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Enacting Identities: An Ethnography of a Job Training Program

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In this article, we explore “identity enactment” within the context of a job training program that pushed its adult students to adopt certain work-related identities. Drawing on analyses of long-term participant observations, longitudinal interviews, and written artifacts, we reveal the tensions, adjustments, and reorientations that occurred when adults’ conceptions of their current and future identities collided with different, even disparate, models of the professional people they were asked to become. This research reveals job training as a prime context for identity construction and speaks to the complicated relationship of identity formation to skills development. It also provides a set of terms for analyzing such identity work, conceptual categories developed from our reading of sociocultural theoretical perspectives on identity formation, ethnographies of personhood, and our ethnographic data. These terms—enacted identities, mediational means, performative moments, and reorientations of self—comprise a useful heuristic for fine-grained examinations of the process of identity formation.

Me, I ain’t nobody special. I’m in this program for the knowledge, the skills, to make some good money, pay the child support.

—DuMario, vocational student, responding to his instructor’s directive on the first night of class to tell everyone “who you are” (September 2000)

A person’s sense of self, the particular knowledge of who “I” am, within a general cultural framework, is re-created from moment to moment in all the signifying acts of
all the relations in all the events that make up a person’s life. There are moments in relationships that are especially performative in this respect, moments of intense creation or realization of self.


In this article, we explore what we term *identity enactment* within the context of a job training program that pushed its adult students to adopt certain work-related identities. In particular, we use findings from our ethnographic research, conducted within a sociocultural framework on identity formation, to examine how students like DuMario, quoted earlier, articulated changing notions of who they were and might become in what Giddens (1999) has aptly called our “runaway world.” As we will demonstrate, these identity enactments occurred continually during ordinary day-to-day interactions, but they were foregrounded, we will argue, during “performative moments,” including job interviews, classroom speeches, and graduation ceremonies (cf. Urciuoli, 1995, p. 202). Drawing on our analysis of long-term participant observations, longitudinal interviews, and written artifacts, we reveal the tensions, adjustments, and reorientations that occurred when adults’ conceptions of their current and future identities collided with different, even disparate, models of the professional people they were asked to become. The fact that the participants in our study were each attempting not only to invent themselves anew in relation to the world of work, but also to do so within a host of daunting economic, social, and programmatic constraints, makes their experiences especially relevant and poignant for the many who struggle to participate in today’s “new work order” (Gee, Hull, & Lankshear, 1996).

Our argument in this article is that job training programs are important sites for identity construction, although they are rarely recognized as such in the educational or policy literature. In this article, we offer evidence of that purpose and reveal the tensions and outcomes that were visible when we examined program activities through a particular identity lens. Specifically, we demonstrate what we saw as participants’ gradual reworking and sometimes ultimate rejection of the identities that were proffered by their job training program. To analyze such identity work, we developed conceptual categories from our reading of sociocultural theoretical perspectives on identity formation (Bakhtin, 1981; Gee, 2001; Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998; Vygotsky, 1986), ethnographies of personhood (Dimitriadis, 2001; Weiler, 2000; Yon, 2000), and our own ethnographic data. These terms, defined and illustrated later in this article, are *enacted identities*, *mediational means*, *performative moments*, and *reorientations of self*. We believe that as a set, they comprise a useful heuristic for fine-grained examinations of the process of identity formation. Before presenting our sociocultural framework, we offer a brief review of U.S. federal policy about job training and preparation for work. This background frames our local study of one job training program—se-
lected for its “second chance” orientation (cf. Inbar, 1990), its information technology (IT) focus, and its director’s desire to secure well-paying jobs for low-income people—and sets this program against its sociopolitical, economic, and educational backdrops.

ADULT EDUCATION AND JOB TRAINING

Job training programs are now ubiquitous in the United States, having garnered for the last two decades enthusiastic bipartisan support from the U.S. Congress, culminating in comprehensive legislation, most recently the passage of the Workforce Investment Act (1998). However, interest in worker training and retraining is also an international phenomenon, as nation-states look for ways to achieve or retain a competitive economic advantage. In postapartheid South Africa, for example, youth organizations that originated as part of the resistance movement were quickly transformed into job training programs, as young adults and non-governmental organizations looked for ways to engage citizens to participate in their country’s economic and social transformation (Perrow, 2000).

Job training programs and vocational offerings are sometimes considered second chances for education, offered, that is, as assistance to individuals who have been poorly served educationally and who consequently need help to change careers, reverse paths, or attempt something once again (cf. Grubb, 1996). “The notion of a second chance,” Inbar (1990) explained, “is derived from the basic belief that everyone has the right to attempt success and mobility, the right to try again, to choose a different way, and that failures should not be regarded as final” (p. 1).

With its thousands of community colleges, its vast system of vocational training, and its equally vast, if largely uncoordinated, collection of remedial programs, adult basic education, and literacy classes, the United States in some ways epitomizes a society that values a second chance for its citizens (cf. Grubb & Kalman, 1994).

However, it could also be argued that a genuine second chance philosophy is not at the center of most U.S. educational policy (cf. Oakes, 1986; Varenne & McDermott, 1998), and this is especially the case where adults are concerned. Job training programs are almost always underfunded, marginal, and limited in their success (cf. Grubb, 1996). For example, studies of adult basic education classes have consistently shown that students do not remain in these programs long enough to appreciably improve in reading (Porter, Cuban, & Comings, 2005). And large-scale studies of job training (i.e., 20,000 people over 4 years) have demonstrated no significant effects in terms of employment and wages (Lafer, 2002). In fact, job training programs boost participants’ annual earnings only modestly, from $200 to $500 annually, and even those small effects disappear over time (Grubb, 1996; see also Grubb & Ryan, 1999, who showed that such results on the ineffec-
tiveness of job training are worldwide). Lafer suggested that the current federal emphasis on job training in the United States seems to be almost a kind of subterfuge, an effort to direct attention away from the fact that there are not enough well-paying jobs, regardless of the kinds of training workers may receive. Up until the Reagan administration in the 1980s, he pointed out, federal policy had supported job creation; however, with Reagan’s economic policies came a shift in federal emphasis from job creation to job training, which continues to this day.

Significantly, a parallel shift has occurred in the focus of job training and its measurement of success. Employers have begun to direct their complaints about the American workforce not only toward perceived deficiencies in cognitive skills, but toward their values and behavior as well: discipline, punctuality, loyalty, and work ethic (Lafer, 2002; cf. Holzer, 1997). Increasingly, both in the Unites States and internationally, job programs address such attitudinal barriers by providing instruction in what are popularly called “life skills” (Perrow, 2000). It is perhaps not surprising that a well-documented discourse focusing on worker deficits has accompanied many calls for worker retraining, or that this discourse has lapsed into varieties of ethnic, racial, gender, and even generational stereotyping (Hull, 1993). For example, one of the more infamous calls to action around worker deficits was based on the worry that our near-future U.S. workforce was likely to be “nonmale,” “nonwhite,” and “nonyoung” (quoted in Hull, 1993; cf. Rose, 2005).

In response to the disappointing outcomes of job training programs, some have called for a shift in priorities to job creation and workers’ rights. As Lafer (2002) saw it:

Instead of seeking a ninth life for job training, the most productive direction employment policy can take is to abandon the search for supply-side solutions and concentrate instead on the demand side of the labor market: improving the quality of the jobs available. (p. 220)

Another response, one that puts more faith in the possibility and promise of educational reform, is to reenvision job training. Although clearly noting that the benefits to be had from current job training programs are few and far between, Grubb (1996) nonetheless argued that “the problems they address—unemployment, underemployment, and welfare dependency—are too serious to ignore” (p. 7); he therefore advocated programmatic reform, in particular, a consolidation of shorter term job training with longer term education (cf. Kincheloe, 1999; Olson, 1997).

It is at this complex nexus of global economic competition, U.S. policies on and debates about job training, doubts about the quality of the U.S. workforce, and a local job training program striving at once to create a pedagogical marriage between a second chance orientation and a commitment to high-tech corporate America
and its market economy, that we locate our research. This program, “City Jobs,” adopted the worthy aim of providing intensive training in computers and information technologies to inner city residents. Mindful of the enormous wealth being generated just down the freeway in the Silicon Valley, City Jobs hoped to propel its students, predominantly people of color who were out of work, underemployed, unemployed, or dissatisfied with their job options, to take their place at the region’s economic table. The optimistic spirit with which City Jobs began in many ways mirrored the Silicon Valley zeitgeist at the time, when freshly minted technology and business enthusiasts rushed to seek their fortunes in a crazily expanding dot.com economy. The dominant narrative of work at the time privileged notions of the clever entrepreneur; his or her willingness to engage in intensive, almost maniacal bouts of work; and the promise, for the lucky and the talented, of vast material rewards (cf. Bronson, 1999). We were interested in studying the intersection of this ideological framework with individual identity formation as it played out in a job training program that was especially designed, many might assume, for unlikely entrepreneurs.

Greene (1990) has commented on the importance, for those enrolled in second chance programs, of being able to “perceive alternate possibilities” (p. 37). These are crucial abilities, she insisted, “if people are to maintain their sense of agency and become capable of new beginnings” (p. 46; cf. Côté & Levine, 2002, p. 5). City Jobs indeed saw itself as positioning local residents to embark on new economic beginnings, and we in fact chose to study this particular program precisely because it seemed positioned for success, in contrast to U.S. job training in general. But as we will illustrate, at the heart of its approach was the effort to remake participants into the program’s image of what a successful technology professional ought to be. This racialized, gendered, and classed identity was contested, especially as the realization grew that the program would fail to deliver the kinds of high-tech skills and jobs that were promised.

THEORIZING IDENTITY

We approach identity formation from a sociocultural perspective that foregrounds the role of language and other “psychological tools” (Vygotsky, 1978, 1986; cf. Wertsch, 1991) in the process of constructing and enacting a sense of self. We also acknowledge the inherently dialogic nature of the process (Bakhtin, 1981; Holland et al., 1998). That is, our senses of ourselves are fashioned in relation to the identities of others—sometimes in concert with them, sometimes in opposition to them, but always in relation to them. Bakhtin (1981) viewed identity formation as a lin-

1All names of organizations and individuals are pseudonyms.
guistic, ideological struggle to make others’ words one’s own. Of necessity, he believed, words come to us from “other people’s mouths, in other people’s contexts, serving other people’s intentions” (Bakhtin, 1981, pp. 293–294). However, through “revoicing” or “reaccenting” the words that others have spoken, one can manifest an agentive self able to direct one’s actions according to one’s own “wishes, desires, beliefs, and expectancies” (Bruner, 1990, p. 41; cf. Côté & Levine, 2002; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998).

Working within this dialogic perspective, we assembled a framework for investigating identity formation by drawing on three related bodies of research and theory: cross-disciplinary work on narrative and self as “storied” (Bruner, 1990, 1994; Eakin, 1999; Ochs, 2001); perspectives from activity theory and cultural psychology on the primacy of language and other mediational means for identity formation (Cole, 1996); and performativity theory (Urciuoli, 1995) that foregrounds the importance of pivotal moments or events that afford identity formation. We do not attempt to create an integrated framework that encompasses the nuances of each perspective, which is one limitation of the approach. In addition, deploying insights from different theoretical perspectives of necessity runs the risk of juxtaposing seemingly irreconcilable epistemological assumptions and methodological traditions. Yet, attempting to understand real-world problems more often than not requires perspectives that do not match disciplinary ways of dividing knowledge. By ranging across several theoretical frameworks, and by remaining alert to the tensions among them, we attempt to foreground and exploit both their complementarities and their distinctive contributions, in order to bring their different vantage points to bear on understanding the complex process of identity formation.2

For example, studies of narrative foreground stories as a primary tool for identity formation. But stories of self are only one such tool; activity theory approaches privilege the notion of a variety of “mediational means,” but do not always notice the value of these for identity formation. To give another example, studies of narrative and performativity typically do not bring an institutional lens to bear on understanding identity formation, yet the motivation for enacting a particular self can have much to do with an institutional context, as is demonstrated very well through activity theory. Activity theory, on the other hand, has generally eschewed a focus on language, so it commonly misses the kinds of insights that can come from linguistically alert analyses like those that characterizes studies of narrative. We note that there are some excellent attempts to cross disciplinary boundaries in order to theorize identity, namely, Côté and Levine (2002). There have been successful attempts as well to use theoretical constructs from a range of disciplines within an in-

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2For a discussion of the need to conduct interdisciplinary research in order to address complex real world issues, as well as suggestions for how the academy can foster such research, see the National Academy of Sciences Committee on Science Engineering and Public Policy (2004). For examples of research on work from an interdisciplinary perspective, see Rose (2001, 2005).
individual study to theorize identity (i.e., Holland et al., 1998), as we hope is the case for our research.

IDENTITY FORMATION THROUGH NARRATIVE

Scholars of narrative often assert that we construct representations of ourselves by telling stories about who we have been in the past and who we want to become in the future. In fact, it is said that our “lives are the pasts we tell ourselves” (Ochs & Capps, 1996, p. 21). Hall (1997) overtly linked narrative to identity construction, writing that

identity is always in part a narrative, always in part a kind of representation. It is always within representation. Identity is not something which is formed outside and then we tell stories about it. It is that which is narrated within one’s own self. (p. 49)

Thus, although narrative may not be the sole basis for identity building, it is surely a central one. To summarize the almost isomorphic relationship of narrative to self, Bruner (1987) stated that “a life as led is inseparable from a life as told” (p. 137), because the human “self is a perpetually rewritten story” (Bruner, 1994, p. 53).

Bruner’s (1994) work on narrative is particularly relevant to our analysis of identity formation at City Jobs because of his interest in the uses that people make of narrative to navigate life changes, and because of the primacy he grants agency, a property that he argued is frequently represented in narratives. In recent studies of spontaneous spoken autobiographical accounts, Bruner commented on the universality of “turning points,” moments when people report sharp change in their lives and accompanying dramatic changes in representations of self. Key features of these turning points are vivid detail and great affect, a connection between external events and internal awakenings, and agentive activity. In Bruner’s words, these “preternaturally clear instances of narrative construction” are “thickly agentive” and “have the function of helping the teller clarify his or her Self-concept” (p. 50). These turning point narratives thus can serve as tropes for how a person conceives of his or her life as a whole. In our study of City Jobs, we paid particular attention to autobiographical narrative accounts that featured turning points, examining them for clues as to how participants represented themselves in relation to past events and relationships.

MEDIATIONAL MEANS

Narratives are one example of what we term the meditational means of identity formation. To theorize identity and agency, Holland et al. (1998) pointed to what
Vygotsky (1978) termed “psychological tools” (pp. 52–55), Wertsch (1991) conceptualized as “mediational means” (p. 12), and Cole (1996) later reconceptualized as “cultural artifacts” (p. 108). Vygotsky believed that human sign systems such as language, writing, and mathematics have significant consequences for how we think and how we interact with the world, and he saw each of these semiotic systems as a means of achieving voluntary control over one’s behavior. As products of human history that emerge over time and vary in their nature and their use from culture to culture, sign systems structure mental activity. As Cole pointed out, we can also usefully think of such psychological tools as “cultural artifacts” that encompass material objects and also include scripts and schemas (p. 108).

Holland et al.’s (1998) work helpfully drew semiotic mediation and cultural artifacts together with identity formation. They argued that people “develop more or less conscious conceptions of themselves as actors in socially and culturally constructed worlds,” and that “these identities … permit these persons, through the kinds of semiotic mediation described by Vygotsky, at least a modicum of agency” (p. 40). One example that Holland et al. provided of this process is the creation of particular narratives by members of the self-help group Alcoholics Anonymous (AA), stories which members learn to tell and retell about their drinking histories. These narratives—what we term mediational means, following in the tradition of Vygotsky (1978), Wertsch (1991), and Cole (1996)—have particular structures and allow particular roles. Holland et al. argued that in learning to interpret their own histories according to the scripts and frames of an AA story, each AA member forms a new, contextually significant identity. In turn, we suggest that certain discourses of the City Jobs program afforded adults opportunities to reinterpret events and representations from their autobiographies, to see themselves as “one way in the past and another way in the future,” in the words of one City Jobs participant.

USING MEDIATIONAL MEANS
IN PERFORMATIVE MOMENTS

Narrative and other mediational means are the tools of identity formation from moment to moment in all of our daily interactions. In her essay on indexicality as a feature of all sign systems, Urciuoli (1995) reminded us once more of the interpersonal nature of self-construction, but also emphasized the multiple types of signification and their different affordances. “If all sign systems have in common that they are indexically structured,” she wrote, “then all meaningful action is concerned with the interactive construction of a person” (p. 192). Urciuoli noted that each sign system has “a different potential for enacting a self”; if this is true, and if, as she suggested, “speech facilitates ways of being social, or of understanding, that writing does not, and vice versa” (p. 191), then we need to examine the multiple
types of signifying acts—speech, writing, visual texts, multimodal composing (Hull & Nelson, 2005)—through which individuals enact identities.

Further, Urciuoli (1995) signaled the special role of performativity in identity enactment. While acknowledging that a person’s identity is continually recreated from moment to moment throughout his or her life, Urciuoli also claimed that some moments are more significant than others and take on a special intensity. She explained, “Any activity that coordinates action to create a unity from many selves—dance, ritual, religion, sport, even military actions—can generate performative moments” (p. 202). Urciuoli’s formulation situates self-construction collectively, as part of an activity that creates solidarity among a group of people and lessens an individual’s sense of self as autonomous or isolated (this was the case in Holland et al.’s (1998) example of AA). It also implies the power of performance, public performance, in generating especially intense moments of identity enactment, examples of which we will provide as part of our findings on City Jobs.

**CONCEPTUAL CATEGORIES**

Proceeding dialectically by juxtaposing the aforementioned literature on identity with our ethnographic data on a job training program, we derived four concepts that framed and directed our analyses of identity formation and that we used to organize our findings. Our central concept and key term is *enacting an identity*—which refers to the embodiment principally through language and particularly narrative, but also through gesture, dress, posture, and demeanor—of who one is in relation to others. As we will discuss in more detail later, we deliberately selected the metaphor of “enactment,” instead of “fashioning” (Holland et al., 1998) or “performance” (Goffman, 1959), in order to index the salient features of our ethnographic data on identity formation.

We examined identity enactment by looking diachronically, examining moment-to-moment daily interactions across time, and also synchronically, honing in on particularly potent events that we call, following Urciuoli (1995), *performative moments*, our second key concept. These are especially intensive events or periods in social relationships during which the enactment of self is foregrounded or intensified. In our ethnographic data on a job training program that self-consciously viewed itself as promoting life changes, and to which most participants had expressly come to reinvent themselves career-wise, these moments were visible, numerous, and often characterized by intensive preparation, public displays, and much affect.

To engage in such identity work, individuals draw on a range of what we term *mediational means*, our third key concept. These are the repertoire of available cultural artifacts that direct, shape, or influence identity enactment, and as we will discuss and illustrate in some detail, they can include scripts, representations, and mod-
els. As one would expect in any educational endeavor, but to a degree that we believe
was especially heightened in a “second chance” jobs program, the participants in our
study were explicitly offered and expected to internalize a variety of mediational
means. What we observed, and what was of most relevance to our study of identity
enactment, was how participants internalized but also rejected and reworked these.
Mediational means are therefore the tools of identity enactment as it occurs across
time through daily interactions and performative moments.

Our last key concept suggests how identity enactments can culminate in identity
shifts. Later we will illustrate how, as observed in our ethnographic data, the enact-
ment of new identities led to what we term a reorientation of self, a detachment from
identities that existed in other “figured worlds” (Holland et al., 1998) or fields
(Bourdieu, 1977), followed by the reconstitution of identity. To be sure, participants
in our study did not always take up the new identities that were promoted by their job
training program through its range of mediational means; indeed, some of the partic-
ipants explicitly rejected them. But each participant did engage with those possible
subjectivities and psychological tools, and by the end of the program, they could
each articulate a sense of the somewhat different people they had become as well as
the array of possible new trajectories they could entertain in terms of their social and
economic futures. These reorientations of self we view as temporary anchor points
in adults’ vocational lives, to be followed by other enactments of self and ultimately
other identity shifts, motivated by exposures to additional sets of mediational means
and crystallized through performative moments.

Next, we present the details of our research, an ethnography that both sheds
light on the particular context of a job training program and provides purchase on
conceptual categories related to identity formation.

CONTEXT FOR THE RESEARCH

Research Questions

We were interested in answering the following questions about City Jobs and its
students: (a) What kinds of identities did students enact, and how did these identi-
ties change in the course of the program? (b) What tensions or points of conver-
gence were there between students’ identities and the identities proffered by the
program? and (c) How did those tensions or points of convergence play out in par-
ticipants’ identity work?

Research Site

For 18 months, we were participant-observers at City Jobs, a newly formed job
training program located in the Bay Area of Northern California in an economi-
cally struggling neighborhood. The community was 74% African American but
was slowly changing, with a steadily increasing percentage of southeast Asian immigrants. City Jobs intended to demystify the workings of computer hardware, introduce the complexities of computer networking, and prepare its adult and young adult students for various IT certification tests and ultimately well-paying jobs in the IT industry. This program incorporated some of the features that Grubb (1996) identified as likely to contribute to the success of such programs. For example, City Jobs recognized the need for literacy assistance, given the complex technology tomes that participants would be required to read, and there was the intention as well to create appropriate pedagogical structures that centered on activities rather than didactic instruction. Another part of City Jobs’ vision, consistent with job training reform visions, was to link students to other training opportunities and work experiences. What initially attracted us to this program, however, was not only the particular high-tech skills that City Jobs wanted to teach, and its organizational structure and pedagogical vision, but its stated commitment to serving low-income communities and addressing issues of economic parity. This goal was fostered through the daily service of the director, Ken.

**Researcher Roles**

We came to City Jobs as researchers intending to study the workings of a promising vocational program. We soon realized, however, that were we to become party to the kinds of information that we sought, we would need to find ways to take part legitimately in the day-to-day workings of the program. Thus, for the first 9 months of our fieldwork at City Jobs, we served as volunteer writing teachers, offering this supplementary instruction in order to be meaningful participants in the program. The director of City Jobs and the participants knew from the beginning our intent to conduct research. However, they were also happy to have additional resources and support for their program and their individual work, so our arrangement as researchers and teachers was an optimal trade. We came to the site once a week as writing teachers, typically presenting a short segment of published writing that dovetailed with the broader concept we wished to teach; in addition, we provided space and time for students to write in individual journals. We also adapted our instruction to students’ and the director’s requests—providing, for example, help in learning new vocabulary words.

Participation in our writing class was not voluntary—it was part of the larger City Jobs life skills course set—but there was no penalty for nonattendance at our classes. After a few weeks with all 15 students, our class settled down to an average of 8 attendees per week. We obtained informed consent from all participants. We also explained, in formal self-introductions and in informal conversations, that we were there to try to understand the process of constructing a “second chance” or embarking on a new job path. We jotted and later wrote up field notes about the technology and life skills classes we observed, about events we attended with par-
participants in the larger community, and about our own writing classes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998).

Two students, Angelo and Amy, were our key informants; we were able to carry out member checks and triangulate our findings with them during the program and after it ended (Miles & Huberman, 1994). They and the other students benefited from our relationship in two main ways. First, they received feedback on their writing skills from qualified writing instructors; we read, commented on, and edited resumes, possible job interview responses, personal journal entries, and, later, scripts for multimedia “digital stories” that recorded pivotal moments in their lives as students and workers. Second, midway through the program and after it ended, we worked with several students, including Angelo and Amy, to create these multimedia stories that were later shown in community venues.

Instructors

City Jobs was founded and run by Ken, an American man of East Indian descent who started the program in the heyday of the Silicon Valley dot.com craze. Ken brought business expertise and connections with people in the technology world to City Jobs and believed that he was helping the local economy by providing the kind of workers that technology-related companies were demanding while offering better economic futures for his students, who would themselves “give back” to their communities, once having “made it.” His vision for the City Jobs program, and his stated ideals about creating such a workforce in the community, helped make the program attractive to many students who wanted better economic futures.

Ken set up the City Jobs curriculum by coupling technology classes (75% of the program) with training in “life skills” (25% of the program). The curriculum for the latter was based on two pop-psychology books—The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People (Covey, 1989) and How to Think Like Leonardo Da Vinci: Seven Steps to Genius Everyday (Gelb, 1998)—and one financial literacy book, Rich Dad, Poor Dad: What the Rich Teach Their Kids About Money That the Poor and Middle Class Do Not (Kiyosaki & Lechter, 1998). Aided by a women’s mental health counselor named Silvia, a Latina who helped to teach classes in life skills, Ken also invited financial planners, self-help gurus, novelists, and others to speak to the class.

Ken had grown up in an economically depressed urban neighborhood in a nearby city and said that he wanted to help his students escape the kind of life he once had. The life skills program, texts, and activities City Jobs offered suggested a middle-class business identity necessary for success in the dot.com world; although Ken never mentioned race explicitly in relation to this identity model, the students interpreted the model as racialized—to wit, as White. In addition, because Ken was operating on the sometimes faulty assumption that his students were poor, poorly educated, and somewhat oppositional, he wanted them to leave their old selves behind. He attempted to change students’ language (making them into “talkers”), punctuality (“you gotta be on time … rule number 2, if you are late, you pay
2 dollars”), and style of dress (“with wearing what you got, make sure you wash them first”). He sent some students to a free workshop where they were given clothes that looked “professional,” took them on rock climbing, opera, baseball, and nature field trips, and emphasized through the seven habits how important it was for his students to change their outlook on life in order to become successful technology workers. These assumptions undergirded much of what Ken did and played out in different ways in all of our findings.

Of special importance were Ken’s assumptions about his students’ incomes, lifestyles, and abilities. At the same time that he provided an IT program that would position them for promising careers and that encouraged them to pursue their ambitions—“everyone is a genius in one thing, and possibly two,” he was fond of saying—Ken also deployed a particular set of class, education, work, and family histories that he believed defined his students. When he introduced City Jobs on its opening day, he described his target students as “disadvantaged” “have-nots” who lived “welfare-based or poverty-level” lives and had never been out of their neighborhoods, much less “touched a computer.” They came from “inner city communities,” were likely to have been “homeless guys,” and were almost always “unemployed” and/or “low-income workers.” Ken had administered math, reading, and grammar assessments to the students; he told us that some students had gotten “high scores,” but others did poorly. Referring to their cognitive abilities, Silvia once observed to us that “some of these students can’t even read a line.” Finally, Ken’s image of his students’ family lives centered on abuse and neglect: He referred to them on occasion as “orphans,” children of drug dealers, past drug addicts, and the like.

Most of these labels and assumptions were incorrect or exaggerated; we learned from students that they had owned property, we saw copies of college diplomas, we knew about steady jobs they had held, and we saw how they had built families on their own terms. Angelo, an African American student who became alert and resistant early on to Ken’s views, noted, “Being low-income doesn’t define who we are, doesn’t define our essence.” By the middle of the term, more and more students had begun to resent the way they were categorized within City Jobs and had begun to resist the work-related identities being offered through the program.

It was these clashes—Ken’s assumptions about his students’ backgrounds and his goals for them, juxtaposed against what they felt and yearned for—that turned our attention to students’ identity work. First, the narratives Ken told to himself, his other instructors, his students, and his present and potential funders about his students—that they were poor and in need of help—was, in a general sense, sometimes true. To receive federal funding for City Jobs, he had to classify his students as “have-nots,” had to show that they were in need of help. To compound this problem, the material conditions of some of his students’ lives were dismal, and many of his students really did need a second chance to be able to make change in their lives. If they had already succeeded, had had a level playing field from the start (not growing up in a racially and socioeconomically segregated city, for example), they might not have needed his help and might not have come to the program. So, although students resented his cat-
egorizations, and we also often saw them as condescending, from Ken’s perspective, his beliefs about his students and their need for second chances made sense, and he felt he was making a difference in the lives of many people.

Students

At the start of the program, 15 students were enrolled: 9 African Americans, 1 African, 2 Asians, 1 African American/Filipino, and 2 Latinos. Eight of the 15 were men. Within two months, the class had gained 1 member (an African American male) and lost 7 more, bringing the total number of students down to 9. We interacted predominantly with this group of 9: Okene, an African immigrant in his late 40s; Angelo, Shawn, Kenneth, and Paul, all African American men; Amy and Ruth, African American women in their early 40s; Fred, a man of mixed African American and Filipino heritage in his 20s; and Ramona, a Latina, also in her 20s. All these students were initially attracted to City Jobs and persisted through it because they were determined to improve their lives and their economic futures. To use Côté and Levine’s (2002) typology, each of these students seemed to be a “Resolver,” a person committed to “taking advantage of the opportunities in late modern societies in spite of the anomic character of these societies” (p. 5).

Methodology

We drew on three main types of data in our analysis: field notes, interviews, and artifacts. In Table 1, we label each source and note its location and/or participants or authors. In addition, we categorize each source according to the analytic methods we employed with it, which include, broadly speaking, either inductive analysis of patterns and behaviors or triangulation of findings. We also note which analytic terms—enactment of self, performative moments, mediational means, and reorientation of self—each data source was particularly useful in highlighting.

Data Sources

Field notes. We wrote detailed field notes (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998) for all program activities that we observed and for related activities in which we took part, such as field trips to baseball games and holiday parties. For most of these events, we took handwritten notes during the events and later transcribed our notes into typewritten documents. We audio- and videotaped selected events as well, and used the transcripts of those events to complete our notes. We found examples of enactments of self, performative moments, and reorientations of self to be most prevalent in our field notes and in the transcriptions of events.
**TABLE 1**

Data Sources and Corresponding Analytic Methods

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Analytic Methods</th>
<th>Analytic Terms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>Field notes</td>
<td>About program class and/or our classes</td>
<td>Inductive analysis of patterns and behaviors</td>
<td>Enactment of self, performative moments, reorientations of self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Notes</td>
<td>Field notes (key events audio- and videotaped)</td>
<td>Out of class, community events</td>
<td>Inductive analysis of patterns and behaviors</td>
<td>Enactment of self, performative moments, reorientations of self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Oral histories (audiotaped)</td>
<td>Director, students</td>
<td>Inductive analysis of patterns and behaviors</td>
<td>Enactment of self, mediational means</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>End of year focus group (audiotaped)</td>
<td>With remaining 6 students</td>
<td>Triangulation</td>
<td>Mediational means, reorientations of self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Phone interviews</td>
<td>Program dropouts</td>
<td>Triangulation</td>
<td>Reorientations of self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>Informal, postprogram</td>
<td>Director, students</td>
<td>Triangulation</td>
<td>Reorientations of self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artifacts</td>
<td>Student journals</td>
<td>1/week, 7 weeks, 11 regular students</td>
<td>Inductive analysis of patterns and behaviors</td>
<td>Reorientations of self, performative moments, reorientations of self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artifacts</td>
<td>Program promotional scripts</td>
<td>Written by students</td>
<td>Inductive analysis of patterns and behaviors</td>
<td>Performative moments, mediational means</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artifacts</td>
<td>Resumes</td>
<td>Students</td>
<td>Triangulation</td>
<td>Mediational means</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artifacts</td>
<td>E-mail communications</td>
<td>Director, students</td>
<td>Triangulation</td>
<td>Enactment of self</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artifacts</td>
<td>Program flyers</td>
<td>Written by director</td>
<td>Inductive analysis of patterns and behaviors</td>
<td>Mediational means</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artifacts</td>
<td>In-class handouts</td>
<td>Written by director</td>
<td>Inductive analysis of patterns and behaviors</td>
<td>Mediational means</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
Interviews. We audiotaped oral history interviews with the director and with 3 individual students. In these, we asked about their previous working lives, ascertained their views about the program, and learned their goals and plans for the future. We did not interview the life skills or technology teachers formally, but we had numerous conversations with each teacher, and wrote summaries of those in our field notes. In addition, we visited a sister vocational program in an adjacent city and spoke with instructors there about the challenges of job training for the IT industry. We also audiotaped an end-of-year focus group interview in which we asked students to reflect on their experiences and to describe what had worked for them and what they would have changed. We asked as well about students’ postprogram plans and goals. We had phone interviews with 2 students who had dropped out, and we maintained contact with the City Jobs director and with several students who graduated from the program, carrying out follow-up and impromptu interviews with them periodically for 2 years after the program ended. In these interviews, we found many mediational means used by students and the program, and we also triangulated (Miles & Huberman, 1994) our findings from field notes about enactments of self and performative moments. In the end-of-year focus group interview, interviews with dropouts, and postprogram interviews, we also found additional data to clarify the term reorientations of self.

Written artifacts. We collected students’ journals from their writing class and made copies each week, for an average total of six entries a week for 7 weeks. We collected scripts that students wrote for videotaped job presentations, promotional flyers and newspaper articles about the program, and in-class lecture handouts. For the participants we came to know most closely, we helped with résumé writing and kept copies of those documents as well. We collected, compiled, and saved copies of all e-mail communications between ourselves and sent to us from the students, the teachers, director, and people related to the program. These data were our main sources for understanding and gathering examples of the mediational means offered by the program. In addition, we used our analyses of patterns and events found in students’ writing to validate our broader argument about the identity work done by students in the program itself.

Data Analysis

Data analysis began with the transcription of field notes and audiotapes and proceeded inductively. We used standard qualitative methods for organizing, reducing, analyzing, and interpreting qualitative data (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998). We began with holistic data from the field notes, interviews, and student journal writing as described earlier, which gave us multiple ways of attempting to describe how, in the context of this particular program, students created identities by alternately integrating and rejecting the models offered by the program itself. In particular, we looked for patterns and behaviors that we could classify across the notes, inter-
views, and written artifacts. As we began to classify the data, we continued to talk with Ken, with our key informants, and with other students to check the validity of our findings. We reviewed our final analytic terms with Amy and Angelo.

We divided the data into seven major units of analysis: (a) students’ changing sense of self; (b) identities of students offered by the program; (c) conceptions of students held by the program director and teachers; (d) identity of the program itself posited by the program director; (e) conceptions of the program by students; (f) ways literacy was taught in the program and used by students; and (g) race and gender categorizations that ran through the program. These units of analysis in and of themselves were not sufficient to explain the intricate phenomenon of the identity work in which students engaged throughout the program; to further understand how it took place, we contrasted some of the larger units against each other.

In our second step, we revised our categories so that while we left the initial unit of students’ changing sense of self standing on its own, it was paralleled by two other categories: identities of students offered by the program, and conceptions of the students held by the program director and teachers. This reworking enabled us to see how students’ self-authoring processes changed over time, and how those changes were mirrored by the discourses reflected in both the identities the program offered them and the underlying conceptions about students that those who taught the students held. We also paired and contrasted two other categories to analyze the ways that the identity of the program itself posited by the program director and the conceptions of the program by students impacted each other.

Finally, as we reread and reorganized our categories, juxtaposing them to the sociocultural literature on identity formation, we devised a terminology that encapsulated the tensions we saw and gave us some purchase power in terms of accounting for identity work in the moment and in the context of this particular program. Our description and illustration of these terms—identity enactment, mediational means, performative moments, and reorientations of self—provide the centerpiece around which we arranged the central findings of our research.

### RESULTS: IDENTITY WORK IN A SECOND CHANCE PROGRAM

#### Enacting a Self

We use the term enacting an identity to mean embodying or representing a sense of who one is in relation to others through acts of signification, primarily oral language, but also writing, images, gestures, and movement. At City Jobs, participants were

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3Although each finding’s section foregrounds one of the four terms, this is only an organizational scheme for the sake of presentational clarity and does not imply linearity or a separation of the concepts. Identity enactment of necessity employs mediational means, as do reorientations of self, while both can occur during performative moments.
asked to enact selves publicly right away, to represent themselves to others and thus narrate their identities (Hall, 1997). At their first class, the director told students to introduce themselves and to tell why they had come to the program, because “everyone in class wants to know who you are.” Thus, students’ first identity enactments were verbal, and their identities were realized in relation to their second chance program peers and the City Jobs director. DuMario, a homeless African American man clutching his book bag to his chest, went first. “Me,” he said slowly, “I ain’t nobody special. I’m in this program for the knowledge, the skills, to make some good money, pay the child support.” Fred, a young man of mixed African American and Filipino heritage, said he was there to “get this certification and go on with my life.” Rosa, a Latina in her early 20s, said that she worked at a local grocery store and was there to learn about computers because they “is, are, uh, the future.”

Okene, an Ethiopian man in his 40s, went next. He told the class that he had been a taxi driver on the East and West Coasts of the United States, but that this work had been too dangerous. He said he had come to City Jobs to find a “career” for himself. Shawn, a young African American man who had lived all over California, said he wanted to “work in computers” and have his “own business.” Finally, Amy, an African American woman in her early 40s, said that the program was her “opportunity to learn without it costing … so much money” and that it was a way to get into “the dot.com craze.” All of these introductory statements were, we argue, enactments of identity; in them, we saw DuMario embody an insecure, and certainly physically uncomfortable, new student identity; Fred seemed to view the class as a step on his way elsewhere, a means to an end and the place he really wanted to go; and Rosa fell back on a cliché, leaving us unclear about what she knew about computers and what her reasons for being in the class really were. In essence, the students enacted particular selves on this first day—for the most part positive, modest, and hopeful—as they took their second chance.

Over time, as Ken placed more and more emphasis on the identities expected within the world of IT—problem-solving, trouble-shooting professionals—students began to suspect that they were not learning enough about computers. They noticed with concern that technology teachers came and went (three people taught and left the class in 4 months), and they began to worry that the in-house course materials that Ken had created in an effort to lessen their reading load were not, after all, proper textbooks. Further, as students perceived the identities Ken tried to ascribe to them as “underskilled people,” as “folks that have really not a whole lot of options,” some lost confidence in themselves as learners while others became increasingly disenchanted with the program. As a consequence of such growing

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4Although DuMario and the others were together for this first introductory class, after this, DuMario joined another class, and although we followed his fortunes, we did not focus on him in the rest of the study.
dissatisfaction, we saw other, different identities enacted as the program continued and, at its end, in the graduation ceremony.

To illustrate the ways that these enactments changed, we turn next in more detail to Amy, who started the program enacting a thrifty, market-savvy educational program consumer, someone who had come to City Jobs to “get in on the dot.com craze” without spending a fortune. She felt she “had to do it,” to be “part of it at another level.” In the middle of the program, Amy and the others found themselves responsible for writing short speeches that would present themselves as certain kinds of employees to prospective employers. These speeches were to be videotaped as part of a promotion/fundraiser for the City Jobs program. As Amy prepared to speak, Silvia, the life skills instructor, advised her to put on her “corporate persona,” and Amy seemed to do so: “My name is Amy and I am computer literate and software savvy,” she said with a flourish. Watching other students enact their corporate personas, Amy admired the way that men like Fred “used the lingo” of the industry; later in the course, she suggested to us that it was more difficult for her as a woman to do so, and that such language somehow came more “naturally” to men. Amy also admitted that as the curriculum got harder and harder for her, she was worried about applying for jobs because “you only gonna advance once people let you in the door, and a lot of time they doing this on-the-job training, and they select people, and I don’t know how to get in that door.”

She eventually felt that the program had not prepared her for finding a job; despite her efforts to enact a computer-literate self, the best she could do after the program had ended was to say that she had indeed learned some of the “lingo” required to be a computer technician. However, as she also noted, “once you learn the lingo, you understand that you didn’t learn as much as you could have learned, or should have learned, there.” As we will illustrate in more detail later, the self she enacted at City Jobs graduation was a bitter one indeed, full of recriminations about what she had and had not learned.

All of these identities—Amy’s slide from a positive to a negative outlook about her own prospects as a computer technician, Fred’s initial urge to get in and get out, Okene’s self-positioning as someone who wanted a career—were enacted moment to moment throughout the City Jobs program, in formal classroom conversations with peers and their instructors, but also in sidebars, during breaks and at lunchtime, during walks to cars and public transport, over drinks and over e-mail. As we will soon see, they also occurred during moments that were more “performative,” and that were characterized by an “intense creation or realization of self” (Urciuoli, 1995, p. 202). These moments, we will argue, abound in such programs, because participants are asked to imagine themselves as certain kinds of people and told to present those selves to their peers. As the program progressed, we were also able to see what mediational means for identity construction were offered at City Jobs, and how students took up, reworked, or rejected them. In the next section, we turn to a discussion of these psychological tools.
Mediational Means: The Tools of Subjectivity

These are scripts, models, and representations that provide their users with a means of directing their actions and influencing the world around them. As we have previously noted, they are devices making possible self-enactment and self-understanding, and are in this sense the tools of subjectivity. They are also a means of socially negotiating the interpretation of events. At City Jobs, a range of mediational means were embodied in different kinds of writing and speech and other social practices, and were differently embraced or privileged by different teachers and students. We also saw them variously employed and reworked by participants—revoiced and accentuated, to use Bakhtin’s (1981) metaphors—as the weeks went on. The three primary types of mediational means that we observed were heuristics for self-reflection, self-help recipes, and biographical models. Next, we describe these categories and focus on the former two to offer a sense of the ways that participants used mediational means to enact identities in particular performative moments, and ultimately, as we will explain at the end of our findings section, to reorient themselves at the program’s close.

Heuristics for self-reflection were exercises that afforded participants the imperative and means to examine and reinterpret past events, relationships, and images of self. They included the construction of life “timelines,” the identification of and assignment of significance to “pivotal autobiographical moments,” and the writing of reflective essays and poetry from prompts such as “I come from …” The heuristics were used primarily in the writing classes provided by us and another volunteer instructor. Ken tended toward self-help recipes as a primary mediational means, these derived from his two main life skills textbooks, *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People* (Covey, 1989) and *How to Think Like Leonardo Da Vinci* (Gelb, 1998). In addition, Ken told stories about himself each week to highlight one of the Habits or to provide personal up-by-the-bootstrap success examples. He also handed out lists of “10 things one should do every day” drawn from Nepalese culture (e.g., “spend time alone each day”) and promised that, with the repetition of a habit, his students could “own” it, internalizing it as a behavior that would become second nature. Finally, biographical testimonials included those of Ross Perot, Sam Walton, and other well-known businesspeople, all European American. We classed Ken’s longer autobiographical narratives as such stories because, like the biographies, they were meant to suggest that if he could make it, so, too, could his students. In addition, there were several guest speakers who shared their life stories and their personal success at overcoming obstacles.

Next, a brief discussion of two kinds of mediational means. In the writing class, we saw a space for what Bruner (1994) would term “turning point” narratives. In the creation of such narratives, we saw students draw on many mediational means from the program to enact new identities. In doing so, we as teachers had taken up some of the tools offered by Ken, who often asked students to think about “where you were before” and “where you wanna go”; we offered writing activities that we
hoped would position participants to think about past identities in relation to the people they were and would like to become. Angelo, Amy’s brother, had come to the program to learn more about technology, to be on the right side of the “digital divide.” He did not engage with the *Seven Habits*, but he did construct a life timeline in our journaling class. From that, he chose a pivotal moment to write about. His story began, “Have you ever felt like you were dumb? Well, I did. One memory of feeling dumb clearly stands out in my mind, when I found out that I have a learning disability.” In his story, he told about his life as a child, particularly his frustrating experiences in school, then his university work, and the professor who helped him discover the disability that had made him feel “dumb.” This story, which he gradually turned into the script for a digital multimedia story that he subsequently premiered at the City Jobs graduation ceremony, ended with this evaluation:

Presently, I know that I’m not dumb and that I don’t have to prove it to anyone. I still struggle a little, but it’s all for my own benefit. I’m not where I really want to be in life, but life is not over yet. Sometimes I look back and realize that I’ve done a lot of things.

We see this particular tool as central to Angelo’s identity enactment in the program, and we also see the showing of the multimedia story at the graduation as a performatice moment, in which Angelo enacted a competent, not-dumb self, likely in response to what he saw as Ken’s “deficit perspective” on the City Jobs students.

On the first day of the program, Ken introduced the *Seven Habits* (Covey, 1989) and *How to Think Like Leonardo Da Vinci* (Gelb, 1998), books that were to be his main mediational means, more used and more discussed than the technology training manuals his students would eventually struggle through. He chose these books because he believed they could have potent effects on thought processes and that “the more you can expand your mind, the more you can learn technology.” Over time we saw elements of them taken up, reworked, lampooned, and appropriated by participants in the course of the program (including ourselves). Initially, he promised to teach students how they could translate the habits into their daily lives, telling them that in “21 days” they could learn and own any habit, and he gave students a checklist of the habits to carry with their course papers. The habits included “Teach yourself to be proactive”; “Begin with the end in mind”; “First things first”; “Win-when”; “Seek first to understand, then to be understood”; “Synergize”; and “Sharpen the saw.” As the course went on, Ken offered the seven habits (and seven steps) as tools that students could use to create their own identities and understand their new places in the local and world economy as computer technicians.

Fred, who had come into the program to get his certification in basic technology and “go on” with his life, seemed to adopt the habits with the most vigor. During the videotaped job presentations, Fred first listed his favorite habit, “Synergy,” and
his favorite Da Vincian principle, “connciones.” On the surface, he seemed willing to take up this particular mediational tool. In Bakhtinian terms, Fred had begun to reaccentuate Ken’s proffered words and make them his own; at graduation, which we discuss below, he revoiced several of them, using them for his own purposes. We now turn to an exploration of that and other performative moments, spaces in which we saw students enact particular identities, relying on the mediational means at hand.

Foregrounding Self-Enactment in Performative Moments

We use Urciuoli’s (1995) concept of performative moments, which we have taken to describe events or periods in social relationships during which self-enactment is especially heightened or foregrounded, to tie together our previous findings. The first day of class was a performative moment for all present. Each of us enacted a self in that moment—we gave examples in the section earlier—and we argue that the reason we did so was because the moment called for it. In other words, the class session was an especially intense period of identity creation. Other performative moments in the course included the videotaping day, when students were asked to enact certain identities in the presence of their peers, to be preserved as advertisements for the program as well as for themselves; writing classes, in which we asked students to write in journals and then share their work with their peers; and the graduation ceremony, when students like Amy and Fred enacted very different selves than they had done on the first day of class, and where Angelo showed his own mediational tool for constructing an identity.

We have already said that educational contexts provide many performative moments, partly because of the ready-made audience of peers, teachers, and, sometimes, researchers present in educational settings. At the City Jobs graduation, there were also students’ friends and family members, City Jobs funders, and locals interested in the program: in other words, a very large audience in front of which students experienced “moments of intense creation or realization of self” (Urciuoli, 1995, p. 202). We look first at Amy’s and then Fred’s speeches, because they were the most intense of all performances of the evening, and together they draw our attention to important problematic aspects of City Jobs’ agenda.

Amy, whose ultimate experience with the program was fairly negative, took up some of the tools Ken offered, saying that the students had been “exposed to open[ing] and expanding our thinking and thoughts, along with being computer literate.” She went on to do an “inside joke” about the 7 habits at the graduation, including “Begin with the end in mind,” which she and some friends had redesigned to be “Begin with vacancies in mind.” She moved on to “Win-when,” saying, “When, when, you sign in. Please sign in. Because we need proof that you were here.” This jest, aimed at the teachers who made students sign in to ensure funding, was barbed, and the next was sharper still. Her critique called attention to the seeming inanity of the Seven Habits in the face of the program’s inability to help
the students pass necessary tests and get good jobs: “Teach yourself to read, so you can understand why you’re not employed yet!” In addition, it allowed her to perform an ironic, oppositional self, to express some of her frustration at not being able to use the mediational means the program offered.

Although her bitterness points to the clashes between the expectations of students and the program, and highlights the complexities involved in developing adult education programs that are geared towards the creation of new selves, we use these examples here to highlight the ways that students introduced, took up, and reworked the mediational means visible in the City Jobs program. In addition, we need to highlight the fact that the jokes, humorous though they might have been, point out what was perhaps the most serious flaw of the program. We saw City Jobs repeatedly offer certain identities for participants based on the Seven Habits, especially the idea that by reworking one’s identity, one could become a new person, a better worker, a person who earned more money. Through this lampooning, students seemed to reject the idea that they could change their circumstances through such self-help alone, and they rejected these notions in different ways.

Fred began his graduation speech after the applause for Amy’s died down, drawing on the Habits and principles that he had taken up. He said he and his peers in the program had been taught to

expect the unexpected. It is up to the eye of the beholder to anticipate what the future holds, and not get caught up in believing that a particular situation was meant to be, or think they have no control over certain situations. Cause you see, I believe we control our destiny.

This part of his speech seemed to embrace the Habits and principles, with little criticism of them; the phrase “expect the unexpected” was drawn from Ken’s life skills mediational means set. We believe Fred used this language to mediate his own identity as someone who could rise to any challenge, control his destiny, and “be proactive,” as well as to encourage his peers.

However, Fred went on to compare his journey through the City Jobs program with a poem titled “Invictus,” by William Ernest Henley (1875), which he thought was “symbolic of what we all went through in the class.” With lines like, “In the foul clutch of circumstance / I have not winced nor cried aloud. / Under the bludgeonings of chance / My head is bloody, but unbowed,” the poem made Fred’s time at City Jobs sound like Henley’s “place of and wrath and tears.” Fred ultimately congratulated his peers, saying

We’ve had to endure pivotal moments leading up to this event. There were even doubts about whether some of us would be able to get to the point where we are tonight. It took strength of will and supreme problem-solving skills in order for a lot of us to complete this program.
We had used the term “pivotal moments” in our journal writing class, and Fred revoiced it here, using it to describe not only moments in his own life, but moments that all of his peers had “had to endure.”

We read Fred’s use of the Henley poem—situated as it was between his uplifting speeches about controlling his destiny and using problem-solving skills—on two levels. First, it was a critique of City Jobs, an opinion that came out in this extremely performative moment. Second, we think that it was his way of applauding his peers for living through the “menace” of their own lives and the program’s obstacles. In each of the main performative moments of the course—the opening day, the videotaping class, and the graduation—students were asked to formulate and enact identities based on the mediational means at hand, and in each one, we can see how students enacted identities in relation to those around them. Had we ended our analysis at this point, we would not have had such a clear picture of how students reoriented themselves after the program ended, of how students sifted through all of the mediational means offered by the program, as we ourselves did after our end-of-year interviews.

Reorientation of Self: City Jobs Was Only a “Stepping Stone”

Because of their intensified nature and their emphasis on change, second chance programs are prime sites in which to witness the ongoing process of identity formation, what Giddens (1991) termed the “reflexive project of the self” (p. 5). Yet, little attention has been paid to how adults in such programs conceive of themselves after the programs end, much less how they perceived the goals and successes of the program in relation to their own identities, their own evolving senses of self. Ultimately, we think that the enactment of new identities, particularly in a program that overtly calls for an identity shift of some sort, can lead to what we term a reorientation of self, a detachment from identities that exist in other “figured worlds” (Holland et al., 1998), followed by the reconstitution of one’s identity. We want to focus here on the ways that Amy, Fred, Angelo, and Okene reoriented themselves after the program ended, drawing on notes taken throughout the year as well as their comments in our final interviews.

Amy entered the program to get in on the dot.com craze but was quickly caught up in her inability to learn the “lingo.” Her desire to enter the field was not enough, and as the months progressed and the technical curriculum grew increasingly more complex, we observed a decline in her self-confidence and in her hopes for passing technical certification tests. “At first I expected to pass the tests,” this college graduate told us. “Now I’m just hoping I might be able to pass them.” Although she continued to want a job in the industry, she was timid about applying, fearing she did not have the skills. At the end of the course, she confessed that one of her main disappointments was the lack of available jobs.
She said, “I heard, that people couldn’t wait ’til you finished the school [to hire graduates], based upon the knowledge you were gaining,” yet only two people in the program, Angelo and Shawn, landed technology-related jobs right away. At the end Amy said City Jobs had been a “stepping stone” that had “helped me see just how many things I can do,” but she was not able to get a job in the field. Two years later, she went to a local public university to get her teaching credential and eventually became a classroom teacher.

Angelo found himself almost immediately opposed to the mediational means Ken offered and, indeed, Ken’s perspective about the students in City Jobs. Unlike some of the other participants, he began early on to question the quality and viability of the program and to notice and dispute the staff’s negative assessments of himself and others. He interpreted Ken’s and other staff members’ comments about students’ economic circumstances and abilities as racist and looked on Ken’s investment in the community with great skepticism. During the program, Angelo and Shawn had been given jobs working in the City Jobs building, and Angelo had begun networking and organizing for the community organization that housed City Job’s program. After the program ended, Angelo collaborated on the creation of a community technology center for youth in the same building, despite Ken’s doubts that he could perform a leadership role in the project. He subsequently continued to work on the creation of more centers, offering multiple avenues through which area residents could access technology in meaningful ways.

Fred, the young man who spoke so eloquently at the graduation about his time at City Jobs, reoriented himself after the program as someone ready to “devote some time to education,” although not necessarily in computer hardware and software. He wanted, he said, “just to step back, and take my time, and see what else is out there, what else is available.” Although he had taken up the mediational means offered by Ken, means that Ken thought people would use to transform themselves into certain kinds of workers, he had not adopted Ken’s target identity. Okene, who came to City Jobs to find a career, was one of the most resentful about the program in the years after it ended. Eventually, after being temporarily homeless and having to live in his car, Okene found a job at the post office, where he continued to work. Ramona, the young Latina who was a supermarket checkout girl at the beginning of the program, remained a supermarket checkout girl some 3 years afterwards.

It would be a triumph of Ken’s ideals about work identities for us to be able to say that more adults reoriented themselves as capable technological workers after they finished the program. For their sake, we do wish we could report that such intense identity work led to a large number of students receiving jobs in the dot.com boom. What we can say instead is that people did reorient themselves after this intense period of identity enactment, that in our observations they did seem to detach from certain identities—cab driver, nobody special—and gain ground in enacting new identities. However, these identities were only tangentially related to the ones on offer through City Jobs.
DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

Local, National, and International Job Training Concerns

We have shown how adult students enrolled in a job training program were ready to take small but hopeful steps toward new skills, new jobs, and new identities. By the program’s end, however, they had become skeptical about having acquired the valued expertise, they recognized that immediate career enhancement was not a real possibility, and a goodly portion of their identity work came to be carried out in opposition to the models offered them by their program. One of the tenets of recent sociocultural theorizing about education is the deep connection between identity, learning, and mastery (cf. Eisenhart, 1995; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). That is, our senses of the roles we want to take on and the types of people we want to become always interact with and can be the engine that powers our desire to learn and achieve. As Eisenhart helpfully noted, “developing a sense of oneself as an actor in a context is what compels a person to desire and pursue increasing mastery of the skills, knowledge, and emotions associated with a particular social practice” (p. 4). To this we would add, based on the research reported here, that a lack of opportunities to learn, acquire, and apply true expertise can certainly result in the rejection of the very identities that could, in other social contexts, be the drivers for learning, achievement, and mastery.

This conclusion takes on added significance for job training in the context of today’s work world, where the production and regulation of identities are major aims for international corporations (Farrell, 2001; Gee et al., 1996; Hammer, 1996). As Deetz (1994) reminded us, “personal identity has always been linked to work and other productive activities,” yet “the workplace today has an even more significant influence on the identities of people who work there through new work processes, the complex web of social relations, and control over financial well-being” (p. 24; cf. Goffman, 1959). What we have shown here is that individuals involved in job training also can and do choose to reject and modify those identities; the same holds, we would add, for workers already on the job in new capitalist companies (Hull, 2002; Hull, Jury, & Zacher, 2007).

At City Jobs, some participants’ rejection or modification of proffered identities had also to do with how they understood themselves to be perceived and defined through their interactions in the program. As we have demonstrated, the director of City Jobs and other of its staff members tended to represent students, during the program and on public occasions, in very “classed” ways—as coming from poor neighborhoods and therefore as needy, as deficient in basic skills, and even as deviant—and these understandings influenced the structure, pedagogy, and content of the program. Although some students came closer to stereotypical depictions of the “underclass” than others, most, as we have already said, did not fit this profile, and some expressed their resentment to us about this ascription, which they viewed
as racist as well as classist. It was noteworthy that views about the students did not appear to change across time, even when information to the contrary was revealed. We think the absence of a rethinking at City Jobs of original conceptions of students’ circumstances and identities had structural and cultural roots, including patterns of residential segregation and attendant assumptions about inner city residents. In addition, as we have argued, the adult education funding structures through which Ken had to work in order to obtain continued support for City Jobs supported this deficit perspective.

Deskins and Bettinger (2002) have demonstrated that, since the 1960s, residential segregation among the underclass in the United States has increased so much that, not only have the African American poor been displaced economically and geographically, they have also been made separate in terms of identities. Deskins and Bettinger explained:

Space … is an ideal means of creating and asserting racial identities. If a group is isolated in where it lives, this has a measurable effect on its economic position. But it also creates a group that is thought of as a separate community, a separate culture, a separate identity. Those relegated to exist in a society’s pariah areas become pariahs themselves. (p. 57)

Although City Jobs hoped to serve an inner city community, we would argue that it was not able at the time of our research to transcend the particular racial, cultural, and social biases that are some of the most negative legacies of U.S. history. Further, such biases have well-documented negative impacts on educators’ expectations about students’ potential and often equally discouraging consequences for students’ engagement in and identification with school (cf. Hull, Rose, Fraser, & Castellano, 1991; Weinstein, 2002). It is discouraging, then, and certainly ironic, given City Jobs’ second chance mission and the commitment of its staff, that vocational trainers in an inner city would be almost unwitting parties to class- and race-based limiting assumptions about students’ abilities and circumstances. As we mentioned earlier, such assumptions thread as well through the popular and policy literature accompanying discoveries of and worries over workforce preparedness and worker retraining crises.

There was one other uphill battle that made the hopeful second chance project of City Jobs a Sisyphean task: the paucity of available jobs at the end of the program. Even if the program had managed to impart the sorts of technology-related cognitive skills that were desired, and even if participants had adopted the worker-related identities that were proffered with the best of intentions, it is still not clear that well-paying, career-enabling jobs would actually have been available to City Jobs graduates. Evidence was, in fact, to the contrary. The lack of jobs on the national scene for current and recent graduates of job training programs has been documented (e.g., Lafer, 2002), although disappointing outcomes for work-
ers in terms of employment and wages have not seemed to dampen policy-makers’ and legislators’ enthusiasm. On the local scene, the Silicon Valley of northern California was viewed, for a time, as an economic mecca, attracting both entrepreneurs intent on becoming the next “siliconillionaire” and people hoping to take part more modestly in this latest version of the American dream (cf. Bronson, 1999). Notions of work became saturated with beliefs about individual agency, technological know-how, and luck, as people dreamed about becoming the next success story and sought (and offered) vocational pathways that might lead in the right direction. Such ideologies concerning work and success, with their optimism and emphasis on the free-wheeling agent and entrepreneur, were alas short-lived.

City Jobs’ first graduation, documented in our fieldwork during the spring of 2001, coincided with the bursting of the Silicon Valley bubble and the issuing in of a freshly insecure economic era. Expectations for jobs, social futures, and if not instant wealth, at least a piece of the pie—the opportunity to “get in on the dot.com craze,” in Amy’s words—were reassessed and scaled back. We see, then, how personal identity formation within the context of a local job training effort and a particular ideology about work was structured by social and economic forces on a national and international scale.

Theorizing Enactments and Performances

As readers of this journal are acutely aware, a concern with identity formation was a leitmotif of the 20th century and has assumed special importance during the last two decades. In the words of Gergen (1991), “under postmodern conditions persons exist in a state of continuous construction and reconstruction. … Each reality of self gives way to reflexive questionings, irony, and ultimately the playful probing of yet another reality” (pp. 5–6), whereas Giddens (1991) wrote of late modernity’s “reflexive project of the self” with its “continuously revised, biographical narratives” (p. 5). Côté and Levine (2002) believed that our current era derives much of its ontological challenge precisely from the fact that identity formation, especially in western societies, has for the first time in human history become more “a matter of individual choice and negotiation” (p. 1).

In this article, we have attempted to juxtapose our readings of these and related late-modern and postmodern theoretical perspectives to our own empirical data on individuals’ attempts to improve their socioeconomic circumstances, projects that by definition had at their core the formation of new identities. In so doing, we have documented the resiliency and agency of these individuals as well as the daunting challenges that face job training programs and the identity work that they attempt to foster. We believe one contribution of this research is that it documents and provides a theoretically motivated analysis of the experiences of people on the frontlines of economic change and their self-transformation projects. Another contribution is a set of conceptual categories, including mediational means, reorienta-
tions of self, enacted identities, and performative moments, that we hope will prove useful in future fine-grained studies of identity formation.

As we discussed previously, mediational means were the tools through which participants enacted identities. At City Jobs, these tools included, but were not limited to, heuristics for self-reflection (e.g., pivotal moment autobiographical stories), self-help recipes, and biographical models. Using such mediational means afforded participants chances to reinterpret their life histories and enact new identities. For instance, Ken offered a particular set of mediational means, narratives about ideal workers and what it took to be a success in the IT world, that Fred and some other students took up and revoiced (Bakhtin, 1981). Using the concept of mediational means enabled us to see how participants enacted identities in performative moments such as self-introductions in the opening class and students’ graduation presentations. The notion of reorientation of self, the period in which participants shifted from one perspective to another, allowed us to trace some of the ways the adults used mediational means to create new identities after the program’s end. Next, we trace the theoretical implications of the latter two categories, the ones that we believe are most salient for thinking broadly about identity work in these times: enactment of identities and performative moments.

In keeping with much theorizing about identity formation, we have conceptualized the process as constructed through interactions with others. Various metaphors have been employed in the literature in an effort to capture this dialogic nature, including “construction,” “fashioning,” and “performance.” We have employed the term identity enactment because we believe it best characterizes the identity work that we saw our participants take on. “Construction” was too mechanical and static in its associations, because the process appeared to us both fluid and changing. Yet “fashioning” as a metaphor (e.g., Holland et al., 1998) made identity work appear too malleable and effortlessly agentive, untrue to the contentious nature of the process we observed. “Performing” an identity, a conception pioneered and deployed by Goffman (1959), placed more emphasis than we were comfortable with on what he called “impression management.” The participants we studied were involved in much more than managing their images; they were seriously engaged in self-reflection and self-transformation. We thus settled on the term enactment to suggest how individuals embody and live out a possible identity. Yet, in our conception, enactment does not imply complete ownership or commitment, and thus leaves space for the contingent nature of the identity work that we observed. We examined identity enactment in two ways. We looked longitudinally across time, focusing on moment-to-moment daily interactions, paying attention to what was said and how, and to dress, gesture, and demeanor, in an effort to ascertain contingent and shifting enactments of identity. But we also looked synchronically at particularly potent events that we call, following Urciuoli (1995), “performative moments.”

It has long been the case in the identity literature that attention has focused on particular life stages, such as adolescence, or critical events, such as the birth of a child (cf. Honess & Yardley, 1987), for these are generally agreed to have import
for identity formation. There are also turning points unique to individuals, as Bruner (1994) has noted, which likewise can serve as contexts for change in how one’s sense of self is conceptualized. What we call attention to, in addition, are those public occasions, ranging of course in degree of formality and intensity, when individuals are explicitly called on to perform an identity publicly in the presence of an audience of others. For adult students in a second chance vocational program, students who have taken up Greene’s (1990) injunction to “perceive alternate possibilities” (p. 37), these moments can have special import and significance for a reorientation toward new roles and possible futures. We hope that they also have import for future ethnographies of personhood and other studies of identity formation that desire to explore individuals’ personal identity trajectories within the context of their sociohistorical positionings.

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