Profile of the modern smokejumper| A tension-centered lens on identity and identification

Cade Wesley Spaulding

The University of Montana

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PROFILE OF THE MODERN SMOKEJUMPER: A TENSION-CENTERED LENS ON
IDENTITY AND IDENTIFICATION

by
Cade Wesley Spaulding
B.A. Idaho State University, 2003

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of
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Approved by:

Chairperson

Dean, Graduate School

Date
How organizational members manage the daily tensions they face can have significant positive or negative consequences for themselves and the organizations they work for, especially when those contradictions are experienced as part of an organizational identity. Organizational identities are shown in this research study to be especially potent forms of organizational tension which must be managed discursively on a daily basis in order to maintain a sense of solidarity in what it means to be an organizational member. After interviewing members of the Missoula Smokejumper Base, this study highlights two significant identity tensions that go into what it means to be a smokejumper and describes in detail two discursive management techniques participants used to manage them in daily practice. It also explores the ways in which identity tension can challenge and reinforce organizational identity, while offering a sobering look into how specific discursive management techniques frame tension in practice.

This study offers several theoretical implications pertinent to the field of organizational communication as well as several practical implications for the smokejumper organization and wildland fire community. Among other things, this study reinforces previous theories that promote collaborative and situation based tension management models as productive ways of dealing with unavoidable tension. It also makes several unique theoretical contributions dealing with decision making and the impact of discursive management techniques on identity. This study also includes several practical implications that reexamine the efficacy of creating a "safe" identity as part of what it means to be a professional firefighter, as well as recommendations that impact current dialogue within the wildland firefighting community dealing with crew cohesion.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND RATIONALE, REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

Introduction

On July 6, 1994 a fire blowup at the foot of Storm King Mountain, Colorado overtook and killed 14 elite wildland firefighters (J. N. Maclean, 1999). Three of these ‘elites’ came from the ranks of the smokejumper organization (J. N. Maclean) hit hard by a similar disaster near Helena, Montana in 1949. This study targets the unique tension between organizationally mandated safety rules and aggressive firefighting norms in order to better understand how organizational members make sense of themselves amid the unavoidable contradictions that make up their daily work lives.

In response to what is now known as the South Canyon fire, smokejumpers along with other wildland firefighters were condemned for an over-aggressive “can do” attitude (TriData, 1998; Weick, 1995). However, follow up accounts and critiques of the South Canyon fire suggest that at the heart of the 1994 disaster lay a unique organizational tension mandating two seemingly contradictory edicts listed as the first of ten standard fire orders all wildland firefighters were expected to obey: “fight fires aggressively but provide for safety first” (J. N. Maclean, 1999, p. 237; Appendix A). Even a casual reading of the first standard fire order suggests somewhat of a paradox in being able to simultaneously “provide for safety first” while also fighting fire “aggressively.” A closer reading provokes even more suspicion of mandated organizational tension. While the Ten Standard Orders were originally implemented as a means of improving safety in 1957
(Cook, 2004), firefighters interviewed after South Canyon admitted that "strict adherence to the standard orders and guidelines would mean letting many, perhaps most, fires burn unchecked" (J. N. Maclean, p. 237). This suggests the unique challenge smokejumpers and other wildland firefighters may face in balancing the needs for safety with the needs to aggressively get the job done.

However, despite the challenge of this dilemma, smokejumpers, like the rest of the wildland fire community, still seem to get their job done year after year. Notably, the smokejumper organization has maintained a relatively strong safety record with only two major fire disasters in the course of a 60-plus year history. This suggests that they may already have reliably productive ways of managing this tension in practice.

**Rationale**

Organizational tensions have traditionally been framed as problems that should be eliminated to preserve organizational harmony rather than ever-present structural qualities of organizations and what it means to organize (Ashcraft & Trethewey, 2004a; Weick, 1969). However, "...foregrounding tension can lead to richer understandings of actual practice and thereby aid in theory building" (Ashcraft & Trethewey, 2004a, p. 82). Additionally, recent scholarship suggests that it is not whether organizational tensions exist but how they are managed that spells the difference between individual and organizational well being and distress (Tracy, 2004). Ashcraft & Trethewey (2004a) as a result argue for a tension-centered perspective on organizational research as a productive way of reframing traditional views on organizational tension. They encourage
organizational communication scholars to begin with the assumption that tensions are a natural and unavoidable part of organizational life. This highlights the management techniques members use to respond and "...live with tension..." as important concerns directly connected to applied theory (Ashcraft & Trethewey, 2004a, p. 84).

Scott, Corman, and Cheney (1998) position organizational identification as a communicative process that creates, maintains, and alters the structures of "rules and resources" which constitute individual identity (p. 303). Organizational scholars recognize the contradicted and competing nature of organizational identification (Larson & Pepper, 2003; Scott et al., 1998). While some scholars have clearly outlined how organizational members manage conflicting identities in practice (Larson & Pepper, 2003), they recognize that current theory is lacking in studies that target the consequences of identity management techniques (Kuhn & Nelson, 2002; Larson & Pepper).

In this study I will use the tension-centered perspective as a lens by which to study organizational identification and identity. A tension-centered perspective can help researchers better understand organizational identification and identity by highlighting how members experience core identity tensions in the course of day to day work life and how they communicatively manage those tensions in practice. As an applied framework, the tension-centered perspective is well equipped to engage not only how organizational members manage unavoidable identity tensions but also "...the relationship between the management of multiple identifications and particular outcomes" (Larson & Pepper, 2003).

In light of a tension-centered perspective on identity and identification, the smokejumper organization is a productive group to look at for several reasons. First, as
described in the introduction. Smokejumpers are intimately tied up in tension as part of their daily work lives. They are required to be “safe” firefighters as well as “aggressive” firefighters. Second, as previously discussed, the smokejumper organization boasts a 60-plus year history of fighting wildland fire with only two major disasters. This suggests they may already have productive identity management techniques in place which allow them to reduce the tension between opposing identities. Third, this study fills an important gap by targeting a much neglected, but significant research group. It’s significant that despite their involvement in two of the largest wildland firefighting tragedies (Mann Gulch & Storm King Mountain), this group has been virtually neglected in terms of academic research (for exceptions see TriData, 1996; Driessen, 2002). As a result, while they may have productive management techniques that can contribute to what we know about organizations, previous scholars have not tapped this potential strength.

More specifically, smokejumpers at the Missoula base are a unique and fruitful group to study for several reasons. First, smokejumping began only 35 miles from the Missoula base at the Seeley Lakes Ranger Station in 1939, suggesting that this particular base has a long tradition in the trade (J. N. Maclean, 1999). Such deep rooted traditions influence how members manage their identity as smokejumpers in terms of the tension between safety and aggression. Additionally, having the Missoula base in close proximity to the University of Montana (Missoula Smokejumpers, 2004) makes this a convenient location for research.

Second, the Missoula base participated in the South Canyon fire which has been heralded as one of the two most influential disasters in wildland firefighting history (J. N.
Maclean, 1999). As a result, the emphasis the U.S. Forest Service has placed on safety in the wake of the disaster may have special meaning to this group. Understanding how current identity issues impact how this group functions within the larger parent organization of the U.S. Forest Service is important especially within a culture of "safety" (Safe Fire Concepts and Forest Stewardship Concepts, 2004).

This study is well positioned to comment on several areas of practical concern to the smokejumper organization. First, this study can offer a unique window looking at potential ways in which entrenched structures of identity impact practical issues like safety. Second, this study is also well positioned to comment on the status of safety recommendations made by investigators following South Canyon in 1994 (TriData, 1998), especially as those recommendations concern issues of identity and culture. Third, this study may also be useful as a means of seeing whether smokejumpers themselves agree with how they are described by outside researchers as "can do" firefighters (TriData, 1996) who lack "crew cohesion" (Driessen, 2002, p. 14). Fourth, this study is obligated as an applied study to evaluate the effectiveness and offer practical implications for the discursive management techniques smokejumpers use in order to negotiate the identity tensions they work with on a daily basis.

Having established a rationale for this study, in Chapter One I will present the relevant literature related to organizational tension, organizational identity and identification. After presenting the relevant literature, I will summarize the chapter and present the research questions guiding this study. In Chapter Two I will discuss my method for conducting this research, giving a brief history of the smokejumper organization, a discussion of the chronological progression of the ten standard fire orders.
participant demographics, and the specific procedural and theoretical methods I used to go about this study. In Chapter Three I will discuss my results, answering each of the three research questions introduced at the end of Chapter One. In Chapter Four I will discuss the theoretical and practical implications of this study to the field of communication studies as well as to the smokejumper organization and wildland fire community.
Review of Relevant Literature

Organizational Research: A Tension-Centered Perspective

Organizational tensions between conflicting values and expectations have always been a significant part of organizational life. While they have traditionally been framed as anomalies to be removed from otherwise healthy organizations (Ashcraft & Trethewey, 2004a), some scholars suggest significant consequences connected with managing and mis-managing organizational tensions. For example, through Tracy’s (2004) study of prison guards, she found that when tensions are framed as “complementary dialectics” that must be managed it “is associated with positive organizational outcomes as well as with emotional well being” (p. 143). On the other hand, framing tensions as contradictions and especially double-binds are “associated with debilitating emotional reactions including paralysis, literalism, withdrawal, and paranoia” (p. 143) and can be especially destructive for individuals and organizations. Likewise Stohl and Cheney (2001) argue that some paradoxes and tensions are more debilitating than others, suggesting that even good techniques may not adequately respond to more devastating binds.

Thankfully, scholarly interest in addressing the challenges of organizational dilemmas and tensions has increased throughout the field of communication studies over the last ten years (Ashcraft & Trethewey, 2004a). Ashcraft and Trethewey (2004a) suggest that some of this interest may be due to the much more complex environment the modern organizational member is required to navigate. More recently, a lively interest in
how organizational members "...experience the variety of organizational tensions that have been theorized as part of their everyday lives" (Ashcraft & Trethewey, 2004a, p. 82) has led to new and innovative frameworks from which to look at organizations and respond to growing needs in applied ways.

For example, rather than framing tensions as problematic glitches, Ashcraft and Trethewey (2004a) argue that they "are routine features of organizational life that attest to the fundamental irrationality of organizing" (p. 83). As a result, they have argued for organizational scholarship to begin with a "tension-centered approach" (p. 82) to organizational study that assumes from the start of research the unavoidable existence of tension as a fundamental part of what constitutes organizational life. As a result of this scholarship, a fundamental assumption has begun to shift: tension is no longer framed as the culprit of organizational distress. Tensions are neutral. They exist as a critical part of what makes people organize (Ashcraft & Trethewey, 2004a; Weick, 1969). Rather than blaming unavoidable tensions, a tension-centered approach argues that more scholarly effort needs to be placed in first identifying how organizational members manage the tensions of daily life and also, framing the study of tension as an applied concern, evaluating the productive and destructive consequences of various management techniques.

Readjusting the weight of responsibility onto members rather than the tensions themselves not only reframes how we look at tensions, but also empowers individuals with the ability to change or maintain the status quo. Organizational members are active agents who largely determine how everyday challenges will play out in their own lives by the choices they make. While organizational tensions have the potential to slow or hurt
workers – they don’t have to. It’s still true that some tensions can be more difficult to navigate than others for both organizations and members, but it is how members and organizations choose to manage the unavoidable tensions found in their everyday work practice that makes the real difference between positive and negative outcomes.

Recent research to date has emphasized how organizational members manage implicit personal values with organizationally mandated behavior (Tracy, 2004), conflicting ideals associated with masculinity and agricultural cooperatives (Harter, 2004), competing expectations for female managers (Martin, 2004), and how employees manage the tensions between multiple identities (Larson & Pepper, 2003). However, even with recent interest in tension management we are still just breaking the surface in tension-centered organizational research. More scholarship is needed to uncover the tensions common to organizational members generally and those specific to their unique fields of occupation (Ashcraft & Trethewey, 2004a). Such needs should move organizational communication scholarship to continue integrating other communicative emphases of research in an effort to further uncover how these unavoidable tensions play out in daily life.

Identity and Identification in Organizations

Scott et al.’s (1998) structurational model of organizational identification provides a helpful framework by which to view the relationship between identity, identification and organizational tension from a communication perspective. They see identification as the communicative process by which individuals create, maintain, and reshape their
individual identities. Drawing from the work of Czarniawska-Joerges (1994), they provide a working definition of identity as the “core beliefs or assumptions, values, attitudes, preferences, decisional premises, gestures, habits, rules, and so on...[that]...ideally speaking, provide us with relatively stable characteristics that make up the self” (p. 303). They argue that identities are constructs of “rules and resources” (p. 303) members use in order to navigate organizational life and make sense of themselves. However, they make a clear distinction between constructs of identity and how members choose to express those identities in terms of communicative actions (identification). They discuss three primary aspects of a structurational model of identification as it impacts identity and identification research: identification as a process and a product, multiple identities, and situational context.

Identification as a Process and a Product

Using a structuration approach to identification, Scott et al. (1998) express identities in terms of relatively stable constructs while identifications refer to the ways in which members use discourse and communicative actions to enact the principles and values that make up their identities. In other words identification describes both a process and a product (identity). For example “I am a father because I act in fatherly ways, and my fatherly ways make sense because I am a father” (Scott et al., p. 307). More importantly, the father that acts in fatherly ways is shaped in their identity as a father by those actions. Identification provides members with a framework by which they can make sense of themselves and the world around them (Larson & Pepper, 2003). Therefore, as noted by Larson and Pepper, identity is the structure (i.e., values, rules, etc.)
and identification deals with the communicative choices of assumed identity made by free agents.

While identity is typically recognized for its ability to stabilize our sense of meaning, the simultaneous influence of identity on identification and identification on identity bind organizational members in a reciprocal cycle where identity influence identification and identification influences identity. As a result individuals cannot express their identity without impacting the structure of who they are. Ironically, while identity is recognized as a stabilizing agent, this tension stemming from identity and identification simultaneously creates instability. In effect it places individual and organizational identity in a communicative environment of continual management and flux "where organizational members struggle for the primacy of various meanings of truth and identity, as well as their material manifestations" (Ashcraft & Trethewey, 2004a, p. 83). In such a situation of continual contestation and change over the meanings of organizational identities the opportunity for clashing values and premises of action increases, complicating what it means to be an organizational member.

This obvious tension between the characteristics of stability and change may be understood by an analogy to driving a car. When driving a car we are able to maintain a relatively straight course by making constant and somewhat unconscious adjustments to the steering wheel. Similarly, while making constant minor adjustments to our sense of self we may be able to maintain a sense of stability in terms of an identity that continues to make sense within the context of a continuously changing environment. Rarely do we pay attention to the minor adjustments made to the steering wheel when driving a car.
This suggests that how we maintain identity may be relatively unconscious. We just feel stable as the familiar methodical actions of daily management fade into the background. Additionally, the relationship between identity and identification suggests that changes, while constant, are fairly minor for the most part. True enough, there may be rare moments when a significant deviation from course is necessary in order to maintain stability, bringing our consciousness of the otherwise unnoticeable 'steering wheel' adjustments to the forefront in terms of identity management, but for the most part it makes sense that identity adjustments are relatively small changes we rarely notice.

Multiple Identities

Further complicating our understanding of how identity plays out in practice, this model also acknowledges how individuals are naturally fragmented beings that embody multiple identities as a result of multiple societal relationships (i.e., father, brother, son, etc.) and multiple organizational memberships (i.e., manager, committee member, employee, etc.). Such identities and their communicative expression via identification are plural, coexist and group together, often conflict and therefore must be negotiated in productive ways (Scott et al., 1998). To illustrate how such identities conflict, Scott et al. give an example of a university instructor who identifies with his role as a husband, father, university employee, departmental faculty member, citizen, and member of a larger academic discipline. As a result, the possibility for incongruent and competing values and beliefs is much more likely. When that professor is placed in a situation where such values contradict, as when he discovers his daughter is attending one of his classes (a good university employee avoids nepotism; yet a good father feels special affinity with his children), the obvious tensions and contradictions become more apparent.
In light of the previous reciprocal relationship between identity and identifications, it's also interesting to recognize that choosing to enact a specific identity may also impact the structure of other identities in complex ways since many of the values and premises that constitute one identity are shared by other identity constructs. As a result, the complexity of how identities and identifications are continuously managed in light of organizational tension increases dramatically. Additionally, applied research that investigates how such complexities are managed in actual practice becomes even more relevant (Ashcraft & Trethewey, 2004a).

Several scholars have investigated how organizational members manage identity in actual practice. For example, Larson and Pepper (2003) found that members appealed to three primary discursive strategies when justifying their choices between multiple, competing identities: comparison, logic, and support. Comparison involved a variety of individual techniques that sought to justify their decision in terms of what the other available options were and made the claim that theirs was the best choice. Logic involved “rational justifications for their identification choices” based on evidence a particular group accepts as credible (p. 544) and support was identified “when the speaker [drew] on others to justify his or her identification” (p. 547). In this way, members were able to navigate difficult tensions and contradictions they faced when placed in an uncertain environment.

However, other research indicates that identities appear to be difficult to change once they have been firmly established. Bullis and Tompkins (1989) argued that when organizations abandon key values, members will stay loyal to the values rather than to the organization. Additionally, Larson and Tompkins (2005) argue that managers often
participate in subtle forms of resistance through ambiguity when the organization changes values and principles upon which they have become identified. More open resistance to traditional identity roles has led to entrenched power inequities within organizations (Collinson, 1994) and society (Knights & Willmott, 1985).

Situational Context

Lastly, Scott et al.'s (1998) structurational model of identification argues that identities and identifications are often managed according to the context of the situation. For example, the illustrative professor who is caught in a dilemma of loyalty to the university through his role as a good instructor (who avoids nepotism) and loyalty to his daughter (who has claim upon his special attention since he is a good father) may likely resolve the conflict in terms of his role as instructor because he is at school surrounded by contexts that strongly reinforce that role. This isn't to say that he abandons his special affinity for his daughter, but what it does mean is that the balance between the two competing identities sways in favor of his contextualized self. As a result, the context of the situation has the potential to dramatically impact how members manage identity tensions in actual practice.

This study is especially well-suited for investigating the ways in which smokejumpers handle identity tensions since such tensions involved in organizational constructions of identity are theoretically more potent when individuals are surrounded by the contexts that reinforce them. Since the tension between aggressively fighting fire and obligations to safety are tied to how smokejumpers make sense of themselves (e.g., the identity construct of "smokejumper"), it's reasonable that they would have to face and manage this tension more directly in actual practice where their environment reinforces
that particular identity. As argued in the rationale, smokejumpers offer a unique context in which to study organizational tension. Using interviews as a means of contextualizing the decisions they make will allow this study to more accurately assess how they manage unavoidable organizational tension.

**Framing Organizational Tensions as Identity Tensions**

The literature on tension-centered research (Ashcraft & Trehewey, 2004a; 2004b) and the structurational model of identification (Scott et al., 1998) suggests that organizational tensions can be productively framed as *identity* tensions. Looking at them as identity tensions is productive because it recognizes that at the heart of daily tensions organizational members experience are core values and beliefs that structure organizational and individual identity. These values often exist in tension within organizations as a direct result of contradicting and competing sources of identification. For example, organizational members may identify strongly with the individual members of their department while also identifying strongly with their parent organization.

Framing organizational tension as issues of *identity* intensifies how these tensions play out during daily organizational life. For example a close reading of the tension between safety and aggression that smokejumpers face in the context of identity suggests that these values are not merely actions smokejumpers engage in but rather core identities that make up what it means to them to *be* smokejumpers. By framing these tensions as *identity* tensions, we should expect to see that the contradictions are much more entrenched, difficult to avoid, and more lethal to individual decision making and
organizational well-being if managed in negative ways. This increases the urgency of not only identifying how organizational members deal with tension, but of evaluating the enabling power of “particular outcomes” (Larson & Pepper, 2003).

Additionally, framing organizational tension as identity tensions also allows us to tap into grounded and proven theories that can productively enhance and improve our understanding of how far reaching organizational tensions are in daily practice. Identity tensions effectively complicate how we look at decision making by adding one more nuance to the mix. Looking at identity and identification from a tension-centered perspective suggests that, like organizations themselves, individuals are made up of unavoidable and contradicting identities. Rather than looking for ways to eradicate opposing identities and identifications in pursuit of greater individual and organizational health, framing unavoidable tensions as identity tensions suggests that organizational and individual health can more successfully be ensured by discovering and promoting productive management techniques.

Summary of Review of Relevant Literature

This section has reviewed relevant literature dealing with organizational tensions and organizational identification and identity. While organizational tensions are traditionally seen as problematic glitches in otherwise healthy organizations, a tension-centered approach suggests that it is not tension themselves, but rather how tensions are managed that more accurately predicts organizational and individual well being and distress (Ashcraft & Tretheway, 2004a). Literature dealing with identity and
identification (Scott et al., 1998) highlights the role of discourse in the ongoing process of creating, maintaining, and changing structures of identity. Current research highlights the need to not only report how organizational members manage the identity tensions they experience as part of organizational life, but more specifically the ways in which particular management techniques bring about “particular outcomes” in the lives of those who employ them (Larson & Pepper, 2003). As a result framing organizational tensions as issues of identity has productive consequences by reinforcing the daily unavoidable tensions members feel in terms of entrenched, core values. This suggests that from a tension-centered perspective, identity tensions would be much more difficult to avoid because they connect so deeply with how organizational members make sense of who they are. Looking at organizational tension as identity issues also emphasizes the importance of identifying management techniques which promote individual and organizational well being. With management techniques as a focus, I will use the following three research questions to guide this study:

**RQ1**: What are the primary identity tensions smokejumpers must manage?

**RQ2**: How do smokejumpers discursively manage identity tensions in daily practice?

**RQ3**: How does the tension between fighting fire aggressively and providing for safety first: a) challenge and/or reinforce smokejumper identity, and b) get reshaped by smokejumper identity in actual practice?
CHAPTER TWO: METHODS

In the first section, I gave the rationale for doing this proposed study and reviewed the related literature. I then presented the three research questions used to guide this study. I will now address the methods I used to conduct this study by giving a brief background of the field, describing the participants, discussing the method of inquiry and instruments I used to gather my data, and by presenting how I went about gathering and analyzing that information to produce the final results and discussion.

Background of the Field

In order to understand the field of smokejumping, it is important to understand the main events that shaped the smokejumper organization during the last 60+ years. To accomplish this, I will first give a brief history of smokejumping in the United States. This history will cover the birth and major events that shaped what smokejumping is today. Following this, I will present an overview of the history and development of the Ten Standard Fire Orders which play an important role in smokejumper identity by providing bureaucratic support of the safety-aggression identity tension jumpers must manage on a daily basis.

A Brief History of Smokejumping in the U.S.

Talk of dropping firefighters from airplanes onto remote wildland fires began as early as the 1930’s. Most historical sources dealing with the early years of smokejumping
indicate that the idea of dropping firefighters on fires was generally rejected "as being too dangerous and impractical" (First Parachute Years, 2004). As a result, U.S. Forest Service officials worked from 1936-1939 to develop other ways of managing fire from the air, including "water and chemical bombs" (First Parachute Years). However, while these efforts helped the newly established Aerial Fire Control Experimental Project to improve cargo dropping techniques, they did little to actually contain remote wildland fires.

In 1939, David P. Godwin, Assistant Chief of Fire Control in Washington, D.C. recommended that funds from the water and chemical bombing tests should be transferred to a new parachute jumping experiment. Successful experiments were conducted in the area of Winthrop, Washington from October 5th through November 15th, 1939 (First Parachute Years, 2004) where Walt Anderson gave them a name. He called this new band of remote wildland firefighters "smokejumpers" (First Parachute Years; National Smokejumper Association & Smith, 2000).

After experiments proved successful in 1939, a call went out for young men interested in being a part of this new group. From the ranks of 100 applicants with little or no fire fighting experience, seven were selected to take part in the first firefighting drops in the United States: Jim Alexander, Jim Waite, Rufus Robinson, Earl Cooley, Bill Bolen, Dick Lynch, and Chet Derry. Stationed out of the Seeley Lake Ranger Station, 35 miles northeast of Missoula, Montana, the crew began an intense physical fitness training program consisting of ten training jumps (Early Missoula Years, 2004). The training was so rigorous that all but two of the original crew were injured during practice jumps and could not finish. In 1940, Rufus Robinson and Earl Cooley became the first
smokejumpers to jump an actual fire (Early Missoula Years).

The history of smokejumping in the U.S. is not without its tragedies. Just nine years following the first jump smokejumpers sustained their first major disaster. After fire jumped a ravine in Mann Gulch near Helena, Montana in the summer of 1949, 15 smokejumpers and one forest ranger raced for their lives in a desperate attempt to outrun a 60 mile per hour wall of flame (N. Maclean, 1993). Twelve jumpers were burned over by fire that day, making it the largest single loss of smokejumpers in history.

The disaster seemed to shake the foundations of wildland firefighting, creating no small debate between victims’ families and U.S. Forest Service personnel (N. Maclean, 1993). Ironically, the disaster became a marking point for a period of relative safety and growth for the smokejumper organization. The National Smokejumper Association reports that the next 45 years brought only a few accidental deaths due to parachute malfunction and/or landing accidents, a period of peace that ended on the slopes of Storm King Mountain, Colorado in 1994 (National Smokejumper Association & Smith, 2000).

When the South Canyon Fire hit Colorado on Storm King Mountain, jumpers came from a number of bases including Missoula (J. N. Maclean, 1999). The first man out the door was Don Mackey, making him “jumper — in — charge,” a title indicating it was his duty to lead the other Missoula jumpers during the fire. Around four o’clock in the afternoon on July 26, 1994, jumpers were working alongside hotshots, BLM crew members, and district crews, digging line downhill with chainsaws and pulaskis when the fire blew up (J. N. Maclean). Later investigations showed that the physical terrain was similar to the Mann Gulch fire of 1949 and a similar historic tragedy followed. While racing up the severe incline of the slope, fourteen wildland firefighters lost their lives.
Three of those killed were smokejumpers, including Don Mackey from the Missoula Base.

In the aftermath of the 1994 disaster, the U.S. Forest Service commissioned TriData Corporation to conduct a massive nation-wide study of wildland firefighters. Using data collected from interviews and surveys involving over 1000 participants from virtually all fire fighting occupations within the wildland fire (TriData. 1996) community, they made several recommendations to improve safety. In the report that followed, often referred to as the TriData study, the traditional "can do" attitude of wildland firefighters generally and smokejumpers specifically was targeted as a major cause of the disaster (TriData). Since the fire of 1994 in Colorado, while tragedies have hit other areas of the wildland fire community, smokejumpers have enjoyed a period of relative safety, change, and growth.

**History and Development of the Ten Standard Fire Orders**

According to Cook (2004), the Ten Standard Fire Orders were one of three formal safety contributions stemming from the *Report of the Task Force to Recommend Action to Reduce the Chances of Men Being Killed by Burning While Fighting Fire, 1957* (see Appendix E) following the Mann Gulch Fire of 1949. The ten rules "were incorporated into firefighter training" (National Interagency Fire Center, 2004) and provided the basis for the subsequent "18 Situations That Shout Watch Out" which were "more specific and cautionary than the Standard Fire Orders and described situations that expand the 10 points of the Fire Orders" (National Interagency Fire Center).

In a recent paper presented at the 2005 Human Factors Conference in Missoula, Montana, Thackaberry (2005) describes the early rules as an industry response to the
increasing fatalities resulting from wildland fire up to that point. She argues that the wildland firefighter community relied heavily on personal narratives, highlighting the character traits of individuals as a means of creating a safer work environment rather than the performance of minute duties. For example, she describes one situation where one firefighter, responding successfully to a dangerous situation, was set up as the prototype of what other wildland firefighters should become. Over the subsequent years, the early rules that had formerly embraced an ethic targeting individual character as the primary element influencing decision-making on fires, moved to a military, rules-based “ethic of duty” (Thackaberry, p. 4). This duty ethic assumed that “...a list of rules could harness individual loyalty to the group as a way to correct defects in individual thinking” (Thackaberry, p. 4).

By the time South Canyon hit the fire community in 1994, the orders had undergone another evolution (see Appendix A). moving even further away from a focus on character traits (albeit rigid, rule-based ones). The shift in wording from the use of nouns such as “fire weather” and “communication” to “Fight,” “Initiate,” “Recognize,” “Ensure,” etc., shows that the industry favored specific actions or duties as the primary element influencing safety (Thackaberry, 2005). It was during this shift in the Standard Orders that the tension between safety and aggression became structured within the written dogma of the field in the first order “Fight fire aggressively, but provide for safety first” (Appendix A).

Following the tragedy at South Canyon in 1994. TriData recommended that the orders be revised and shortened (TriData, 1996). However, it wasn’t until a veteran from the field pushed through an initiative to change the orders in 2002 that they were formally
altered from the 1994 version (Thackaberry, 2005). An interesting critique of the newest version (see Appendix B) is that they resemble "...more of a PowerPoint slide then a memory mnemonic" (Thackaberry, p. 6).

The 2002 version of the Ten Standard Orders contains several important revisions that are worth mentioning. First, while the 1994 orders came in a laundry list fashion (i.e., 1, 2, 3, 4, etc.) without any grouping, the newer version categorizes the rules under four primary headings (e.g., Fire Behavior, Fireline Safety, Organizational Control. If 1-9 are considered, then...). While this may aid in remembering all ten of the orders, it creates a much more visual image than previous versions (Thackaberry, 2005).

Additionally, the 1994 version of the Orders places "fight fire aggressively but provide for safety first" (see Appendix A) as the first point on the list. In the current version this mandate is tenth on the list, has been rephrased as "Fight fire aggressively, having provided for safety first," and is preceded by the qualifier "If 1-9 are considered, then..." (see Appendix B). Moving this order from first to last and preceding it with a strict qualifier may suggest that the organization places a higher emphasis on rule-keeping than on trusting firefighters to "provide for safety first" under their own guidelines. This view is supported by the statement following the tenth point which emphasizes that the "10 Standard Fire Orders are firm. We Don’t Break Them; We Don’t Bend Them. All firefighters have a Right to a Safe Assignment." This suggests an even greater emphasis on rules as the primary qualifier of what constitutes being "safe." Placing this at the bottom and contingent upon the adherence to each of the other nine guidelines may also indicate a more negative organizational view of "aggressively" fighting wildland fires, since aggression is only to be used once everything else has been
satisfied.

As mentioned, it is also interesting that the actual wording of this mandate describing the conflict between safety and aggression is changed in the 2002 version. The 1994 version states that firefighters are to “fight fire aggressively but provide for safety first” (italics mine. Appendix A) while the 2002 version states they should “fight fire aggressively, having provided for safety first” (italics mine. Appendix B). Rephrasing this has significant meaning because it openly prioritizes safety as a qualifier for aggressively fighting fire. To “fight aggressively but provide for safety” suggests that safety may be more of an afterthought such as in the example “drive to the store, but don’t forget your seatbelt.” It in no way openly suggests how wildland firefighters should approach the tension. However, to use the word “having” between the two ideals suggests that firefighters are only to fight fire aggressively after having first provided for safety. As a result, safety may be seen as the gatekeeper, determines whether firefighters are licensed to fight fires aggressively in a given situation.
Participants

National Smokejumper Organization

Smokejumpers are an elite and professional organization within the wildland firefighting community. As a national organization, they are split up into five regions consisting of nine bases that employ roughly 270 smokejumpers (Fire and Aviation Management, 2004a). Two of the bases (New Mexico and Alaska) are managed under the direction of the U.S. Bureau of Land Management (BLM) while the vast majority of smokejumpers in the U.S. fall under the jurisdiction of the United States Department of Agriculture, U.S. Forest Service, Fire and Aviation Management (Fire & Aviation Management, 2004a).

Becoming a smokejumper is no easy task. Jumper candidates must have a history of fire experience in wildland firefighting “and be skilled in using the tools of the trade” (Fire & Aviation Management, 2004b) which include, among other tools, chainsaws and pulaskis (a unique tool made specifically for wildland firefighting that combines a shovel with an ax blade welded to the side and used for chopping through trees and brush (N. Maclean, 1993; J. N. Maclean, 1999)). They must also be in excellent physical condition, “possess a high degree of emotional stability and mental alertness,” and meet specific height, weight, and other health-related requirements (Fire & Aviation Management, 2004b).

Missoula Base Smokejumpers

The Missoula Smokejumpers are one of the oldest smokejumping organizations in the nation. In fact, “the airplane used on the first fire jump ever, July 10, 1940, took off
The Missoula Smokejumper Base is located at the Aerial Fire Depot west of the Missoula International Airport in Missoula, Montana and is home to 85 smokejumpers consisting of men and women whose ages range from early 20's to 50's (Missoula Smokejumpers, 2004). Surrounding the base are several other buildings housing the Region One Fire Cache, the Interagency Fire Science Laboratory, Missoula Technology and Development Center (MTDC), and the Northern Region Training Center.

The Missoula Base Smokejumpers' primary job is to suppress wildfires in remote mountainous terrain of the western United States (Missoula Smokejumpers, 2004). However, they are also qualified as the "initial attack" force in "wilderness areas, rangeland, and the desert southwest (Missoula Smokejumpers). They often form the "personnel for extended attacks and Incident Command Teams" and can be called out almost anywhere in the western continental United States including: Montana, Idaho, Wyoming, Utah, Nevada, Colorado, New Mexico, Washington, Oregon, California, Arizona, and Alaska (Missoula Smokejumpers). During the off season or while waiting for calls, smokejumpers are often engaged in prescribed-burning operations all over the continental United States (Missoula Smokejumpers). They are also used as tree climbers in New York and Chicago to help with an "ongoing insect eradication program" (Missoula Smokejumpers).

Organizationally, the Missoula Smokejumper Base has a formal hierarchy which begins at the top with the Region 1 Smokejumper Program Manager, also known as the Base Manager. Just below him on the organizational chart is the Base/Operations Manager, or the Assistant Base Manager followed by five individual foremen each
individually assigned to one of the following responsibilities: Fuels/Projects. Internal Base Operations. Parachute Loft. Airplane Loadmaster. and Training. Below this group are five Assistant Foremen who are assigned to work with foremen and help them accomplish their specific responsibilities (e.g., fuels, internal base operations, loft, etc.). Following the assistant foremen on the organizational chart are the GS-7’s or Squad Leaders who in turn supervise the GS-6’s, or regular smokejumpers, with a wide range of experience ranging anywhere from 2 years and over. Last on the totem are the Rookies, or first-year jumpers. For a graphic chart of the Missoula Smokejumper Organization, please refer to Appendix D.

Smokejumper Identity

From the early years of smokejumping to the present day smokejumpers have developed a unique identity. As reflected in N. Maclean’s (1993) best-selling historical book investigating the Mann Gulch fire of 1949, an “important [part] in becoming a Smokejumper is learning to act like one” (p. 30). Several key values are tied into what it means to be a smokejumper. First, on an organizational level, it has been reliably described as a “brotherhood” and “fraternity” (National Smokejumper Association & Smith, 2000; N. Maclean, p. 27). In fact, a common way of addressing fellow smokejumpers is to call them “bro” even if that “bro” is a woman (National Smokejumper Association & Smith).

This commitment to the organization and to one another is evidenced in the lives of current and former smokejumpers across the country. One smokejumper relates a situation in which he was asked by a former “bro” who was dying in a hospital to take his ashes and scatter them for him from a flying airplane. He remarked that his loyalty to this
fellow smokejumper was "unconditional" (National Smokejumper Association & Smith, 2000). One of the female jumpers continued to jump even while she was pregnant because she loved the work so much. After she had her son, she went back to jumping for several years before giving it up (National Smokejumper Association & Smith). Another man jumped during his younger years then went on to get a "real" job founding a successful accounting business. After several years away, he left his business and became a jumper once again in spite of the lower wages (National Smokejumper Association & Smith). These examples show the tenacious nature of the job. People who do it typically enjoy what they do. They have a strong loyalty to one another and to the profession.

Additionally, key to a discussion about the underlying values that make up what it means to be a smokejumper is a sense of "pride" and "romanticism" that goes along with being a smokejumper (N. Maclean, 1993). According to N. Maclean smokejumping is "a highly select outfit somewhat like the Marines" (p. 27). He writes about how early smokejumpers would return from fires and go to the bars to brag about their near-misses to the girls. Smokejumpers are also well known throughout the field for their independence and self-reliance (J. N. Maclean, 1999) which are also qualities expressed more locally by the Missoula base.

Smokejumpers at the Missoula base have described themselves on their website in a number of revealing ways. They are "self-sufficient" and "capable" (Missoula Smokejumpers, 2004), reinforcing a "can do" attitude (Weick, 1995). The Missoula smokejumpers at the Mann Gulch fire were confident in their ability to do their jobs and referred to it on first glance as a ten o’clock fire (N. Maclean, 1993) or that they would get the job done by ten o’clock the next morning and be on their way home. As
mentioned, this “can do” attitude was also criticized at the South Canyon Fire. This attitude highlights the confidence jumpers have had in their own abilities over the last 60 years.

In short, smokejumpers since the beginning days to 1994 have had a very specific and unique identity construct made up of several key values embodied in the following terms: “brotherhood” (National Smokejumper Association & Smith. 2000) or “fraternity” (National Smokejumper Association & Smith; N. Maclean. 1993). “dedicated”, “professional”, “highly-trained”, “experienced”, “self-sufficient” “capable” (Missoula Smokejumpers, 2004), and “can do” (Weick, 1995) as expressed in both word and action by smokejumpers themselves as well as the wildland firefighting community.

Participant Demographics

This study represents a relatively diverse group of smokejumpers at the Missoula Base based on official rank, years of experience, and gender and is comparable to the demographic proportions of the entire population. In terms of official rank, 5 of those interviewed were GS-6’s or regular smokejumpers with two or more years of experience, 3 were Squad Leaders, 5 were Assistant Foremen. 5 were Foremen. 1 was upper management, 1 was a former jumper that was now on the personnel staff at the base, and 2 were former jumpers that were now working in other areas of wildland fire management and/or training.

It is also interesting to note the relatively even spread of smokejumpers across the category of work experience within the field of smokejumping. The largest portion of those interviewed had worked there over 15 years. This helped significantly since a large portion of the interview targeted issues that compared the world of smokejumping prior
to South Canyon in 1994 to issues in a post-South Canyon community. More specifically, one of the 22 interviews, 6 had been jumping for over 20 years. 6 had been jumping between 16 and 20 years. 3 had worked between 11 and 15 years. 5 were between 5 and 10 years, and two had worked there less than five years.

One seeming exception to the general rule of even distribution among participants in this study is in the category of gender. Of the 22 participants, 19 were male and 3 were female. However, while this ratio may look lop sided, it is a higher representative sample of the actual smokejumper population where, of the 85 jumpers working at the base, 78 are male and 7 are female.

The demographics of the participants suggest that they are well qualified for a study of this kind. Most of the participants in this study held some level of management over other smokejumpers. As a result, it makes sense that the core values and beliefs they report as part of what it means to be a smokejumper would be communicated down the chain of command to the lowest level part-time rookies coming into the organization both in formal training and socialization efforts as well as less formal observation and mentoring. By understanding how experienced and seasoned veterans of the organization make sense of who they are and how they manage the inherent tensions that up their organizational identity in practice, we should have a much clearer idea of those themes play out throughout the entire organization.

However, since most of the participants in this study were seasoned full time smokejumpers who were often part of the organizational overhead, this study may be limited in what it can say to the entire smokejumper community. For example, the time constraints of this study excluded large numbers of rookie smokejumpers as well as part-
time smokejumpers that may have important and possibly different views of what it means to be a smokejumper. While targeting the fulltime leadership of the smokejumper organization has recognizable benefits to a study like this, as detailed above, it would be important to include rookies and part-time jumpers in future research in order to get a more accurate idea of the entire smokejumper organization and to locate any deviant themes of identity present in their ranks.

**Method of Inquiry & Instrument**

I conducted this study using semi-structured interviews using an interview guide. According to Lindlof & Taylor (2002), “interview guides…consist of groupings of topics and questions that the interviewer can ask in different ways for different participants” and typically allows for considerable flexibility for both the interviewer as well as the participant (p. 195). Using an interview guide was especially helpful for this group since they often had additional comments and experiences to share that often veered off the strict order of the interview questions. My interview guide covered ten questions (Appendix C) targeting issues related to smokejumper identity, changes in what it means to be a smokejumper, changes in the smokejumper organization since South Canyon in 1994, and accounts of experiences smokejumpers have had dealing with the tension between safety and aggression. Previous studies have shown that interview questions that draw out accounts and experiences from participants have been an effective means of getting at the core values and beliefs that structure identity and bring about identification (DiSanza & Bullis, 1999; Larson & Pepper, 2003; Tompkins &
Cheney, 1983). In this study, I relied heavily upon questions similar to those used by Larson and Pepper and Tompkins and Cheney in their studies, asking open ended questions about experiences that described what it meant to be a member of the smokejumper organization.

Interviewing has been a productive way of getting at issues of organizational tension (Tracy, 2004) and specifically at identity tensions (Larson & Pepper, 2003) as well as larger issues of identity and identification (Bullis & Tompkins, 1989; DiSanza & Bullis, 1999; Larson & Pepper; Larson & Tompkins, 2005; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). Even interpersonal scholars advocate more qualitative methods when researching dialectical tensions (Baxter, 1988).

Larson and Pepper (2003) frame interviews in terms of “interview talk” (p. 537) which they argue is a legitimate means of getting at narratives of identity. For example, when people talk about their experiences they emphasize certain values and de-emphasize less important values in terms of the details they share and how they interpret those details. Larson and Pepper frame language as a means by which people make sense of experience and reveal the core values that make them who they are.

In terms of this study, experiences shared during interviews represented the communicative process of identification and revealed the core values which structured their identities. These core values stood out through their discourse not only explicitly as they identified important values and beliefs that make up how they saw themselves, but also in the types of experiences they shared and the details they pointed out from those experiences. How they talked about themselves in the context of their daily work said as much about the core values that implicitly defined their identities as express explanations
of core values. Since identity is rooted in constructs of values and premises (Scott et al., 1998) and since identification is a means by which members make sense of the world (Larson & Pepper, 2003), getting participants to talk about their lived experiences as smokejumpers carried within them the patterns of competing values and premises that structured what it meant to participants to be smokejumpers.

**Procedure**

In January 2005, I received institutional review board authorization from the University of Montana to conduct this study and interviewed 20 smokejumpers and 2 former smokejumpers using a semi-structured interview approach between February, 2005 and April, 2005. The majority of these participants were stationed as full-time and active jumpers at the Missoula Smokejumper Base. Participants were selected using a snowball data gathering method which provided a list of people to contact. Due to the seasonal nature of the job, I was limited to those who were working full-time and were available for interviews. As a result, while targeting names from referrals given to me by organizational members working at the base, the participants were ultimately a convenience sample. Participants received no immediate benefits from participating in the study, but were promised a full briefing, video taped for those unable to attend the actual presentation, following the final analysis and write up of the collected data.

Interviews were based on a ten-question interview instrument and averaged 45 minutes to an hour each. Individual participants had time to ask questions about the study and review the interview questions before the interview began. Several participants asked
more in depth questions about the study following the interview, resulting in unrecorded conversations that lasted anywhere from 5 to 15 minutes. Interviews were kept conversational by allowing the direction of the conversation to dictate the order and emphasis of the interview questions.

Of the 22 interviews, 21 were conducted on site at the Missoula Smokejumper Base while one participant requested that I meet him at his apartment in Missoula as a matter of personal convenience. One participant approached me a day after his interview and spoke with me about specific concerns he had dealing with current litigation against firefighters following the Cramer fire incident. At his request, I listened to his concerns and took field notes, but did not include the information because it did not seem germane to the direction of this study and because it was not recorded on tape and then transcribed for accuracy. After half of the interviews were conducted, I began transcribing tapes and alternated between transcribing, interviewing, and analysis until I had finished transcribing 21 of the interviews. I attempted to transcribe participant 1’s interview, but found the tape inaudible due to the extreme poor quality of the audio recording caused by mechanical problems during the interview. As a result only interviews 2-22 were transcribed and analyzed for use in this study.

The data were analyzed using a modified grounded theory approach (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). I took preliminary notes during each stage of the data collection, transcription, and formal analysis in order to document emerging themes while they were fresh on my mind. I began the formal analysis by reading through the 267 single spaced pages of raw data derived from transcribing 21 interviews and looked for emerging themes of values and beliefs that constitute the smokejumper identity and patterns of how
people talked about the relationship between various identities. During this stage of analysis “the analyst usually goes through the texts… line by line and marks those chunks of text that suggest a category” (Lindloff & Taylor. 2002. p. 219). My goal was to identify the prevalent themes that constitute how smokejumpers see themselves and how they discursively frame the relationships between larger categories of emergent themes.

At multiple times during the formal analysis, I would break away from the data and write about impressions and ideas that came to mind dealing with the characteristics and relationships between themes, experimenting with categories and codes that would accurately address the patterns I was finding. Throughout the formal analysis I found that the emerging patterns fit nicely with previous research dealing with identity (Scott et al., 1998), tensions (Tracy. 2004; Martin, 2004; Harter. 2004). and dialectics (Baxter, 1988).

After comparing my findings with what others had found, I would then return to the data and organize the themes I was finding into preliminary categories, placing chunks of text into such emergent categories as independent, connected, leader, follower, safety, aggression, and bureaucratic, concertive. Using categories represented in previous research in tandem with emergent categories and themes from participant data has been productively used in other qualitative tension-based research (Tracy, 2004). Comparing each category with the raw data led me to adjust them in accordance with prevailing themes from the data that described how smokejumpers saw themselves. Returning to the transcribed data several times to verify the themes and categories I was finding, two codes of discourse emerged from the data representing the primary identity tensions smokejumpers faced: safety/aggression, independent/connected.
Using this same process of moving "line by line" through the data, I looked for emergent themes representing the discursive ways that participants talked about each code of identity tension. Similarly, the process of moving line by line through the text looking for themes was punctuated by personal notes and departures from the text to write about relationships and possible connections between themes and emerging categories as well as consistent reference to previous literature dealing with tension management techniques as a means of more accurately identifying emerging themes and categories as I moved back to the data. Through this process, two codes of discourse emerged dealing with how participants framed identity tensions in practice which are presented in detail in the following chapter.

Because of the unique nature of one of the codes that emerged from this data set, a brief explanation of its inductive roots may be helpful. While the tension between safety and aggression was one that was identified early on as part of the Ten Standard Fire Orders and one that many wildland firefighters must cope with (J. N. Maclean, 1999), themes emerged from the data that suggested that participants actually felt they were "safe" firefighters and also that they were "aggressive" firefighters. As a result, while deductively beginning this study with an understanding of the tension between safety and aggression, the fact that each end of this tension was seen as part of what it meant to be a smokejumper emerged inductively from the interview data and therefore constituted a legitimate code of identity tension.

Personal names were transcribed just as they were used during the interviews to maintain clarity and flow of ideas, experiences, and explanations during the analysis, but were omitted from the text used in the final results and discussion to preserve
confidentiality. As part of the formal analysis process, I performed a member check with one of the participants (Lindloff & Taylor, 2002) who validated many of my findings as accurate with his own lived experience and also offered several insights that were taken into consideration prior to final analysis.
CHAPTER THREE: RESULTS

Introduction

In Chapter Two I gave a brief background of areas related to this study, described the participants, explained my method of inquiry, and detailed the procedure I followed in conducting this study. In Chapter Three I will answer the research questions introduced at the end of Chapter One by presenting the interview data I collected and analyzed. The research questions I introduced in Chapter One were:

**RQ1:** What are the primary identity tensions smokejumpers must manage?

**RQ2:** How do smokejumpers discursively manage identity tensions in daily practice?

**RQ3:** How does the tension between fighting fire aggressively and providing for safety first: a) challenge and/or reinforce smokejumper identity, and b) get reshaped by smokejumper identity in actual practice?

Smokejumper Identity Tensions

Smokejumpers have a very pronounced understanding of who they are. This sense of self was apparent in their discourse. The most widely and explicitly reported characteristics included: “loyalty,” “hard working,” “dedicated,” “goal oriented,” “safety-conscious,” “aggressive,” “competitive,” “professional,” “elite,” “independent,” “team-
oriented,” “misunderstood,” “leaders,” “can-do,” a “brotherhood,” “responsible,” and “diverse.” Each of these values casts the smokejumper in a slightly different light, adding depth and meaning to how they see themselves.

The data showed that smokejumpers have several identity tensions they deal with on a daily basis. While there was remarkable clarity and consistency for some identity tensions, others were incomplete and/or inconsistent. For example, some participants talked about the difficulties the job placed on their family lives, reporting that they tried to leave the organization simply because the pay was low or they wanted something that kept them closer to home. While this suggested that smokejumpers felt tension between their professional and personal identities, tensions like this did not represent the majority of those interviewed. Due to the lack of continuity among participants, I did not feel such tensions represented conflicting “core” values that “structure” (Scott et al., 1998, p. 303) what it meant to the majority of participants to be a “smokejumper.” Rather, they seemed to represent local, micro tensions individuals may face when navigating the threads that make up their individual rather than professional identity.

In the first section of this chapter I will report the two identity tensions most pervasive among the discourse of this study and most intimately linked to smokejumper identity. Two themes of identity tension were universally acknowledged by all participants. They provide the most reliable and openly agreed upon explanation of what it means to be a smokejumper: safety/aggression, independent/connected.

In this first section, I will answer RQ1: What are the primary identity tensions smokejumpers must manage? I will first talk about how smokejumpers see themselves simultaneously as “safe” and “aggressive” firefighters (safety/aggression). I will then talk
about how they also see themselves as extremely independent, self-reliant, and autonomous individuals while at the same time affirming their connection to one another and to the wildland fire community (independent/connected).

**Safety/Aggression Tension**

The tension of safety aggression describes how smokejumpers see themselves as both safe firefighters while simultaneously thinking of themselves as “aggressive,” “can-do” firefighters. The paradox of this tension was openly laid out in Chapter One as an express organizational imperative, making it a difficult tension to pass by in the course of this study. However, it was impressive how openly and emphatically participant discourse highlighted these two tensions not only as mandates imposed upon them by their employer, but as deep-rooted characteristics that when taken together actually constituted what it meant to be a smokejumper. Importantly, seeing themselves as “safe” firefighters contradicts and complicates relatively flat descriptions of the modern smokejumper as simply “aggressive” and “can do” firefighters (J. N. Maclean, 1999).

**Safety/Aggression: Smokejumpers as “Safe” Firefighters**

The safety/aggression tension describes how smokejumpers see themselves simultaneously as both safe and aggressive firefighters. Smokejumpers were very clear that they felt they were “safe” firefighters. However, they expressed their identity as safe firefighters on various levels. Participants often suggested that being “safe” firefighters was something the organization expected of them as employees. One way they expressed this expectation was by talking about the “safety first” mantra. One participant with over 15 years experience talked about how “safety first” was a policy every smokejumper should be aware of:
I mean it’s clear as a bell…and if you’re not hearing it, man, your ears are plugged…It’s safety first. You don’t take on unnecessary risks to save vegetation. That’s just policy…

While being “safe” firefighters as part of an organizational expectation for employment, smokejumpers typically felt they were “safe” firefighters on much deeper levels. Smokejumpers not only acted in safe ways, being safe firefighters as a means of appeasing bureaucratic requirements, but they actually saw themselves as “safe” people – recognizing safety as a deep rooted core value. One smokejumper with more than 15 years experience positioned the value of safety as a gatekeeper over what kind of people should be allowed into their ranks:

You have to look – how can I do this and go home tonight or at the end of the fire. No one wants to die out on those fires and if they do we don’t want them in our ranks. We don’t want those kind of people…

This participant felt that the kind of people that made good smokejumpers were safe people that “go home” at the end of the day. This sentiment of being a certain kind of person, a safe person, was something that many of the jumpers talked about by comparing themselves to other wildland firefighters they felt were less safe. They seemed to do this in an effort to build up the value of safety as an integral part of what it meant to be a smokejumper. One participant with more than 20 years experience in the field, said
that smokejumpers were the kind of people that always wore their seat belts and the kind of people who always wore a bicycle helmet when biking to work. He reported that he once saw a helitack crew member, who had been preaching the safety mantra at a training meeting, climb onto a motorcycle without a helmet at the end of the day and drive home. After talking about this situation, he pointed out that smokejumpers were much safer people than many of the wildland firefighters because they recognized unsafe situations and took precautions. This suggests that safety is not only an important, defining quality of smokejumpers, by helping them see who belongs in their ranks, but it is enough of a core identity trait that it can be used to separate themselves from other wildland firefighters.

Many of the participants talked about the ideal of safety as a responsibility they had towards others, something they accepted with the title of being a “smokejumper.” This particular jumper recognized a difference between formally mandated duties within the organization and informal duties that came from a deep rooted personal sense of self as a smokejumper:

There’s been a couple situations that I had to get people out of a bad place and it wasn’t my duty or responsibility but I just took it upon myself because I feel that’s on our shoulders just because we wear the title of smokejumper.

As this participant points out, the duty of ensuring the safety of others is part of having the title of “smokejumper.” This also points out how smokejumpers see themselves as
safe firefighters when they are protecting the safety of others. It shows that smokejumpers don’t necessarily need to just be thinking about their own safety in order to feel like “safe” firefighters. Part of being “safe” is having a desire to ensure the safety of others around them. Other participants talked about safety as everyone’s “responsibility” or feeling “accountable” for not only their own safety but the safety of everyone else on the crew.

Many participants felt that safety has always been a part of what it means to be a smokejumper. In fact, during interviews, they talked about being slighted and misunderstood by popular media and by the U.S. Forest Service, especially during the TriData (1996; 1998) studies, who they felt framed them as “daredevils” that throw caution to the wind when approaching a dangerous situation. In an effort to clarify this, some of the participants emphasized in their discourse how safety was an important value making up the smokejumper identity many years prior to South Canyon. One smokejumper, who started up with the Missoula base a few years prior to South Canyon stated emphatically that “…the bottom line is safety. We’ve never, ever, ever veered away from that.” Other jumpers reinforced this, talking about “common sense” as a typical way of maintaining safety:

…it’s always been common sense; it’s never been willy-nilly throw caution to the wind—go risk you’re life type work. That’s not the approach anybody ever took…
Despite the majority, other participants openly talked about the old days as a time when safety was not embodied as much as it is today. One participant felt that older smokejumpers were often condemned because critics used today’s standards to judge people that lived during a different time. He felt that changes in how fire behaved and the industry’s present view towards fire as an important environmental agent necessary for healthy forests have placed safety on a higher pedestal than it used to be held on. However, despite the minor conflict between participants on how smokejumpers have seen themselves in the past, smokejumpers all agreed that safety was an essential trait of what it means to be a smokejumper today.

Safety/Aggression: Smokejumpers as "Aggressive Firefighters"

Interestingly enough, while smokejumpers see themselves as safe people, they also pride themselves on being aggressive firefighters. Nearly every participant talked about character traits that point directly to aggression as a defining feature of who they are: “hard working,” “competitive,” “can do,” “dedicated.” One participant openly laid claim upon aggression as an important identity trait defining what it meant to him to be a smokejumper:

... everyone who’s in this profession at least to a certain level is the type of personality that has common traits...as far as aggression, they tend to be more of an aggressive type of personality...[m]eaning they’re going to hang it out – they’re going to get the job done. They want to be successful, ok.
As this participant points out, smokejumpers often share the same personality characteristics – one of the strongest being “an aggressive type of personality.” He also provides a fairly consistent definition of what it means to be “aggressive” as something intimately connected to the idea of getting the job done and being “successful.”

Many smokejumpers recognized aggression, defined as “getting the job done” and being “successful” as important qualities of who they were. One jumper was very open, stating that he felt smokejumpers were competitive individuals and that competition was rewarded within the smokejumper ranks:

...smokejumpers are probably the most competitive people I’ve ever worked with and me being the same way that’s probably one of the underlying reasons I probably ended up here and have excelled...I hate to lose as much as the next person.

This game metaphor of winners and losers begs the question of who or what smokejumpers feel they are competing with. Smokejumpers seemed to report a number of things they compete with. Often smokejumpers compete with themselves and their environment. For example, one smokejumper stated that his move from college football, following graduation, into wildland firefighting and then into smokejumping was largely inspired by his personal need for mental and physical challenges:
Ever since I’ve got here, it’s more than taken the place of playing football... I mean it’s got the physical challenge, the mental challenge. You’ve got a reason to train and stay in physical shape and it’s just the best thing that ever happened.

As this participant describes, smokejumpers often compete with themselves. They feel a drive to overcome personal barriers and challenges – something smokejumping gives them the opportunity to face. Most smokejumpers explicitly included the desire to face and overcome challenges as a premier quality defining what it meant to be a smokejumper.

In addition to competing with themselves, smokejumpers often compete with other wildland firefighters. Many of the “success” stories that smokejumpers used to describe how they “got the job done” involved hooking a fire (stopping it’s progress) and starting the mop up (using dirt and water to extinguish all of the flames and ensuring that the ground and trees are cold) before another wildland firefighter crew could get there to help them finish the job. One participant captured this in one of the experiences he shared describing what it meant to him to be a smokejumper:

You get around the fire and you meet the line you started at where you anchored and you caught this thing and in the mean time the district has ordered a type 2 team and really there’s nothing left for them to do. You caught it... you’ve probably heard that from other people... That’s one of the best feelings right there.
Through smiles and laughs, smokejumpers consistently talked about surprising and impressing other wildland firefighting crews or the district manager that had called them out to the job. This suggests not only that smokejumpers generally have a desire to compete, but extending the sports metaphor a bit further - they enjoy the attention that comes from being on the playing field and surprising the audience. This need for “competition” and “success” is best captured by the smokejumpers’ traditional “can do” attitude.

Much of the criticism that came out of the TriData (1996; 1998) study condemned smokejumpers’ aggressive firefighting by targeting their “can do” attitude. In defining the “can do” attitude, smokejumpers often reported a difference between the perception of the “can do” attitude described by the TriData (1996) study and the preceding investigations of South Canyon and the traditional smokejumper “can do” attitude. One participant was very direct about this difference:

It’s night and day. Their “can do” attitude, I mean the way they put it the “can do” attitude is just going like a bull in a china shop and just plowing through, head down and going for broke. That’s not what our “can do” attitude is. Our “can do” attitude is seeing any situation and being able to find a solution to get something done.

As this participant explains, smokejumpers see two definitions of “can do” being used within the wildland fire community. One definition seems to “throw caution
to the wind." without regard to the safety of others, while smokejumpers claim to endorse a "can do" attitude that embraces something akin to positive thinking—believing they can do the job in front of them. One jumper associated the "can do" attitude with "problem solving" and finding solutions. Often the "can do" attitude was talked about in conjunction with a sense of being a public servant. Several participants commented on how they felt pressure from the wildland fire community to maintain their "can do" attitude in order to measure up to their (the wildland fire community’s) expectations. One participant talked about this pressure, suggesting that this "can do" image is not only engrained into smokejumpers, but is such an integral part of the smokejumper identity and reputation that it actually keeps the smokejumper organization in business:

We feel like our existence is on people calling you and they’re going to call you because you can do the job for them when maybe somebody else couldn’t. So, we feel like we have to almost perpetuate the “can do” attitude to stay in business as an organization...that’s sort of almost engrained in you.

This participant talks about "can do" as not only something that is "engrained in you," but as something they feel pressure to maintain in order to "stay in business as an organization." Other jumpers expressed this pressure by emphasizing their duty to provide alternatives even if they don’t feel a situation is safe to engage:
Refusing it’s one thing – and it’s you’re right to do – but to us the most important thing is providing an alternative – saying “no, we don’t want to go down there, but we think if we come around here and go drive around and tomorrow at 6am before it starts heating up, we come up from the bottom, we can do this” Instead of just refusing. The refusal comes with the responsibility to give an alternative.

By looking at “can do” as a “responsibility” they have to the rest of the wildland fire community, it further entrenches this quality as part of who they are. Rather than centering this identity trait completely within the smokejumper community, it also shows that the wildland fire community shares some of the burden for a quality they have largely condemned.

While participants often focused on the positive outcomes of the “can do” attitude, many of them recognized the limitations and boundaries of a “can do” attitude. Most often, those boundaries were negotiated along the lines of safety. One participant clarifies the boundaries of the “can do” attitude:

…They will “can do” all they can do in those boundaries, you know, of being safe…so I would say that the “can do” attitude now is still there, but the boundaries under which you have that attitude have changed.

As this participant expressed, the boundaries of “can do” have undergone a change that most of the participants recognized. Some felt stronger about the evidence of a change
than others, but it was evident that most of them felt that to some degree the "older jumpers" were more aggressive in the past than they are today.

As the data in this section show, smokejumpers feel very strongly that they are safe fire fighters. However, they also feel very strongly that they are aggressive firefighters. Both are tied to their sense of self, making it a formidable identity contradiction to navigate if they are to maintain stability as smokejumpers. I will now talk about the second primary identity tension smokejumpers demonstrated in their discourse.

Independent/Connected Tension

Along with facing the tension between safety/aggression, participant discourse also shows that smokejumpers feel they are at once independent individuals as well as connected group members. Smokejumpers are well known within wildland fire for their fierce independence and self reliance (J. N. Maclean, 1999). Ironically, interview data suggests that they also feel a strong connection with the very groups and individuals they feel separate from. Dealing with these two opposing ideals complicates the two-dimensional image we get of smokejumpers in literature and scholarship that seems to almost entirely focus on their independence (Driessen, 2002; J. N. Maclean; N. Maclean, 1993).

Independent/Connected: Smokejumper as "independent resource"

Smokejumpers see themselves as very independent people. During interviews, it became almost cliché to hear participants talk about their independence as an important core value that made them who they were. They typically talked about their independence in two ways. First it was something that distinguished them from other wildland
firefighting crews. Second, it was something that distinguished them individually from other smokejumpers within their own organization. An important way they talked about how their independence separated them from other wildland firefighting crews was the fact that they actively looked for it during the recruiting process and then found ways to cultivate it during the training process. One participant was very direct about the organization's efforts to promote independence as a core value within smokejumpers during the training and recruiting process:

We're a pretty independent organization. We try to foster that in people. Look for that in people that we're hiring and then foster that in the way we train them.

Tompkins and Cheney (1985) point to training and socialization efforts as important opportunities to encourage new members to identify with core organizational values. By looking for new recruits that already embrace their independence and then actively "fostering" that in their training efforts, the smokejumper organization creates a fairly concrete division between it and other wildland firefighting organizations.

Many of the smokejumpers talked about independence by using it as a way of distinguishing themselves from other wildland firefighting crews. A 20 year veteran boasted about this separation as something the organization promoted by training smokejumpers to think independently:
You'll see other crews that's just really trying to look the same. Same colored hard hats, same t-shirts and walking in a straight line. You cannot get a smokejumper crew to walk in a straight line. The training is different. Another crew is trained to follow their leader. A smokejumper is trained to be thinking for themselves...

Another participant reported that while “other” crews often wore the same colored hard hats and the same colored backpacks, smokejumpers wore different colored hardhats and backpacks. As if this wasn’t enough, they also used stickers, patches and other designs to separate themselves from their fellow smokejumpers in an effort to identify themselves as a group of non-conformists. Such efforts broadcast to the wildland fire community obvious differences that create separation between the smokejumper organization and any other wildland firefighting crew.

Smokejumpers also talked about their independence from other wildland firefighting crews by talking about their self-reliance and autonomy on the fire line. One participant with more than fifteen years experience highlighted this by pointing to the resources available to smokejumpers on a fire and their unique opportunities for specialized training:

...when we end up on a fire somewhere...districts or anybody don’t have to worry about us because we have everything available to us. If we run out of food we call Missoula...well next thing you know we have fresh food being para-cargoed to us. We have so many people that are trained in
so many different areas through the forestry...we have strike team leaders,
we have division bosses, we have so many people trained in so many
different categories that we’re just a, we’re an elite group...

As mentioned by this participant, much of what they are able to get as resources on a fire
comes from the recognition the industry gives to the title of being a “smokejumper.”
Most, if not all, the participants talked about this division between those who are “elite”
or “professional” and those who are not as an important characteristic of the
smokejumper identity that separated smokejumpers from the rest of the wildland fire
community. Often this reputation was something that contradicted how they felt about
themselves as beginning smokejumpers, showing how the separation and admiration was
largely tied up with the title of “smokejumper” rather than just because they happened to
have useful experience as an individual. One participant with less than 10 years of
experience talked about one of his first fires as a smokejumper and how other wildland
firefighters treated him:

They bused us to the fire. We got on the fire and the IC pulled all the
jumpers out of the bus, told us the situation and asked all of us what to do.
and you know right there in that moment I was like “they really do think
we’re gods of fire” because I don’t know what to do.

It’s significant that smokejumpers often reported that they either were attracted to
smokejumping because it had the reputation of being an “elite” or “top” position in
wildland firefighting – separate from other wildland firefighters – or that they didn’t necessarily feel “elite” as individuals, but that others treated them as “elite” because they wore the title of “smokejumper.” Either way, being labeled as “elite” or “professional” puts some distance between them and the wildland fire community. It suggests that much of the independence smokejumpers feel stems from how other wildland firefighters react to them in their field interactions. Another smokejumper with between 5 and 10 years experience talked about how she often felt like other wildland firefighters expected her to be something as a smokejumper that she didn’t feel she was as a person:

...people expect me to, you know, enter the phone booth and come out in my wonder woman suit and that’s so far from the truth. So far from who I really am.

This participant, like the previous quote, clearly shows that while she doesn’t feel “elite” as a person, others in the wildland fire community treat her that way simply because she is a “smokejumper.” Being a “smokejumper” carries with it a title and reputation that brings with it a level of prestige as well as an implied separation. However, this implied separation may reinforce the need smokejumpers feel to find their own way apart from other wildland firefighters.

Many times participant discussion showed that finding their own way involved using “common sense,” an important attribute of the smokejumper identity. One participant highlighted how “common sense” helped smokejumpers avoid doing things that didn’t “make sense.” To illustrate, he pointed to an
example of digging fire line. While the average wildland firefighter would dig line a standard handle width completely around the fire even if that meant that they would be digging around large rock outcroppings, smokejumpers would accomplish the same task by tying into the outcropping and picking up the line on the other side of the rock. Experiences like this show how smokejumpers separated smokejumpers as an organization by focusing on how their tactics employed greater "common sense" than those used by other wildland fire crews.

In addition to discourse highlighting how smokejumpers' independence distinguishes them from the wildland fire community, I also found substantial evidence that showed how smokejumpers identified strongly with the need to feel like unique and independent individuals apart from their fellow smokejumpers. As discussed earlier, one way they showed their identification with themselves as unique individuals even within the smokejumper ranks was their unwillingness to wear unified hard hats and backpacks or to walk in a straight line. Their need to feel independent and separate from their fellow smokejumpers may come from how they talked about themselves as leaders. In the smokejumper organization, each member of the crew is expected to think independently and act as a leader.

Many if not all the smokejumpers were in leadership positions prior to joining the smokejumper ranks. One participant commented that ". . . the kind of people that are brought into this are usually the leaders of where they came from . . . who naturally are leading point . . . . " It makes sense that placing a group of "leaders" together who are naturally accustomed to leading a fire operation would foster a great deal of dialogue and disagreement.
While some participants expressed their initial discomfort with what they saw as “dissent among the ranks” during their first few years as smokejumpers, the practice of “speaking out” was supported as an important attribute smokejumpers identified with and maintained in their daily work. During one of the interviews, after talking about how the U.S. Forest Service had been encouraging wildland firefighters to speak out if they had a safety concern, one of the jumpers interjected with a ring of humor in her voice:

Smokejumpers do that all the time. They’re not encouraged by the Forest Service – they just do that. They don’t need to be encouraged by anybody to do that...that’s kind of a smokejumper personality...smokejumpers don’t need to be encouraged by anybody to speak out about what they think is right or wrong...I’m around them a lot so I get to hear that a lot. Or question it a lot.

All the participants viewed the ability to speak out as a unique feature of the smokejumper organization and an important part of the individual smokejumper identity. They talked about how speaking out established each smokejumper as an equal “stakeholder” that had a right to his or her personal “say” in a given fire situation regardless of rank. It allowed them to express independent thoughts and separate themselves as unique individuals from the rest of the smokejumper organization. As one participant stated, being able to express your individual opinion and have it count is “...the pride of it [being a smokejumper]....”
Participant interviews also support that the organization itself promotes individual independence as an important part of the smokejumper identity through several organizational policies. First, smokejumpers talk about how they are never on the same load with the same people. The jump list which determines who is going on the next jump was described as something “sacred” that would never be tampered with. Many times smokejumpers don’t even know how many of them are needed until they are up in the plane and flying to the destination. More than one participant said that it’s not unusual to get up in a plane and come back if they need three jumpers and you are the fourth, increasing the uncertainty of who each smokejumper will be working with throughout the fire season.

In addition to the jump list, participants reported that they are hired out to large fires individually rather than as pre-packaged crews. One participant talked about the variety of assignments they can receive independent of what other jumpers are doing:

...[smokejumpers are] individual resources and so I might be called to go do – hey you want to go do a strike team assignment? You want to go do a task force leader assignment? You want to go be a blaster?

Other jumpers often talked about being on assignments where they were the only smokejumpers present, using their leadership training to take charge of hotshot crews, district crews, and perform other overhead assignments. Several participants identified strongly with being sent to large fires as individual overhead, using these as examples of what it meant to them to be a smokejumper.
By looking at how smokejumpers' independent identity separates them from the rest of the wildland fire community as well as independent from one another, we gain a much more complex view of how smokejumpers see themselves. Rather than a single, static image, this discourse shows an image of layers and complex turns and twists combining together to make up their daily work identity. To further complicate this, smokejumpers also strongly identified with the smokejumper organization as a group, feeling connected to their fellow smokejumpers, and with the wildland fire community, feeling connected to their fellow wildland firefighters.

**Independent/Connected: Smokejumpers as Connected Group Members**

While smokejumpers are proud of their independence from the wildland fire community as well as their independence from one another, ironically they also identified forcefully with their fellow comrades in the smokejumper organization. During several interviews, participants were openly upset with critics who suggested they might not be a tight-knit group. They were particularly upset about a study on crew cohesion that claimed smokejumpers were the least *cohesive* crew of all the wildland firefighting teams (Driessen, 2002). This participant expressed herself in no uncertain terms:

...they did this whole study on crew cohesion and how jumpers weren't cohesive...bullshit—complete bullshit.

All the participants echoed her frustration and many talked about feeling more connected as smokejumpers than they had felt in other wildland firefighting positions they had filled previously in their careers:
...a couple years ago a cohesion test came out and they were saying
jumpers were the most uncohesive and I really took offense to it because
I’ve been through all the ranks – all the different levels, shot crew,
districts, different agencies, everything and it’s like I feel there’s more
cohesion here than almost anywhere...

Many participants talked about their connection as a “loyalty” or “bond,”
stemming from the “quality” of the people they worked with. One jumper boldly declared
that he would be willing to “…take a bullet for these people.” Others talked about it as
“trust” emerging from putting their lives into the hands of the person packing the
parachute, or choosing the jump spot. One jumper talked about it as smokejumper
cohesion and felt like this connection came from “…the ability to communicate
clearly…a clear line of respect – open channels.” Most agreed that it was something
that was hard to explain unless you felt it yourself. One participant suggested why this
might be the case, talking about it as something that is less obvious to outsiders:

…it’s not the kind of cohesion like we’re some kind of NBA team going
to a national championship—not that that’s not there, but I don’t think that
people from the outside would pick up on it [smokejumper cohesion]
unless they spent a good couple weeks watching us interact…it’s not
obvious to an outsider.
Many times this identification with “loyalty” and connection came through while participants were sharing experiences that described what it meant to them to be a smokejumper. One jumper said that what it meant to him to be a smokejumper was best described by an experience that had nothing to do with fighting fire. A fellow jumper had undergone a personal tragedy and hadn’t had time to finish the repairs on his home. This participant reported about how the smokejumpers in the area responded:

...I came to work and sort of mentioned it to one person and said “hey, if we could rally some people together we could all really help him out and clean up his place, get some things going for him. You know basically, come together.” The next morning...there was dump trucks...just an unbelievable amount of people that showed up – all jumpers. There was jumpers that came down from Kalispell that retired 30 years ago. There was jumpers that had heard through the grapevine that called, sent money. I mean it was an amazing amount of people that came together in the drop of a hat simply because of who he is and just how these people are. Something that I figured when we first looked was going to take probably two or three days, took probably seven hours.”

As this experience illustrates, the connection smokejumpers talk about seems to transcend the traditional work relationship, bleeding over into their personal lives. Most participants felt they could count on their “bros” for just about anything, even outside of work. Often smokejumpers talked about their identification with one another as a result of their shared
training experience and a variety of core values they had in common with each other, framing this connection with each other as something that was unobtrusive in nature and based on shared values.

However, their “bond” as smokejumpers was not restricted to those they worked with on their own base. Participants often talked about the unique connection they felt with the entire smokejumper community nationwide. One participant made it quite clear that felt the same connection with smokejumpers they’ve never met, emphasizing how this ideal is caught within the identity of “smokejumper”:

The person that I don’t know - who’s gonna rookie in Redding this summer - when I get on a fire is as much my bro as somebody who I rookies with...it’s understood that kind of respect and quality of character exists no matter where.

Many of the smokejumpers tied this “respect” and “quality of character to a unified national organization that tried to keep things relatively similar in terms of training and functionality from base to base. Smokejumpers often gained a sense of continuity by working with other smokejumpers throughout the year from other bases around the country.

Ironically, despite their previous themes of independence, smokejumpers’ patterns of discourse also showed that they readily identified with the wildland fire community as well. Many times this came through in the kinds of stories smokejumpers talked about during interviews. Rather than talking about smokejumping experiences alone during our
discussions, participants would often try to answer a question by talking about an experience they had as a hotshot crew member or while they were working on a district. At first, this was a bit frustrating and I found myself constantly steering the conversation back to experiences they had as smokejumpers. However, these patterns of conversation actually expressed the connection they still had with former crews they had worked with in other areas of wildland firefighting. They still felt connected to other wildland firefighters. One participant talked openly about how his hotshot crew was upset when he became a smokejumper but how he still felt he was part of their crew:

I remember when I came off the hotshot crew the people that were on it were almost angry at me when I left and that I wasn’t a part of their crew anymore (which I felt like I still was)…

Even during the interview, this participant talked about how he still felt like he was a hotshot, despite more than twenty years of firefighting as a smokejumper. This makes sense that they would feel connected since many of them spent five years or more fighting fire prior to becoming a smokejumper.

Other jumpers felt more connected to the wildland fire community after South Canyon. It was described as a time of great reflection by a number of participants during the interviews. One jumper talked about South Canyon as a reality check inspired by losing smokejumpers along with other wildland firefighters in the tragedy:
...it was a good reality check. It sort of made us – it really forced us to realize we’re part of the larger community here and it’s not just a bunch of those dumb other people getting burned up...

As this participant points out, South Canyon seemed to give smokejumpers a greater sense of their own mortality. Many participant accounts agreed with this, recognizing South Canyon as a moment of reflection that brought about a greater sense of unity within the wildland fire community. Rather than just the other "dumb" firefighters getting "burned up," many participants who lived through the event openly recognized that the tragedy forced them to acknowledge that they, like the rest of the wildland fire community, were mortal and could make mistakes. Many times it also called into sharp relief the near misses they had experienced that had placed them in a potentially similar position to their "bros" at South Canyon. The fact that they had been on the surviving end while others had gotten "caught" often reinforced the actuality of their own vulnerability, resulting in an even deeper connection to other wildland firefighters in the larger community.

In conclusion, smokejumpers clearly identify with independence, separating themselves through their discourse from the wildland fire community as well as from their fellow smokejumpers. However, they also very clearly expressed a connection to smokejumpers at their own base, smokejumpers nationally, and to other areas of wildland fire as part of what made them who they were. In combination with the safety/aggression tension, these severe
contradictions point to the fragmented and competing ideals that make up the smokejumper identity. I will now talk about how they discursively manage these identity tensions in daily practice.

**Tension Management Techniques**

While the contradictions are severe, the participant discourse presented in the previous section shows that smokejumpers seem to maintain a surprisingly stable sense of who they are. This suggests that despite significant contradictions they have found ways of managing these tensions in order to preserve solidarity. In this section, I will answer the second research question which asked: *How do smokejumpers discursively manage their identity tensions in daily practice?*

In this section, I will be presenting discursive management techniques which represent the patterns of communication organizational members use in order to ease the burden and reduce the strain of conflicting tensions on their organizational identity. By looking at these patterns of transcribed discourse, my analysis points to two primary discursive management techniques participants consistently used in order to make sense of themselves amid the significant contradictions presented by their own identities. For each of the management techniques, I will first define the technique, show how participants enacted each technique through their discourse, and then show how the technique eases the identity tensions discussed in the previous section.
Discourse of Harmonic Compatibility

The discourse of harmonic compatibility deals with discursively positioning two opposing identities together by reframing conflicting identity tensions as separate but complementary identities. Participants typically enacted this management technique by discursively positioning one identity as the means of achieving the other in practice. For example, in talking about how safety allowed them to fight fire more aggressively, several participants talked about how the LCES safety mantra (Lookouts, Communication, Escape routes, Safety zones) (Gleason, 1991) actually allowed them to be more aggressive and efficient firefighters:

I think it's easy to manage safety and doing your job, because that's part of your job... If you’re doing your LCES while you’re doing your job, you've got safety and efficiency. You're doing it.

This participant describes safety as something that is written into what it means to aggressively fight the fire (e.g. "doing your job") and therefore is easy to do because it is already "part of the job." However this example points out a cost to framing two opposing identities as complimentary partners. Through the discourse of harmonic compatibility, the mutually exclusive frame of being "safe" and being "aggressive" is exchanged for a new definition of safety that supports and actually defines what it means to fight fire aggressively. Values that were once solely used to define what it meant to be
aggressive (i.e., "doing your job," etc.). suddenly find expression in what it means to be "safe."

Other participant discourse substantiated how this discourse was used as a means of reframing safety as a necessary prerequisite of being aggressive. Some said that to aggressively fight fire without first making sure they had lookouts posted or escape routes secured would be "asinine" and something they wouldn't even consider—it was part of the job. Others talked about safety as a contributing "challenge" that was just part of what they had to overcome on the job in order to "...[get] on the ground safely..." or to make sure everyone "...got home..." at the end of the day. In other words, being a "safe" firefighter was achieved simultaneously with being an aggressive firefighter by reframing safety as part of getting the job done (e.g., being "aggressive").

Participants also emphasized the need to aggressively attack small fires in order to ensure safety that might be compromised if fires were allowed to grow into large, multi-crew project fires. In other words, being an aggressive firefighter actually allows them to be safe firefighters by helping them achieve a greater condition of safety for themselves and others. One participant explained it as a frustration he had with management attempts to ensure their safety:

... they are trying to evaluate, evaluate, before they call us in – before they even engage their people...and see what the risk is and it just actually exposes us to more risk...a small fire like this in the morning – this room's size – in the morning its this size, in the afternoon it's the size of the building...so you are exposing that many more people to the situation.
Another smokejumper had a similar response, saying that "...just about all of us here feel that aggressive fire fighting is safe fire fighting and that's because you contain it [the fire] small." Again, by reframing safety as the achievement of containing fires small, this participant frames safety in terms of what it means to be aggressive (i.e., being "successful," "get the job done," etc.). In our interview, the same participant reinforced this definition of safety by talking about a situation where smokejumpers spotted a small fire on a ridge just outside of Missoula, Montana. They requested authorization to engage it, but were denied and told to wait while higher ups got them official authorization. Before they could get authorization, the once small fire quickly burned out of control, eventually threatening several homes and endangering the lives of residents not to mention putting additional firefighting crews at risk. This participant was frustrated because he felt that an aggressive use of a few smokejumpers while the fire was small could have reduced the amount of danger hundreds of others were placed in. He talked specifically about the role of being aggressive in achieving greater safety:

...we're containing the risk. If we fail to catch a fire and it gets that big or even a tenth of that big now you're going to bring in extra crews, you've got tens of thousands of snags out there, you've got rolling rocks, you've got all this stuff. So that's why aggressive is good.

Once again, this frames what it means to be a "safe" firefighter as someone that can successfully prevent the dangers of large fires, thereby reducing the risk of
injury to themselves and others, but positions safety as an accomplishment that can be brought about by an aggressive firefighter who wants to "get the job done" and wants to be "successful" (as defined by putting the fire out). As a result, in order to be both a "safe" and "aggressive" firefighter – all jumpers have to really focus on is being "aggressive." By being aggressive firefighters and attacking fires while they are small, smokejumpers are able to support two identities at once and eliminate the tension caused by opposing ideals.

There seems to be enough consistency in the data to suggest that, when using the discourse of harmonic compatibility to engage the tension between safety and aggression, smokejumpers consistently favor being an aggressive identity by reframing what it means to be "safe" in terms consistent with how they define themselves as "aggressive" firefighters.

In addition to the safety/aggression tension, the data also show that smokejumpers used the discourse of harmonic compatibility to manage the tension of independent/connected. They enacted this in practice by talking about how being an "independent" firefighter actually constituted what it meant to be a smokejumper "crew."

One of the jumpers emphasized this, highlighting the unusual freedom he felt by being part of a smokejumper crew:

...it [smokejumping] has that level of freedom that you can’t find – or it’s hard to find in other crews because of the fact that it’s [independence is] part of the crew.
This participant points to how independence is actually part of being a member of a (smokejumper) crew. Again, smokejumpers used one identity to achieve the other – being part of a crew allowed them to be independent because independence as an ideal was built into what it meant to be a smokejumper crew. Another participant talked about how being part of the smokejumper organization actually opened doors for greater independence because the organization valued this as an important attribute to "foster" in people:

We're a pretty independent organization. We try to foster that in people.

Look for that in people that we're hiring and then foster that in the way we train them. You'll be counted on to act independently to make your own decisions.

Aside from the oxymoron of being an "independent organization," this smokejumper reinforces identity as a shared value among participants that constitutes group membership. As this participant suggests "independence" is framed as an important quality the smokejumper organization looks for in those they hire and something they try to "foster" in those they train. As a result, being independent actually achieves a sense of connectedness because it is an important quality shared by all organizational members. This seems to suggest a view of connection akin to organizational identification based on shared values.

Many participants focused on how their ability to independently express their own ideas in the field brought them close together. One participant suggested that
brainstorming independent ideas and maintaining open communication where people felt comfortable speaking their mind was an act that brought them closer together as a group:

That’s what brings you close is communication...I’m not saying that trying to get a buzz word going, but I mean, what brings people tight? What makes them stick?...either they have spent a long enough time together that they don’t really need to say everything or they have to have a system of respect with built in – “what do you think? What do you think?”...

This participant talks about open communication patterns (independence) that bring members closer together (connection). This reaffirms that smokejumpers seem to view connection in terms of identification based on the shared value of independence.

Looking at specific examples of how the tension between independence and connection are managed in practice suggests that smokejumpers seem to reduce the tension between the two by framing independence as a shared value and connection as the resulting condition of identification brought about by communicative expressions which reinforce an independent identity. Once framed in this way, smokejumpers only have to focus on being independent in order to feel connected.

In a world where safety allows smokejumpers to aggressively get their job done, where “aggressive fire fighting is safe firefighting” [italics mine], and where independence reinforces connection, it’s a challenge to see how any single smokejumper could possibly feel like his or her identity was fragmented or even
conflicted. It’s no doubt that these opposing identities make strange bedfellows, but by forcing them together (e.g., saying that to do one allows them to do the other), participants effectively nullify much of the contradiction they may experience between the two in their everyday lives. Using discourse to reconstitute each identity as separate but complementary allows smokejumpers to stabilize the turmoil each tension may cause to their overall sense of self by sidestepping the conflict and fragmentation through reframing one identity in terms of how they define the other.

*Discourse of Situation “fit”*

Another management technique emerged from the data during my analysis. I found consistently that smokejumpers talked about shifts in the tensions between safety/aggression and independent/connected based on the needs of the situation. The *discourse of situation “fit”* deals with talking about the needs of the situation as a means of negotiating identity in practice. Participants enacted this technique throughout their interviews by talking about the situation as a justification for how they managed a particular tension.

Many participants talked about unique characteristics of the situation as a justification for how they managed a particular tension. Often they did this by denouncing rigid rules as an inadequate way of managing fire. One participant went so far as to say that anyone that tried to use “black and white” rules as a means of negotiating how safe or aggressive to be in a situation had an “unsafe” attitude. He maintained throughout his interview that it was the situation *not* the rules that defined what was safe and what was overly aggressive:
...You never want to be black and white about anything. As soon as you start looking at everything [as] a black and white situation, that’s an unsafe attitude ... I’ve cut fire line down hill in Southern California at night a couple of times – majority of times you usually don’t. It was appropriate at the time. The fire was really inactive and it was the fastest way for us to get it done. There was a crew working from down below too working towards us and it was appropriate. it was ok.

Talking about cutting line downhill as something that should be considered safe, depending on the situation rather than a generalized rule, is a significant statement. The U.S. Forest Service has been very clear about its position on digging line downhill – digging line downhill is prohibited. Investigations leading to the TriData study (1996) found this to be a significant reason why the firefighters on Storm King Mountain got into trouble. When digging line downhill, firefighters place themselves in a fairly vulnerable position. If burning logs rolled down hill, which is often the case, or if the fire spotted, sending burning sparks from the main fire down to the bottom of the gulch, a fire could start which could then race up the hill and catch the unwary firefighters. However, digging line downhill allows firefighters to get more line in with less energy since they are digging down rather than up. This participant is saying, quite openly – something that many other participants agreed with during my interviews – that the conditions of the specific situation should control whether they can be more
aggressive on a given fire not the rule book. Another jumper concurred, openly disagreeing with the rigidity of the newly written Ten Standard Fire Orders:

There's people out there that say, "Don't bend 'em; Don't break 'em." I don't think you can do that all the time and accomplish the job...you're going to dig downhill because the environment here is going to let you do that. You're not going to do it just because you're lazy and that's the easiest way to get the line in.

Taking this argument in a slightly different direction, other participants talked about situation as a better way of navigating their contested identities than cultural norms. One participant was extremely upset about a situation he was in when his smokejumper crew boss chose to follow the cultural norm of requesting feedback from all the jumpers (inviting them to embrace an "independent" identity) rather than just making the decision as a leader (inviting them to embrace a "connected" identity as crew members) that needed to be made based on the circumstances they were in. He told the following story:

...for a few of us that were standing there it was no question what we needed to do, where we needed to go, and why we needed to go – it was that quick. But to him, it was "I need everybody's input on what's going on." And we're like "Where have you been, hey look down at that fire, don't you think it's getting hot down there? Can't you see it's coming up"... I do have my points to where "hey let's stop what we're doing, let's
meet back up on top and discuss it.``but I make sure we’re the hell out of wherever. I’m not going to sit there while the fire’s going looping and go “hey, what do you think?”…

As this jumper points to, despite cultural trends such as this one where jumpers are accustomed to giving their opinion and acting in more independent ways, there are clearly moments in daily practice when it is better to just make a decision and act in more connected ways. Those turning points in deciding whether to embrace more of a connected identity verses an independent one are clearly managed according to the needs of the situation rather than a generalized rule or cultural norm.

There are important reasons why situational management is a good way of managing smoke jumper identity in practice: wildland fire is unpredictable and constantly changing. One jumper pointed this out during the interviews:

It’s like I said, it’s dynamic. It changes at the drop of a hat depending on the wind and weather, fuels or whatever – things that are beyond your control sometimes.

The discourse showed that many of the smokejumpers recognized that there was only so much a person could do to manage a fire. One participant clearly recognized that “…when it’s going to do its thing, its going to do its thing. So, you just have to keep out of the way.” Another smoke jumper described fire as an unstoppable “hurricane” and
talked about the situational elements that motivated him to shift from more of an “aggressive” identity to more of a “safe” identity during one experience on a fire:

We flew over a fire and I was the person in charge and I had a lot of rookies on that plane load and I asked for some reinforcements immediately—an air tanker to come in and drop on this fire. And I was told ‘no’ and my priorities immediately changed. I had a focus on the fire and when they said “no, we’re not going to give you what you need.” I knew at that point we wouldn’t catch it. So it was real clear that we weren’t and so my full attention was in to making sure that the crew was safe...what I think that that teaches you is that you can’t stop a hurricane. You can’t stop a fire that’s going to roar to the top of the hill once it gets the power behind it.

As this account shows quite clearly, this participant began the operation with a fairly aggressive mindset that he was going to catch the fire. However, he mentions some important situational clues that motivated him to shift gears and embrace his identity as a “safe” fire fighter. First, he points out that the crew mostly consisted of “rookie” members, suggesting that a fresh crew of rookies were too inexperienced to chance managing this fire. Second, he clearly explains that his request for reinforcements was denied. Following this, he states that these two situational elements came together and helped him see that he wouldn’t be able to completely accomplish what his “aggressive” self wanted to do – he
therefore embraced his identity as a "safe" firefighter and focused on the safety of his crew.

During another interview one of the participants talked about how situational elements created division within the crew. Following a fire blowup, smokejumpers decided it was best to go into the black (embracing a "safe" identity) where the fire had already burned and wait for it to die down a bit before reengaging it. The participant described the experience including his take on much of the dialogue:

One of the old jumpers – really old, jumping since the 60’s, he says “I’m going to go over and hook up with somebody else.” one of our jumper in charges. And about four of us said, well. no we’re staying here, we’re in the black, its fine – there’s nothing we can do. It’s, we’ve got to let this thing go. We’ll pick it up when the wind dies and we get more resources I mean it’s gone – there’s nothing. I mean look at that retardant thing, it looks like its dumping fuel on the fire instead of retardant. It’s just going. And he said “no, we’ll be safer if we go around. We’ll go around back and we’ll go…” It got to be quite the heated argument and there was a lot of cursing and “you guys aren’t tough like the old guys were”...

Following this, the older jumper chose to separate himself from the majority group, taking a younger jumper with him and leaving the majority of the jumpers in the black. The situational elements that motivated the majority group’s decision
to disengage (abandoning their "aggressive" identity in favor of a "safe" identity) and stay in the black included: excessive wind activity, lack of resources, and overly aggressive fire activity.

While most of the crew collectively decided it was best to stay in the black (embracing what they thought was a "safe" identity combined with more of a connected "crew" identity), there were other situational elements that motivated the older crew member to take his course of action (embracing an "independent" identity). As shown above: he felt it would be safer to go around, he felt that the other jumpers weren't as "tough" as the old jumpers used to be. However, in both cases, their negotiation of the tension between independent and connected was done by recognizing and adhering to situational elements.

This particular example also points to a bit of cross over between the safety/aggressive tension and the independent/connected tension. While the argument was rooted in the safety/aggression tension it led to choices that involved negotiations dealing with their identity as either an independent individual or a connected group member. This makes sense since both tensions are both part of the larger construction of the smokejumper identity. However, this overlap is also rooted in the tension management technique that is being employed by the smokejumpers. Situational management implies a level of subjectivity because it is based not only on the subjectivity of what they see, but also on how they individually interpret and make sense of what they see. If they interpret things differently it stands to reason that smokejumpers will face choices that involve acting independently or submitting themselves to the decision of the group.
When smokejumpers engage in *situational management* they ease the tension they feel between conflicting identities by prioritizing one over the other. However, neither identity seems to completely consume who they are in the moment. They may prefer one in one situation over the other much like a craftsman would prefer one tool over another depending on the type of work the situation called for. but the data shows that they keep the other at the “ready” if the situation changes. By choosing the identity in tension that best meets their needs, they reduce the amount of stress they feel trying to force a square peg through a round whole, so-to-speak. Safety is a better identity to keep at the forefront than aggression when danger is high, resources are low, and the experience level of their crew is under developed. Connection is preferred in a fast paced situation when spending time allowing everyone voice would jeopardize their safety. Regardless of which end of the tension smokejumpers choose in actual practice, it is evident from the data that they choose the one that has better “fit.” Those that go against the grain, choosing the identity that contradicts the nature of the situation, seem to get the most back-lash because it places them in a state of high stress.

**Safety/Aggression & Smokejumper Identity**

This last section will engage the findings from this study related to the final research question. The third research question asks: *How does the tension between fighting fire aggressively and providing for safety first: a) challenge and/or reinforce smokejumper identity, and b) get reshaped by smokejumper identity in actual practice?* To answer this question I will first talk about how the tension challenges how
smokejumpers see themselves, then talk about how the tension reinforces how they see themselves, and then show how smokejumper identity reshapes the tension in practice.

**Safety/Aggression Challenges Smokejumper Identity**

The safety/aggression tension seems to challenge how smokejumpers see themselves in two ways. First, the safety/aggression tension challenges how smokejumpers see themselves because safety has largely been defined by the U.S. Forest Service in terms of rules based structures like the Ten Standard Fire Orders. Smokejumpers pride themselves on refusing to conform and follow certain rules and policies. One jumper openly framed non-conformity as a unique smokejumper strength:

> ...our best strengths are what drive the fire community the most nuts - Our non-conforming to certain things – certain rules – and our non-conforming to certain procedures.

In place of "certain rules," smokejumpers seem to prefer less rigid structures like "tradition" and "common sense" that acknowledge them as "experienced" firefighters. As shown through participant discourse presented earlier in this chapter, smokejumpers often don't feel like "safe" people if they have to conform to strict black and white mandates that offer little situational flexibility.

However, the U.S. Forest Service has historically defined what it means to be safe as behavior that complies with the Ten Standard Fire Orders (Thackaberry, 2005). In addition, smokejumpers feel that over the last ten years the U.S. Forest service has "loaded the safety boat" with far too many rules that paint them into corners. While
smokejumpers obviously don't disagree with being "safe." they have difficulty swallowing safety when it is defined in terms of following a printed list of relatively inflexible procedures because it contradicts who they are as non-conformists. This challenges how smokejumpers see themselves because even though they see themselves as non-conformists they are largely obligated to follow them in their daily work lives. In situations where they must comply with organizationally defined safety protocol rather than using their own "common sense," smokejumpers actively contradict deep set values that help them make sense of who they are.

Second, this tension challenges how smokejumpers see themselves by creating an expectation of perfection. Smokejumpers universally agreed that South Canyon brought in its wake an increased emphasis on the need for safety. While there was slight variation with some reports, most agreed that the increased emphasis on safety within the field has created some impossible expectations for their performance. One participant expressed his frustration in being held to an impossible standard:

...we have these ten standard orders that are fairly nebulous. You look at them and I can't guarantee you that when I'm on a fire that when interviewed the next day or whatever that every single firefighter on every single crew that's out there is going tell an interviewer that I assured that he personally knew what the expected fire weather was, for instance. I mean, I can broadcast it to the crew leaders, you know, or I can have a big briefing where I talk to 120 people at the same time and shout it out but you know. So a lot of those things are just really impossible.
Being held to an impossible standard clashes and challenges how smokejumpers see themselves because they feel they are defeated before they even begin. Smokejumpers see themselves as firefighters that “can do” almost anything they set their minds to do. They have a very strong motivation to overcome obstacles and “succeed.” However, setting a no failure policy to the standard orders and expecting firefighters to demonstrate unconditional, all-knowing execution of those orders makes it impossible for smokejumpers to succeed because they themselves are not perfect. As a result, safety and aggression challenges how smokejumpers see themselves by suggesting they “can’t do” what they are expected to do. As a result, while smokejumpers see themselves as “safe” firefighters – they never quite get the same recognition from the industry because what it means to be “safe” is tied up in faultless adherence to bureaucratic policy.

**Safety/Aggression Reinforces Smokejumper Identity**

Ironically, looking at safety/aggression tension as something rooted in rules and procedures simultaneously reinforces smokejumper identity by emphasizing the differences between smokejumpers and the rest of the wildland fire community. While they may have to conform to standard safety protocol as part of a day’s work, being confronted with safety *rules* provides them with a convenient foil by which to define themselves as independent non-conformists. Smokejumpers are not the type of people who keep their mouths shut when they disagree with something. As the first section of this chapter illustrates, smokejumpers don’t need encouragement to speak out and share their opinions. Throughout the interviews, participants were openly disagreed with long lists of rules and the direction the U.S. Forest Service has taken in expecting them to
adhere to those rules with relative perfection. However, by talking about their frustrations, the rules-based safety/aggression tension actually allowed them to distance themselves as smokejumpers from the U.S. Forest Service and other wildland firefighters. In essence, their discourse reconfirmed their identity as independent firefighters.

Many times the experiences they shared focused on orders they were given by fellow wildland firefighters set as incident commanders over them on a larger project fire. Under such circumstances, one participant suggested that as long as a mandate from the supervising firefighter didn’t clash with situational cues that might indicate danger, they would typically comply. However, this didn’t mean they would follow the order happily. Often compliance came hand in hand with a great deal of grumbling and complaint. Other times, when safety rules came as an order from the district supervisor as long as they could accomplish the same task doing things their own way, smokejumpers reported just ignoring what they were told and doing it the way they thought was best. Under rare circumstances, for example if a direct order placed them in what appeared to be an unsafe situation (based on the situational elements), smokejumpers would refuse to follow the order – one time being thrown off the fire as a consequence to their open refusal. While such dramatic displays are obviously less common in the post South Canyon community, mostly as a result of policies which reinforce individually sanctioned protests based on unsafe directives, such dramatic reactions were the stuff of legend within the smokejumper organization and talking about them reinforced how smokejumpers saw themselves as non-conformists. In any case, having to live in a community that for the most part still values obedience and relatively quick compliance with rules and orders provides smokejumpers with ample opportunities to express their disapproval and thereby
reinforce their own independence from the wildland fire community and, by so doing, reconfirm their unique connection with one another.

**Smokejumper Identity Reshapes Safety/Aggression in Practice**

How smokejumpers see themselves also reshapes the tension of safety/aggression in practice through the communicative ways in which they respond and manage this tension. The discourse of harmonic compatibility and the discourse of situational “fit” provide two unique ways in which smokejumper identity reshapes the safety/aggression tension in practice. Smokejumpers see themselves as “can do” individuals. They want to be successful and they pride themselves on being able to “get the job done.” Many of the participants’ interviews felt strongly that part of what it meant to be a smokejumper had to do with overcoming challenges, both personal and professional. Rarely if ever did I hear participants talk about joining the smokejumper ranks because they wanted to be “safe” or because they wanted to ensure the safety of others. They felt being “safe” firefighters was a responsibility they had to one another and others in the field and part of being a smokejumper in consequence of those connections – but they seemed to place a stronger emphasis on attracting individuals who were interested in overcoming challenges, who were problem-solvers, hard workers, etc. etc. As a result, it makes sense that how they talk about the tension between safety and aggression would reflect these core values. As the previous section suggests, the discourse of harmonic compatibility appears to function as a means of reducing the stress of opposing identities by framing safety in terms of what it means to be “aggressive.” In other words, it frames safety as a condition brought about by “aggressively fighting fire” and therefore something closely related to being “successful” and getting “the job done.” They see themselves as “safe”
firefighters if they are aggressive rather than the other way around. As a result, using discourse to reframe this tension in light of how they see themselves suggests a definite preference for their identity as “aggressive” firefighters. This provides a stark contrast to how the U.S. Forest Service seems to define safety as following safety orders and aggression as something brought about as a result of following those systematic orders. In effect it flips the organizational perception of this tension on its head.

Similarly, managing the tension using the discourse of situational “fit” seems to reshape safety/aggression in unique ways as well. Smokejumpers see themselves as experienced firefighters who have “common sense.” Managing safety and aggression situationally reflects this view of how they see themselves because being closely connected to situational cues implies a high level of experience in being able to recognize subtle shifts in weather, topography, fire behavior, and an alertness to human factors cues in crew members dealing with crew experience, trust, fatigue, etc. As a result, choices made in the situation between either a safe identity or a more aggressive identity are seen as “common sense” – something any seasoned and experienced firefighter would recognize and support. However, by situationally managing the tension between safety and aggression, smokejumpers effectively base their definition of safety and aggression on the evidence provided by the situation rather than the strict rules-based model provided by the Ten Standard Fire Orders or the U.S. Forest Service. Situations are not “safe” just because rules 1-9 have been complied with – rather, they are “safe” if, by their experience and “common sense,” they interpret situational cues as signals that they are “safe” or capable of being more or less “aggressive.”
However, recasting the safety/aggression tension in terms that contrast the U.S. Forest Service definition of safety/aggression as one that is defined in terms of "safety" and one that is defined in terms of following "rules" may have some unexpected consequences for the smokejumper organization. Essentially, the bind comes in that smokejumpers are largely supported in their emphasis of aggression over safety and recognized for their experience and "common sense" by the rest of the wildland fire community. Many of the smokejumpers felt a great deal of pressure to maintain a "can do" attitude in order satisfy the wildland fire community’s expectations of them. They often felt obligated to be "can do" and successfully meet objectives because they had a reputation in the field for being the kind of people that could do what others could not do. One participant, quoted in the first section of this chapter, was so clear on this point that he deserves to have his words repeated:

We feel like our existence is on people calling you and they’re going to call you because you can do the job for them when maybe somebody else couldn’t. So, we feel like we have to almost perpetuate the “can do” attitude to stay in business as an organization…that’s sort of almost engrained in you.

As this participant implies, perpetuating the “can do” attitude as part of what it means to be a smokejumper provides a great deal benefit to the rest of the wildland fire community. By reinforcing this identity, the U.S. Forest Service maintains a relatively gritty breed of firefighters willing to approach and determined to overcome obstacles
other firefighters may have been uncertain or incapable of overcoming. It also seems obvious that by supporting this attitude, the rest of the wildland fire community has at its disposal a crew of firefighters who can save them a great deal of money should they decide they need to corral a specific fire and just “get the job done” rather than letting it burn. As a result, it seems in the best interest of the wildland fire community to continue reinforcing how smokejumpers see themselves as “aggressive” firefighters, treating them as experienced and situationally savvy firefighters if only to maintain them as an on-call resource.

Although the field may support how smokejumpers reframe safety/aggression as a means of maintaining the status quo over their own responsibilities and budgets, doing so severely impacts how smokejumpers are perceived within the field. For example, while smokejumpers may continue to see themselves as “safe” firefighters, constituted by defining safety in terms of aggression and defining it situationally rather than as a result of conforming to “certain rules” and “procedures,” they may not be seen within the U.S. Forest Service as “safe” firefighters. This seems to come about quite simply as a difference in how the two groups define what it means to be “safe.” Since smokejumpers define it differently, they may feel they are being extremely “safe” firefighters, while being condemned by the wildland fire community and the U.S. Forest Service as working outside the bounds (they have) set for being “safe.” Since how they view the safety/aggression tension is closely tied to how they see themselves, this bind may be extremely difficult for them to slip away from.
Summary of Results

In this chapter I have presented my results and answered my three research questions. It seems from the analysis of this data that not only do smokejumpers see themselves in much more complex ways than they are viewed by outside members of the wildland fire community (Driessen, 2002), seeing themselves as both "safe" and "aggressive" and both "independent" and "connected," but that how they manage these tensions in practice reflects much deeper levels of how they see themselves as safe and aggressive, independent and connected. By managing these tensions using the discourse of harmonic compatibility, we see that they effectively mute the strain between tensions by largely redefining one identity in terms of the other. They redefine what it means to be a safe firefighter in terms of what it means to be aggressive and redefine what it means to be an independent firefighter in terms of what it means to be connected (largely viewing connection as a bond that results from the shared value of being "independent").

It is also quite clear to see how a rule-based model of what it means to be safe and aggressive, as held to by the U.S. Forest Service, challenges how smokejumpers see themselves as "experienced" and "common sense" firefighters who don't conform to "certain rules" and "certain procedures." This chapter also highlights how safety/aggression challenges how they see themselves as "can do" firefighters by emphasizing what they "can't do" in terms of unattainable organizational expectations. However, it's fascinating that while challenging how they see themselves on several levels, this view of safety/aggression simultaneously acts as a foil by which to reinforce their view of themselves as "independent" non-conformists, connected to one another by
this shared virtue. The last, and probably most important, thing this analysis seems to suggest is that how smokejumpers make sense of themselves reshapes the safety/aggression tension in ways that may be reinforced by the wildland fire community in practice, but may also be condemned by them as being “unsafe” according to a rules based model of safety/aggression. As a result, this may place smokejumpers in a difficult double bind where they may feel like they are “safe” firefighters, according to how they view what it means to be safe, while reinforcing an identity within the wildland fire community and U.S. Forest Service of being overly aggressive and unsafe firefighters. The next chapter will discuss the theoretical and practical implications resulting from the results of this analysis.
CHAPTER FOUR: DISCUSSION & IMPLICATIONS

In Chapter Three I presented the findings of this research study and answered the following research questions:

**RQ1:** What are the primary identity tensions smokejumpers must manage?

**RQ2:** How do smokejumpers discursively manage identity tensions in daily practice?

**RQ3:** How does the tension between fighting fire aggressively and providing for safety first: a) challenge and/or reinforce smokejumper identity, and b) get reshaped by smokejumper identity in actual practice?

In this chapter I will first present several theoretical implications of this study on the field of organizational communication. After doing this, I will then present several practical implications of this study on the smokejumper organization and the wildland fire community.

**Discussion: Theoretical and Practical Implications**

Previous research has pointed to the conflict and contradictions of organizational life (Ashcraft & Trethewey, 2004a; 2004b), particularly when dealing with conflicting identities (Larson & Pepper, 2003; Scott et al., 1998). This study reinforces and extends previous research into organizational tensions by looking at them as issues of identity. As
a result, this study provides several theoretical implications which affirm the productive use of a tension-centered perspective on the study of identity and identification in organizations. As an applied study, it also provides several practical implications that directly affect the smokejumper organization and the wildland fire community.

**Theoretical Implications**

There are two primary theoretical implications this study can offer to the field of organizational communication. First, this study reaffirms and extends previous research dealing with organizational identification and tension management techniques. Second, this study reinforces the tension centered approach as a productive way of looking at organizational identity and identification.

This study reaffirms and extends previous research with organizational identification and tension management techniques. Previous scholars have theorized (Scott et al., 1998) and offered empirical evidence for (Larson & Pepper, 2003) a structurational model of identification. This model embraces identity as a structure brought about by the patterns of communicative expression (identification) that make up organizational life, emphasizing the cyclical way in which identifications and identities create, maintain, and alter one another (Larson & Pepper; Scott, et. al.). This study reaffirms this relationship with empirical evidence, focusing on the daily and unavoidable identity tensions organizational members are faced with, and how their communicative management techniques (e.g., identification) maintain and reshape the structure of those identities in practice. As this study suggests, how organizational members make sense of the daily identity tensions they are faced with through discursive practices constitutes the process of identification as framed by Scott et al.
Such discursive patterns ease the tension between conflicting identities and influence how members view themselves. For example, while claiming opposing identities, the participants in this study used specific discursive management techniques that allowed them to maintain a relatively stable sense of who they were as smokejumpers. The discourse of harmonic compatibility achieved this by framing one identity in terms of the other, while the discourse of situational “fit” effectively fluctuated between identity alternatives depending on the unique needs of the situation. We see through this study that management techniques, while employed as a means of easing identity tensions, constitute the process of identification and actively reshape how members see themselves in practice. Smokejumpers who employed the discourse of harmonic compatibility actively reshaped their own identity by emphasizing what it meant to be “aggressive” over what it meant to be “safe.” By using the discourse of situational “fit,” members maintained an identity consistent with being “experienced” and having “common sense.” However, this study shows that such identities also reinforced and entrenched the ways in which participants communicated about these tensions by reshaping those identity tensions in ways consistent with how they viewed their own identity. This study therefore supports a structurational model of identification with empirical data that reaffirms the role of identification as a communicative means of shaping identity and being shaped by identity. What’s more, as a tension-centered approach, this study has targeted the daily unavoidable tensions members face as part of their daily lives (Ashcraft & Trethewey, 2004a). As such, it offers a unique scholarly perspective that supports the process of identity creation, maintenance, and change as
something that is not only accurate, but so common as to find expression in even the most common activities of organizational life.

Previous work has also focused specifically on management techniques used in balancing the tension between conflicting identities. This study supports and extends several recent studies targeting organizational tension management techniques generally and more specific techniques related to managing multiple identities as productive ways of managing unavoidable tensions. The techniques expressed in this study confirm two of those found by Tracy (2004) in her study of how prison guards manage organizational tension in practice. She found that two important and fairly positive ways prison guards managed tension was by framing tensions as complimentary edicts or as vacillating contradictions (pp. 136-137). When framing tensions as complimentary edicts, Tracy found that organizational members used one tension as a means of achieving the other. When framing tensions as vacillating contradictions, Tracy found that members acknowledged the contradiction between two opposing ideals, but toggled back and forth between them “depending on the time, target or content” (p. 136). This study lends support to such techniques as relatively positive ways of managing tension. Using the discourses of harmonic compatibility and situational “fit,” participants in this study were able to effectively mute the strain they may have otherwise felt from contradicting identities. However, in contrast to Tracy’s whole-hearted affirmation of complementary dialectics as the solution to organizational distress, this suggests that even this management technique may have negative ramifications on individual members if they choose to frame identities in ways that contradict larger organizational interpretations. As such, while this study supports previous work dealing with tension management, this
study also complicates what is meant by “productively” and “successfully” managing tension. This study suggests that future research must not only answer the question of whether or not a specific management technique effectively restores harmony to individuals, but how those management techniques impact individuals as they interact with organizational interpretations.

In addition, this study supports relative consensus in the field for the productive use of context-driven responses to tension. In their review of Martin (2004), Harter (2004), and Tracy’s (2004) recent studies targeting organizational tension, Ashcraft and Trethewey (2004b) argue that contextually based responses to tension may be a productive way of engaging daily tensions. However, Tracy adds an important caution, suggesting that one downside to managing tensions situationally is that it may create the image that organizational members are “inconsistent and haphazard” as they respond to changing circumstances (p. 136).

This study recognizes a situational approach to managing tension as relatively productive, but also supports Tracy's (2004) caution. Situational responses seem to be most effective because they justify moves back and forth between opposing identity tensions by using situation in the capacity of evidence. Larson and Pepper (2003) argue that organizational members use “logic” (p. 544), or evidence seen as credible to a particular group, to justify moves between conflicting identities (p. 544). Logically justifying moves between two opposing identities using situational evidence is a productive way of meeting the needs of dynamic and changing environments because it allows members to conceptually make sense of opposing structures of identity in their minds while maintaining the flexibility needed for adaptation to unexpected
circumstances. As contextual elements shift, situational evidence allows members to justify moves between identities in fluid ways that can actively cope with fast paced and complex choices. Using situational evidence as a means of negotiating complex interactions also provides a useful way for organizational members to make sense of their choices retrospectively (Larson & Pepper; Weick, 1969) and seems to be a convenient way of being able to defend one's choices in organizations that value the ground perspective. In agreement with recent research highlighting the use of context driven responses to organizational tension (Harter, 2004; Martin, 2004; Tracy) and multiple identities (Scott et al., 1998), this study suggests that identity management techniques rooted in the situational context of organizational life can be extremely beneficial to organizational members by giving them the flexibility to engage shifting organizational conditions. However, this study also suggests that responding situationally may have the unexpected consequence of distancing members from organizations that embrace strict, rules-based models.

In addition to supporting and extending previous research, this study reinforces the tension centered approach as a productive way of looking at organizational identity and identification. Ashcraft and Trethewey (2004a) emphasize three important claims that a tension-centered perspective makes about organizational life. First, the tension-centered perspective emphasizes the "fundamental irrationality of organizing" (p. 83) by centering organizational tension as a "normal condition of organizational life" (p. 81). Second, the tension-centered perspective reinforces how organizations are "gendered" (p. 81). Third, the tension-centered perspective positions "organizational irrationality," and the tensions inherent within that irrationality, "as an applied concern" (p. 81) which
serves to identify "more and less enabling" management techniques (p. 82). This study can contribute to two of these issues.

First, a tension centered lens points to a significant difference between conceptual recognition of identity tensions from a researcher's perspective and how organizational members themselves experience those tensions as part of their daily lives. From the outside looking in, identity tensions seem severe and irreconcilable, however a surprising lack of strain seems to more accurately describe how organizational members experience the tensions that make them who they are. Smokejumpers seemed relatively comfortable with what appeared to be fundamental oppositions. They lived with them on a daily basis and, what's more, they did not see them as fundamentally contradicting. In fact, participants in this study seemed almost offended when they were labeled only as "aggressive" or "independent." Such flat descriptions did not fully capture who they were as organizational members. Participants at the Missoula base not only had to deal with daily identity tensions but they didn't feel like legitimate members of the organization without them. This suggests that organizational members not only gain a much richer sense of identity by talking about the opposing identities that make up who they are, but that what it means to be a legitimate member of an organization is intimately tied up in contradiction. As a result, identity tensions seem to not only be constitutive of larger identifications emerging from the combined interaction of severe contradictions, but are surprisingly unobtrusive, almost lost in the shuffle so-to-speak, when experienced by members in everyday life.

Second, as a tension-centered perspective on identity and identification this study also highlights the profound impact management techniques can have on how
organizational members see themselves and how this might impact future behavior. answering the call for research that targets the "particular outcomes" of identity management choices (Larson & Pepper, 2003, p. 553). This study shows that how members manage conflicting identities restructures those identities in specific ways. For example, smokejumpers actively framed safety as part of what it meant to be aggressive and by so doing actually framed what it meant to them to be "safe" in terms of what it meant to them to be "aggressive." This is an important finding because it suggests that the management choices members subscribe to not only allow them to avoid the debilitating anxiety that might follow unaddressed tensions, but actually influence how they interpret their own identities. This underscores the importance of research that not only targets how tensions are managed, but research that targets how daily tensions are managed since daily management techniques may be more entrenched and unconscious and therefore more difficult for members to become aware of.

As a study that follows the impact that discursive management techniques can have on organizational members through to logical organizational consequences, this study can also comment on more specific outcomes of selected management techniques. Looking at how organizational members manage their identities reframing one in terms of the other suggests that reframing itself may have specific impacts on decision making. As this study shows, when organizational members frame one identity in terms of another, they effectively redefine that identity with the structured values of the other. Doing this allows members to reduce the strain on their sense of self, but does it only by sacrificing some of the unique values and decisional premises that make that identity unique. Simon (1976) argues that organizational identification reduces the clusters of
available alternatives members are aware of when making decisions. In this way, by inculcating members with specific decisional premises they are able to control behavior and choices unobtrusively (Simon, 1976; Tompkins & Cheney, 1985). Since identities are structures of values and decisional premises created, maintained, and altered through the process of identification (Scott et al., 1998), it makes sense that the specific combinations of values and decisional premises which structure identities also provide unique clusters of alternatives by which members make choices; therefore, overlap between opposing identities may suggest that potential clusters of unique alternatives during decisions are also reduced. Reducing the alternatives of choice may be a benefit to organizational members when making decisions by reducing what they are able to process in the moment, but also has the potentially negative effect of blinding members from productive possibilities lost through framing one identity in terms of the other. As a result this study has something unique to contribute to the field of communication studies by suggesting that how members manage identity tensions may impact their decision making ability. Future research is needed to produce a more detailed model of how identity management strategies might function in practice to help or hurt decision making in organizations.

**Practical Implications**

Safety as a Professional Identity

One of the primary recommendations of the TriData (1998) study to the U.S. Forest Service following the South Canyon disaster was to encourage them to implement a "safety" culture. To do this, TriData recommended that they find ways to integrate the value of "safety" as part of what it meant to be a professional firefighter. Data from this study suggest that the U.S. Forest Service may largely have accomplished this act within
the smokejumper community. Smokejumpers who participated in this study disagreed on whether jumpers prior to South Canyon had as strong a desire to be "safe" as did jumpers after South Canyon. Some felt strongly that jumpers have "always been this way," others felt that jumpers before South Canyon were never "willy-nilly, throw caution to the wind," but may have been more willing to "hang it out" a bit more. However, participants were universally agreed that contemporary jumpers were "safe" firefighters. This suggests the smokejumper organization, in the last ten years, has professionalized "safety" as part of what it means to be an elite firefighter — of what it means to be a smokejumper.

Reason (2000) argues that organizations interested in maintaining safety protocol must create and maintain a culture of safety. Creating a safety culture allows organizations to penetrate the deeper recesses of organizational behavior (Reason), allowing organizations to control their members unobtrusively (Tompkins & Cheney, 1985), and therefore allows them to influence members even when they are in the field acting on their own (Kaufman, 1960). However, Reason explains that safe cultures are bound by debilitating paradoxes. For example, organizations' efforts to provide for greater safety often bring about greater dangers.

Many participants in this study suggested several new dangers that have resulted from the industry's push for greater safety. Nearly every participant pointed out frustrations with the work/rest guidelines which restrict firefighter work/rest periods to a 2:1 ratio. If they work 16 hours on a fire, they must be off the clock for 8 hours. This is frustrating to initial attack firefighters who are used to being able to work hard until the fire is out. Participants consistently pointed to the new found dangers this safety protocol
placed them in. By compelling them to leave the fire line and be off-the-clock, smokejumpers reported that it often allowed the fire to grow beyond the control of an initial attack crew. Combined with safety measures restricting fighting fire at night, smokejumpers talked about having to watch as the fire grew from 1 or two acres to 20 or 30 acres by the time they could reengage. This required more firefighters (often with less experience), placed them in dangerous transition periods (Driessen, 2002), and compelled them to fight the fire during the hottest parts of the day instead of at night when the relative humidity is higher and temperatures are cooler. The South Canyon Ten Year Review (Safe Fire Programs and Forest Stewardship Concepts. 2004) engaged this issue reporting that one of the primary similarities between the South Canyon, Thirty Mile, and Cramer fires were that the fatalities all occurred when firefighters were engaging the fire during the hottest times of the day. As a result something that was meant to increase safety by making sure firefighters had time to rest may have the ironic quality of increasing the danger they face.

Following a similar flow of thought, this study suggests that considering oneself a “safe” firefighter as part of a professional identity may also lead to some dangerous outcomes. Smokejumpers openly talked about themselves as safe people. What’s more, many of those interviewed were openly defensive about accusations to the contrary. This suggests that being “safe” in their own eyes has become a protected and entrenched part of their professional identity.

However, there is a danger when individuals begin to think of and talk about themselves as “safe” people. Thinking of oneself as a safe person suggests a startling level of confidence in being able to consistently act in safe ways. People who already
think of themselves as “safe” may not be as aware of the dangers surrounding them as those who are still striving for safety. This suggests that having a “safe” identity may present a potentially compromising framework by which organizational members make sense of the world around them (Larson & Pepper, 2003). For example, Weick (1995) argues that when beliefs and actions contradict one another either the belief has to change to agree with the action or the action has to change to agree with the belief.

Smokejumpers in this study often defended generally accepted “unsafe” actions like digging line downhill as “safe” because the situation allowed them to do what they were doing. With significant pressure from the organization to maintain an identity of safety as part of what it means to be a professional, smokejumpers may be more inclined to justify increasingly aggressive behavior under the umbrella of “safety.” Using the discourses of forced compatibility and situational “fit” may mask truly dangerous and over-aggressive actions as “safe.”

However, the real danger in doing this seems to be how it may destabilize traditional boundaries between safety and danger. Justifying aggressive and dangerous behaviors as safe may make it difficult for smokejumpers to fully recognize when they are acting in dangerous ways. As a result, while seeking safety is an important attribute of any organization, it may be dangerous to see oneself as a “safe” person.

Smokejumpers, Crew Cohesion, and Identification

Unique to the smokejumpers are the bonds that tie them together. Smokejumpers are unique in the field of wildland firefighting because they do not work in pre-set teams. Rather, as discussed in the previous chapter, smokejumpers are utilized throughout the field as “independent resources.” It makes sense that they would not be closely tied
together primarily because they are constantly working with different people, being sent all over the country to "boost" other bases, and have such a fierce independence. However, this study suggests something more about the modern smokejumper that complicates current ideas about crew cohesion.

Driessen (2002) introduced crew cohesion as an important quality leading to safer crews during transition fires. He defined crew cohesion quite simply as the bonds that hold people together in groups. In his study he presented two types of crew cohesion: intercrew cohesion, intracrew cohesion. Intercrew cohesion describes the bonds that hold individuals together as tightly knit crew members. Intracrew cohesion describes the connectedness independent crews have with one another when uniting under a common banner to engage a large project fire or to handle a fire transitioning from small to large.

His study claims that "crew cohesion is "made" by individual workers themselves when they establish agreements about the rules that govern a host of their day-to-day work practices" (p. 7). Cohesion is based on open communication of ideas, team work (Driessen, 1996), and "...comes about only after crews have tested and negotiated acceptable norms governing their work practices" (Driessen, 2002, p. 7). In other words, in addition to other conditions of crew cohesion, Driessen (2002) argues that it takes time for "workers to "click" into crews" (p.7). Because cohesive crews need significant time interacting before they "click" together, Driessen believes "...it would be wrong to think that smokejumpers work in cohesive crews" (2002, p. 14).

However, Driessen's (2002) final evaluation does not account for several variables presented in my study. First, smokejumpers attest to strong bonds that tie them together despite their lack of crew-ness. Second, smokejumpers have a strong track
record for avoiding disaster – something Driessen (2002) identifies as an important byproduct of strong crew cohesion. Third, smokejumpers have a strong tradition of open communication that binds them together.

TriData (1998) offers additional insights, arguing that military research has shown that “operational cohesion does not have to be tied to how long a crew has worked together,” but is instead connected to essential cohesion issues like “respect, well-defined and communicated roles and responsibilities, and active control of barriers to cohesion…” (5-75). As a result, cohesion within the smokejumper ranks seems more closely linked to their strong identification with one another based upon shared values than it does upon their constant interaction with one another. This suggests the field may need a definition of crew cohesion that more adequately accounts for smokejumpers as a “cohesive” crew.

**Conclusion**

This study has used a tension centered approach (Ashcraft & Trethewey. 2004a) as a lens by which to investigate identity and identification within the smokejumper organization. This study offers several theoretical and practical implications that are worthy of repetition. Theoretically, this study supports and in many ways extends previous research dealing with the structurational model of identification and the particular outcomes of specific tension and identity management techniques. Importantly, it suggests that even the most celebrated management techniques are not beyond re-examination. In the spirit of Ashcraft & Trethewey’s (2004b) tension-centered approach, this study suggests that how researchers define “productive” (p. 178) management
techniques must move beyond the scope of whether such techniques guarantee day to day harmony. Researchers who examine the worth of management techniques must continue to look at "particular outcomes" (Larson & Pepper, 2003) and consider the larger ramifications brought about as management techniques interact with organizational identities and the particular binds created as a result of those interactions.

By way of practical implications, this study suggests that organizations must look more closely at the consequences of organizational culture on individual behavior – especially if that culture is a "safety" culture. Creating a professional identity of safety may have significant drawbacks for an organization like the U.S. Forest Service. Practices like those implemented by the smokejumpers as part of their rookie training which reinforce the fallibility of even the most experienced firefighters should continue to be promoted within the organization. In addition, the smokejumper organization would do well to not only allow, but invite future researchers to study their training methods. In terms of crew cohesion, this study also makes an important contribution by arguing for a definition of crew cohesion that takes the "special bonds" (Driessen, 2002, p.14) that bind together the smokejumper organization into greater consideration.

This study began by considering the challenges that might come in being able to fight fire aggressively while simultaneously making room for safety. However, as this study has shown, while researchers may look at this as a palpable bind, smokejumpers employ useful techniques that frame the two seemingly opposing identities as constitutive of a much larger whole. The modern smokejumper is a much more complicated creature than even this study was able to fully paint a picture of. The contradictions they manage on a daily basis attest to the fundamental complexity of everyday life, and overall
complexity of the smokejumpers themselves. This study has captured some of complexity that makes up the daily lives of organizational members, and provides an initial look into a very unique organization. However, recognizing the awesome complexity of everyday life, it makes more sense to look at this study as a faithful profile rather than a complete portrait. Like the smokejumpers themselves, the terrain of organizational identity continues to prove itself an increasingly complex and challenging environment for organizational communication researchers to navigate and understand.
APPENDICES

Appendix A

10 Standard Fire Orders [1994 version]

1. Fight fire aggressively but provide for safety first.
2. Initiate all action in response to current and expected fire behavior.
3. Recognize current weather conditions and obtain forecasts.
4. Ensure that instructions are given and understood.
5. Obtain current information on fire status.
6. Remain in communication with crew members, your supervisor, and adjoining forces.
7. Determine safety zones and escape routes.
8. Establish lookouts in potentially hazardous situations.
9. Retain control at all times.
10. Stay alert, keep calm, think clearly, act decisively.

(J. N. Maclean, 1999, pp. 237-238)
Appendix B

10 STANDARD FIRE ORDERS [updated]

The NWCG Parent Group just approved the revision of the Ten Standard Fire Orders in accordance with their original arrangement. The original arrangement of the Orders are logically organized to be implemented systematically and applied to all fire situations.

Fire Behavior

1. Keep informed on fire weather conditions and forecasts.
2. Know what your fire is doing at all times.
3. Base all actions on current and expected behavior of the fire.

Fireline Safety

4. Identify escape routes and make them known.
5. Post lookouts when there is possible danger.

Organizational Control

7. Maintain prompt communications with your forces, your supervisor and adjoining forces.
8. Give clear instructions and insure they are understood.
9. Maintain control of your forces at all times.

If 1-9 are considered, then...

10. Fight fire aggressively, having provided for safety first.

The 10 Standard Fire Orders are firm. We Don’t Break Them; We Don’t Bend Them. All firefighters have a Right to a Safe Assignment.

(National Interagency Fire Center. 2004)
Appendix C

INTERVIEW INSTRUMENT

1. What does it mean to be a smokejumper?
2. Tell me an experience that describes what it means to you to be a smokejumper.
3. How has the smokejumper organization changed over the last ten years?
4. How has what it means to be a smokejumper changed over the last ten years?
5. How do you balance fighting fire aggressively with providing for safety first?
   a. How do these conflict?
      i. Explain.
      ii. Tell me about a specific instance.
6. Tell me about an experience you've had on a fire when you felt like your safety was at risk.
   a. Who was involved?
   b. What happened?
7. What do you think about the “can do” culture as a valid representation of the smokejumper culture?
8. How does accountability work as a smokejumper?
9. How have things changed for you as a smokejumper since South Canyon?
10. According to current U.S. Forest Service rules, wildland firefighters can disobey a safety rule if they feel it would put them in danger. Tell me about an experience when you ever disobeyed orders that placed you in an unsafe situation.
Appendix D

Missoula Smokejumper Organization Chart

Fall 2004

R-1 Smokejumper Program Manager

Base/Operations Manager

Fuels/Project Foreman
Operations Foreman
Parachute Loft Foreman
Loadmaster Foreman
Training Foreman

Fuels/Project Assistant Foreman
Operations Assistant Foreman
Parachute Loft Assistant Foreman
Loadmaster Assistant Foreman
Training Assistant Foreman

GS-7 Squad Leaders

GS-6 Smokejumpers

GS-6 Temps

Rookies
Appendix E

Taken from Thackaberry (2005. pp. 4-5).

*Standard Fire Fighting Orders* *(ca. 1957)*

1. FIRE WEATHER. Keep informed of fire weather conditions and predictions.
2. INSTRUCTIONS. Know exactly what my instructions are and to follow them at all times.
3. RIGHT THINGS FIRST Identify the key points of my assignment and take action in order of priority.
4. ESCAPE PLAN. Have an escape plan in mind and direct subordinates in event of blow-up.
5. SCOUTING. Thoroughly scout the fire areas for which I am responsible.
6. COMMUNICATION. Establish and maintain regular communication with adjoining forces, subordinates, and superior officers.
7. ALERTNESS. Quickly recognize changed conditions and immediately revise plans to handle.
8. LOOKOUT. Post a lookout for every possibly dangerous situation.
9. DISCIPLINE. Establish and maintain control of all men under my supervision and at all times know where they are and what they are doing.
10. SUPERVISION. Be sure men I commit to any fire job have clear instructions and adequate overhead.

Table 1. From USFS, 1957. Appendix 6.
Appendix F

INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD CONSENT FORM

Please read this form and ask any questions you may have before you agree to be in this study. This study is being conducted by Cade Spaulding as the basis for his master’s thesis, chaired by Dr. Gregory Larson of the Department of Communication Studies at the University of Montana.

Background Information:

You are invited to participate in a research study dealing with smokejumper culture and decision making. I am interested in the values that make up what it means to be a smokejumper today and how that compares to what it meant to be a smokejumper before South Canyon. I’m also interested in how smokejumpers manage tensions between getting the job done and following safety rules and how this affects the decisions they make on the job.

This study is important. Many of the seasoned veterans in the field of wildland firefighting are coming to the age of retirement. As a result, wildland firefighting stands to lose many of its most experienced practitioners. These individuals have learned important lessons about how to productively manage the tension between safety and getting the job done that need to be recorded and passed on before they are lost. This study will record these lessons and look for patterns that contribute to productive firefighting as evaluated by the smokejumpers themselves. It will also help the industry gauge how smokejumpers and the smokejumper organization has changed since South Canyon in 1994 when increased safety initiatives were established.

Procedure:

You were selected as a possible participant in this research because you have experience as a smokejumper at the Missoula base. If you agree to be in this study, you will be interviewed and asked several questions which will be audio taped and then transcribed into text form. The interview will cover topics related to what it means to be a smokejumper today and what it meant to be one before South Canyon, and experiences where you had to manage tension between safety and getting the job done.

Interviews will be held at the Missoula Smokejumper Base. Ed Ward, the base manager, has given his support of this project and Tim Eldridge will make all further contact with you. After the study is complete, only the general findings of the study will be presented to the base manager. All personal information that may identify you, including your name, the date of the interaction, and the names of other participants mentioned will be omitted from the general findings. In other words, those that read the final report will not be able to identify specific participants with the information reported in the findings of this study. Your personal information will remain confidential and secure.
Potential Benefits:

You will receive no direct compensation either financial or otherwise for participating in this study. However, in the long run this study may improve wildland firefighter safety by helping firefighters better understand the things that impact the decisions they make. It may also improve safety in the long run by recording productive decision making patterns and by pointing out less productive patterns that could be avoided.

Potential Risks:

There are two potential risks for those participating in this study. First, this study will require a time commitment that takes you away from your normal work activities. You will be asked for 30 – 45 minutes of your work time for interviewing purposes with the possibility of additional interviews at your discretion and the discretion of the researcher. Second, in the process of these interviews you may experience difficult memories and strong emotions such as anger, frustration, sadness, etc. Should you experience any emotional discomfort you can receive help by contacting the Region 1 Employee Assistance Program Coordinator, Sandra Abbott, who is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, 365 days a year at:

Sandra Abbott (Region 1 EAP Coordinator)
(406) 329-3506 (voice)
(406) 329-3124 (fax)
sabbott@fs.fed.us

Voluntary Participation and Rights:

Your participation in this study is completely voluntary and will have no impact on your rights as an employee or the conditions of your employment. You have the right to stop the interview at any time and withdraw from the study completely. You have the right to skip over any question for any reason (or for no reason) and answer only the questions you feel comfortable answering. You have the right to strike any previous responses from the record at any time during the interview or after the interview is complete. Your participation has neither a positive or negative impact on your relationship with the University of Montana.

Confidentiality:

This study will protect your confidentiality. Each interview will be tape recorded. However, audio tapes will only be used in order to ensure the accuracy of the information and will be transcribed into text form. The audio tapes and transcriptions will be stored under lock and key at a safe location. Original names will be omitted from the transcriptions and your confidentiality will be protected. Only my thesis chair and I will have access to the audio tapes, transcriptions, and interview notes. Once I am finished with the information, I will destroy the audio tapes.
All data collected as part of this project are the property of the researcher. The Missoula Smokejumper Base and the participants of this study will only have access to the general findings of this study. They will not have access to audio tapes of interviews, transcribed interviews, and/or hand notes taken during the interview.

Questions:

You will receive a copy of this signed form to keep for your records. I will keep the other copy for my records. For any further questions regarding this study, please contact:

Cade Spaulding (Graduate Researcher)
(406) 243-6604 (office)
cade.spaulding@umontana.edu
Department of Communication Studies
University of Montana
Missoula, MT 59812

Gregory Larson, Ph.D. (Thesis Chair)
(406) 243-4161 (office)
greg.larson@montana.edu
Department of Communication Studies
University of Montana
Missoula, MT 59812

Note: In the event that you are injured as a result of this research you should individually seek appropriate medical treatment. If the injury is caused by the negligence of the University or any of its employees, you may be entitled to reimbursement or compensation pursuant to the Comprehensive State Insurance Plan established by the Department of Administration under the authority of M.C.A., Title 2, Chapter 9. In the event of a claim for such injury, further information may be obtained from the University’s Claims representative or University Legal Counsel. (Reviewed by University Legal Counsel. July 6, 1993).

Statement of Consent:

I have read the above information. I have asked questions and have received answers. I consent to participate in this study.

Signature ___________________________ Date ____________

Signature of Investigator ___________________________ Date ____________
References


Fire & Aviation Management (2004b). Some say you have to be crazy to jump out of an airplane into a forest fire, but smokejumpers can’t wait for the next fire call. [Online]. Available: http://www.fs.fed.us/fire/people/smokejumpers/index.html. [2004, 3 November].


