explored specific areas of members' experiences in UCC (their background in music, how and why they joined the choir, their perceptions of choir leadership and social relationships, the importance of UCC to them, and their reasons for staying in/leaving the choir). Examples of questions from the interview protocol included the following: "How did you initially become a member of UCC?" "Why are you a member of UCC this semester?" "How important is it to you to be a part of UCC? Why?" and "What keeps you participating in UCC?" Thus, the interviews represent a form of account analysis in which participants shared meanings of and reasons for individual choices and behaviors (Frey, Botan, & Kreps, 2000; Harré & Secord, 1973).



Interviews, which were conducted by both authors, were recorded and transcribed, resulting in 154 pages of single-spaced transcripts.

## ***Analysis***

In initial readings of the interviews, identities and identification sources were recognizable in the data. Thus, the interview data were analyzed for major themes related to the research question (Krippendorff, 1980). The data analysis process was cyclical rather than linear, with the analysis vacillating back and forth between steps as necessary. The process included data reduction, in which, portions of the data unrelated to the research question were set aside. The remaining data were separated into segments or units representing different themes. Then these separate units were compared with each other until a comprehensive set of categories resulted. Based on previous identification research (Scott & Stephens, 2009), the authors used sensitizing categories of identification with UCC, the performing arts, and the nonprofit community. However, the dataset revealed no examples of identification with the nonprofit community. Examples that might be considered close to a performing arts identification were more specifically tied to music as a type of performing art, leading to the development of a music identification and identity category. Finally, the themes were grouped together according to how they addressed the research question. A peer review of the initial findings led to further analysis of the data, focusing particularly on how the various identities and identification sources were embedded within one another.

## ***Validation***

Given its importance in qualitative methods, we provide three methods of validation (Creswell, 2007). The second author used prolonged engagement and persistent observation to avoid misinformation or distortion based on an outsider's perspective. This author also served as a type of peer reviewer for the coding and data analysis conducted by the first author. Finally, we present rich, thick description in the form of verbatim quotes from interviews to allow the readers to assess the transferability of the analysis.

## ***Findings***

The data reveal close connections among multiple identification sources and identities for the participants as they talked about their participation in UCC. Although other choirs and organizations were mentioned as participants discussed their UCC choir membership, their family and music identities were

most important to these discussions. What becomes clear in the analysis is that participants articulated their participation in this leisure voluntary organization as a way of enacting nested identities. These results show how choir members enacted nested choir, music, and family identities through active participation in the choir.

### *Identification With UCC and Its Activities*

All choir members enacted an identification with the choir and/or a strong liking of its activities as they discussed their membership. The identification moments fit Bisel et al.'s (2007) methodological operationalization of identification, such as participants' frequent use of first person plural in relation to the choir and the self ("I hope we continue to do wonderful music"; "I think we were very fortunate"). As an extended example, Barbara (a retired UCC member in her 60s) expressed herself as part of the choir ("we") even during a time when choir membership dropped from 200 to 50, following a change in director:

I stayed in that time because I felt really bad for [the director]. I mean he wasn't . . . what we were used to and a lot of people didn't like that, and I just didn't think it was very fair to him or to UCC to drop out for that reason. So I stayed in, but it wasn't necessarily the best semester we ever had.

This quote suggests that Barbara's identification with UCC was strong enough to keep her in the group even during a time when the experience was not as satisfying as expected. At the same time though, she references UCC as something other than herself ("wasn't fair to him or to UCC") and as something she identifies with ("we ever had").

Others would express the value and importance of the choir to them through statements such as Sarah's, noting, "I value my participation in that group [UCC]." Many would initially respond to the question of "How important is it to you to be a member of UCC?" with a very simple "Very important" (e.g., Susan). However, what is particularly noteworthy is how each of these examples would be immediately followed with a reference to how membership in UCC was very important because it connected them to an activity they enjoyed and/or another identity that was also important to them.

In terms of the role of activity in these interviews, participants frequently indicated that performing in a musical group was important "just because I like singing" (Amber, a 63-year-old retiree who has been in UCC for 13 years). Sally, a 37-year-old university employee, noted the key of the activity in her decision to join the choir: "So this was kind of the first regular community

choir, um, and, you know, the, the idea of getting to do some complex, multi-part harmonies, of, uh, a real challenging piece of music was what drew me to it.” Meanwhile, 50-year-old Rhonda shared that “the pure singing is what keeps drawing me back.” Thus, participants’ interest in the primary activity of the choir was intricately connected to their UCC identification sources and membership decisions.

Whereas the analysis above illustrates the interplay of the activity of singing and identification with UCC, the following sections demonstrate how these choir members nested their identification with UCC with other, higher level and cross-cutting identities. In particular, their identification with UCC often was nested within their music and family identities.

### *Music Identities*

All of our participants expressed prior experience in performing music and all but four participants expressed a personal identification with music. For example, Christine, a retired high schoolteacher shared,

I like the way music makes me feel. It’s been part of my life, music has been in and of itself part of my life for a long, for 50 years since I started piano lessons . . . I like being able to, to put myself into, into the music, and, and uh, feel the, feel the music.

Christine articulated music as a clear part of her sense of the self; she identified with music and thus enacted a music identity. Many others, such as 72-year-old Lola, stated their perception of music as an identity through claims about its place in their lives:

I: How important is it to you to be a part of some musical or arts group?

Lola: I think very important. It’s been a part of my life, and I would . . . I would find life not complete without involvement of some kind with music. It’s just something that’s very definitely a part of me.

A close look at what initially appeared to be distinct identifications with the choir and with music revealed how participants nested their identification with and/or participation in the choir with their perception of themselves as having a music identity. Particularly when they were expressing how much they valued their UCC membership, participants frequently invoked the importance of music to their sense of the self, suggesting a music identity as one of the multiple identities they manage in their discursive and material lives. The strong theme of nesting any choir identity within a higher level

music identity is evident in the finding that no participant suggested that they identified with the choir without also identifying with music and/or singing specifically somewhere in the interview. Even more striking is the extent to which many participants discussed these identifications together.

Sarah, a state worker in her 50s, who had been in the choir off and on for 14 years, highlighted these connections:

I: How important is it to you to be a part of UCC? Why?

Sarah: I would say it's a very important part of, of my life. I guess any, any music group is important. Music to me, like a day without music is just not a very good day. I've just always been tuned into music as a way of expressing myself or just relaxing or therapeutic, or whatever, but I always have music every day of my life so, the UCC is a very important [part] of that because it, it's such a great group to, to be in. And the music is terrific. Um, I like the, being a part of it. So it's, I, value my participation in that group.

She, like many of the participants, explicitly valued the group for its quality and simultaneously valued it because it is (part of) her path to having music in her life. As such, participants expressed identification with the choir as being nested within their higher level music identity.

Furthermore, it was clear with many participants that the music identity was more important to them than the lower level choir identity. Paul, a 50-year-old consultant in his first semester with the choir, articulated that he felt a current loyalty to and a sense of the importance of both UCC and choral singing. However, he very clearly indicated that his identification with singing and music will trump his identification with UCC if the two are in conflict:

I: How important is it to you to be a part of UCC? Why?

Paul: It's important now. Um, now, what happens after this, I mean, you know, what I'm going to do next semester is, to decide, and I'll, I'll join the choir that's doing the things, the music that interests, that most interests me. So if the UCC is doing something that doesn't interest me, [and another community choir] is doing something that is, then I will switch allegiances.

I: So it sounds like it is more important to be part of some music than any particular one? Is that right?

Paul: Yeah.

I: And why is that? Why is it so important for you to be part of some music group?

Paul: Well, . . . I would like to, uh, uh, to reconnect with my choral background.

The key for Paul and others like him is maintaining a connection to his musical (specifically a choral) background. Thus, it is the activity accomplished through UCC membership that is important to him. He does not describe himself as being motivated to maintain his UCC membership by an identification with the choir; rather, it is his higher level identification with music and interest in choir activities that are communicated as relevant to his membership negotiations.

As another example of prioritizing various identities, Patricia, a lawyer in her 50s who had been a member of UCC one semester every 2 to 3 years for the past 15 years shared,

I am not always a member [of UCC]. Um, so obviously, it's not the UCC itself that is the important thing. It is the, again, it's the opportunity to sing the kind of music that the UCC can sing. The UCC itself, I mean I hate to say that, it in itself doesn't have great significance for me. Although I like that group, and I'm, I think it's playing a great role in my life right now, by um, being the vehicle for me to do that.

She does not perceive her membership in UCC as an important part of her identity; rather, it is a vehicle for engaging in the activity that she sees as important to her identification with music. She went on in the following exchange:

I: Well if we rephrase it slightly to how important is it to you to be involved in some musical group?

Patricia: Oh, that's um, it's pretty important to me. Um, there are times in my life when I haven't been terribly involved in musical groups, but singing I would say—Singing is really, singing is one of the great pleasures of my life and singing a difficult, but beautiful piece of music is and learning it, sight-reading it, and learning it is, is, it is a pleasure that it is hard to describe . . . so I enjoy that greatly. So it is important.

Being involved in music groups generates positive emotions for Patricia and many other choir members. Several members indicated that performing in a musical group was important “just because I like singing” (Amber, a 63-year-old retiree who had been in UCC for 13 years), but like Patricia, the particular organization was not that important. This articulation of being in a musical organization for the activity opportunity and associated emotional

experience highlights the potential importance of activity in voluntary leisure organization membership decisions.

### *Music Identity as Nested Within a Family Identity*

Next, a third of our participants expressed a music identity as closely tied into their sense of who and what their family was and did. Thus, their identification with music was embedded within their family identity (e.g., “my family is pretty musical”—Barbara). All of the participants discussed connections to music when they were younger, participating in church and school choirs, music lessons, and so on, but several of them spoke extensively about how music was part of their family’s identity. For example, when asked why she joined UCC, Allyson, a 57-year-old nurse who had been in UCC for 15 years, shared that music is “just extraordinarily an important part of my family life” and discussed her family connections and choral music:

Just because it was always part of my growing up and being in, and loving, loving choral music, and my folks . . . as a couple were in it . . . you know, it goes a way back. Just the joy and love of singing choral music.

These individuals grew up with music as an important, active part of family life. Georgia, a consultant in her 60s, noted the key to enacting a musical identity for her family comes from actually participating in music, the engagement in the activity, versus just listening. When asked how important it is to her to be part of any musical group, she said,

it’s something that I find important. Being part of a music group. Um. It’s kind of hard to quantify . . . we always had music in our house. Oh you know, participatory music—not just sitting down and listening to the radio . . . and so I guess that’s why it’s so important to me. I kind of, I grew up with participating.

These individuals perceived their childhood families as musical and articulated this nested sense of connecting to this musical family identity as the reasoning behind their current UCC identification and participation in UCC and in any musical performance group.

### *Other Nested Identities*

The majority of participants focused on how their choir identity and/or activity blended with their sense of having (and desire to maintain) a music identity and/or family identity, but a few participants also shared how identifying

with and participating in the choir were nested within some additional identities. For Victoria, a recently retired music and art teacher, the choice to rejoin the choir, after more than 30 years out of it, had been very helpful in (re)creating her identity:

When I first retired, I thought I was doing the right thing, and I was very bored and welcomed the opportunity to rediscover, um singing and being in a big group. And it's been an amazing um, identity renewal, because I think I was having an identity crisis when I wasn't a full time teacher anymore and um, this has, it's been the best thing [that] has happened to me . . . it just feels more like I'm a part of the community and reestablishing myself, um in something I used to be really good at and wasn't sure I could do again, and I seem to be managing it quite well. It's been very satisfying.

Through choir membership, she appreciated a sense of identification with singing, a large singing group, and her local community, all of which gave her a renewed sense of personal identity in her retirement. Thus, her identification with UCC is still nested within another identity—her local community.

### *Volunteer Identities?*

One nonfinding that was striking in its absence is the lack of the emergence of a volunteer identity or volunteer identification source as a clear theme in the data. Choir members did not typically identify themselves as volunteers via their participation in UCC. There were four times when participants referenced participation in the group as voluntary, usually to discuss the continued presence of less talented members of the choir (“but it’s a volunteer group and what do you expect?”), but there was only one instance in the 21 interviews where a participant described his or her choir participation as related to a volunteer identity. That enactment came from Paul, a 50-year-old consultant, who identified himself as a volunteer when justifying having to miss an upcoming choir rehearsal:

And so this is one of those times when I'm going to miss rehearsal. And that's okay. You know . . . one of the things about being a volunteer is, you know, uh, you can do what you want. I mean, that's not totally true, but you have a little more leeway about stuff.

Thus, Paul described himself as being a volunteer to justify not attending a particular meeting of UCC. Given this lack of volunteer identity, it is not surprising that the data analysis also did not find participants identifying with

the nonprofit community at large. The volunteer nature of membership in a community choir is discussed by members explaining that they have leeway to miss practice (a leeway that employees and students may not have), but this mention of volunteering seems to be tied to the voluntary nature of their role rather than to part of their identity. Implications of this and the other findings will be discussed below.

## **Discussion**

This analysis revealed how members of a voluntary leisure organization enacted nested identification sources and identities as they discussed membership decisions. What might at first appear simply to be an isolated expression of identification with a choir is more usefully understood as constructed in concert with additional identification sources and identities. Members of UCC expressed identification with the choir and appreciation of its related activities as part of negotiating and maintaining higher order music and family identities. The findings have theoretical implications for research on nested identities, voluntary organization identification sources, and identity negotiation, as well as practical implications for voluntary leisure organization practices and leaders interested in members' membership decisions.

### *Theoretical Implications*

Although the enactment of multiple identifications has been explored among paid workers, and measured in voluntary settings, this project contributes an understanding to what and how such identifications are communicated by members of a voluntary organization. First, this project's findings highlight the importance of activity in the negotiation of identities, identifications, and membership decisions, addressing Scott et al.'s (1998) call for more attention to the activity–identification relationship. A surprising element of the analysis developed out of what was originally coded as an identification with singing, that is, in addition to the expressions of music and family as part of their identities, many participants seemed to be expressing a strong connection to the specific activity of singing. Scott et al. discussed situated activity in their structural approach to identification, highlighting how identification processes are situated within activities, that is, how identifications vary from situation to situation. Although their focus was thus more on the implications of distinct locales in which one might be expressing and experiencing an identity and identification, they did note more broadly “how situated activities and activity foci shape and are shaped by our identifications and the identities drawn upon in that identification” (Scott et al., 1998, p. 324). They



accordingly urged other scholars to pursue greater specification of the activity–identification relationship.

In the current study, we found that distinctions between participating in the activity of the choir and identifying with the choir are perhaps subtle, but very important. As noted in the results, choir members did articulate moments of identification with the choir, when for example, they would use phrases such as “we did” to describe something the choir did. In this way, they were identifying with the organization and its activities. However, that identification with the organization was not often an explicit feature of their discussions of their membership choices; the activity of singing and how that activity fit their higher order music (and sometimes their family) identities were much more relevant to them. Participants frequently discussed decisions to be in the choir and the importance of choir activities to their music identity separately from expressing an identification with the particular choir itself.

Therefore, our findings suggest the importance of activity to the membership decisions, identities, and identifications of these choir members. Participants described wanting to sing challenging music as a motivation for their UCC membership. Engaging in this activity often brought them emotional benefits, some of which were tied to the higher order identities discussed below. The importance of activity makes sense from a leisure organization perspective, where the focus of the organization is active participation in a particular social or recreational activity. Whereas what a volunteer at a film festival (a possibly hybrid leisure and activist organization) might want is a sense of connection to the festival (the organization) without caring what activity he or she does, for leisure organization members and their organizational leaders, the key to encouraging membership is likely to reside in the relations among the desired activity, identifications, and higher order identities. We encourage future research that investigates the role of activity in identification and membership decisions in other voluntary organization types. Specifically, future research could explore how different types of activity (e.g., donating money or ushering vs. performing) may differentially intersect with volunteers’ identification with an organization and other identification sources.

The second implication of this project’s findings is for understanding how individuals enact and express multiple identities and identifications as nested within one another. Although we did not enter the analysis thinking of the nested nature of identities, the data offer insights into how identities are constructed in UCC participants’ talk as embedded within one another. Our findings here have suggested that in the context of membership decisions, UCC members tend to nest their identification with the choir within a higher order

family and/or music identity; yet, we caution against assuming a permanence of this ordering. As such, this project highlights potential linkages between a concept of identities as nested, which stems from a post-positivist line of research on identity, and poststructuralist conceptualizations of identity as shifting, fragmented, and power-laden (e.g., Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004).

Furthermore, the described nesting of the choir identity within higher order music and family identities helps explain one of the findings in the survey data gathered in the larger overall project (see Kramer et al., 2013). That survey measured among all choir participants, not just the individuals interviewed for the current study, members' identification with UCC, musical groups in general, and the performing arts community as a whole. These identification measures were based on Scott and Stephens' (2009) research using similar categories. Unlike their research on ushers, Kramer et al. (2013) found that the three potentially distinct measures of identification with different sources all loaded into one factor, providing further support for the current finding that the choir identity is nested within the higher level music identity.

It is important to note that the data do not denote only a linear linking of one social identity leading to another, but a clear nesting, layering, and embedding of one identity within another. When responding to questions about why the choir was important to them, participants repeatedly responded with a description of how the choir was an important part of who they are because music and their families were important to who they are. They described the lower order choir identity as isomorphic with the higher order family and/or music identities, and when they perceived that there was or might be a loss of isomorphism among these identities, they described planning to lessen or already having lessened their participation in the lower order choir identity activity. Thus, in terms of which identities are likely to be shifted following a perceived lack of isomorphism, our findings suggest that the lower order identity is likely to be the site of change.

In addition, our findings offer potential clarification and development of Ashforth and Johnson's (2001) suggestion that lower order identities will be more likely to be salient and thus be invoked in discussion. Specifically, although participants mentioned the likelihood to end and restart their voluntary membership in the choir based on whether it was serving their higher order identities, these mentions of the choir do not seem like the kind of organizational identity-invoking Ashforth and Johnson envisioned. Rather, our findings suggest that the most salient identity in participant discussions of voluntary membership decisions was their music identity. Participants would bring up music and sometimes their families even when our line of questioning was explicitly focused on their identification with UCC (e.g.,

How important is it to you to be a member of UCC? Why?). Therefore, the current project raises the possibility that higher order identities may be more salient than originally thought, at least in voluntary membership organizations.

A key contribution of the current analysis is how organizational identity is usefully understood as a lower order identity. Most identification research has centered attention on the organizational level of identification (e.g., DiSanza & Bullis, 1999), sometimes considering it as competing with what would likely be viewed as lower order identities of work groups (e.g., Silva & Sias, 2010) or teams and departments (e.g., Scott et al., 1998). In Ashforth and Johnson's (2001) discussion of nested identities, the highest order identity addressed is the organizational identity. Instead, in our study, the organization is the lower order identity that is nested within higher order family and/or music identities. Silva and Sias' (2010) definition of identification suggested understanding identification as "social processes by which identities are constructed, maintained, and transformed" (p. 147). In this way, members' enactment of a choir identification can be usefully conceptualized as constructing and maintaining their conceptualization of the self as musical and familial, that is, of their music and family identities. In essence, the findings show how an organizational level identification can be nested within and consequently help build and maintain higher order identities than previously have been studied.

This finding strongly suggests that research on identification in voluntary organizations should address the impacts of nonorganizational identification processes and identities as well as activity preference as primary factors in decisions to join and maintain membership. Traditional organizational research most commonly has assessed organizational, small group, department, and occupational/professional identifications (e.g., Kuhn & Nelson, 2002; Scott, 1997). In the current study, we found only one of those identification sources (organizational) being articulated by participants and even that one was mentioned rarely in conjunction with a discussion of their membership decisions.

Ashforth and Johnson's (2001) concept of nested identities explains the current data to the extent that participants' identification with the choir is embedded within their less exclusive and more abstract identification with music. In attempting to understand this finding, we note that participants' music identifications seemed closely akin to the occupational or professional identifications that are frequently addressed in studies of paid work (e.g., Lammers & Garcia, 2009; Russo, 1998). Ashforth and Johnson (2001) briefly discussed professions as a type of formal cross-cutting identity (meaning that professions intersect with organizational identities), but we have argued here

that the identification with music seems to line up directly with identification with UCC as articulated by participants, such that their UCC identity is directly embedded within their music identity, rather than the music identity cross-cutting the choir identity.

In considering the proposed similarity between professional identities and the current study's music identities, we suggest that the prevalence of participants' identification with UCC as embedded within their identification with music aligns with Lammers and Garcia's (2009) claims about the transcendent nature of professional identifications. Lammers and Garcia suggested that professional identity was not an alternative to but an influence on organizational identity just as, in the current study, the identification with music and family seemed to transcend choir identification.

Questions remain about what to call this level or type of identification as occupation is not an appropriate term for the voluntary context. Ashforth and Johnson (2001) referenced what Turner (1984) called a psychological group, which is understood as representing people who "define themselves in terms of the same social category membership" (p. 530) but who do not necessarily interact with other members *qua* members" (p. 42). We propose using *social category identity* as an umbrella term for identities such as the music identity described here. Other voluntary work might raise the salience of other social category identities such as feminism, social justice, and perhaps volunteering itself as an identity category.

Returning to nested identity theorizing, participants' description of their identification with music as embedded within their (higher order) family identity does not fit Ashforth and Johnson's (2001) descriptions of higher order identities as abstract and inclusive of lower order identities. Families seem more concrete than music and more exclusive in membership than both UCC and music. As such, families may more closely represent a cross-cutting identity, being relatively exclusive, concrete, and proximal for participants. Alternately, the current descriptors of the exclusivity of identity levels may need to be reconsidered. Therefore, we invite scholars interested in identification and membership processes to further consider the potential role of organizational activity, cross-cutting and/or higher order social category identities, and their related communicative processes. We also encourage further research on the conceptual and practical distinctions between cross-cutting and nested identities.

Future research should also consider the extent to which these findings are unique to voluntary leisure organizations and/or to voluntary versus paid-work organizational memberships. Thus, we urge scholars to consider how identity, identification, and activity choices and enactments might be distinct in paid and voluntary work. For example, would an employing organization as

a source of income be enacted as the more salient identity due to its situational importance in the individual's material well-being? We can envision the possibility that material, financial needs could reorder the salience and nesting of these relationships among activity, organization, occupation, music, and family for paid workers.

This study is also notable for the identities that were not clearly enacted by participants. The near absence of discussions of a volunteer identity and of UCC participation as volunteering is revealing for research on theorized volunteer identities (e.g., Ganesh & McAllum, 2009). In particular, it contrasts with Cruz's (2009) research on volunteer identity in which participants expressed the presence of and extensive overlaps among volunteer, work, and family roles and identities. We suggest that this difference in presence of a volunteer identity may be tied to the type of organization Cruz' participants volunteered for, that is, social justice work. Her work stems from voluntary organizations more likely to be categorized as activist organizations, and as such suggests the potential value of continuing to investigate voluntary organization issues in more nuanced ways, such as by type of voluntary organization and activity.

Finally, the contrast in articulation of a volunteer identity in Cruz' findings and ours suggests the potential value of addressing differences in scholarly and lay person definitions of being a volunteer. Although voluntary membership in nonprofit arts organizations fits scholarly definitions of volunteering (see Kramer, 2011), some individuals may have a narrower, more social justice focused definition of volunteering. Future studies should focus on understanding how volunteers understand and describe their identities in relation to individual and organizational efforts to describe those voluntary members as volunteers. Perhaps only certain kinds of voluntary work, decision making, and organizational messages are associated with the enactment of a volunteer identity. Studies addressing such questions have relevance not only for identity research but also for nonprofit policy and funding issues of interest to philanthropy scholars.

### *Practical Implications*

In terms of practical implications, these findings offer guidance to managers of voluntary leisure organizations. This research highlights the interconnectedness of a specific desired activity to a nested series of identities. On a practical level, that connection suggests that recruitment efforts could focus on highlighting how organizational membership can facilitate activities that foster the enactment of desired higher order identities. To benefit from this research, organizations might assess whether their messages are focused only

on building identification with the organization. Although participants did express identification with UCC, those identifications were rarely discussed when talking about their membership decisions. Based on the findings, we suggest the potential value of voluntary leisure organizations creating messages that highlight how organizational participation can enhance individuals' desired sense of the self as musical or the equivalent higher order, social category identity most connected to the organization's primary activity. Such messages would highlight the activity, the organization, and the higher order identities that were discussed by this study's participants when they described their membership decisions.

Another possible application of these findings could be for volunteer leaders to work to foster alternative identifications linked to their volunteer organization. Previous research suggests that individuals join performing arts organizations for two primary reasons: (a) the opportunity to perform and (b) the opportunity to socialize and create relationships (Kramer, 2005), and that social integration is linked to voluntary retention (Garner & Garner, 2011). Our interview protocol did not focus on the possibility of identifying with UCC due to social relationships, but we randomly happened to interview two members of a group of four women who traveled together each week from a nearby town to participate in UCC. It might be that in such cases, an identification with the organization is nested in their social relationship or such relationships may be viewed as cross-cutting social category identities. Although it may reduce some time and cost efficiencies, facilitating voluntary member social activities may create social identities nested within or cross-cutting the organization that will increase the identification with the organization and reduce turnover in the long term.

Finally, although we believe that the importance of the activity may be particularly strong in voluntary leisure organizations (due to the key role of a particular activity in this type of organization), other voluntary organizations seeking to recruit and maintain membership might highlight different higher order identities. For example, for activist organizations, a likely higher order identity is their social justice cause that is larger than the organization itself. In other words, potential members may identify with the desire to achieve social justice in society. Similarly, it is likely that religious identity may be an important higher order identity for religious volunteers, the largest group of volunteers in our country (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013), rather than identification with a particular local organization. It may also be that what has been discussed elsewhere as a volunteer identity (Cruz, 2009; Ganesh & McAllum, 2009) could be promoted in organizations that engage in activities more typically described by laypersons as volunteering. For example, Red Cross volunteers may wish to identify with the Red Cross and with a sense of the self as being a volunteer. Future research should investigate enactments of identity

and identification in additional voluntary settings to further develop these practical implications.

### **Limitations**

This study focused on voluntary participation and membership in a performing arts voluntary leisure organization. Such organizations are a vital part of the non-profit sector in the United States, but are distinct from the social service organizations that have been traditionally studied as voluntary and particularly nonprofit organizations. As such, the findings represent a nesting of identities and identification sources that may or may not transcend to other voluntary and/or paid work. In addition, the average age of the choir members may well play into how these identities are nested and enacted. However, it is likely that the implications of this study transfer to additional settings with similar characteristics.

### **Conclusion**

Overall, this study contributes to scholarly and practical understanding of how nested identities and identification sources are enacted by members of a voluntary leisure organization. Organizational identification is articulated as less central to membership decisions than a desire to participate in an activity that facilitates individuals' family and/or music identities. Scholars and practitioners interested in membership decisions are thus invited to focus on organizational identities as being cross-cut by and nested within higher order, social category identities.

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