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BEYOND THE BIKE;

IDENTITY AND BELONGING OF FREE CYCLES MEMBERS

By

CAITLYN MICHELLE LEWIS

Thesis

Presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts
in Communication Studies, Organizational Communication

The University of Montana
Missoula, MT

May 2017

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ABSTRACT

Lewis, Caitlyn, Master of Arts, May 2017

Communication Studies

Beyond the Bike; Identity and Belonging of Free Cycles Members

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A qualitative analysis was conducted at the community bicycle shop, Free Cycles, in order to examine participants’ identities and belonging within a community of practice. Semi-structured interviews with 19 members of the community and 50 hours of participant observation were conducted. Data analysis followed the grounded theory methodology of Strauss and Corbin (1990). Four research questions were proposed to examine the ways participants at Free Cycles identified with the bicycle-related practices of bicycle riding and maintenance, co-constructed the collective organizational identity, and developed a sense of belonging within the community amongst other members. The constructs of identity and belonging were examined using Wenger’s (1998) community of practice and modes of belonging frameworks, as well as Nishida’s (1987) Japanese philosophy of relational place-based belonging, basho. The study articulates how practices can enact both individual and collective identities and are instrumental to the belonging process. This research also shows how participants can identify and engage without developing a sense of belonging due to situational barriers. The study shows how individuals pull meaning from their belonging through a sense of inclusion and purpose in the community that is fostered by the shop director, employees, and other members. Free Cycles as a case study adds to current community of practice, identity, and belonging literature because of its inclusive and empowering nature. Overall, the study shows how identity and belonging are fluid, complex aspects of individuals’ lives that are separate but interconnected through practices and thus communities.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks to Dr. Joel Iverson for his academic insights, edits, personal support, and many hours spent on this study. Thanks to Dr. Steve Schwarze for this rhetorical perspective and motivation to continually ask myself, “the upshot” of my study. Thanks to Dr. Nicky Phear for the inspiration and encouragement to study the cycling community as a female cyclist.

I am thankful for Free Cycles as an organization and for all the people that keep it going on a daily basis. I am also thankful for the all the beautifully unique people I had the chance to meet during my data collection. I’d like to offer a huge thanks to professors and colleagues alike in the University of Montana Communication Department that supported me and encouraged me throughout the entire thesis process. Last of all, I am thankful for my strong legs and able body that allows me to bike.
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Introduction

Think back to your first bicycle. Things have probably changed a lot from the time you rode bikes around your neighborhood as a kid. If you have returned to your pedal-powered ways as an adult, your reasons for bicycle riding might have changed. People rediscover their bicycle differently though. People often approach cycling later in life with a specific purpose. Some people use the bicycle as their main means of transportation, while others choose it as a form of recreation. People reach towards bicycles for economic, environmental, health, social, political, and recreational purposes (Blue, 2012). In 2015, the U.S. Bicycling Participation Benchmarking Report indicated that about 34% of US citizens rode a bike at least once in the last year making bike riders a widely diverse population to understand. Even though the number of ridership in U.S. is growing, the feeling of belonging on the road does not always come naturally. Since we live in a motor-centric country, riding a bicycle automatically places bike riders in a type of counterculture. This makes getting back on a bike a bit more than a physical balancing act.

Actions, like bicycle riding, involve individuals who bring complex ideals of identity and belonging into their practices and communities. In Weiss’s Bike Snob Abroad (2013) he talks about the elusive nature of belonging as a cyclist. He recounts his experience of wondering if he belonged in New York because his “bike was a constant reminder that he was an outsider. It is a symbol of lone coyoteness” (p.55). The loneliness of cycling is not found everywhere through. Some towns and neighborhoods strongly endorse the practice of cycling while other places ban it all together (Weiss, 2013). The practice and identity of cycling varies from state to state, town to town, and person to person. Some places like Portland, Oregon seem to ooze bicycle enthusiasm where others are less than excited to have bike riders on their streets. To put this study in perspective, the League of American Bicyclists (2015) awarded Portland, OR platinum for
bicycle friendliness and Missoula, MT gold. While this study does not specifically focus on city-based belonging, it looks at one case central to Missoula: a 21-year running community bike shop and its role in shaping a community of individual’s identification and belonging.

No matter how bicycle friendly a city is though, bikes have a way of impacting their local areas. Due to the power of meaning creation, a simple bicycle changes once it is mounted. It is not the bikes themselves, but the people that ride the bikes that are changing communities. People use them as tools that can promote healthy, happy, safe, and environmentally sound communities. Susie Stephens, a prominent US Bicycle Advocate, once said, “That simple efficient little machine represents everything I believe in: sustainable living, a cleaner earth, egalitarianism, and community” (Vivanco, 2013). Cyclists resemble a large and diverse community based around the common tool of a bicycle and practice of riding it. Each city, group, club, and individual approaches the bicycle differently. Everyone has his or her own experiences, stories, and rituals that define and redefine what it means to them to be a “cyclist” but bicycle practices and their purposes have the potential to connect people together. The bike is more than just a means of transportation. It functions as a tool that allows people to come together around a common interest. Recreational riders create the ever-familiar group that hit the mountains and roads alike. Groups of bicycle tourists create a widespread community that meets on the open road. Bike groups pop up around just about every type of activity from bicycle polo to bicycle themed art (Blue, 2012). In the cycling world, questions remain as to how individuals identify with the act of riding a bicycle, connect with other cyclists, and create communities of people with similar or different interests, goals, and desires. The cycling community is complex, vast, and ever changing depending on the cyclists themselves and reasons they bike.
Bicycle practices offer a concrete lens to learn more about the identity creation of bike riding individuals. Even though the literal practice of riding your bike is usually done alone, many people seek out others who share in their interest. Popular cycling author, Elly Blue (2012), advocates for riding with a friend or at least having friends to talk with about riding. Having a space to gather as cyclists allow people to ask questions and learn more about their bicycles and practice. The more individuals attend group events and talk with other bike riders, the more they strengthen their community networks. This is the socially constructed advantage of riding with and talking to other people who share your goals and interests.

**Rationale**

Due to this vastness and complex nature of bicycle related purpose and groups, community bicycle shops and cooperatives can serve as an entry point or connection to the cycling world. These community spaces serve an important role of providing individual access to bicycle practices they might not have approached before due to financial, social, or skill-based reasons. Community shops provide individuals the opportunity to participate in cycling practices and connect to the larger community. Beyond the bicycle, community shops give individuals space to connect with other one another around common interests, goals, and concerns. Looking to past cycling communities, the Dutch Cycling Union that was founded in 1883 identified very strongly with the use of bicycles. To them the bicycle symbolized independence, self-confidence, and consistency in a changing world (Vivanco, 2013). The Dutch Cycling Union was so passionate about everyday bicycle use, that they shaped nation-wide road laws and left a social and political legacy in Europe (Vivanco, 2013). This group of dedicated Dutch tourists identified strongly with the bicycle and the meaning they created as a community. Because of their passion
and dedication to the cause, their collective goals were successful in changing the way people thought about the common bicycle.

Community bicycle shops provide a glimpse of the local cycling culture as represented by individuals who identify with bicycle practices within a community of other related individuals. For these reasons, this study utilizes a local community bicycle shop in Missoula, Montana as an avenue to understand the important aspect of the cycling community. Much like the Dutch Cycling Union, Free Cycles makes up an important branch of the cycling community that has its own purposes, drive, and meaning that are created by and through its members. For this study, participant observations and interviews with participants in the community bicycle shop, Free Cycles, explain how individuals identify with the shop community and derive meaning out of their sense of belong. Specifically, I seek to explain the complex concepts of identification and belonging through the members of the Free Cycles community.

In the communication studies literature, identity, belonging, and community have been studied in great detail. Throughout this study, I piece these theories together and examine them in a separately new way in order to better understand how they fit into a community of practice. Examining a specific study site that serves as a community a practice adds to our understanding of the theory and provides the space for questions and answers to flourish. Where identity and belonging have previously been discussed in interchangeable ways, I hope to explain how these concepts are constructed and approached by individuals differently. Approaching identity and belonging from an individual to collective prospective also provides new insights into these concepts. This study provides scholars an opportunity to understand the complex concepts of identity and belonging differently as connected but separate in nature and see how they develop in an open and voluntary community of practice setting.
Understanding the individuals that practice, identify, and join communities of cyclists is key in recognizing the possible practical applications this research has to offer. By understanding more about community bicycle shops like Free Cycles, we can better understand the role individuals play in meaning making, identification, and belonging. These concepts that ultimately constitute communities of practice can teach us how to develop, promote, and extend cycling practices and advocacy through a community based understanding. Beyond an extension of the Communication literature, this research will also provide Free Cycles an outline of their collective identity and membership involvement as told by their participants. This research will show them how they have developed as a social organization, where they might be headed, and possible areas they could change in order to improve membership belonging and community engagement. By highlighting identity and belonging of Free Cycles members, this research serves as a tool to illustrate the organization’s importance to individuals and the community. Quantifying these concepts could benefit Free Cycles in the future as they write grants, ask for community support, and connect with the larger cycling community. Individual stories that explain community identification and belonging help outsiders connect on a deeper level and allows Free Cycles to demonstrate their influence and purpose in the community.

This study can both serve as a resource for Free Cycles as well as an expansion of identity, belonging, and communities of practice research. Since belonging is often purpose-driven, this study allows us to understand why members of Free Cycles approach, use, and identify with the shop. Beyond the desire to ride a bike, the diverse motives of bike riders also makes Free Cycles a fascinating example of the many different purposes that exist within a practice. Free Cycles offers also an excellent example of identity creation and belonging as individuals engage in the practices of riding and working on bicycles.
Throughout this study, I explore identities and how they are formed through communication. By synthesizing the available communication and community literature on identity and belonging, I explain the interconnected process that occurs between individuals and their communities. Identity and belonging are both complicatedly connected concepts that are socially constructed. Individual and group communication creates and continually recreates concepts of identity and belonging. It is important to note that while identity and belonging can be mutually inclusive, they are also independent notions of a person’s self. The concepts of identity and belonging work together but interaction between the two advances our understandings.

Even though many communication scholars have studied identity (Cheney, 1983; Cheney & Christensen, 2001; Flores, 1996; Larson & Pearson, 2012; Meisenbach & Kramer, 2014; Pepper & Larson, 2006; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005) and belonging in communities (Haugh, 2005; Iverson, 2010; Wenger, 1998), few have sought to deliberately separate these concepts and explore them in detail using communities of practice literature. Understanding the web of constitutive communication processes at work in communities is key to understanding the roles and relations both on individual and collective levels. Using a specific organization as a case study will advance understandings of these concepts in a tangible and physical way. Studying these complex concepts as grounded in an organization also shows how identity and belonging manifest within a real community of practice. Through the use of participant observations and interviews, I examine how individuals identify with the practice of cycling, constitute communities, and create meaning out of their sense of belong at Free Cycles. Through this analysis, I also seek to explain the role members play in their communities through personal identities, collective identification, and their sense of belonging in relation to others.
CHAPTER 1
LITERATURE REVIEW

Communicatively Constituted Practice

Communication plays a major role in the identification and community creation process. Communication is key in the creation of groups, organizations, communities and their identities (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009; Brummans, Cooren, Robichaud, & Taylor, 2014; Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen, & Clark, 2011; Luhmann, 1995; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009; Weick, 1979). Identity, community, and belonging can all be regarded as phenomena that emerge from communication (Adelman & Frey, 1997; Koschmann, 2013; Iverson, 2010). A constitutive approach happens through a process of growth and change as discourses and surroundings simultaneously also change. A changing system requires an equally dynamic lens to understand how people enact identity and belonging in communities. Communities refer to a variety of different aspects in our social lives, so it is useful to narrow the concept. First of all, examining the activities and actions in which people participate is a useful exercise in understanding individual behaviors.

Practice

Cronen (1991) defines communities as organized social practices and coordinated activities based on obligation and prohibitions, highlighting the importance of practice within communities. Lave and Wenger (1991) study the importance of activities and actions in communities of people that participate as a “community of practice.” To understand communities of practice (CoP) in greater detail, it is important to understand how individual and collective dimensions of knowledge combine in an action or practice because practices are key to the theory at hand (Iverson, 2003).
The theory of “practice” explains the behaviors of individuals as knowledgeable actions that happen within a social framework (Iverson, 2003). A practice is a routine behavior that derives from our understanding, know-how, and motivation (Reckwitz, 2002). Practices are produced and reproduced through actions, but they are more than just a physical act (Reckwitz, 2002). In order to be a practice, the behavior must be shared with other participants (May, 2001). A single person does not have to socially perform an act in order for it to be a practice though. A person can ride a bicycle alone, but riding bicycles is still considered a social action (May, 2001). The social nature of practice is unique because it can still be carried out individually (Iverson, 2003). The concept of practice “is doing, but not just doing in and of itself. It is doing in a historical and social context that gives structure and meaning to what we do” (Wenger, 1998, p.47). Wenger (1998) explains practice as social phenomena, meaning that practice is based on what is said and left unsaid. This is not to say practice is abstract but the social aspect of practices makes them inherently communicative. “Practice happens because people engage in actions whose meanings they negotiate with one another” (Wenger, 1998, p.73). Social practices include language, stories, documents, and symbols as well as untold rule of thumb, underlining assumptions, and embodied understandings (Cohen, 1989; Wenger, 1998). Practices are often the mundane, embodied, and repetitive actions that convince us of who we are and how we should act (Senda-Cook, 2012). This study specifically looks at how individuals do this as they identify with bicycle-related practices.

People who participate in practices approach them with different goals in mind (May, 2001). While some practices happen by unconscious accident, others are premeditated based on motivation (May, 2001). Some people choose to ride a bike for environmental, health, or economic reasons, where others might not have such intentional motives. No matter how
conscious though, individuals are still agents of their own actions. A practice only endures because of the choice the agent makes to continually re-enact it (Giddens, 1993; Iverson, 2003). Individuals visiting a community bicycle shop aren’t enacting a practice until they continually choose to show up, develop common goals, share knowledge, and develop mutual understanding. They might commonly practice cycling, but they aren’t a community of practice until they interact and share with one another.

Practices are social and discursive, making them excellent for understanding and analyzing the communication of knowledge within groups and communities (May, 2001). Because of this, practices can communicatively enact identities for participating individuals. A lot can be learned about social practices and knowledge enactment by understanding how groups mutually engage, share repertoire, and negotiate their joint enterprise (Iverson & McPhee, 2008). In understanding their own identities, individuals often turn toward the practices and communities in which they participate. Practices contribute to how people understand themselves through their social engagements. It is important to remember though that practices are situated around certain people, communities, and places that also influence identity and belonging (Senda-Cook, 2012). Individuals of a practice, communicatively construct their realities and identities through their collective social enactments. A communicatively enacted approach to communities examines how individuals are simultaneously enacting their communities while both identifying with them and belonging to them (Iverson, 2010). For this specific study, this understanding can explain how participants and members at Free Cycles co-construct identities through communication.
Identity

Cycling is a practice that is enacted by millions of American citizens, making it a significant act to analyze. Since this shared action is so widespread, it offers a rich opportunity to better understand how individuals communicatively enact identity through bicycle-related practices. Practice can serve as a critical aspect of identity creation since matters of identity are connected to the understanding of practice, community, and the meanings created therein. Identity is created in the discourse surrounding the groups people belong to and the things they do (Wenger, 1998). It is the connection between practices, identity, and belonging that fundamentally guides this research. Examining identity creation and negotiation is key in understanding individual cyclists in a community of practice.

To better understand identity, Meisenbach and Kramer (2014) conceptualize identity as an answer to ‘who am I’ questions. In this way, the communication that happens within and surrounds practices helps us make sense of identity (p.190). It is also by means of communication that individuals construct their own space where they enact self. In this way, discussions and conversations (discourse), allow individuals to construct and navigate their own identities. Identity is conceived from a socially constructed concept of personal reflection and discursively represented self (Kuhn, 2006; Larson & Pearson, 2012). This means that discourse and self-reflection constitute notions of identity.

Identity is an ever-changing phenomenon that is influenced by daily discourse. Different individuals can access different discursive resources in order to enact their own identities (Flores, 1996). Based on available discourse, “identity is constantly open and available to be negotiated and re-negotiated, defined, and redefined” (Collinson, 1992, p.31). People are required to draw from an array of available discourses in order to build their identities (Kuhn, 2006).
discourses vary depending on the culture, place, and situation of the individual. Because of this, individuals continually negotiate a variety of different available identities that could define their self (Larson & Pearson, 2012). Larson and Pearson (2012) refer to this process as identity work. Individuals work to weave the available socially constructed discourses into a narrative of identity (p.244). During this negotiation, people rely on their available resources. Thus, physical location and materiality also factor into identity creation. Both the physical and societal aspects influence the way individuals and groups form identities (Larson & Pearson, 2012). This study seeks to understand how practices influence an individual’s identity work within a community of practice through mutual engagement, negotiation of joint enterprise, and shared repertoire.

Since individuals must situate themselves within the socially available discourses around them, a dichotomy often forms that they must navigate in order to find their most authentic self (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). Individuals identify at different levels depending on the situation at hand. Because of this, an individual’s self can be thought of as dynamic and multidimensional. “Crystallized selves have different shapes depending on the various discourses through which they are constructed and constrained” (Tracy & Trethewey, p.186).

To build identity, individuals negotiate meaning of their experiences as members of social communities (Wenger, 1998). Identity comes out of the social, historical, and cultural aspects of human life. Social identity can occur “spontaneously, intuitively, and even unconsciously” (Burke, 1966). Identity forms through an individual’s ideologies and position or place in society. Beginning positions fundamentally influence people such as their name, family, and gender (Charland, 1987). People are also influenced by: language, culture, ideological commitments, organizations, the economy, church, state and many other factors. Discourse provides the foundation for identity and subjectivity (Charland, 1987). Often, these elements
situate a sense of belonging within communities and organizations. For an individual that rides a bicycle, the practice alone might be enough for them to identify as a “cyclist” or even more, feel like they are part of a community of cyclists. For others, their experience and surroundings might have them believe that riding a bike is nothing more than a commonplace act. Individuals that participate in social practice often rely on their experiences, relationships, and surroundings during the identity creation process.

Identities are formed through multiple avenues and to differing degrees. Communication’s discursive effects often induce human collaboration and constitute characteristics (Charland, 1987). In identity work, people often rely on their community and group affiliations. Community identity refers to the collective’s sense of itself, which is the communal property that cannot be created by any particular individual (Koschmann, 2013). Community identities are formed through participating members and the organization itself. Once formed, community identities become a resource from which individuals draw from as they engage in their own identification process (Meisenbach & Kramer, 2014). Based on how individuals imagine an outsider’s perception of the community, members often use the collective identity as a reference point for their own identity work (Larson & Pearson, 2012; Cheney & Christensen, 2001).

Individuals that participate in a practice decide the level they integrate an act into their self-identity. Individuals who participate in Free Cycles practices draw from their available discourses, experiences, and surrounding situations to identity with those practices. Practices are communicatively enacted aspects of social life, but ultimately it is the individual involved in that practice who chooses to identify or not. Interviewing people who participate in Free Cycles practices provides an opportunity to gauge the degree in which participants personally identify
with the actions. Gathering personal accounts from members offers a way to recognize different bike-related facets of individual identities (Felkins, 2002). During interviews with participants, I sought to uncover the ways in which individuals discursively construct their identities through personal accounts of practice-related experiences at Free Cycles. Understanding how practices become facets of identity expands current understanding of identity creation and identity work of individuals. Since “practice-related” identity has not been studied in great detail, this research articulates how members of a community of practice enact it. This study seeks to more deeply explore practice-related identities that happen within communities of individual participants within a collective whole. The many actions and discourses that can possibly impact multidimensional individuals leads to the following research question:

**RQ1**: *How individuals enact their identity through practices at Free Cycles?*

**Community and Collective Identities**

Individual’s identity, history, experiences, and relationships all play a role into the overall collective identity of their communities (Felkins, 2002; Koschmann, 2012). Due to its communicative properties, the development of practices requires interactions with other participants through knowledge creation and sharing. The naturally occurring discourses both inside and outside the community as well as the structured organizational foundation constitute collective identities (Koschmann, 2012). Discourses during the enactment and negotiation process of a community constitutes and reconstitutes both individual and group identities. Discourse surrounding the organization’s foundation, mission, and goals also play into this identification process. Many layers of experience, conversations, events, and participation play a role in the creation and reification process of identity (Wenger, 1998). This study seeks to better
understand how individuals in a community of practice play a role in the larger collective identity of their communities.

When people engage in the process of collective learning of a shared domain, communities have the potential to form; but defining what “community” means can get complicated. The term “community” gets used in thousands of different contexts, making it one of the most overused terms employed in contemporary discourse (Underwood & Frey, 2008). Due to the vast array of explanations people have for it, the term “community” has nearly lost its denotative meaning (Underwood & Frey, 2008). When we think about which communities we, as individuals belong to, everything from geographical locations to different symbolic practices come to mind. Since community is such a complex topic, it is beneficial to explore where it originated in order to understand how it is used in this research.

The origin of the word “community” is based on commonness and unity. The Old French term “comunité” means commonness shared by many, while the Old English word for community, “gemænscipe” means fellowship and common ownership (Community, 1993). The broader definition of community can be as simple as: a group of common members that interact together. Fundamentally, all communities are organized as moral orders with social practices and coordinated activities based on obligation and prohibitions (Cronen, 1991). In order to narrow the concept of community, I focus on the Free Cycles community that represents a certain type of community, a community of practice. To best understand Free Cycles participants, this study examines their experiences, identities, and overall sense of belonging within a community of practice.
Communities of Practice

Communities of practice happen when a set of people who share a concern, set of problems, or a passion for something come together to learn how to do it better as they interact and share on a regular basis (Wenger, 1998). Even though the social phenomenon is age-old, the concept of communities of practice (CoP) began with Lave and Wenger (1991). The theory originated as a social psychology alternative to cognitive theories of learning (Iverson, 2010). We all belong to communities of practice whether we realize it or not. Family groups, colleagues, clubs, sports teams, and groups of individuals that share a similar skill-set make up CoPs. In our daily lives, these communities are an integral part (Wenger, 1998). Through these communities, people engage in joint activities, help each other, and share information but it is the “practice” that really makes a CoP what it is (Wenger, 1998).

Although Free Cycles could be examined solely as a community of practice, this research uses practices and CoPs as a lens to better understand identity and belonging in communities. Wenger’s (1998) conceptual framework examines communities of practice that people use as they pursue shared enterprises in order to learn, create meaning, and form identities. When it comes to community membership, Wenger (1998) defines membership as “identity formed through participation as well as reification.” He states, “community membership constitutes identity” (p.152). As members at Free Cycles engage in practices, they do so within a social setting that has the power to impact both individual and collective identities. While members are a part of a community, they are also simultaneously enacting and constituting it through their communication and knowledge. That is why Wenger focuses on both the individual and the collective. The construction of CoP as a community is not simply a lone entity, but a source of
identity and identification that is enacted in the process of knowing and practice (Iverson, 2010; Wenger, 1998).

To better describe communities of practice, Wenger (1998) uses the concepts of mutual engagement, negotiation of joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. Communities are created when people get together and talk about their shared practice (Felkins, 2002; Wenger, 1998). Mutual Engagement deals with these interactions and understands them as participants develop knowledge, share ideas, and work together on a practice. It is important to understand the power communication and practices have when it comes to building communities. A lot happens when people gather together around a common cause, talk, interpret, and apply what they have learned into their daily lives.

Since practices are social entities that form communities, they lead to inquiries of membership and participation within a group (Wenger, 1998). Beyond engagement in a practice, participants also negotiate their joint enterprise. Communities are complex and often require members to negotiate the internal and external factors that enable and constrain them (Wenger, 1998). As participants negotiate their joint enterprise, they develop a sense of coherence and purpose in their practices and interactions. As members define significance they shape and reshapes their practices through negotiations. This joint interaction often holds members of a CoP accountable to their practice because of their negotiation of its greater purpose.

Once an individual identifies with a community, their membership allows them to recognize the different narratives that make up the collective identity and live the story themselves (Felkins, 2002). Individuals’ identities can also express their beliefs and experiences they share in the overall community (Larson & Pearson, 2012). Community members are
responsible for following collective norms, rules and rituals as taught through shared dialogue and stories. Wenger (1998) also explains these shared dialogues as a shared repertoire.

As interactions continue, communities of practice build up a shared repertoire. This shared repertoire consists of stories, jargon, forms, and other resources members draw on when communicating around a practice (Wenger, 1998). Discourses surrounding a practice play a large part in individual identity work and member identification. Shared repertoires offer a way for members to showcase their identification through community specific language. The repertoire in a community is a tool that helps members negotiate meaning and is developed over time as participants engage in their shared practice (Wenger, 1998).

People form different facets of their identity as they engage in practices, negotiate their joint enterprise, and share repertoire with other participants. Interviews and observations provide a rich resource to understand the connections people form in and with communities of practice. Participant observations allow the researcher to gain insight and participate in surrounding discourses that play into individual and collective identities. Stories come from individuals within a community that create the taken-for-granted reality of the collective whole (Felkins, 2002). Interviews with members of the community provide rich information about the foundation and co-construction of the community’s collective identity. This research seeks to hear stories from individual participants through observations and interviews as they tell about their own experiences and add to the surrounding community discourse. An analysis of participation experiences and recounts shows how people identify with a larger group. In order to explore and understand community identities, Wenger’s (1991) CoP theory offers a powerful guide to analyze the Free Cycles community. This research specifically examines how members engage in a shared practice, negotiate a joint enterprise, and develop shared repertoire. Through a
communicatively constructive lens, a clearer understanding of the creation of individual and collective identities can be gained through the following research question:

**RQ2: How do Free Cycles members co-construct the community's collective identity?**

**Belonging**

Once individuals personally identify with practices and the Free Cycles community, questions of belonging come into play. The notion of belonging has many definitions, including a synonym for membership. People often think of belonging as a “sense of” or an enacted process within a group but the concept of belonging has been studied in multiple ways (Iverson, 2010). Belonging can be examined through a mythological (Wenger, 1998), physiological (Cheney & Christensen, 2001; Iverson, 2010; Kember, Lee & Li, 2001), and place-based lens (Haugh, 2005; Iverson, 2010; Nonaka & Kohnon, 1998). All these ways of considering belonging are useful in fully understanding how and why individuals belong to communities. Modes of belonging explain how individuals align in their communities while a sense of belonging explains why people chose to participate (Cheney & Christensen, 2001; Iverson, 2010; Wenger, 1998).

Wenger (1998) explores belonging through three distinct modes of belonging. Engagement is the first mode and is described as the ongoing involvement of the mutual negotiation of meaning process. Imagination is the second mode that explains the creation of images of the world that connect through time and space. These images are created from past experiences, future exploration, and current orientation of self and other perceived relationships (Wenger, 1998). This mode explains the process by which we expand our self through our goals and dreams. The final mode of belonging deals the connection of our energies, actions, and practices. Like imagination, this mode of belonging goes beyond mutual engagement by bridging
time and space. Alignment allows individuals to manage and align their practices with a broader purpose (Wenger, 1998). This mode is what explains how people can direct their energy to affect and change their communities. This is where bicycle advocacy often takes place, as people understand the potential of the bicycle.

Even though engagement, imagination, and alignment all work as modes of belonging, they are not mutually exclusive. As focus changes in a community from one mode to another, the community changes its character (Wenger, 1998, p.183). These modes of belonging mainly focus on the process by which people identity with a community. People choose to participate in a community to different degrees depending on the communities’ current focus. At Free Cycles, participants engage in practices, imagine possibilities into the future, and align their own purpose with that of the organization. Wenger’s (1998) modes of belonging help us understand the different ways members belong to communities of practice based on their collective identity and goals.

Belonging is also the “sense of belonging” and is connected to the idea of integration and feeling of comfort that is in contrast to a feeling of “otherness” (Iverson, 2010; Kember, Lee, & Li, 2001). A “sense of belonging” is tied to our human desire to be a part of something bigger than ourselves. This drive for connection is particularly observable in value-based communities but applies to a range of organizations and sectors (Cheney & Christensen, 2001).

Since Wenger’s (1998) modes of belonging expand an understanding of identification with a community, they work nicely with the concept of collective identities. Understanding the collective identity helps individuals apply core values in order to reconstruct conflicting ideals of the past or present. The first two research questions in this study offers a unique opportunity to better understand how individuals identify with practices and utilize the collective identity as an
identication resource (Larson & Pearson, 2012). Understanding why individuals choose to participate and identify is also significant to this study of the Free Cycles community. Through interviews with members of the Free Cycles community, RQ3 seeks to gain a clearer understanding of meaning-based belonging. Interview questions about participant motives and goals within the community can explain how and why people enact belonging. Engagement, imagination, and alignment can create mutual understanding and an emotional connection with other members. This connection can often lead to a sense of belonging within a community (Iverson, 2010; Kember, et al., 2001). Participants identify with practices and communities but a sense of belonging is different. It is the meaning found through the identification process that can lead a sense of fitting into something larger than one’s self. Members often establish meaning based on their experiences and connection to community values and members (Felkins, 2002). Participants, who fail to find meaning and connection with the practices or community, might also struggle to feel as if they belong. Wenger’s (1998) modes of belonging with the psychological notion of a sense of belonging guides the following research question:

**RQ3**: *How do people enact belonging within the Free Cycles community?*

**Basho**

The mythological (Wenger, 1998) and physiological (Cheney & Christensen, 2001; Iverson, 2010; Kember, Lee & Li, 2001) approaches create a good starting point to understand of the concept belonging. To advance our understanding, it is also helpful to look beyond a sense of belonging and begin to understand how people position themselves based on their belonging and identification. An extension of belonging comes from Iverson’s (2010) explanation of *basho*, a Japanese philosophy of place. The word *basho* is defined in the *Koojien* dictionary as ‘location, place, or position’ (Haugh, 2005, p.6). *Ba* or *basho*, explains a deeper connectivity that is alive
within all of us. Nishida’s (1987) concept of basho explains the place individuals and identity derive from (Haugh, 2005; Iverson, 2010; Nonaka & Konnon, 1998; Nonaka & Nishigushi, 2001). Unlike Larson & Pearson’s (2012) concept of place that is based on a space both socially and geographical created, basho focuses more on relational coordination and connectivity. The concept is examined in relation to knowledge of individuals within the collective whole. “Ba is a shared time and space for emerging relationships- either physical, virtual, or mental- shared by two or more individuals or organizations” (Nonaka & Nishigushi, p.4). Like Burke’s (1966) theory of identification and subject creation, basho understands how the collective enacts an individual’s place. The notion of place is ever changing as relationships, engagements and discourses change.

Each individual in a community has their own place relative to others that creates a space for those members to belong and meaning to live. Like belonging and identity, basho offers a dynamic concept of place. “Place is a fluid, impermanent, enacted construct of selves collectively enacting identity through communicative construction of identity as individuals interact with one another” (Larson & Pepper, 2003, p.531). Basho works well as a concept that shows us the connectivity identity has in communicatively constituting belonging through others’ relative place. Unlike a sense of belonging, basho is a constantly occurring process that situates participants relate to others whether they are concisions of the positioning or not. Basho is more than just a sense of “inclusion.” It encompasses the idea that place is where one stands and refers to someone’s position, persona or circumstance that distinguish them from others (Haugh, 2005, p47). Basho, as a concept of place, provides an excellent understanding that connects identity to the community processes (Iverson, 2010). Since basho or ba is a collectively enacted group construct, it is also a useful lens to understand belonging within communities of practice that
demonstrates how relational-place is always being enacted (Haugh, 2005). Within communities of practice, like Free Cycles, members often look to place positioning to see where they belong and therefore understand the flow of the organization. Since Free Cycles functions as an open community space, it is a dynamic and ever changing environment. Because of the fluid nature of Free Cycles, place-positioning amongst employees and participants is important to maintain some structure within the community. By analyzing basho, this study provides both a theoretical addition as well as a practical application for the Free Cycles community. Identifying key influences of place is important to promote a positive and inclusive environment for basho to occur.

Interviews with Free Cycle participants and employees can explain relational-place because much of the living history and culture of a community is rooted in informal and personal communication amongst members (Felkins, 2002). Communication within the shop provides a space for dialogue, questions, and story sharing, which in turn, invites people to participate in their own identity creation and place positioning (Felkins, 2002; Gadamer, 1989; Haugh, 2005). Once one’s place is recognized, they can better understand their relationship to others and decide the degree to which they identify and belong. When collective knowledge and stories are shared, they are linked to present experiences, which opens new meaning and understanding (Felkins, 2002). Older members, employees, and leaders of a community are often the keepers of these stories and serve as an important source of information (Felkins, 2002). Community leaders are often the ones that demonstrate the core values and practices that help other members evaluate and situate their own community belonging. In this way, those creating the structure within the organization help participants find their place relative to others within the community (Felkins, 2002; Wenger, 1989).
In seeking to understand belonging in communities, interviews and participant observations act as a resource for understanding the co-constructed traditions and values that are modeled by the Free Cycles community (Felkins, 2002). Ultimately, individuals sort out their role in the community script through their own personal identities, life story, and experiences (Felkins, 2002). In this way, individual and collective identities serve as a guide that sustains communities and provide direction, unity, and place for its members. When people are forced to locate themselves in relation to social and cultural phenomena within a collective identity, the community partly constructs identity and belonging for participants (Schriffrin, 1996). When people locate themselves within social and cultural aspects of a community, they also position themselves relative to other individuals both inside and outside that community (Iverson, 2010). It is through this process that individuals often recognize their place or basho in a community. Once recognized, community members use that awareness to demonstrate their place to outsiders (Koschmann, 2012; Meisenbach & Kramer, 2014; Schriffrin, 1996). Participants at Free Cycles show how members enact belonging and place through communication and identification. Studying a variety of individuals who belong to the Free Cycles community offers an opportunity to examine the intersection between the concepts of identity and belonging in relation to place. It is the concept of basho that guides the following research question:

RQ4: How is basho enacted in the Free Cycles community?

All in all, understanding communities of people, practices, and place come down to complex concepts of identification and belonging through everyday communication. Within these communities, people can find their place in something bigger and potentially more important than themselves.
CHAPTER 2

METHODS

In this chapter, the qualitative methodology for the research on identity and belonging in the context of Free Cycles as a community of practice is outlined. The study was completed through the qualitative research methods of interviews and participant observations. An open coding approach was taken for iterative data analysis, followed by a second-cycle of axial coding. The grounded theory approach in junction with Wenger’s (1998) community of practice and modes of belonging literature was helpful when explaining the vast and complex theories of identity and belonging.

Data Collection

Study Site. Participants were observed and interviewed during open-shop hours. Access to the shop space was obtained through the shop director and founder of the organization (see Appendix B). The shop space provided an opportunity for both participation observation and interview access.

Free Cycles is a branch of the Missoula Institute for Sustainable Transportation (MIST) nonprofit organization. The mission of MIST is to create a network of sustainable transportation systems that are safe, equitable and environmentally sound, with a specific focus on the Missoula area (freecycles.org). Free Cycles, as a program of MIST, provides bikes, parts, and help to the overall community. According to their website and Facebook page, Free Cycles offers “empowering and engaging skills” to everyone who walks through their doors. Free Cycles serves all walks of life from lifetime bicycle enthusiasts to children on training wheels. The staff at Free Cycles is passionate about sustainability, empowerment, and growth. Free Cycles is generally known in the Missoula community for their free-spirited open environment and
innovative approaches to sustainable transportation. Bob Giordano, the founder and executive director of the shop can often be found patiently teaching bicycle skills on the shop floor. Bob and three other fulltime Free Cycles employees run the shop five days a week. The shop is open every Tuesday through Saturday from 10am-6pm. During that time, they provide whatever tools, parts, and knowledge they can so people can diagnose, fix, or build their own bicycles. They always encourage people to volunteer and participate during those times, especially when the shop is crowded and busy. In fact, before you can walk away with a working bicycle, you must first volunteer at least four hours and take a bicycle laws and safety class called, BikeWell. Free Cycles estimates that they have given away more than 18,000 bikes since Giordano founded the operation in 1996.

Over the past 21 years, Free Cycles continues to grow and develop as the community of Missoula, Montana demands more affordable, safe, sustainable transportation options. Over the last year (2016), Free Cycles successfully fundraised enough money to secure their current property, which was recently up for sale. During their capital campaign, Cycles of Change, in addition to saving their shop, they also purposed an expansion of their programs, space, and contribution to their neighborhood and surrounding community. Since Free Cycles is currently located right next to two major trail systems, they believe it is the ideal place to promote healthy transportation and positive community development. After many months of hard work and grassroots community effort in 2016, Free Cycles was able to raise enough money for a solid down payment on their 1.1 million dollar property. In the end, the capital campaign to save their property included hundreds of volunteers, several community bike rides, and lots of independent donors and media coverage.
Even with a down payment secured on their property, Free Cycles continues to be in and out of the local spotlight because of the many services they offer to the community. As they figure out long-term goals for the future, everyday business continues as usual. A diverse variety of individuals continually utilize and rely on Free Cycles year round. As a bicycle shop, community, and meaningful place in Missoula, Free Cycles is an interesting and worthwhile organization to study in order to better understand identities, community belonging, and place-based inclusion.

**Interviews.** For this study, I conducted semi-structured interviews with a combination of predetermined and open-ended prompts in order to gain greater discussion during interviews. Interviews were chosen in order to understand the participants’ involvement and relationship to Free Cycles. To understand community members’ sense of identity and belonging, experiences, perspectives and purpose for participation were examined. Since I have previous experience with the community, interviews allow me to ask questions and gain unique insight without revealing my own involvement. This was to ensure that my experiences do not skew the data. According to Tracy (2013), interviews provide many advantages including a space for emergent understanding to blossom and complex viewpoints of participants to be heard more clearly. In this study, interviews supply naturally derived, rich data that provides insight on communicatively constructed identities and belong within a community of practice.

Fifteen participants, three employees, and the founder, Bob, were interviewed to reach a better understanding of identity creation, belonging, and place positioning that happens at Free Cycles. The interviews were voice recorded either in-person or via phone call. Most of the interviewees were conducted at the Free Cycles shop location, but depending on convinces some
were conducted off site at participant’s homes, coffee shops, breweries, and even by phone. Semi-structured interviews lasted anywhere from 20-90 minutes long.

**Participants.** The participants of this study included individuals who have or are currently involved with the community bicycle shop, Free Cycles. A mixture of self-selection and convenience sampling were used to gain access to interviewees. Interview participants were provided with a constant form (see Appendix C) that outlined the purpose of the research, terms of participation, and contact information. Before entering the field of study or conducting interviews, a proposal was submitted and approved by the International Research Board (see Appendix D). Past participants and employees were self-selected in order to gain a more diverse set of insights that could potentially span time and space. A variety of individuals were selected in order to gain a diverse sample across rate of involvement, gender, and sense of belonging. Participants ranging from 20-65 years of age who identify as both male and female were interviewed. Other participants were conveniently chosen during open-shop hours (Tracy, 2013). These participants are individuals who visit, volunteer, and use the shop for personal projects. Interviewees included a variety of new and old members at different identification levels in order to illustrate a more accurate representation of the community. Interviewees ranged from new shop users to past participants who no longer live in the Missoula valley. This mixed set of interviewees offered a variety of experiences, involvement, knowledge, and perceptions about the community.

**Interview questions.** To maintain a semi-structured approach, I crafted an interview guide (see Appendix A) with a mix of predetermined questions and informal prompts. As noted by Tracy (2013), “The less structured interview guide is meant to stimulate discussion rather than dictate it” (p. 139). I approached this part of data collection as a conversation that
encouraged participants to share their experiences and unfold the meaning of their participation in bicycle practices. Qualitative interviews focused on the participants’ involvement with bicycle related practices and the community of Free Cycles. Questions sought to understand if and how individuals identify with Free Cycles practices and the community itself. Interview questions asked participants to share specific experiences of their involvement in practices, with other members, and within the larger cycling community. To better understand communities of practice, individuals were asked about their overall community involvement and motives behind participation. To better understand belonging and place positioning, individuals were also asked to share stories about their sense of belonging and inclusion within Free Cycles. Interview questions were posed to facilitate conversation and gain an in-depth understanding of participants’ experiences, knowledge, and connection to their community. Participant observations allowed me, as the researcher, to experience the community through practice engagement, interactions, and relationships that I would not have had access to any other way. The two methodological approaches of qualitative interviews and participant observation were mutually informative to this study.

**Participant observation.** To better understand the process by which participants engage, learn, and share knowledge, the methodological approach of field research was used. In participant observations the researcher leaves their desk and enters into the field of study to generate understanding and knowledge by watching, interacting, asking questions, taking notes, and reflecting on their experiences (Lofland, 1995). Participant observation aims to gain a close and intimate familiarity with a certain group of individuals making it a particularly useful method in examining community, identity, and belonging. Participant observations give the researcher the opportunity to embody the practice in an intensely sensuous and unique way.
BEYOND THE BIKE

(Tracy, 2013). This method allows researchers to fully engage their whole bodies in the research as they look, listen, smell, touch, and feel their surrounds. During participant observations, I had the chance to engage in the practices of bicycle riding and maintenance, as well as other social activities such as concerts and fundraisers. During my time at Free Cycles I observed as an active participant in order to become part of the group and embrace the skills and customs of the community. While engaging with other members of the community, I took notes on the details of the activities and people around me as well on my own emotional insights and reactions.

To best organize and streamline note taking, I utilized Grumperz and Hymes (1972) descriptive framework. This framework was originally created to analysis speech events within a cultural context and serves as a useful tool to accurately and satisfactorily describe any particular event, message, context, or setting. During note taking, I used Grumperz and Hymes’s (1972) framework to record information on the setting, participants, ends/purpose, act sequence, key/tone, instrumentalities, norms of interaction, genre, and self-reflections that took place during my observations. Using this framework helped me to quickly gather in-depth, objective information about my surroundings. During observations, I took notes that were later expanded after each observation session. This model guided my observations and helped me to consider all aspects of my surrounding as well as the norms, rituals, and language that are important aspects of communities.

Participant observations are more than just showing up at a site and taking notes though; it is a complex method that is based on the level of the researcher’s involvement. To best understand community identification and belonging, participation observations are an extremely useful research strategy. This method allowed me to become more involved in order to gain a clearer, more complete comprehension of the Free Cycles community. I understand that with
such in-depth participation, there is the risk that the researcher will lose objectivity in their attempts to understand a certain population. In order to combat this potential issue, after each period of observation I recorded my own experiences, emotions, beliefs, and values to remain self-aware and as objective as possible. For this study, participant observations were conducted over the span of three months from January 12, 2017- March 23, 2017. Approximately 50 hours of participant observations were conducted, 39 of which are recorded in detail notes. The other participant observation hours happened during work on personal projects, volunteer time, and community events.

**Data Analysis**

The data analysis began with a manual transcription of all nineteen interviews. Manual transcriptions allow the researcher time to become familiar with the data before they begin the data analysis process. Field notes were also developed from raw notes in order to expand them using Grumperz and Hymes’s (1972) framework. After this process was complete, open coding was conducted on both transcriptions and observation notes. A second round of axial coding was then conducted to further break down themes and reveal a clearer data representation of the research questions posed. The qualitative data analysis software, NVivo, was used throughout the coding process to thermalize and keep data organized.

The grounded theory approach of open coding is “the process of breaking down, examining, comparing, conceptualizing and categorizing data” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.61). Data is categorized by occurring themes using a constant comparison method (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). After data is coded the first time, it then goes through a second axial coding process (Charmaz, 2006). This process reassembles data, allows the researcher to explore category relationships and connection to the theoretical frameworks. Axial coding also allows the
researcher to tease out key similarities and differences between categories, assuring the data
place in a certain category made during the open coding process (Tracy, 2013). This approach
enables the researcher to capitalize on the benefits of qualitative analysis methods by
categorizing data thematically and privileging the perspectives of research participants (Tracy,
2013).

In this research, categorizes were originally based on broad themes present in the data,
allowing a vast variety of themes to evolve. This process allowed, me, as the researcher, to get
deeply familiar with the data. During this process, all the participants except Bob (the director of
Free Cycles) were assigned pseudonyms to protect their identities. I have specifically chosen and
gained permission to use Bob’s name and no on else’s in my research because of his strong
influence and connection to the community. Over the last 21 years of Free Cycles existence, Bob
has been a pillar of the organization and is well known and respected in the Missoula community.
To not use his name, would be a disservice to the community being studied.

After the initial analysis process, the second cycle of analysis, called axial coding took
place (Charmaz, 2006). In this process, the research reassembles data that that might have been
fractured or forgotten during open coding (Tracy, 2013). Once I entered into the data coding
process, I was able to utilize literature on identity (Iverson, 2003; Iverson & McPhee, 2002;
Larson & Pearson, 2012; Meisenbach & Kramer, 2014; Senda-Cook, 2012), communities of
practice (Wenger, 1998), belonging (Iverson, 2003; Wenger, 1998) and basho (Haugh, 2005;
Iverson, 2010) as a guide. These frameworks served as a foundation to dive deeper into my
research questions about identity, identification, belonging, and place. This dual-coding process
allowed me to draw out recurring themes and experiences, which deviate from initial themes in
order to best utilize the dataset. Axial coding then allowed me to explore the relationships
between categories that arose out of the central theoretical frameworks within the literature review. This step is important as it allow commonalities and differences in the data to arise more clearly and naturally. This process also allowed me to distinguish any outliers or atypical examples from the original descriptive frameworks of identity and belonging that did not directly apply to the current research.
CHAPTER 3

BICYCLE RELATED IDENTITIES

The practices we participate in on a daily basis are more than just acts of participation. They are the blueprints that lay the social framework that in turn contributes to identity creation. Practices might seem repetitive or mundane, but they are the embodied actions that communicatively enact who individuals are within their social context (Senda-Cook, 2012). In this study, interviews and observations of Free Cycles participants added to an understanding of the identity creation that happens through practices. Practices and the means by which they form identities amongst Free Cycles participants are identified during participant observations and interviews. After the initial coding of identity development, shared knowledge, and social experiences as categories, a second round of axial coding took place to better get at ideas of practice-enacted identity development. Apart from participation in the practices themselves, the data revealed that knowledge creation, sharing, experiences, and identity work through available discourses all impacted identity creation. As individual identities are shaped, the collective identity of the community is also formed and changed since practices are inherently social acts. Identity creation is a fluid process that is contently changing as knowledge, experiences, and discourses also change. Throughout this chapter, Free Cycles practices are recognized in relationship to the processes of individual and collective identity that are analyzed through the social lens of communities of practice.

**RQ1:** *How individuals enact their identity through practices at Free Cycles?*
Practices

Throughout this study, I sought to better understand how individuals act out cycling practices as participants of a cycling community. To best answer RQ1, I first identified practices there were being enacted amongst Free Cycles participants. Since practices are produced and reproduced through actions, a great deal of practice analysis at Free Cycles came through observations (Reckwitz, 2002). Throughout my time with the participants, I identified several practices happening at Free Cycles. Even though several practices were present amongst individuals, two main cycling practices stood out as significantly connected to the Free Cycles community. First, cycling stood out as a major practice that attracted participants and engaged them in the action of riding a bicycle for transportation, travel, and/or recreation. This practice, which often extends past the walls of Free Cycles, encompasses visitors, participants, and contributors to the organization. All the interviewees’ referred to some aspect of this practice. Ryan, a seasonal Free Cycles volunteer, said, “I consider myself a guy that rides his bike a lot.”

Due to the nature of the shop, the second major practice identified was bicycle maintenance. When talking about their involvement at Free Cycles, the participants often mentioned some aspect of bicycle maintenance. Garrett, a transient shop-user said, “I’ve learned a lot. I’ve honed my skills and I’m learning how to true wheels.” Participant observations also allowed me to engage in both of these practices. During my time at the shop, I learned how to build a bicycle from the frame up, which took lots of questions and a few weeks of work. Practices of bicycle riding and maintenance stood out as the two most commonly shared activities amongst participants. Since Free Cycles fosters the bicycle practices of riding and maintenance, it is also able to function as an extension of the larger cycling community because of the common threads
that are created and shared amongst members. At Free Cycles, people from all over the community come together around the bicycle to ride, learn, and share. In fact, the bicycle itself seemed to represent a sort of material discourse or physical symbol in which the practices are embodied (Senda-Cook, 2012). Within several of the interviews, participants even referred to the bicycle as a common theme from which practices evolve. A Free Cycles employee explained how people come to the shop with a sense of commonality and general understanding of how the bicycle brings individuals together. Emma, the shop’s only female employee and program director, said, “We have a bicycle theme because we’re a community bike shop. Most people come in to support that theme.” With the bicycle as a focal point, individuals are able to engage in bicycle related activities and negotiate with one another through their shared focus and interest.

Free Cycles not only functions as a bicycle shop, but as a space where people can come together and share concerns, knowledge, and their passion for bicycles. Even though the physical location of Free Cycles seems to foster these interactions, they are not strictly confined to the shop. The physical shop offers members the space to participate in practices, learn, share, and make sense of their surrounding discourses, but identity creation can happen anywhere. Even though members of Free Cycles and the larger cycling community extend beyond the boundaries of the shop, most of the data presented in this research examines the practices and communication that occurred during shop hours.

**Knowledge Creation and Sharing**

During data analysis, knowledge creation and sharing around practices arose as recurring themes in participants’ identity development. More often than not, participants talked about their desire to learn and/or teach. Participants often explained the learning environment at Free Cycles through their own experiences, “I’m empowered to learn (Jill).” and “I learned how to true tires
and fix spokes (Kevin).” Free Cycles was also described as a place of education. Kevin, a professional hand-cyclist and shop user, said, “It is school in here. School is in session when you come here” while Jessie, volunteer of 10 years, said, “I believe anyone can learn to work on a bicycle.” Even during their BikeWell class Emma said, “Make sure you ask if you do not know what a tool does. You can always ask other people for help and they are usually willing to help.” Knowledge development and sharing is a large part of the Free Cycles community. Participants explained it as a place to get your hands dirty and learn. When explaining how to participate at Free Cycles, Garrett, a shop regular, said, “Come check it out and get your hands dirty. If you're scared, just shadow somebody and ask questions. It is always good to ask questions. They might get annoyed but that is how you learn.”

To better understand knowledge within practices, Wenger (1998) uses the concepts of reification and participation. Reification is the process of giving form to our experiences by producing objects [including symbols and texts] that congeal experiences into ‘thingness’” (p.58). This is the concrete aspect of knowledge within practices and can be seen clearly at Free Cycles as participants learn how to build bicycles. Throughout this process of building a bike, individuals participate in the Free Cycles practice of bicycle maintenance that can manifest itself in a physical bicycle and form of transportation. This process allows participants the opportunity to volunteer, learn about the organization and practices, and take ownership over their own project that they can eventually ride out of the shop. Knowledge is formed through participation in an active and social way as individuals engage and share in practices (Wenger, 1998). Together, reification and participation form a duality that can explain the process of knowing (Iverson & McPhee, 2002).
From kids to long-distance bicycle tourists, Free Cycles receives participants with a vast degree of cycling knowledge but it is the shop’s sharing, teaching, and hands-off\(^1\) education approach that seem to keep the practices alive. It is the sharing of the practices that make them social in nature and different from other activities or behaviors (May, 2001). This is not to say that practices must always be a group activity though. Social practices are unique because they can still be carried out individually (Iverson, 2003). Individuals often carry out both bicycle riding and bicycle maintenance solo, but Free Cycles allows participants the chance to negotiate practices and their meanings in a social setting. Through knowledge, individuals develop the skills both physically and socially to continue their practice. As individuals return and connect with bicycle practices at Free Cycles, they begin to personally identify with these actions. As they start to identify with the practices, they often share what they have learned with others. Through observations and interviews, I was able to witness and participate in this exchange of knowledge first hand. During an interview, Jim, an employee who moved to Missoula on his bike, explained the amazing cycle of sharing that happens between participants at the shop,

> If I show someone how to fix a chain they can turn around and show someone else. I have seen it in the same day! You turn around and they are teaching someone else. That knowledge spreads and it is really cool. It wouldn’t work any other way. There is no way the employees here could fix all these bikes. It is impossible. Even right now, you walk in and it is kind of crazy. If we actually get paid to fix those bikes it would be overwhelming but instead everyone is tolerant and pitches in and helps. You can even walk away from the shop. That is the really humbling part. Someone more comfortable at the shop just

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\(^1\) Hands-off education: Even though bicycle maintenance is a hands-on activity, Free Cycles approach to maintenance education is independent in nature and requires participants to physically do their own work.
steps into that role. It just keeps moving on… It is bigger than all of us I’ll tell you that much.

There is a constant evolution of knowledge as people learn, experience, and then turn to the people around them and share. My own experiences at the shop manifest knowledge creation and sharing as well. During my first week of participant observations, Emma and Aaron, who are both employees at Free Cycles, taught me how to true the wheel of my own bicycle. After much trial and error, I was able to adjust the spokes of my wheel so it was more stable. Just a week later, the shop got busy, which often pulls the employees in many different directions as the work with other participants. When someone asked Aaron how to true a wheel, I was able to jump in and show him myself. “I was really excited to teach someone something I had just learned from my time in the shop” (Observations, February 24, 2017). Free Cycles creates a space where knowledge sharing can happen and is even expected of its participants and employees. It is their open and education-based environment that seems to promote the development and growth of practices. The empowerment of others in their education-centric environment also serves as a representation of Free Cycles’s collective identity.

Experiences

Different practices within the same enterprise can emerge in separate communities and be surprisingly different in nature (Iverson & McPhee, 2002). Even though Free Cycles fits into the cycling community, their participants approach bicycles differently than other cycling groups, clubs, retail shops, or even other bicycle co-ops. In fact, when individual participants were asked about “cycling” they approached the practice differently based on their experiences with bicycles and other riders. Even though everyone interviewed rode a bicycle frequently, some answered “yes” to the question, “do you consider yourself a cyclist?” with no hesitations, while others
rejected the term “cyclist” and preferred to be called “a person on a bicycle, “commuter”, or “urban rider.” This shows the differing degrees of identification individuals take on when it comes to bicycle-related practices. It is important to remember that these identifications also impact the collective identity. Since Free Cycles is a community bicycle shop, it attracts a large variety of individuals with a diverse set of skills and experiences. As knowledge is shared and gained, individuals are constantly renegotiating the practices in which they participate as well as their own identities (Wenger, 1998).

Identity creation is a fluid process that is constantly being renegotiated and reprocessed. As individuals participate in practices, develop new knowledge, and share, they are continually making sense of their own identities. The different aspects of identity development in the data indicated this fluidity as participants made sense of their identities and participation in bicycle-related practices. Individuals formed identities as they negotiated both their past and present experiences (Wenger, 1998). Individuals talked about their first experiences riding bicycles, life-changing bicycle tours, new-found bicycle possibilities, as well as their current connection to bicycle practices. During interviews participants made sense of their bicycle participation as they talked about past experiences that influenced their identities. They said things like: “Growing up we always had bikes so I was always working on bikes as a kid (Kevin).” “I have always owned a bike as long as I can remember (Garrett).” “At a very young age my Dad pushed me down a big grassy hill...I mean that was part of growing up. I was just around bikes (Aaron).” Individuals also talked about how their identities as bicycle riders changed as they grew up. A lot of the participants talked about their experiences learning how to ride a bike and how that led to their current bicycle identities. Participants would say things like: “I was just any old kid with a bike and then I got a road bike in high school and that showed me how fast I could go and then I
got into road bike racing. It started from there (Jim).” Individuals also addressed “tipping points” in their bicycle identities. They said things like: “Before I was just riding my bike, but then I became a cyclist when I bought that new bike because it was easier to ride around and it was fun (Jill).” “After a long distance ride with Free Cycles, I realized it wasn’t that hard. It was a very good esteem builder. After that I realized I could do this (Kassie).” and “I think my biggest life-changing thing was going on the bike tour (Lisa).

As participants come to Free Cycles and perform cycling practices, they display social and situational knowledge that reflect their experiences (Senda-Cook, 2012). Some individuals, who already identify with the practices, come to Free Cycles to continue the learning and sharing process. For example, Mitch who previously rode across America on his bike said, “I bike everyday but I would like to be more of a cyclist. I would definitely like to bike more then I do.” To some people, Mitch is the epitome of a “cyclist” but to himself, he has room to grow.

Everyone comes to the practices with different experiences and insights into their own identities, but they often use the practices as a tool to understand that process. Over time, practices develop and become sense-making tools by which people constitute their selves. RQ1 poses the question of how the Free Cycles practices of bicycle riding and maintenance might become part of one’s identity. Everyone comes to Free Cycles with a different set of experiences and knowledge that influence how they identify with bicycle practices within a shared community. Where a large handful of Free Cycles participants have some knowledge of these practices, other participants enter the shop with no knowledge but a desire or a need to learn. Throughout their experiences at the shop, individuals often enter into a sense-making period where they address their practices in relation to their selves. Data showed that participants’ bicycle identities solidified as they continually had positive and meaningful experiences with the
practices. For some participants, Free Cycles introduced them to bicycle practices, but others came to the shop with previous bicycle experience placing everyone’s identification at different levels through time and space.

I think it is also important to note that employees at Free Cycles are not solely hired for their mechanical skills since they are often hired out of the volunteer pool. While making-sense of her time at Free Cycles, Emma said, “Before I went to Free Cycles I didn’t know the difference between a nut, screw, or bolt but I trained all summer, got my hands dirty, and I’ve been working there ever since.” Today, that prior lack of knowledge makes Emma a better employee, as she is extra conscious of newcomers in the shop. Over time, Emma created and developed a bicycle aspect of her identity, partly because of her experiences and involvement with Free Cycles but also due to her personal reasons for participation in bicycle practices. This just shows that everyone comes to the practices with different knowledge, different purposes, and different degrees of prior identification.

Identity Work

When forming identities, individuals are influenced by the available discourses around them. People draw from socially constructed discourses and weave them together with their experiences and knowledge to define their selves. As individuals learn from Free Cycles practices, share knowledge, and make-sense of their situation, identities simultaneously emerge within the communication around them. The data shows instances where individuals are encouraged, empowered and inspired to bicycle because of the discourses around them. Identities are influenced by group affiliations as well as social and physical influences. Material resources and the discursive representations of one’s self also impact identity (Larson & Pearson, 2012). When looking at Free Cycles participants and their identity creation, RQ1 is most interested in
identity in relation to cycling practices. The research shows that individual identities are influenced by shared practices as well as experiences at the shop or at other Free Cycles events such as bike rides and tours. Quality time spent on practices or at special events helped solidify participants’ bicycle identities. For example, Lauren shares an experience with Free Cycles, “Last year we went up to Glacier and bike packed. That is really hard to do on your own. The whole time we talked about possible bike trails for people that do not have cars. It was really cool to talk with them and always keep the conversation focused on making cycling more viable for everyone.” Not only was Lauren able to have a new bicycle experience, she was immersed in discourses surrounding bicycle practices.

Individuals familiar with bicycle practices or who already identify with the cycling community to some extent seem to develop their Free Cycles identities more easily. A few participants explain their involvement with Free Cycles as a natural progression. For example, some volunteers already familiar with bicycle maintenance help in the shop because of their previous identification with the practice. A shop volunteer, Shawn said, “When they need help I come in. I'm always happy to fill in and I like to just come in and help be a mechanic. That is my connection to Free Cycles.” Other individuals, who were new to the shop and/or cycling, identify with Free Cycles practices after they develop experiences and are immersed in the discourses surrounding the practices. Both cases tell us something interesting about how Free Cycles practices become part of identities to differing degrees. Since identity creation and work is a fluid process, it changes over time as participants learn, grow, and experience different available discourses.

This research not only explains how practices influence identity creation, but it looks at how identities that were originally cultivated or fostered by Free Cycles transform. For example,
a past participant that has since moved away from Missoula recounted how her relation to Free Cycles shaped her cycling identity as well as her desire to live in Missoula. Rebecca’s first experience at the shop was building a bicycle when she visited a friend in town. She goes on to explain the impact of that experience,

*I got the bike back to Utah with me and just loved it. My parents had a bed set up for me in the garage and I got to sleep next to this bike. It is then that I realized through all the connections I made building the bike I realized that I wanted to move to Missoula so I found a ride up there with this bicycle, a bag of clothes and my computer. I didn’t have a job lined up or anything but I just started my new life with this bike and have loved biking ever since.*

After she moved to Missoula, she explained how Free Cycles served as her guide to newly discovered bicycle practices, people in the community, and the surrounding area. But it wasn’t until she moved away to a less bicycle-friendly city, that her identity as a cyclist, influenced by Free Cycles, became salient. In a phone interview she explains what it means to her to be a cyclist,

*So it is just been recently that I have started considering myself a cyclist mainly because of the location I’m living right now. In Missoula and at Free Cycles, everyone road bikes, everyone loved bikes, everyone shared the road and people lived more connected on this weird locally spiritual level. I'm now in a place where bikers are the minority so I've definitely had to identify with being a cyclist and dedicate my whole life to it. Biking has basically become everything in my life. I mean I still have other interests but I feel like it is something I've had to fight for...whether justifying riding my bike to my family or*
spending all my free time going to City Council meetings and sitting in on committees trying to establish more bike friendliness in the place I live.

Free Cycles practices and experiences shaped her cycling identity into the future, but they also showed her how cycling practices could be changed and done better. After moving, Rebecca chose to dedicate her time to creating a co-op similar to Free Cycles in her new city and how she hopes to make changes in order to create the shop she wished Free Cycles had been for her at the time. This example shows how Free Cycles practices are one of the many aspects that shape individual’s identities as bicycle riders. It also shows that when considering identity work, individuals choose different aspects to different degrees of the available discourses surrounding a practice.

Identities are also created as people represent themselves to others. In this example, the participant explains the need to defend cycling as part of her identity to her family and fellow community members. Other participants also talked about how their families, friends, and coworkers influence their cycling identities and even inspire them to be stronger, bolder, and more frequent riders. Jill, who recently road cross-country on the Transamerica trail, said, “I think a lot of people were impressed that I biked a lot so that kept me going. People were amazed by my strength especially in the winter. That definitely enforced my identity as a cyclist.” Since practices, such as bicycle riding and bicycle maintenance are communicatively enacted aspects of social life, when individuals are placed amongst those discourses, they must choose to identify with them or not (Meisenbach & Kramer, 2014).

In this study, I found that more often than not, Free Cycles participants adopt some aspect of Free Cycles practices into their own identities as they learn, gain inspiration, and grow out of their involvement. Each participant not only comes into the shop with unique set of knowledge
and motivations, but they often continue to participate at Free Cycles due to their knowledge and passion for the bicycle. Data analysis shows that knowledge creation, sharing, experiences and available discourses all play major roles in the identification process of Free Cycles participants. Even though all these aspects of practice-related identification influence each other, they can still teach us something new about how individuals identity with a practice.

**Free Cycles as a Community of Practice**

After understanding practices happening at Free Cycles and how they have the potential to influence individual identities, I further the research to see how these concepts play into the larger collective community identity. As discourses and experiences shape individual’s identities, they play a role in the overall community story or collective identity. Each individual’s experiences, relationships, history, and communication have the power to influence the collective whole. Free Cycles operational internal discourses as well as external discourses outside the community have the power to influence the collective identity. To answer RQ2, data from interviews and participant observations are used to explain how individuals who identify with Free Cycles as a community of practice, co-construct the organization’s collective identity. RQ2 is presented as follows:

**RQ2: How do Free Cycles members co-construct the community’s collective identity?**

The discourses happening via practices in a community can constitute and reconstitute both the individual and collective identity (Wenger, 1998). Many factors go into this process such as conversations, events, participation, and commitment to the organization’s goals. When individuals come together and interact around a common goal or practice, like many of the participants due at Free Cycles, a community of practice forms (Wenger, 1998). Communities of practice consist of people who engage in joint activities, help each other, and share information
about a practice. Participants who identity with bicycle-related practices, but don’t engage in the social sharing nature of them do not seem to fully embody the community of practice. Since practices, based around the bicycle are essential to Free Cycles, it makes communities of practice framework ideal for better understanding not only the individuals at Free Cycles but the community as a whole. Free Cycles participants make up a community of practice (CoP) through their mutual engagement, negotiation of joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. After data was sorted into categorizes of shared knowledge, goals, collective identity, and perceptions about Free Cycles, it was further broken down to understand more about Free Cycles as a CoP. Axial coding provides categories of mutual engagement, negotiation of joint enterprise, and shared repertoire. Negative cases where individuals did not fit the community of practice framework were noted for future examination (Tracy, 2013).

**Mutual Engagement**

Mutual engagement deals with the interactions between members as they share ideas, stories and generally communicate as they work together (Iverson & McPhee, 2002; Wenger, 1998). The data shows that during shop hours and events, individuals mostly engage in communication based around the bicycle, the shop, and practices at hand. Participants engage as they teach one another how to “tune up bikes,” “true wheels,” “pump up tires” and “fix flats.” I often observed employees and other participants teaching each other about the internal working of the bicycle. They share stories about bicycle tours, rides, and everyday commenting routines. As participants work on bikes at the shop, they are included in conversations and instruction that engage and include them in the community’s practices. Free Cycles is not a traditional bicycle shop because it is a community of practice that relies on the engagement of its members. Members are encouraged to learn the practices so they can work on their own bike and help
others do the same. Through face-to-face interactions, individuals teach, offer encouragement, and learn more about bicycle riding and maintenance. In turn, this promotes Free Cycles collective identity of empowerment. Since only one or two employees work at one time, the community relies on other participants to engage in instruction and share knowledge with newer, less familiar shop users. Even if participants do not know exactly what they are doing, they are still encouraged to engage in sharing as community members. This also demonstrates Free Cycles’ collective education-centered learning identity. During observations, I often noted people “checking-in” with me or other participants at the shop to make sure we were not stuck at any point in our progress. In my field notes I recorded, “There is a norm of offering help, but only when is asked for or well received. Ryan had a lot of advice to ‘make my life easier’ but first made sure I wanted the advice. There is very much a feeling of inclusion” (Observations, March 13, 2017). Even if people are not experts in the practice, they still engage with one another and offer ideas of how to best accomplish the task at hand. “We all kind of watch each other and if someone is visually struggling, it is fair game and even expected to offer help to that person if you can” (Observations, February 7, 2017). This is not always the case though. One deviant example in particular happened frequently as people entered the shop. One regular shop-user would often shout, “Don’t look at me! I don’t work here!” when people walked in the door. While this example contradicts the open, empowering, and education-based collective identity Free Cycles often presents, it was usually addressed quickly by an employee who would rush to help the newcomer.

Data also shows mutual engagement happening around less practice-related topics as participants develop relationships beyond the bicycle. Through mutual engagement, participants interact with each other and share knowledge. As individuals interact, they often engage in
conversations that go beyond the practice, allowing people to connect on more personal levels. Mainly though participant observations, I watched people develop friendships and connect beyond the bicycle. For example, Garrett, a homeless participant, who often comes in with his dog, has developed friendships with people at the shop. Rather than excusing him, many of the other participants care for his dog while he works on his bike. “I noticed that Lee was watching Garrett’s dog as he worked on his bike. That showed me that people that hang in the shop often act as family” (Observations, February 14, 2017). This mutual engagement goes beyond sharing knowledge strictly related to bicycle repair and connects people on a deeper level. The bicycle and bicycle-related practices serve as the foundation for connections to develop. During my time at the shop, I witnessed this first hand as I developed relationships and connected with other participants. One relationship I developed is particularly salient to me. When I first started observations at the shop, I spent a lot of time with another volunteer, Aaron. Because Aaron was a skilled bicycle mechanic, most of our conversations revolved around the practice of bicycle maintenance as shared knowledge about the trade. Over a few months, I watched our interactions change as we talked about friends, hobbies, and events happening in the community. An excerpt from field notes explains this friendship: “Aaron was friendly to me since we have been around each now for a few weeks. I shared my smoothie with him and he talked to me about his living situation” (Observations, February 7, 2017). Our interactions, like many others, started off practice-related and transformed over time. Because personal relationships can form out of practice-related conversations so easily, communities of practice often become tight nodes of interpersonal relationships (Wenger, 1998). Continued participation in the community can even hinge on these personal connections that happen through mutual engagement. For example, Lauren who built her bicycle at Free Cycles said, “I started going to the parties and then I got
more interested in learning more and being able to fix my bike. I built a bike there and that was the catalyst for me being super involved because I got to meet everyone that worked there. Emma works there and she is now one of my closest friends.” Mutual relations are diverse and complex but they represent the members that make up the community of practice. I witnessed and experienced unlikely friendships develop between participants at Free Cycles. When talking to Bob about different populations that utilize the shop he explained relationships as, “…For example, maybe someone will not come here because they know some people are homeless or just out of prison. I understand that but I would suggest that people who get to know other people better and preconceived notions with explode and dissolve. Maybe someone you are scared of will help you in ways that no one else would have offered to help.” In communities of practice, people are always learning and part of that learning is how to work with others. As members share ideas and work together, they form genuine relationships with one another. As individuals identify and practice through empowerment, openness, and sharing they further Free Cycles’s collective goals. Through the members, mutual engagement furthers the collective goals and mission of the organization as well as the collective identity (Wenger, 1998).

**Negotiation of Joint Enterprise**

Mutual engagements can be complex because an enterprise is never fully determined and changes with its members. Since communities of practice are as complex as their members, negotiations are often required for the community to navigate internal and external factors that enable and constrain them (Wenger, 1998). Participants negotiate their joint enterprise, which gives them a sense of coherence and purpose. The data shows that participants negotiate bicycle practices with others to meet their own goals as well as the goals of the community. Members negotiate how bicycle riding can meet their goals like: cheap travel, sustainable transportation,
health, wellness, and self-sufficiency. During one of these negotiations, Jill, a previous bicycle ambassador, explained how the bike could be used, “They can improve your mood and your health and your financial situation. There are things you experience on your bike if you give yourself the time to ride your bike a lot. It is just beautiful the things you can see at that pace.” Other negotiations focus more on how practices should be executed in the community. This happens frequently amongst members while they practice bicycle maintenance. During observations, I noted an individual that helped another get a stubborn pedal off a bike. After the tool they were originally using didn’t work, another guy joined them with a hammer. Conversation ensued as they negotiated the best way to get the pedal off. I noted the goal-oriented manner in which members shared ideas, offered helping hands, and supported one another (Observations, February 7, 2017). Negotiations also take place as members seek to find the best way to work together. Since helping each other is encouraged, members frequently negotiate this aspect of their practice. There is a common “hands-off” learning approach in the Free Cycles community that is shared between members and encouraged during the BikeWell course. “Free Cycles is a journey. You learn as you work on your own project” (Bob). Members sometimes look to this norm when negotiating their shared practice of maintenance. During shop hours, I overheard a member complaining about truing a wheel and asked Aaron to do it for him. Aaron relied, “Now, is that the way we do things? Today is your day to learn how to do it” (Observations, January 19, 2017). Staff and members alike are continually negotiating how they will approach the community practices. Members negotiate how much help they offer an individual in order to empower them without discouraging them. This is often a difficult balance because some individuals do not always feel comfortable asking questions. Since there is an expectation at the shop that people should figure out the mechanics themselves, some
participants reported feeling lost and even intimidated. For example, the first time Mitch went to Free Cycles he said, “I did not know what Free Cycles was about. I didn’t know…I brought my bike in there and I guess I expected Bob to fix it and he was like, ‘you can do it. If you need any help let me know.’ I was like, ‘I don’t know what I’m doing!’ He showed me how to do it but I realized these people are pretty hands off.” Once Mitch realized the collective identity of Free Cycles he was better able to fit in and navigate interactions with other shop participants.

One day while working on my bike, I quietly worked alone for an hour until struggling with a wheel. The man across the room noticed this and said, “Do you need any help? I do not want to stand over you, but I do not want you to struggle either. I’m not sure which is worse” (Observations, January 13, 2017). After a few minutes of discussing the tension of empowerment and discouragement, we verbally ran through the process of getting the wheel fixed. We were able to negotiate of our joint enterprise and decide that we shared the collective goal of membership empowerment through hands-off instruction. He was able to teach me while allowing me to physically do the work myself. While negotiation is often the best-case scenario, some individuals do not get the opportunity. There is a fine balance happening in the Free Cycles community and it needs to be taken into consideration. To foster a negotiation of their joint enterprise participants need to feel safe and confident rather than intimidated, which can lead to empowerment in practice rather then discouragement.

As members interact, they define significance, which in turn shapes and reshapes their practices. As practices change, the collective identity of the organization is also changed (Iverson & McPhee, 2002). As participants talk about Free Cycles, it was clear that many of them think of the bicycle as more than just something to ride. For example, Kassie, a self-proclaimed environmentalist, said, “I think Free Cycles is doing this amazing thing where they are helping
the community and the Earth. It has recycling and outreach to the community, which unifies and connects people. It also has a health component because it is really good for people to cycle.” Members are continually redefining what the practices of bicycle riding and maintenance mean to them and their community. Jill said, “When I go there, I’m not only inspired by the people but I’m empowered to learn how to work on my bike on my own. It is not only about biking, it is personal agency that you can fix things on your own and get around on your own.” Throughout the data, individuals explain what bicycle practices mean for them on a personal and communal level. Jim said, When you move somewhere with nothing, a bike is a great tool. As someone who uses it to get around town, it is a tool…my vehicle.” The bicycle is talked about in so many different ways. It is seen as a tool to transport, travel, empower, and inspire.

As members become a part of the practice, they develop mutual accountability through their negotiation of their joint enterprise (Wenger, 1998). Every individual has a different reason to come to Free Cycles but those reasons change as members share and motivate each other. Some individuals talked about coming to Free Cycles originally because they needed a form of transportation. As they volunteered, they realized the bicycle was more than just a bike; it was a symbol of something bigger. As individuals spend time connecting with others, they often realize Free Cycles and cycling is a community. As I talked to Nick, who was new to the shop, he explained how Free Cycles was just a place to get a “free” bike but when asked if he thought it was a community, he agreed that it seemed like more than a mere bike shop. Nick explained that he felt a part of the community, even though he was new. He explained that because he was helping out and building a bicycle like everyone else, he was part of the community.

Other participants negotiate their joint enterprise as they talk about the reasons they choose to bike. Some individuals use Free Cycles simply as a place for bicycle repairs, while
other individuals develop more altruistic and personal reasons to participate around the same practices. Conversations often develop around sustainability, health, empowerment, community safety, and bicycle travel or exploration, which demonstrate Free Cycle’s collective identity. It is no coincidence that these topics are often negotiated, especially bicycle safety, health, and sustainably because they are formally taught as part of the required BikeWell class. In my interview with Bob, he even told me his “laundry list” of reasons that he bikes. Health, environment, and financial reasons are at the top of his list. As individuals develop their bicycle identities and connect with others through a negotiation of the practice, the collective identity of the shop grows and changes. Formal knowledge, shared in classes, and by leaders in the organization serve as the foundation from which the collective identity develops but members contribute and co-construct that image as well. As individuals identify with Free Cycle’s collective goals, they reinforce the current structure of the organization and thus the collective identity. Negotiation of joint enterprise is not always smooth. When participants challenge collective practices or goals, tensions can arise but they are often resolved because of the open environment in the shop.

**Shared Repertoire**

Communities of practices are also built from the shared repertoire the members use when they interact and negotiate their enterprise. Shared repertoire consists of stories, jargon, discourse, and other resources members draw on when communicating around a practice (Wenger, 1998). Participants often share stories and knowledge around bicycle practices that include bicycle terminology. This shared repertoire often includes specialized tools, parts, and bicycle models. Throughout my time at the shop, I often had to stop the person helping me and ask them to clarify what they were talking about. During observations, I noted that participants familiar with
the practices, especially the employees, often used jargon when communicating but are quick to simplify terms for whomever they were teaching. One day, I was tightening a brake cable with pillars until John said, “There is a tool for that. It is called a third-hand” (Observations, February 7, 2017). After showing me how to use the new tool, I felt more deeply connected to the practice with new knowledge, literally in hand. Later that month, I was even able to teach a group of middle school girls in the shop all about brake maintenance and share the repertoire of the community. The more time I spend doing the practice and learning from others, the more I learn and can participate in the shared repertoire. In this way, shared repertories are a way to showcase membership inclusion as participants ‘talk the talk.’ Since Free Cycles stresses the collective goal of education, tensions around shared repertoire did not appear frequently. Members are often quick to explain, illustrate, and teach processes without using complicated jargon.

Apart from jargon, the data reveals a shared repertoire around things that are excluded or discounted from the CoP’s identity. Repertoire in a community is a tool that helps members negotiate meaning and develop identity over time (Wenger, 1998). Throughout interviews, the term “cyclist” presented itself as part of the Free Cycles shared repertoire in a surprising way. I had never considered the term “cyclist” in a contested manner before, but participants demonstrated what the phrase meant to them and often rejected the term within their own identity work. To about half the Free Cycle members that were interviewed, “cyclist” meant something more than just a person who rides a bicycle. They explained it as a “weekend warrior,” “spandex wearing,” sport rider. In this way, the shared repertoire of a “cyclist” in the community reflects a history of mutual engagement and negotiations around the phrase. When looking at Free Cycles collective identity, the term “cyclist” is rarely mentioned and when it was, it was
often challenged. Bob, as a leader of the shop, even said, “I consider myself a person that really enjoys riding a bicycle and am inclined not to call myself a cyclist. I try not to use that language as an advocate. We need to say that we need roads safe for ‘people who ride bikes’ rather than cyclists.” Where the use of cyclist in terms of one’s identity often has to do with available discourses and experiences individuals have, it also plays a part in the collective identity of the organization because Bob and other shop leaders reject the term themselves. As individuals embark in the identification process, they often look towards leaders and the organizational whole for guidance. This showcases how individual identities as seen in RQ1 and the collective identity of Free Cycles co-construct one another.

The data reveals how participants help construct the organization’s identity while also utilizing it to understand the community as a whole. Participants look beyond their limited participation in the community to better understand how Free Cycles is perceived and portrayed outside of the shop. Free Cycles has been in Missoula for 21 years, making it well known in the community. During an interview Sara, a past volunteer, said, “Free Cycles has been around in Missoula for so long it has become an institution. You might have volunteered there 10 years ago and it still might hold a special place in your heart even though you do not go there very much anymore.” Free Cycles’s rich history serves as a major discourse that individuals draw on when explaining their participation in the community. The narrative of how the shop was founded, developed, and ran by the director is common knowledge amongst the community. The Free Cycles that people know today was originally a green-bike share program that Bob and his roommates started in college to promote sustainable transportation and the environmental re-use of bicycles. Free Cycles was run out of basements, garages, and tiny rental spaces for many years. The shop, which still runs on a “shoestring” budget, and seems to be most concerned about
making a difference and getting as many people on bicycles as possible. During interviews, all of the employees mentioned something about how they measure success by people helped rather than by dollars received.

Overall, Free Cycles’s collective identity reflects the organization’s goals as well as the individuals it serves. Many individuals develop their identities around Free Cycles practices. This process happens through the creation of knowledge, sharing, experiences, and identity work. Participants define part of their selves in the discourses and actions of the community of practice. Participants’ personal identities play a part in the collective identity as they co-construct and align their identities with one another.

The organization’s identity is reflected in its goal to create a healthy community through a wide range of strategies such as education, empowerment, and engagement. Free Cycles prides itself on being open and available to anyone and everyone in the community, which in turn allows participants to have more control over the shop’s environment. It is the organization’s overall goals and mission as well as the member’s participation and identification that co-construct the community’s collective identity. Beyond their open, imaginative, and resourceful way of thinking, Free Cycles is often described as “wild”, “behemoth”, and “anything but cookie cutter.” It might actually be this unique appeal and flair that attracts some of its members. Their open nature provides a space for individuals that do not feel like they have anywhere else to call home. This idea also emphasizes the social aspect in the organization’s mission. In fact, it might be their lack of homogeneity that makes them more of a community. According to Wenger (1998), engagement in a community of practice is possible and more productive when members are diverse. If individuals do not feel as if they can identify with the organization’s identity, they might not be able to form a sense of belonging or even participate. I would argue, though, that
the silly, diverse nature of Free Cycles usually pairs well with their open and free-spirited environment. A lack of commonality to the shop’s collective identity often seems to vanish quickly as individuals spend time engaging in the practices. This is why Bob often encourages people to think and act outside of their comfort zone. He believes that is where change occurs.

Through mutual engagement, negotiation of joint enterprise, and shared repertoire, participants navigate and identify with Free Cycles as a community of practice. Each participant in a community finds a unique place and unique identity that furthers their engagement with the practices and community as a whole. The diversity of Free Cycles members might actually be furthering their community development and empowering members within shared practices. When talking about Free Cycles identity, individuals refer to it as fundamental player in making Missoula an amazing place to live. Many interviewees even called it a “hub of Missoula” or the “center of the cycling community” in the area. The energy and identification of the members seem to permeate past the shop walls and into the surrounding community. Perceptions of Free Cycles are ever-changing as members identify to differing degrees. Even though participants continually engage in identity work, some aspects of the community stay consistent, making it the organization it is today.

As individuals participate in practices they identify with, they have the opportunity to connect with others and contribute to the overall collective identity of the community. When looking at the collective identity, individuals often refer to the “Free Cycles way” or even members as “Freecylians.” As members present themselves as “open-minded”, “hardworking”, “scrappy” and “carefree” individuals, they also constitute the diverse collective identity of the community. Through bicycle-related practices at Free Cycles, members connect with others,
develop meaning, and uphold the collective identity of the organization as a whole. The members’ own identities and Free Cycles’s collective identity co-construct one another.

In conclusion, identities and identification within communities of practice are unique and complicated concepts. Drawing on past literature, we know that CoP theory articulates important differences among communities of practice (Iverson & McPhee, 2008). CoP theory explains how communicative processes of mutual engagement, negotiation of joint enterprise, and shared repertoire enact communities in different ways through similar means (Iverson & McPhee, 2008). This case study adds to the variety of CoPs being researched and provides scholars a more diverse sample to compare and test the framework. This framework explains how members of Free Cycles cultivate a CoP and collective identity over time through their interactions (Iverson & McPhee, 2008). Looking at Free Cycles through the lens of CoP provides a clearer understanding of how knowing is communicatively constituted in practices and identity creation. This study also adds to our understanding of CoP theory by articulating how participants both navigate individual and communal identities within a community of practice. Additionally the voluntary nature of involvement at Free Cycles adds another aspect to the communal and individual identities being enacted. The open nature of Free Cycles adds an additional aspect to identity theory as individuals choose to make Free Cycles part of their lives. Members of the Free Cycles community find their selves and connect to their community through bicycle-related practices. Overall, participants at Free Cycles enact their CoP through a variety of different communicative processes that make them uniquely “Freecylian.”
CHAPTER 4

BELONG WITHIN A COMMUNITY

Participants co-construct the meaning of cycling and bicycle use through Free Cycles practices that enact and shape their personal identities as well as the collective organizational identity (Iverson, 2003). This enactment of identity through organizational practices, in turn enacts belonging amongst participants through different modes (Iverson, 2003; Wenger, 1998). Individuals enact their sense of belong in a community of practice in different ways and for different reasons. Participants who belong within a community also do so in relation to others around them. For these reasons, communities of practice are complex systems with complex members.

RQ3: How do people enact belonging within the Free Cycles community?

Wenger’s (1998) modes of belonging get at the meaning making process that develops psychological notions of belonging. Throughout this research, I have identified modes of belonging amongst different Free Cycles members in order to understand why they enact belonging within that community. Original categories from participant observations and interviews of beliefs, inclusion, influence, sense of belonging, and connections to members were further coded into Wenger’s (1998) modes of belonging; engagement, imagination, and alignment. When making sense of the processes of identity formation, Wenger (1998) has often found it useful to consider modes of belonging as understood as part of a community of practice.

Engagement

Engagement and involvement in a community of practice such as Free Cycles, demonstrates the first mode of belonging (Wenger, 1998). Time and time again participants return to Free Cycles to learn, grow and develop their bicycle practices during open shop hours,
BikeWell classes, group events and bicycle rides. Engagement as a mode of belonging demonstrates the active involvement happening in a community. Free Cycles members demonstrate engagement through their ongoing involvement and mutual negotiation of meaning through their community practices (Wenger, 1998). During an interview, Emma explained, “We have a bicycle theme because we’re a community bike shop. We all have a general understanding...just commonalities that we can relate to around the bike.” Individuals come to Free Cycles with common goals and understanding based around the bicycle, but RQ3 seeks to understand why people continue involvement beyond the bicycle. The data shows how the degree of engagement plays a role in that belonging process. Based on participation in the practices, individuals choose the degree they identify, which also affected their sense of belonging.

When talking to some more seasoned members, they were able to look back on their experiences and explain how their engagement and belonging in the community changed over time. Interestingly, when individuals first identify with practices, they sometimes assert their membership in the community by “excessively engaging.” Much like other participants who felt like they had to prove their identities as cyclists, Shawn who had started riding his bike frequently felt like he had to prove his identity by excessively engaging in his practice. He said, “For a period of time, I was constantly asserting my ‘rights’ as a cyclist. I realized that running red lights could save me something on the order of 90 seconds. Then I had an epiphany that I could take the side streets and add on a couple minutes. When you actually run the numbers, it is kind of crazy and not worth being stressed out all the time for 5 minutes.” When Shawn first identified with the practice of bicycle riding, he asserted his participation in the community. As Shawn engaged more, he felt as if he actually belonged in the cycling community and became
more comfortable in his practice. He worked at a community cooperative in his hometown, so when he moved to Missoula, engaging at Free Cycles made him feel as if he belonged by extension. When explaining what Free Cycles means to him he said, “I think co-ops are great and in extension, I think Free Cycles is great.”

Engagement often acts as a catalyst for belonging in a community. Many of participants explained how engagement in one way or another lead to their sense of belonging. During an interview with a self-proclaimed gypsy, Jessie said, “When I first got here I didn’t know where I fit in. Free Cycles gave me that place to come and start fitting in. By default that connected me with Bob and some nonprofits which helped me fit in and feeling like I was part of the community.” Over time, Jessie continued to engage in the Free Cycles community and became one of the driving forces behind their outreach program. Another participant, Mitch, reflexed on his belonging by saying, “I went on a quick bike tour with them back in September... so I’m kind of a part of the Free Cycles crew.” Through his engagement with Free Cycles members, he was able to establish a sense of belonging in the community. Mitch went on to explain how he wanted to get more involved because he thought that would make him more connected to the community. Duration of engagement seems to play a key role in the belonging process. Several individuals attribute their lack of belonging to their involvement or time at the shop. Participants addressed their lack of involvement with statements like: “I definitely feel more a part of it when I’m actively going to the shop and events (Lisa).” Kassie, a longtime volunteer, even said, “I feel like a part of the community, but not at the center of it. I feel like the people that are there everyday and are hardcore cyclist are at the center.” Another participant, Ryan, also attributed his lack of engagement to his lack of connection. He said, “I’m not on Facebook so there are
lot of things I miss out on. I’m not there enough to get into the flow of things but when I do show up it is a welcoming place.”

Participants certainly addressed how important engagement was to the belonging process but even though engagement is a major aspect of belonging, it is not the sole reason individuals feel like they belong. As participants continually engage in the community, they have the opportunity to form a sense of belonging, but engagement is not everything. Members in a community can identify with practices, engage, and still not fully belong. Many of the female cyclists at Free Cycles stood out as individuals who both identified and engaged, but did not feel like they belonged. This demonstrates a tension between identity and belonging. Even though these participants identify with bicycle-practices, they do not fully connect with Free Cycles open identity because of barriers to engagement and as a result, belonging. Women cyclists often attributed intimidation of the practices and shop to their lack of connectivity in the community. When asked if they felt like a part of the Free Cycles community, many of the women would say things like: “Not really. I am somewhat intimidated of going alone (Lauren).” “I have one concern. It is still very male dominated. The regulars and people who hang around there create a very masculine space (Lisa).” “I feel like Free Cycles sucks for gender equality (Rebecca).” and “I had a couple of intimidating experiences coming to work on my bike. I just didn't feel like I received the help I needed (Emma).” The data obviously highlights an issue with female equality happening in the Free Cycles community that should be addressed by the organization. Rebecca, who felt passionately about this issue, explains her experiences in detail.

Umm... I guess I never felt super connected mostly because it wasn't a safe place for me to get outside of my comfort zone and learn new things. I would be working on my bike or getting help and some pretty girl with a walk in and my mechanic would completely drop
me to go hit on them. It definitely was not a safe place for ladies. I should be able to choose whatever form of transportation I want and have cool learning opportunities without being harassed for being a woman. I mean that still shouldn’t exist. I hate that the one thing that I’m really into has that risk.

Rebecca, who strongly identifies with bicycle practices and engages in them on a regular basis, never felt like she would fully belong to the Free Cycles community. In this case, even her negative engagement experience impacted her ability to belong. For the most part, Free Cycles fosters a welcoming sense of inclusion, but their openness unintentionally create barriers for female participants by including those who engage in behaviors that create an atmosphere of intimidation. When asked about his dilemma in the community, the director, Bob said, “We are not sure about the solution. It is not clear. It is a gray area. We tend to err on the side of people being able to be here. Communities and people are always learning how to be with each other and work with each other and sometimes we have to go beyond what we are comfortable with.”

This barrier shows an interesting complicity between Free Cycles’s collective identity of openness and community belonging. This study shows how individuals who identify and engage, might not fully feel like they are able to belong due to comfort levels, intimidation, lack of information, and time constraints. Participants, who do not feel like they hit these barriers, continue towards the belonging process through imagination and alignment.

**Imagination**

Imagination is the second mode that explains the belonging process (Wenger, 1998). This mode seeks to understand how participants interpret past experiences, current self-identity, and future expectations in relationship to the world around them (Wenger, 1998). As participants in the community engage in practices, they gain new bicycle skills and new experiences they create
a foundation for imagination. As Free Cycles participants have the chance to personally grow and develop within the organization, they also have the opportunity to identify and expand their self through future goals and dreams. Imagination in this research really highlights participants’ ability to look beyond the bike and find purpose and empowerment that can lead to a sense of belonging within the organization. For example, a few participants mentioned a three-day, hundred-mile bicycle tour they attended with Free Cycles. Anyone was encouraged to attend no matter his or her skill level, which also demonstrates Free Cycles’s free spirited hands-on learning approach that is very much an aspect of the organizational identity. Two interviewees in particular talked about this bike trip from a life changing perspective. When talking about her cycling identity, Sara said,

> I do not think I would have considered myself a cyclist two years ago because at the time it was just a way to get from point A to point B. Being a cyclist to me, is being involved in the community and considering my bicycle more than just a mode of transportation. A huge turning point for me is when I went on my first bike tour with Free Cycles. Even though I was a Bicycle Ambassador before the trip, I might not have considered myself a cyclist. The tour with Free Cycles was a turning point because before that, I didn’t think I could do that. It was so empowering and the community was so supportive.

Not only did Sara expand her own identity through this experience, but she also found strength, empowerment, purpose, and a sense of belonging within the Free Cycles and overall cycling community. Looking back on her experiences, she was able to pinpoint this bike trip as an identification tipping point and look towards future explorations with newfound abilities and potential. During the interview, Sara went on to explain how she still considers herself a part of the Free Cycles community even though she has moved away from Missoula. When asked about
her sense of belonging, Sara said, “I do feel like I’m a part of it but I hope they still consider me a part of it. I still follow them on social media and I still get emails. I know if I was ever to come back to Missoula that would be one of the first stops.” Her belonging, which transcends time and space, demonstrates more than just engagement in the practice. She went on to say, “Free Cycles, to me, is symbolic of my transformation as a cyclist for my personal life.” Since individuals are constantly co-constructing their identities based on their experiences, connections, and available discourses, this mode of belonging connects through time and space (Wenger, 1998).

As participants realize the exciting potential of their bicycles, they explain future bicycle goals and plans. During interviews, participants even imagined the future potential of the community by saying, “We have so much power as a culture. There is a power when people come together that shows how much of a difference we can make in a community” (Emma). Members see the possibilities of their communities of practice can offer them as they transform themselves and reimagine the world around them. Jill, a local bicycle advocate, talked said, “They are a community, but they are so much more. Bikes can basically fix every problem in our world.” When participants can imagine the possibilities of their involvement and practice into the future, they are able to find belonging within a community. Imagination is an individual process, but it can foster belonging because it involves the social world around them, imagined future and remembered past.

Alignment

The final mode of belonging deals with alignment of motivation, practices, and purpose (Wenger, 1998). Everyone comes to Free Cycles and participates in the practices of bicycle riding and maintenance for different reasons. When these individual reasons can align with the community and collective identity of the group or organization, people tend to develop a sense of
belonging. Meaning making is often a large part of the belonging process as participation leads to emotional identification and connection within the community (Cheney & Christensen, 2001; Iverson, 2010). This mode of belonging allows people to align their own reasons for participation with the broader community and find a place for themselves there. Individuals do not just participate for different reasons, but they identity and participate to different degrees depending on their sense of belonging within the community. A sense of belonging is tied to the human desire to be part of something larger. When an individual’s personal drive aligns with a community’s purpose, that belonging can develop and grow (Cheney & Christensen, 2001; Iverson, 2010). Each individual interviewed explained their reasons for participation within the Free Cycles community and some were much more deeper rooted than others. Individuals align their identities with Free Cycles through sustainability, inspiration, openness, social network, and their love for bikes. Most of the participants, who feel like they belong to the Free Cycles community, explain how their personal goals align with the collective goals of the organization. One individual that I spoke with explained her reasons for participation as environmentally and sustainably focused. Kassie, who feels like a part of the community, did not originally come to Free Cycles because she loved bicycles or wanted to attend events; she came to Free Cycles because she liked what they stood for and wanted to help promote those ideals. This original alignment of meaning, eventually led to her sense of belonging within the community. When talking about her perception and association in the community she said,

*What strikes me about Free Cycles is the openheartedness. Everyone is helpful. They make you feel like you are doing a good thing for your health, the Earth, and the community. There is a good feeling with that and a helpful nature that comes from*
entering that space. I think Free Cycles is doing this amazing thing where they are helping the community and the Earth.

Kassie is continually thinking about ways she can become involved to further improve Free Cycles sustainable mission and connect people with the community. Through her alignment with Free Cycles mission, Kassie is able to find a sense of belong and purpose within the organization.

Other individuals create social networks at Free Cycles, which allows them to develop a sense of belonging through their connectivity and alignment to others. Participants referred to this connection in different ways. They said things like: “I feel like everyone who is a cyclist is connected because of our shared experiences (Emma)” or “I think the biggest thing is that is a place of inspiration. The people I talk to there are always really inspiring (Jill).” These shared connections amongst Free Cycles members allow them to engage, connect, and align their social networks and experiences with that of the community. Alignment deals with the control over one’s energy and power to inspire alignment (Wenger, 1998). When individuals align their social networks with Free Cycles, they create the possibility for social belonging to occur.

RQ1 explains how individuals adopt aspects of Free Cycles practices into their own identities while RQ2 explains how those same individuals both utilize and simultaneously co-construct Free Cycles’ collective identity. Data shows that participants find purpose in their practices because they connect them to others, inspire confidence, promote sustainable habits, and increase their financial situation. These purposes, amongst others, strengthen members’ bicycle identities and allow them to align with and belong to the community in a variety of ways. As individuals strengthen their practice-related identities within an organization, they often form a sense of belonging and membership within that community. Individual’s personal identification
and alignment with collective organizational goal provides a better understanding of why individuals choose to participate and how they consider themselves part of a larger community.

Wenger’s modes of belonging literature ultimately guides RQ3 and helps explain how participants at Free Cycles develop a sense of belonging. Examining Free Cycles as a voluntary community of practice extends and tests the literature on modes of belonging. As individuals engage in practices, imagine possibilities into the future, and align their purposes with that of the organization, this research demonstrates how belonging is develops to deferring degrees through different modes of belonging.

**Basho in Free Cycles**

Individuals make meaning out of their engagements, purpose, and alignment within communities. When individuals feel as if they belong within a community, they relate to others members. Beyond engagement in practices, individuals must feel safe, welcomed, and needed in order to belong. Since the shop is open to the community, it creates an interesting and ever-changing environment where participants are constantly coming and going. Since Free Cycles is so dynamic, the philosophy of basho (ba) could serve as great tool to understand how individuals navigate that environment and continue practices within an ever-evolving community.

**RQ4: How is basho enacted in the Free Cycles community?**

Basho, the Japanese philosophy of place, explains how the collective enacts an individual’s position or place in a community (Haugh, 2005; Iverson, 2010). Basho can help explain how participants experience and interpret their practices and sense of belonging at Free Cycles in relation to others around them. Basho is a constantly occurring process that situates individuals in relation to others around them in a community. Basho utilizes one’s sense of belonging in place positioning process. Since basho focuses on how individuals relate place to
others, this research explores the relationships between participants, members, and employees at Free Cycles. I use the term “participant” in this research question specifically when referring to individuals who are involved in Free Cycles practices such as bicycle maintenance but may or may not identify with the community at large. These individual participants specifically mentioned that they do not feel as if they belong to the Free Cycles community even though they engage in practices. I use the term “member” when referring to participants who currently both identity and feel that they are a part of the Free Cycles community. Members make up the bulk of the interviewees, followed by participants. Three employee interviewees were also included since they were often referred to as a main connection to the shop during member and participant interviewees. Throughout interviews, people often mentioned instances that they felt welcomed, included, or needed in relation to others in the Free Cycles community. The categories of member, participant and employee were used as a base comparison of belonging to better understand basho at Free Cycles. During data analysis, instances were interviewees mentioned specific individuals that welcomed them, made them feel included or influenced their belonging in anyway were recorded.

The director of the shop, Free Cycles employees, volunteers, friends, and co-workers were the main people that influenced shop connections. First, some of the individuals that participate at Free Cycles do not necessarily identify or feel like they belong to the community. I argue that even though these individuals do not personally identify with the shop, they still add to the collective identity and overall environment through their interactions and shared experiences. When talking about the roles people play at Free Cycles, Sara explained it as, “There's definitely the people that just come there to fix something or to donate something and I think those people are just as big a part of the community as the people that consider Free
Cycles a “community” even though they're not part of it in the same way. They help make Free Cycles what it is...” These participants place-positioning is especially interesting because for one reason or another they do not identify with the shop on a personal level. To find out more about basho amongst these participants, I asked about their involvement at the shop and received stories about experiences they had at Free Cycles. Basho is enacted at Free Cycles through participation’s place, sense of inclusion, and sense of purpose.

**Participants’ Place**

Findings show that many participants are physically escorted or introduced to the shop by more senior members such as volunteers or employees. These members create a sense of basho that helps new-comers understand the deeper connectivity that is alive in the community. People find out about Free Cycles through co-workers, friends, and people in the cycling community who are already involved in practices at the shop. As individuals come and learn, some immediately connect with the community while others develop connections over time. Some individuals though, continue to remain on the periphery of membership throughout their entire involvement. Some participants originally attend Free Cycles for the after-hours parties and music but then end up getting more involved later on. For example, Lisa, who did not originally feel like she belonged, said it was not until she got a flat tire that she decided to actually use the shop’s bicycle resources. She explained her belonging as someone that comes and goes. Lisa said, “I feel like I can be part of the community if I want to be, but I do not have to be.” The notion of basho seems to change as relationships, engagements, and demand for shop resources ebb and flows.

Even though participants and members are always changing in the community, a handful of connections stay relatively fixed. Bob, as the director of the shop, and the handful of
employees at Free Cycles make up a semi-solid foundation on which other participants and members seem to locate their selves. Interestingly enough, participants that did not really feel as if they belong to the Free Cycles community still feel welcomed and included. The participants that fall under this category still commented on the welcoming, open, and friendly environment that Free Cycles offers even though they didn’t feel like they “belonged” to it. Like mentioned above, when referring to engagement many individuals attributed their lack of belonging to their time at the shop, but it was not always the case. Some longtime participants utilize the shop resources the same today as they did ten years ago. These participants are happy with the shop solely for bicycle repairs and/or donations. Most participants felt welcomed into the shop, but not all of them felt as if they needed or had the time to go beyond their current involvement and become a larger part of the community. Even though these participants co-construct the shop identity through their involvement, they are not claiming it as “their” community. In this case, basho explains that even though current members introduce and welcome individuals into the shop, the individuals themselves still have a sense of agency in their own place positioning. Despite not personally attracting identity or belong to Free Cycles, individuals in the practices still speak highly of the members and employees that originally embraced them into the community. Through their interactions with people in the community, participants are still able to find their place in relationship to others.

At Free Cycles, I want to understand some of the factors that play into basho amongst participants and members. Looking back at RQ3, individuals can develop a sense of belonging through shared purposes that align with other members and the organization itself. Even though this is still happening, something larger is at play that is solely based on relational place positioning. Basho (ba) helps us understand that individuals define themselves within their
relative place to others within a community. At Free Cycles this is happening amongst Bob, shop leaders, and long-time members. Two major reasons for basho emerge from the data as first, a sense of inclusion, and second a sense of purpose in the community.

**Sense of Inclusion**

Basho encompasses the idea that place is where one stands and refers to someone’s position, persona or circumstance that distinguish them from others (Haugh, 2005, p47). Data shows that a feeling or sense of belonging in one’s place or position often starts with a member’s sense of inclusion.

When individuals feel a sense of inclusion or purpose in the community, they are able to locate their place. As the founder and director of the shop, Bob has developed a powerful way of creating ba for Free Cycles members. Bob strives to create an open environment that makes people feel welcome. It is worth noting that all of the Free Cycles employees and most of the other interviewees mentioned Bob in their stories and experiences that related to their place in the community. Over time, Bob has also been able to communicate and impart this welcoming approach to staff and other members that continue it themselves. For this reason, Bob and Free Cycles employees were the most mentioned individuals during interviews.

Interview narratives describe a sense of inclusion at the shop that comes from employees, other shop users, but usually directly from Bob himself. In fact, interactions with Bob were often the first and most memorable exchanges participants recall about Free Cycles. Many of the people interviewed even explained that Bob’s friendly demeanor and openness is what made them either come to the shop for the first time or return to the shop to get more involved. As mentioned in methods, I have specifically chosen to use Bob’s name and no on else’s in my research because of his strong influence in the Free Cycles community. He acts as an anchor in
the community for basho to occur as people look to him to find their place. For example members often referred to Bob during their interviews by saying things like: “There is a good feeling and helpful nature at Free Cycles that comes from Bob (Kassie).” “Bob has this amazing way of welcoming anyone who comes into the picture. He has a way of making people feel a part of it…like an intimate part of it. It is very genuine (Jim).” and “Bob is an entity in his own (Ryan).”

Members of the Free Cycles community often find a sense of belonging in the inclusion that Bob, shop employees, and other members foster. While sitting in the backroom of the shop, I interviewed Shawn who had recently moved to Missoula from Alaska. He retold the story about the first time he went to Free Cycles while on a bicycle tour.

It was in 2009 that I rode across America and I slept at Free Cycles when we passed through Missoula. We came into the shop and worked a full day here... Bob asked where we were staying that night and we said we were going to pitch tents outside of town and he said ‘no you’re not and just handed us the keys.’ Shawn pointed to the floor and said, We actually slept right there. We ended up spending two whole days here and I remember thinking ‘hey that was a cool place’ and that is pretty much why I came back.

Bob’s overwhelming and immediate generosity and inclusion is often what draws people in and makes them feel like they are part of something larger than themselves. Another member, Kevin, that was interviewed explained that the main reason he volunteers is to give back specifically to Bob. He said,

When I first came here, I felt welcomed by Bob. Bob welcomes everyone and includes everyone of all diversity. He has helped me out in a lot of ways. He has been there for me
in so many ways so I want to give back if I can. It is doing my part to show him that he was been family for so many years.

Other interviewees also talked about Free Cycles employees in a similar manner. Members often talked about Emma, the only female employee at the shop, as invaluable to the organization. They said things like: “Emma is an incredible teacher. It is even great to watch her teach. She is really good at what she does because she connects with all kinds of people. I think she is invaluable” (Lauren). In fact, when asked about her biggest strength, Emma recognized her gender as well. She said,

*It might be kind of cliché but at this point in time it is having a female at the shop. We approach problems differently and have different ways of thinking. I think it throws people off when I'm in a dress running around with wrenches and grease on my face. Sometimes people tell me that I do not look like I belong and I’m like ‘what do you mean?’ ‘I'm right here where I'm supposed to be.’ I can be a woman and work in a shop.*

That might be my main role without even purposely doing it.

Emma is able to create a space for members, especially female members to fit in and relate to the rest to community. Her presence alone has the power to connect people to the Free Cycles community that might not otherwise feel as if they could not belong. She serves as another anchor in the community that people look to when finding their place through inclusion.

**Sense of Purpose**

Members examined how either Bob or other employees had personally helped them, became their friends, and empowered them within bicycle practices. These members said that they continued involvement with Free Cycles mainly due to those relationships built with staff and other members along the way. Like stated before, Bob and his employees have a way of
developing basho for Free Cycles participants and members. This relationship building and place positioning often happen through a sense of purpose and empowerment in the organization. Bob often does this through the allocation of responsibilities in the organization. Not only does this make participants feel needed, it creates a sense of purpose and place for them within a crazy and ever-changing environment. In fact, it seems like most members of Free Cycles have a “Bob story” or two. During interviews, members often talked about their place in relationship to their responsibilities at the shop. Some members are useful mechanics where others work well with diverse group of individuals. Some interviewees felt most a part of the community when they were representing Free Cycles in some manor or another. When talking about his first interaction with Bob, Ryan said,

> My first interactions with Bob were volunteering and Bob asked, ‘Do you know how to work on bikes?’ and I said, ‘I know my way around.’ So I went from schlepping bikes around in the Boneyard to working inside. I remember a moment with Bob because... it is so Bob... I love the man dearly, brought this bike in and said, ‘This bike needs some love, take care of it.’ I thought to myself, ‘can I do that? I think. I’ll find out.

Even though neither of them knew each other long, Bob saw potential in Ryan and acted on it, which made him feel needed, cared for, and included. Ryan went on to explain a sense of inclusion and purpose he felt at Free Cycles through his experiences volunteering and helping other people in the shop. When asked about a time he really felt like he belonged to the Free Cycles community, he recounted a time where Bob gave him an outreach assignment where he represented Free Cycles to the larger community. Ryan explained how he encompassed his place and membership within Free Cycles as he took charge of that event. This sense of belonging also happens on a daily basis between individuals and Free Cycles staff as they allocate volunteer
opportunities to different people based on their knowledge, experience in the practice, and overall skillset. These actions help individuals encompass the idea of place that positions them amongst Free Cycles staff, participants, and the outside community. It is important to note, that these actions that influence participants and members also influence Bob and the Free Cycles staff because everyone in the community finds place in relation to others.

As individuals spend time at the shop participating in Free Cycles practices, they naturally have the opportunity to expand or change their position. When thinking about senior members in the organization, a few long-term members come to mind. For example, Lee is a member at Free Cycle who has been at the shop almost every day. When talking about the community at Free Cycles, Jim said, “It is bigger than all of us, I’ll tell you that much. All these people here...like Lee! Lee has been here longer than any of us. I bet Lee has spent more time in the shop than Bob. Honestly, who am I say that I’m running the show? Lee knows what is going on.” In this instance, the leadership position can change due the experience of senior members who can demonstrate more knowledge in the organization. This shows how ba can change over time with different relationships and experienced knowledge. Even on a day-to-day basis, different situations in the shop influence a member’s place. Structure is maintained through the staff, but Free Cycles structure is also somewhat fluid based on other members’ connection and involvement in the organization. Jim went on to explain his a busy day at the shop,

I can walk away and it keeps going. Even if it just me and I go to warehouse for 15-20 minutes and come back and it is fine! Someone more comfortable at the shop just kind of steps into that leader role...and says ‘Oh, I know where that is’ or ‘I can help you with that.’ It just keeps moving on.

Even though a basic structure and network exists amongst employees and members, it is also
acceptable and even encouraged to step in and take over leadership roles if you feel capable. The confidence and empowerment that comes with a sense of inclusion, purpose, and belonging also helps individual members find a place in the community amongst staff and other members. As individuals grow into their Free Cycles roles, they can identify with their position and distinguish themselves from others in the community. Because basho demonstrates a place relative to others, it can also explain structure within organizations as it ebbs and flows based on relationships, knowledge, and practice. Basho not only helps us understand the flow of structure at Free Cycles, but understanding changing structures in turn help us better understand the philosophy of basho. Place positioning creates a sense of structure within organizations so that practices and enterprises can progress.

In conclusion, this research shows that individual participants, who do and do not feel like they belong, are influenced by their relational place to others in the community. Even though the participants who fell as if they belong have a stronger awareness of their ba, it is still constantly occurring amongst participants, members, and employees. Once participants feel as if they belong to the community, they demonstrate their sense of inclusion through their roles within the community, take on leadership positions, and often spend more time at the shop due to their connection with Bob, staff, and other members. This research also shows how individuals can move from participant to member status through a sense of inclusion, purpose, and belonging in the organization. Since basho is always occurring, it is the recognition and acceptance of it that is important in this study. As participants recognize and align with their basho in the community, they can develop a deeper connection and sense of belonging but that degree of belonging changes as individuals and organizations like Free Cycles also change.

Understanding basho adds to the current literature by providing an explanation of identity
and belonging intersections. This is seen as the study examines the difference between identifying individuals who do and do not feel as like they belong to the Free Cycles community. It is important to note that this research found the purpose of practice-identification in the belonging process. While belonging did not seem essential for individuals to identify with a practice, the process of belonging did rely on bicycle and Free Cycles identification. This research also provides a greater understanding of how specific individuals influence belonging.

Bob, as a welcoming and generous director, stood out as the key individual that influenced basho amongst members in the community. Other staff and senior participants also played a major role in creating a sense of inclusion and purpose that translated to the place positing of Free Cycles participants and members. Even though the degree of membership can change over time, individuals are still able to position themselves relative to others in order to identify with practices, place, and their community. Basho can help scholars better understand how the communication of members play a major role in the process of identity creation and belonging within communities.

Overall, this chapter shows how engagement, empowerment, and alignment of purpose can create a sense of belonging in a community. This study demonstrates how identification is instrumental to the belonging process, especially as members imagine the possibilities of the future and align their purpose with that of the community. Participants learn, grow, and develop relationships with others in the community. As they identify in different ways, to differing degree, we better understand how that also impacts their belonging. Research articulates that participants can still identify and engage in bicycle practices despite potential barriers to belonging. Beyond barriers and basic engagement in practices, participants develop deeper connections, as they understand how the bicycle serves a greater purpose in their lives now and
into the future. Research also shows us how place is enacted amongst participants and members of a community despite their sense of belonging.

The open environment of Free Cycles serves as a unique case study to better understand basho and relational place-positioning. The voluntary and open nature of the shop adds to current scope of CoPs and basho research. This study shows how Bob and the employees at Free Cycles were able to identify, engage, and empower participants and members in shop activities. A sense of inclusion and purpose creates positive experiences for individuals as they develop a sense of belong and seek to understand their place in the community. This study extends the current belonging and basho literature by providing a specific case study that points to the meaning members find in their belonging. The study articulates how basho is always occurring and influenced by relations. Through a CoP framework, we can also see how participants influence and affect one another in a real, open, and ongoing community.
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Understanding the fluid and complex theories of identity and belonging can be a challenging endeavor but after studying the communication literature on identity, practices, community, and belonging, I was able to piece together these multifaceted theories in order to better understand communities of practice. Seen through this research, Free Cycles is an ever-changing community full of complex and interesting individuals who find themselves in relation to bicycle practices and those around them. My study of Free Cycles advances our understanding of how identity and belonging are fluid, complex aspects of our lives. Throughout this conclusion, I highlight findings about individual and collective identities, participants approach to belonging, community importance, and the significance of place. Both theoretical implications and practical applications can be drawn from these findings.

Theoretical Implications

This project explores the theories of identity work, communities of practice, collective identity, belonging, and basho. Findings from each of the four research questions allow me to draw implications and make connections between these theories.

Practice and Identity

First, RQ1 specifically examines how individuals identify with practices at Free Cycles. The theory of practice describes the routine and even mundane behaviors of individuals who communicatively enact identity due to its social nature. Since practices are knowledgeable actions that get shared, they often revolve around groups of people. At Free Cycles, common behaviors amongst members were identified, which leads to a discussion of practice-related identities. Scholars have previously understood that practices are social and can add to identity
creation, but have not referred to this phenomenon specifically as practice-related identity (Cohen, 1992; Senda-Cook; Wenger, 1998). This study adds to the current practice literature as it uses a specific organization to make a more explicit link between practices, community, and identity creation. By utilizing identity work (Larson & Pearson, 2012) as a framework, this project more clearly illuminates how individuals identify to differing degrees based on available surrounding discourses and practices. Specially, individuals identify with practices to differing degrees based on their knowledge creation, sharing, experiences, and discourses. As a result, this project answers the call for understanding the role of practices in organizations (Koschmann, 2012).

Second, as participants constitute identities within these practices, they do so within a community of practice full of other individuals who share similar goals and interests. As individuals gather together, their individual identities combine and collectively construct the identity of the community (Koschmann, 2013). For RQ2 I was interested in how individuals who participate in Free Cycles practices add to the overall collective identity. Members articulated a collective identity for Free Cycles as a place that empowers individuals through hands-off education within a free-spirited environment. It is the individuals who frequent Free Cycles that make up the organization and thus the collective identity through their communication and participation. Findings show that over time, Free Cycles identity has evolved around its members and the community at large. Since Free Cycles is a non-profit organization, its goals are changed and driven by members’ needs. But the overall mission of the organization also influences the members’ individual bicycle identities. This finding extends current research regarding the communicative enactment of mission (Sanders & McClellan, 2014) by connecting it to identity
work. Discourses surrounding the mission and goals of the organization offer members tools to build their own Free Cycles identities.

Third, this research illustrates how individual and collective identities within a community of practice (CoP) are co-constructed over time (Iverson, 2010). However, this project extends our understanding of how individuals participate in practices as they align themselves, their goals, and relationships with the community. As a CoP, Free Cycles is inherently social as participants engage, learn, teach, and spend time together. This research adds to the literature on CoPs and offers a unique case study to the field. An important finding that adds to the understanding of collective identities and members is alignment (Wenger, 1998). As participants identify with a community, they do so in different ways and to differing degrees. Some individuals identify with the social, party-related aspects of the Free Cycles community, while others identify strongly with the empowering aspects of bicycle maintenance. This study found that not all participants’ goals can align with the collective identity of the organization, just like the organization does not fully represent all members. This reinforces the fluid and contested nature of organizations (Mumby, 2012) and extends scholarly understanding of CoPs.

When examining collective identities, the fluidity of the shop makes it an interesting community to study because participants are always changing. Overall, it functions as a community where people of all walks of life can find commonality and purpose in and beyond the bicycle. Free Cycles’s openness is a significant aspect of their collective identity as people from every corner of the town and even world are welcomed into the shop. It is this open, voluntary environment that allows identity and belonging to flourish naturally making it a great organization to extend the theory of CoP. Free Cycles’s collective identity is reflected in their teaching approaches that encourage everyone to get dirty and learn with one’s own hands. Free
Cycles relies heavily on participants’ knowledge creation and sharing within a classroom-like environment. As a community of practice, participants are expected to learn practices and teach each other. At Free Cycles this often happens in a hands-off or casual manner.

Finally, this research extends the community of practice literature by focusing on the tensions surrounding collective identities and CoPs. Current CoP research (Iverson & McPhee, 2008; Wenger, 1998) does not explore the contested nature of CoPs in relationship to collective identities. Even though Free Cycles’s collective identity revolves around empowerment through education, tensions arise as participants feel intimidated or discouraged rather than empowered. While the hands-off education approach gets some people immediately involved in their own learning experience, it does not always fit individual learning styles. This seems to create a barrier to the construction of collective identity. Despite the organization’s goal to be open to all, the data show an interesting tension between this goal and some of its members’ goals. Some participants explained how the openness of both the shop and the practices are intimidating rather than empowering. If someone new to the practice or community feels intimidated to ask questions and get help, they can feel lost and distressed because their lack of assimilated into the community.

The data especially emphasized this tension among female participants, as some feel unwelcome despite the communities’ “welcoming” identity (Ashcraft, 2005). Women, who either identify with bicycle practices or have the desire to, often report feeling intimidated or out of place in Free Cycles’ male-dominated shop. This study demonstrates the real consequences when individuals do not feel like they can align their own identities with the collective whole. As individuals engage in their own identity work and make sense of the world around them, they also contribute to discourses that in turn impact the communities in which they participate. This
study articulates the co-constructive nature of identities within communities of practice through its test of identity-based communication theories and pinpoints tensions that occur within those communities.

**Belonging and Basho**

By exploring identity creation, I better understand how the theories of identity and belonging work together. Even though individuals find their bicycle identities differently through their experiences and available discourses, my data shows how important identification is to belonging. Just like individuals identify to differing degrees, they also belong to differing degrees. Once participants have the opportunity to engage in community practices, learn, share, and develop experience, they find themselves imagining possibilities and aligning themselves and their social relationships with the practices and thus the community (Wenger, 1998). Social relationships are formed through shared engagement and become crucial to the Free Cycles community as members negotiate their joint enterprise and develop a shared repertoire. Social aspects at Free Cycles reach far beyond the bicycle making it more than just a bicycle shop. Members use the bicycle as a foundation to develop relationships and identification through the engagement of practices. As a result, this extends current belonging research to understand how common objects such as the bicycle and places like Free Cycles offer individuals a vehicle through which they enact belonging (Senda-Cook, 2012). Beyond barriers and basic engagement in practices, participants develop deeper connections, as they understand how the bicycle serves a greater purpose in their lives now and into the future. This research also explores how place is enacted amongst participants and members of a community.

This research shows how belonging and basho are enacted differently within a community of practice. Basho (ba) shows how members of the Free Cycles community enact
relational place-based belonging for one another. Where a sense of belonging requires some
degree of identification in the practices, ba occurs wherever there are social interactions. Since
practices and communities are hubs of social interactions, ba is an important philosophy to
consider when understanding belonging within communities of practice (Haugh, 2005). In this
study, I identify factors of belonging that influence how members recognize their place. A sense
of inclusion and purpose creates positive experiences for individuals as they develop a sense of
belonging and seek to understand their place in the community. Examining basho in a
contemporary non-profit setting adds a fresh new lens to this field of study. Free Cycles’s open,
voluntary and fluid environment makes it particularly interesting for understanding whom
influences basho and what happens as people recognize it as part of their own belonging.
Research shows how Bob and the employees at Free Cycles enact basho through their
identification, empowerment, and inclusion of participants and members during community and
shop activities.

Studying belonging at Free Cycles shows the importance of place because belonging in a
community runs much deeper than relationships amongst members. Even though members come
and go and aspects of the community change, there is a basic structure to Free Cycles that
remains constant and projects their collective identity into the larger community. That identity is
what often draws people in, engages them in practices, and allows them both the physical and
social space to belong. Even though this research mainly focuses on that social or relational
space, it is worth noting the importance of the physical space as well. The fact that Free Cycles
has a physical shop location large enough to handle a constant flow of people, bikes, tools and
events is important to their identity and functionality as a community of practice. Free Cycles,
which recently secured its location after tremendous fundraising efforts, refers to the shop as
their “home,” indicating the great importance of their physical space. Beyond the shop itself, the Missoula area provides individuals and participants of Free Cycles a place-based discourse to draw from when engaging in identity work (Gill & Larson, 2014). In future research, the importance of physical place in regards to identity and belonging within a community of practice should be examined.

Finally, this research extends the community literature (Felkins, 2002; Underwood & Frey, 2008). Free Cycles serves as an institutional marker and distinctive identifier in the larger Missoula community. Individuals often use Free Cycles as an example of how bicycle-friendly, unique, and generous the people of Missoula can be. As local discourses align with bicycle identities, interviewees mentioned how Free Cycles stands out as a key aspect in the community that “…makes Missoula a cool place to live” (Lisa). They also described it as “the hub of the cycling community” (Kassie) and a “symbol of bicycling in Missoula” (Sara). Bob talked about how Free Cycles fits nicely into the Missoula community and is constantly adapting to fit its changing needs. He said, “People say that ‘Free Cycles is really important to Missoula and the identity of the town.’ I’m honored to be a part of a cool town and change that town while also being influenced by it and the people that walk through our door each day.” Much like individual and collective identities construct each other, it seems like the Free Cycles and Missoula community overlap and influence each other in much the same way. This research shows how important place and belonging are to communities of practice like Free Cycles and Missoula as the community at large. Place explains not only social belonging, but physical place-based belonging as well (Gill & Larson, 2014). Participants learn, grow, and develop experiences with others in their community of practice, but only within social and physical spaces demonstrated above.
Overall, this research extends and challenges theories of identity work, communities of practice, collective identity, belonging, and basho. The connections between these theories help us better understand interactions that happen between individual participants and communities of practice as they form identities, engage, and form a sense of belonging. Future research should continue to explore the communicative enactment of identity through practice-related activities within communities and organizations.

Practical Applications

The findings in this study offer practical insights for Free Cycles as well as the overall cycling community, other community bicycle shops and cooperatives, and other CoPs more generally. Since this study closely examines the personal identities and belonging behaviors of Free Cycles members and employees, it offers a wide range of potential practical application for the organization. Practical applications include promotion of social learning, alignment of individual and collective goals, elevation of empowerment discourses, and a fostering of belonging amongst members.

First of all, individuals and organizations can create a space where social learning can occur. Through this study, findings show that as individuals adopt bicycle practices, they often discover aspects of their own identities in their enactment of the practices. When participants are able to connect and align their beliefs with the practices of bicycle riding and maintenance, they enter into different levels of the identity process. Some individuals come to Free Cycles with bicycle-related identities already developed, while others discover or expand those identities through the practices and the community. Understanding the importance of social practices, Free Cycles and other community bicycle shops can prompt social learning and purpose-based participation. Knowing the differing degrees of identification can also help facilitators at the
shop pair individuals together for a more beneficial learning and identity-creating environment. For example, when someone enters the shop, identifying their skill set and goals can help individuals more easily align with bicycle-practice and the organization as a whole.

Second, when goals and purpose do not align amongst identities, tension can arise. As an organization, being aware of the many different stakeholders and participants within a community is important when developing collective goals. Identifying the many different participants and their individual identities allows an organization like Free Cycles to be as inclusive as possible. After studying the collective identity and its co-constructive influence, I would suggest offering community discussions that allow members to imagine future possibilities of the shop together. Providing a safe space for people to make comments and suggest change is important for empowerment, community growth, and co-construction.

Third, organizations have the potential to offer empowering discourses to members. This research shows how individuals pull from past experiences and surrounding discourses in identity work. Knowing this can help the shop staff and volunteers address past experiences and build upon them. Once presently aware, they can provide empowering discourse around bicycle practices in order to reduce potential tensions created from any past intimidating experiences and offer participants positive discourses that they can utilize in their identity work. For example, when Free Cycles encourages hand-off education, it allows participants to take pride in their work and feel empowered in their learning of the practices.

Fourth, understanding collective identity is useful for the organization as it communicates to its stakeholders. The collective identity, and thus the members themselves influence the perceptions outsiders have of Free Cycles, which create social and material consequences. As people talk about their experiences at Free Cycles, discourses about and surrounding the shop
play into the collective identity. Since Free Cycles is a well-known organization in the Missoula community, their collective identity has real material consequences as it is represented to the larger community. For a community like Free Cycles, representation is important as they fundraise and ask for donations. If individuals can identify with communities’ goals, mission, and other members, they are more likely to offer their support and involvement. Fostering a positive image and identifying with members is important for growth and support.

Fifth, organizations need to understand that belonging and inclusion create meaningful experiences, but are complex and often filled with tensions. Fostering a sense of belonging is important to Free Cycles since they rely on the interactions of their participants to continue practices and keep the shop running. Findings about basho show how important Bob and the employees are to the organization. Offering participants skill and experience-based tasks seems to promote a sense of purpose and belonging in the community. The social aspects of Free Cycles are incredibly important because they make people feel needed and give them a “home” or purpose they might not have had before. Free Cycles’s openness often provides disenfranchised individuals a space to feel included and important. But, not everyone feels that sense of inclusion. Free Cycles and other bicycle communities should pay special attention to their female members as they often report feeling intimidated and uncomfortable in a male-dominated learning environment. Offering a safe space for women to freely ask questions amongst other women in a closed space might allow a sense of belonging to develop as they find purpose and empowerment on their own terms.

Overall, despite some tensions, Free Cycles serves as an excellent example of a community of practice that makes people feel connected, included, and important despite their ever changing clientele. Free Cycles offers an example for other community bicycle shops to
model when it comes to developing practice-related identities and a sense of belonging within a community. Free Cycles’s open education-based environment allows members to find purpose and empowerment beyond the bicycle.

**Limitations**

This study takes a close look at the identification and belonging process of members in the Free Cycles community, but there are limitations to every research project. I have identified some of the key limitations to this study due to the possible impact they might have had on the data and research findings. I believe one of the major limitations of this study is the sample of Free Cycles participants. Even though consideration was taken to get a variety of participants, the study missed an important population of people who were disengaged or uninterested in the community. The study mainly used voices of individuals who identified and engaged in the practices, but it does not capture the voices of those who do not identify with the organization or bicycle practices. Even the individuals interviewed, that moved away from the Missoula community still identify with bicycle practices. Data shows how individuals can identify even if not feel like they belong. This research does not include those who are completely disconnected or disinterested in Free Cycles or cycling. These individuals could have offered more valuable insights about potential belonging tensions.

Another limitation of this study deals with the current discourse surrounding Free Cycles as an organization. 2016 was an important year for Free Cycles as they launched and successfully executed a major fundraising campaign to secure their shop location. This capital campaign likely influenced perceptions of Free Cycles due to heightened news coverage and conversations in the community surrounding the organization. Even though awareness in the community was heightened, the day-to-day practices in the community most likely did not
change because the shop structure has remained basically the same during the fundraising campaign. Therefore, I do not believe it had a large impact on practice-based identity and belonging. The success of the organization’s campaign might have created a more positive discourse around the shop in the past year. Because of this, the increased attention on the shop’s goals during media coverage might allow people the opportunity to more easily identify with it as an organization. Keeping this limitation in mind throughout the study, I did take into account constantly changing perceptions that impacts identity creation and a sense of belonging.

Looking to the future, it would be insightful to conduct a longitudinal analysis of an individual’s progression through the identification and belonging process. My study offered a diverse set of data from participants at differing degrees of identification, experience, and involvement. An extended linear analysis of individuals would either add to current findings or more likely produce new findings about identification and belonging within a community of practice. Doing this would also allow the study to include more new participants, fresh to the organization, in order to provide a better baseline for analysis. Since communities of practice are as complex as their members, future research of identification and belonging is a multifaceted puzzle just waiting to be explored.

Overall, I believe this study adds valuable information to the field of communication literature on identity, belonging, and communities. Free Cycles serves as a fitting example to show how individuals identify with practices, influence collective identities, and develop a sense of belonging among others within a community. In-depth interviews and participant observations at Free Cycles add to the understanding of how identities and belonging are formed, influenced, and co-constructed within a community of practice. This study, through the lens of Free Cycles, shows how identity and belonging are fluid, complex aspects of individuals’ lives. It also shows
how identity and belonging are separate concepts that are interconnected through our practices and communities. When it comes to unique members of the Free Cycles community, I hope we can see that the complex nature of identity and belonging reach far beyond the bike.
References


Appendix A
Interview Guide

1. How did you get into biking?

   Prompt: When did you first start biking?

2. Would you consider yourself a cyclist? What does that mean to you?

   Prompt: What are some memorable experiences that shaped your identity as a cyclist?

3. What is your experience and involvement with Free Cycles?

   Prompt: Why did you originally come here?

4. Have your experiences changed at Free Cycles overtime?

   Prompt: Why do you continue to participate at Free Cycles?

5. What would you say to someone interested in coming to Free Cycles?

6. What does Free Cycles mean to you?

7. Do you consider Free Cycles a community?

   If yes: Do you consider yourself part of a community? Why or why not?

   Prompt: Can you think of a time you felt especially apart of the community?

8. What other communities do you consider yourself apart of?

   Prompt: What does being part of a community mean to you?

9. What is your connection to other people in the cycling community?

10. Have you had any specific individual that made you feel welcome?
Appendix B
Field Study Permission

Date: December 18th, 2016
To: Whom it May Concern
From: Bob Giordano, Executive Director, MIST, Free Cycles
Re: Research Permission

To whom it may concern,

I grant Caitlyn Lewis permission to conduct 40 hours of participant observations and 15-20 interviews at Free Cycles during operating shop hours and special events. During the research project, Caitlyn may use Free Cycles facilities in order to complete and conduct her research.

Please feel free to contact me with any questions.

Sincerely,

Bob Giordano, Executive Director, Free Cycles Missoula
mist@strans.org, 406.830.7676
Subject Information and Informed Consent

Study Title: Life Beyond (Handle) Bars: Identity and Belonging Through Cycling Narratives
Investigator: Caitlyn Lewis, University of Montana, caitlyn.lewis@umontana.edu

Purpose:
This qualitative study looks at a unique group of individuals to see how they identify with practices surrounding the act of cycling. This study also seeks to understand how individuals become part of a community, what that means to them, and how their place within that community is situated. For this study, I will be accessing the cycling community by focusing on a local community bicycle shop known as Free Cycles. With Free Cycles as a lens, I hope to better understand how practices enact meaning and how communication creates communities. Understanding this can help individuals and organizations alike become better, more aware participants in their own situations and actions.

Procedures:
If you agree to take part in the interview process of the research study, you will be given an opportunity to discuss your Free Cycles involvement. You will be asked a few questions about your biking experiences, association to Free Cycles, community involvement, and cycling connections. The interview session will last from 30 minutes to an hour.

Risks/Discomforts:
There is no anticipated discomfort for those contributing to this study, so risk is minimal. Mild discomfort may result from discussing unpleasant experiences or challenges. Answering the questions may cause you to think about feelings that make you sad or upset. You are not required to disclose any information that makes you uncomfortable.

Benefits:
Your participation in this study will further the work on communication identity, belonging, practice identification, collective narratives, and communicatively constructed communities. The data gathered from interviews will also foster understanding of enacted meaning and community development that can benefit Free Cycles in future outreach, recruitment, and communal bicycle endeavors. Your participation also assists the researcher in accomplishing a thesis project with the University of Montana.

Confidentiality:
Your records will be kept confidential and will not be released without your consent except as required by law. Your identity will remain private. If the results of this study are written in a scientific journal or presented at a conference, your name will not be used. Your responses will be associated with a pseudonym for the analysis of data and presentation of research. The data will be stored on a secure, personal computer. Your
signed consent form will be stored in a secured file separate from the data. The interview recording will be transcribed without any information that could identity you. The recording will be deleted upon completion of the research process.

**Voluntary Participation/Withdrawal:**
Your decision to take part in the interview process of this research study is entirely voluntary. You may refuse to take part in or you may withdraw from the study at any time. You are free to share or withhold any information from the researcher during the interview process.

**Questions:**
If you have any questions about the research now or at any time during the study, please contact:

Caitlyn Lewis at caitlyn.lewis@umontana.edu
You can also contact my advisor on this project, Dr. Joel Iverson at joel.iverson@mso.umt.edu
If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, you may contact the UM Institutional Review Board (IRB) at (406) 243-6672.

**Statement of Your Consent:**
I have read the above description of this research study. I understand that audio recording may be used during the study and will be destroyed following transcription of the interview. I have been informed of the risks and benefits involved, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction. Furthermore, I have been assured that a member of the research team will also answer any future questions I may have. I voluntarily agree to take part in this study. I understand I will receive a copy of this consent form.

__________________________
Printed Name of Subject

__________________________
Subject’s Signature             Date
Appendix D

IRB Approval

Date: January 13, 2017

To: Caitlyn Lewis, Communication Studies
    Dr. Joel Iverson, Communication Studies

From: Paula A. Baker, IRB Chair and Manager

RE: IRB #2-17: “Life Beyond (Handle) Bars: Identity and Belonging Through Cycling Narratives”

Your IRB proposal cited above has been approved under the Exempt category of review by the Institutional Review Board in accordance with the Code of Federal Regulations, Part 46, section 101. The specific paragraph which applies to your research is:

X (b)(2) Research involving the use of educational tests (cognitive, diagnostic, aptitude, achievement), survey procedures, interview procedures or observation of public behavior, unless: (i) Information obtained is recorded in such a manner that human subjects can be identified, directly or through identifiers linked to the subjects; and (ii) any disclosure of the human subjects’ responses outside the research could reasonably place the subjects at risk of criminal or civil liability or be damaging to the subjects’ financial standing, employability, or reputation.

Under the Federal exempt category of review, obtaining written consent is not required but is optional. If you do use the written form, please use the date-stamped copy sent with this approval notice as a master from which to make copies.

University of Montana IRB policy does not require you to file an annual Continuation Report for exempt studies as there is no expiration date on the approval. However, you are required to notify the IRB of the following:

Amendments: Any changes to the originally-approved protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before being made (unless extremely minor). Requests must be submitted using Form RA-110.

Unanticipated or Adverse Events: You are required to timely notify the IRB if any unanticipated or adverse events occur during the study, if you experience an increased risk to the participants, or if you have participants withdraw from the study or register complaints about the study. Use Form RA-111.

Please contact the IRB office with any questions at (406) 243-6672 or email irb@umontana.edu.