

Growing at Work: Employees' Interpretations of Progressive Self-Change in Organizations

Scott Sonenshein

Jesse H. Jones Graduate School of Business, Rice University, Houston, Texas 77005, scott@rice.edu

Jane E. Dutton

Stephen M. Ross School of Business, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109, janedut@umich.edu

Adam M. Grant

The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104, grantad@wharton.upenn.edu

Gretchen M. Spreitzer, Kathleen M. Sutcliffe

Stephen M. Ross School of Business, University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109,
{spreitze@umich.edu, ksutclif@umich.edu}

We develop theory about how growing at work is an interpretive accomplishment in which individuals sense that they are making progressive self-change. Through a study of how employees interpret themselves as growing at three organizations, we develop a theoretical account of how employees draw from contextual and personal resources to interpret their growing in ways that embed their idiosyncratic experiences within an organization. The data suggest that employees develop three different types of growing self-construals: achieving, learning, and helping. We use our data to ground theory that explains the development of growing self-construals as deeply embedded in organizations. At the same time, we suggest that growing self-construals reflect individual agency through how individuals work with available resources to weave interpretations of themselves into their growing self-construals. We further suggest that growing self-construals influence the actions employees take to support a sense of progressive self-change.

Key words: qualitative research; interpretation and sensemaking; cultural construction of organizational life; psychological processes; human resource management

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Introduction

Employee growth is a central concern in organizational life. Interest in employee growth at work has a rich history traceable to humanistic movements in organizational studies (e.g., Alderfer 1972, Argyris 1964, Herzberg 1966, Likert 1967, McGregor 1960). Psychological research suggests that employees regard growth as a core value (Schwartz 1992, Sheldon et al. 2001) and will seek out contexts and activities that facilitate their growth (e.g., Deci and Ryan 1985, Helson and Srivastava 2001). Researchers also find that a sense of growth contributes to psychological well-being (Keyes et al. 2002) by providing structure and meaning to experiences (Carstensen and Charles 1998, Davis et al. 1998, McAdams 2001) and valuable self-knowledge that enhances the ability to function in, and adapt to, social life (Ryff 1989).

In organizational settings, psychological approaches primarily treat growth as a developmental experience that is generically marked by gaining knowledge and skills (e.g., McCauley et al. 1994). To date, this research has sought to identify the antecedents and consequences of growth by conceptualizing employees' orientations toward learning (e.g., Bunderson and Sutcliffe 2003,

Button et al. 1996, VandeWalle 2003), as well as their growth satisfaction and growth need strength (Hackman and Oldham 1976). These studies assume that growth carries a common meaning across employees and organizational contexts.

In contrast to psychological approaches, some research proposes that growth can be understood as an interpretive accomplishment. For example, Gergen and Gergen (1997) argue that growth is a process of narrating how the self is changing in a progressive direction. Such a shift from an intrapsychic to an interpretive process highlights how individuals come to see themselves as growing through how they make sense of experiences. When applied to the context of work, a focus on individuals' interpretations of growing as progressive self-change is important because such interpretations affect how individuals choose and find motivation for career and other work-related choices (e.g., Ibarra 1999, Kreiner and Sheep 2009), shape how individuals design contexts that fit or enhance future growing (Roberts et al. 2005, Schlenker 1985), and even relate to how individuals feel about who they are becoming in a particular work context (e.g., Roberts et al. 2005).

Four streams of research in organization studies inform how employees' growing can be theorized from a more interpretive perspective. First, research on identity change at work suggests that individuals expend effort to interpret self-change in ways to fit organizational and occupational contexts. For example, we can view Ibarra's (1999) study of how young professionals search for and experiment with provisional selves as a study of the process by which individuals seek to grow themselves professionally. Similarly, Pratt's research reveals how individuals exercise agency to grow and adapt their self-concepts to their contexts, as in the cases of individuals becoming Amway employees (Pratt 2000) and physicians customizing their professional identities to different specialties (Pratt et al. 2006). Second, scholars have studied how contexts shape the way individuals see themselves becoming a member of a community of practice (e.g., Lave and Wenger 1991). In this literature, growing is equated with learning, and learning takes place as community members move from peripheral participation in a community to becoming community insiders (Brown and Duguid 1991). Individuals learn in context by using the "wide range of materials that include ambient social and physical circumstances and the histories and social relations of the people involved" (Brown and Duguid 1991, p. 47).

Third, recent research examines how individuals move forward in terms of positive paths of self-development. For example, Roberts et al. (2005) propose a model of how individuals move closer to their "best self" in organizations through soliciting feedback about how and when they add value in situations. Their model of best-self development implies that individuals interpret who they are becoming at work and make deliberate changes to grow themselves in desirable directions (see also Carlsen 2006). Fourth, some research focuses on growing at work in the context of trauma and hardship (Maitlis 2011). Building on research on post-traumatic growth done by psychologists studying humans coping with disease, disasters, and other major life crises (Tedeschi and Calhoun 1995), Maitlis (2009) studies how professionals interpret their growth after losing the capacity to perform in their profession, finding that some construct positive self-meanings in the wake of setbacks.

The four perspectives reviewed above provide a foundation for conceptualizing growing as an interpretive accomplishment, but they leave several important gaps unresolved. First, research has tended to emphasize a narrow range of ways that individuals interpret progressive self-change, thereby missing the variability in how individuals see themselves growing at work. In fact, individuals may interpret progressive self-change in different ways, and these interpretations likely motivate different choices about what an individual is apt to do to perpetuate or alter his or her path of growing (Kreiner and Sheep 2009). Second, because constructions of self (and,

by implication, self-change) are always interpreted in interaction with others (e.g., Sampson 1993), the content of an individual's interpretations of growing are shaped by social contexts, thus suggesting the importance of understanding how growing interpretations are embedded in organizational contexts.

To develop theory about a more interpretive approach to growing, our study emphasizes how work organizations make a difference in employees' self-interpretations (Michel 2007, Michel and Worthman 2009). More specifically, we focus on how employees in particular contexts construe themselves as changing in a progressive direction and how employees make sense of what leads to these changes. We rely on Swidler (1986, 2001), who theorizes individuals as drawing from a cultural toolkit for self-construction. Accordingly, individuals interpret their growing through the cultural resources made available to them in a particular organizational context, such as concepts, actions, stories, and symbols (Weber 2005). This approach highlights not only the agency of individuals in drawing from cultural materials but also the embeddedness of these interpretations, as employees working in a particular organizational context have a limited set of resources from which to draw.

We develop the idea of a *growing self-construal*, or employees' interpretations about progressive self-change, including the content of that change (growing type) and the processes through which it unfolds (growing causes). We unpack three primary growing types (achieving, learning, and helping) that we found dominant in three organizations, as well as a variety of interpretations of growing causes. We find that the basic contents of individuals' growing self-construals are quite similar within a particular organization. We explain this by developing theory that proposes how individuals, while still striving to affirm their agency, draw from contextual and personal resources in ways that bring their interpretations of growing closer to the interpretations shared across their work organization. This allows us to theoretically elaborate on the different ways employees interpret how they are growing by using a bounded set of cultural materials that implicates both the self and the organization in explaining employees' growing.

Methods

Starting Assumptions

We start from the premise that individuals use discourse to create meanings from their ongoing experiences (Dodge et al. 2005). We assume that employees, like all individuals, form broad life narratives in which they portray themselves as growing in different ways and to varying degrees (McAdams 1993). Yet as organizational researchers, we are particularly interested in growing self-construals that emphasize employees' progressive self-change in the context of membership within a work organization. This approach shifts

the conceptualization of growing from a solitary focus on individual progress and achievement (e.g., Feldman and Bolino 1996) to a recognition of the range of ways individuals interpret their experiences in context. Additionally, this perspective illuminates mechanisms that explain how employees construe themselves as growing (Lin 1998). More specifically, we examine how employees at three organizations interpret their growing, as well as how they credit themselves and their organizations in varying ways as shaping their growing. We do not claim that these interpretations represent a “true” reality, but rather they are interesting in and of themselves because they provide a window into how individuals construct their self-concepts in the context of their forward development.

Case Selection

Growing self-construals, or interpretations of progressive self-change, capture both the ways employees interpret themselves as growing and the reasons employees give to explain their growing. Using data on growing self-construals, we induce a theoretical perspective to explain how individuals interpret their growing in work organizations. Using a multicase design (Yin 1994), we conducted, recorded, and transcribed interviews—each between 30 to 60 minutes—with 55 employees at three separate organizations. We used a semistructured interview protocol¹ with interviews focusing on employees' elaborations of personal stories of growing and their explanations for that growing. Additionally, we examined the mission statements and websites of our research sites to better understand the contexts in which employees constructed their growing self-construals.

To maximize contextual variation, we followed principles of purposeful sampling and selected three different organizations as our cases (Miles and Huberman 1994). We sought not to select a representative sample of employees from each organization but instead to interview a range of employees from diverse parts of each organization. We selected two for-profit organizations and one not-for-profit organization, all headquartered in the midwestern United States. Our first for-profit was FinCo, a privately held financial services organization that frequently appears on *Fortune's* “Best Companies to Work for” list. FinCo was the largest organization in the study. It had been lauded for its treatment of employees, so we reasoned the organization might invest heavily in growing its employees. At the time of our data collection, FinCo was in the midst of a mortgage explosion from a housing boom. FinCo demands long work hours of relatively young employees by paying them well and providing a variety of perks, including on-site meals, contest prizes, free travel, awards banquets, and an informal work atmosphere. Employees come from a variety of different industries and are socialized into the industry and the company's intense culture. FinCo is led by

a charismatic founder who, even during rapid expansion, works hard to get to know his employees. However, despite the extensive perks and *Fortune* ranking, FinCo's annual voluntary turnover rate is over 20%. For our study, we interviewed 29 FinCo employees.²

ChemCo, founded in 1930, is a regional, privately held chemical company that both manufactures and distributes products for a variety of industries. Given the dangers of working with chemicals, safety is a chief concern at ChemCo. In addition to safety, ChemCo emphasizes across-the-board, high-quality processes and products (it holds several ISO certifications) and exemplary customer satisfaction (it offers same-day shipping and custom products). ChemCo has a strong tradition of community involvement through its support of charitable activities and employee volunteerism. At the time of our study, ChemCo was facing the challenges of an economic slowdown that had led to modest downsizing. In contrast to FinCo, ChemCo operated in an increasingly difficult economic market, resulting in an inability to provide employees with extensive rewards or resources. We reasoned that such difficult economic conditions might make growing less central to employees, as they focused on simply staying afloat. We interviewed 12 employees at ChemCo.

Our third site, SocialOrg, was founded in 1993. SocialOrg is a nonprofit consortium of social services agencies, all with a primary focus on providing basic life services to a largely geriatric clientele. Its mission is to improve the quality of life for senior citizens in a Midwestern city by identifying their physical, social, and financial needs in a way that preserves their dignity. SocialOrg's work brings employees in close contact with a vulnerable population often in need of great help. SocialOrg employs social workers and other staff members to provide daily living assistance to older people with few material resources. Given their dependence on outside funding (such as from long-term grants) and nonprofit status, employees lack the perks enjoyed by FinCo employees. On the other hand, SocialOrg employees consider their organization to be fairly stable, and the organization was not suffering the uncertainties facing ChemCo. Thus, we reasoned SocialOrg would serve as a fitting contrast to our two other cases, as it had more stability than the rapidly expanding FinCo and the shrinking ChemCo. We interviewed 14 employees of SocialOrg.

Data Analysis

Our analysis involved three steps. First, sorted by research site, two authors independently read each interview transcript, took extensive notes on themes from the data, and then compared notes to identify common themes. Our objective was to inductively catalog interpretive themes (Miles and Huberman 1994) involving how individuals described the ways they were growing

at work. In this analysis, we found three primary interpretations of the content of a growing self-construal and labeled them *learning*, *achieving*, and *helping*. Each content type emerged as the dominant theme at one of the organizations.

Second, we sought to explain how employees interpreted the development of these growing self-construals. To this end, the same two authors read the transcript data again to induce interpretive themes about what or whom employees credited for their growing. We found that individuals interpreted aspects of both themselves and their organization as shaping their growing. The two authors then used these provisional themes to construct descriptive narratives that described how employees thought each organization and the focal employee shaped growing (Langley 1999, Plowman et al. 2007). Our purpose in creating these descriptive narratives was to remain as close to the data as possible while aggregating themes into a more holistic text. This allowed us to be mindful of the different ways participants implicated organizational contexts and themselves in shaping their growing.

Third, after constructing the narratives, we further refined our categories to better understand the mechanisms participants credited as responsible for shaping their growing (Miles and Huberman 1994). We mapped these mechanisms for each organization and then abstracted these ideas to devise theory that explains how employees construct growing self-construals.

Findings

FinCo: Growing as Achieving

FinCo employees often interpret their growing as achieving—self-change focused on achieving goals and standards valued by the organization. In interpreting how they came to construct their own growing in this particular way, employees often credit features of the organization—such as institutionalized training, rituals, and managerial interactions—as shaping their growing. FinCo employees see a limited role for themselves in shaping their growing, largely crediting themselves only with the decision about whether they should accept or reject FinCo's preferred interpretation of growing. Below, we detail each way FinCo employees interpret their growing as shaped by either the organization or themselves (see Table 1 for an elaboration on how each interpretive element shapes the content of the growing self-construal).

Participating in Institutionalized Training (Company Orientation). Structured orientation activities are one primary venue in which employees see FinCo as prescribing how they ought to be growing. When participating in these activities, employees learn about “FinCo Adages,” a set of axiomatic expressions that capture the company's philosophy and help employees make mean-

ing of their experiences in ways that privilege an organizationally endorsed form of growing. Janice provides a helpful elaboration on the importance of FinCo Adages:

It starts with a belief system. So, we have a set of FinCo Adages. And FinCo Adages is just our company's philosophy. We don't necessarily live by a mission statement every single day. I'm sure we have one, but really our mission statement, our purpose, our company's drive comes from something called our FinCo Adages. And it's our belief system. It's “you'll see it when you believe it,” not “you'll believe it when you see it,” which is kind of cynical and resigned. “You will see it when you believe it” offers hope; there's some opportunity there, there's a spark there that you don't get in normal companies because in normal companies, it's just status quo.³

In addition to providing a description of FinCo Adages, Janice describes a specific example—the company's reversal of the axiomatic expression “you'll believe it when you see it” to “you'll see it when you believe it.” FinCo uses this play on words to differentiate itself from other organizations through opening a vast array of possibilities for employees and emphasizing that anything is achievable. This expression helps employees sense that they can achieve even the biggest of stretch goals at FinCo.

Cindy is a trainer in FinCo's human resources department. She describes the orientation program as an opportunity to shape employees' growing self-construals as achieving through satisfying clients and thereby helping both the company and employees grow:

We're not going to even talk about [specific banking products] because that's not what it's about. It's about clients. It's about servicing them. It's about impacting you. It's about growing who you are as a person. And letting them know that they can impact the company, that they can make a difference. A lot of times a corporate culture you walk into a company and you really, you don't feel like you can impact anything. And they don't give you the philosophy or the foundation to do that. I mean most companies are like, “Ok. This is what you do.” There's all these different systems in place, and you feel stuck, you're in a rut, you can't do anything. This company is not like that. And that's what I try to portray to the new team members coming in... You're either growing or you're dying. And in this company we want to be growing.

As Cindy describes, FinCo trains employees about the importance of interpreting growing as achieving through serving clients. Growing, Cindy reminds us, starts with embracing FinCo's philosophy, rather than from working on tasks or developing skills. Cindy ends her interpretation by setting up the binary distinction between “growing” and “dying,” and she notes the company's belief that if you are not growing, you do not have a place at FinCo (i.e., you are dying). In doing so, Cindy sees FinCo as an organization that can help employees

Table 1 The Content and Causes of Growing Self-Construals

Source of interpretive elements	Content of growing self-construal	Active agent in growing self-construal	How active agent shapes content of growing self-construal
FinCo			
Participating in institutionalized training (company orientation)	Achieving	Organizational	Provides vocabulary (e.g., FinCo Adages) from which to interpret experiences at work as achieving.
Participating in institutionalized training (FinCo University)	Achieving	Organizational	Teaches tangible skills that employees interpret as essential for achieving.
Performing rituals	Achieving	Organizational	Engages in collective activities that signal group achievement.
Managerial interactions that push employees to grow	Achieving	Organizational	Communicates the value of achieving and that failure is not an option.
Accepting FinCo's preferred interpretation of growing	Achieving	Individual	Interprets making a choice to adopt organization's preferred interpretation of growing as achieving.
Rejecting FinCo's preferred interpretation of growing	Achieving	Individual	Interprets making a choice to resist organization's preferred interpretation of growing as achieving.
ChemCo			
Managerial interactions that support employees' growing	Learning	Organizational	Communicates the value of a safe learning environment.
Seeking out growing initiatives	Learning	Individual	Takes responsibility to acquire skills, which fosters interpretation of learning independently.
Drawing from personal backgrounds	Learning	Individual	Reflects on background, which fosters a sense of one's own agency in growing.
SocialOrg			
Providing access to clients in need	Helping	Organizational	Creates context that allows employees to participate in and/or observe helping acts.
Supervisor interactions facilitate perspective taking	Helping	Organizational	Communicates the value of helping.
Reframing job as a social worker	Helping	Individual	Takes on new work tasks that help others.
Drawing from personal backgrounds	Helping	Individual	Reflects on background, which fosters a sense of one's own agency in growing.

achieve through servicing clients in ways that follow FinCo Adages. Even so, her interpretation also makes it clear that there is a restricted set of possibilities at FinCo—growing or dying. In doing so, she interprets the importance of growing, but in a way that privileges achieving and yet questions the extent to which employees can deviate from this type of growing interpretation. We found this strong push for employees to grow through achieving facilitated by the organization in the interpretations of other FinCo employees. For example, Stacy states that FinCo is “really, really good for giving people a positive attitude...they also kind of train us and give us support to keep that positive attitude.” As a result, employees at FinCo see the organization as *giving them* (versus their bringing to FinCo) a positive (i.e., growing) attitude.

Participating in Institutionalized Training (FinCo University). FinCo employees also interpret their growing as achieving through participating in training activities around work tasks. This training is institutionalized through “FinCo University,” in-house education that employees interpret as readying them for promotion into new roles. For example, Rachel sees FinCo University as a means to develop her skill set so she can move to her next position (i.e., achieving):

We have what we call FinCo University here. It’s a whole segment that they just train people, like newly [sic] hires and then people that are already in their job positions they just want to help them know their jobs better. Like in January, I started in FinCo University, and I am learning actually the next position that, to my job.... And I’m going to attend until, I think, it’s the end of this month or next month, and then they have an actual graduation ceremony.

Rachel highlights how FinCo is preparing her for a promotion and new role. Note that the ultimate purpose suggested by her interpretation is “the next position,” a view that privileges the end goal (achievement) over the process (learning) to get there, thereby further providing cues about growing in particular ways. Moreover, the “graduation ceremony” reinforces the sense of achievement, as it serves as a marker of accomplishment.

Performing Rituals. Employees also interpret rituals as another means through which FinCo shapes their growing self-construals. Through participating in these collective activities, and given a vocabulary by the organization to make sense of these activities (i.e., FinCo Adages), employees interpret their growing as achieving. For example, in the “FinCo chant,” employees describe

boosting energy levels through a collective chant that helps them see themselves as growing through achieving. Jacob, an executive loan analyst, explains participating in the FinCo chant one day:

Everyone's going, "Oh, FinCo, dah, dah, dah." So it wasn't hard to get in that mindset that "You know what? I'm going somewhere. I'm not just going to sit still and whatever" . . . it's kind of an underlying company philosophy. We're always striving to be the best, so it's whatever state of mind you're in is what you, like our CEO . . . he'll leave us voice mails all the time, and he says, "What state of mind are you in right now? If you see it, you can get it."

Jacob understands the collective chant as a way to be always moving and "striving to be the best," both of which illustrate that growing is not an end state but rather a process of continuous forward movement. In his story, Jacob connects the FinCo chant to voice mails from the chief executive officer (CEO) that explicitly question employees about the mind-set they are embracing. He ends the story by citing a FinCo Adage, "If you see it, you can get it," suggesting that having optimism about achieving is all one needs to achieve. The CEO's voice mail serves to prod employees to consider their state of mind and, by referencing a FinCo Adage, quickly provides an answer about what their state of mind *ought* to be—that is, what the organization's preferred interpretation of growing is.

Managerial Interactions That Push Employees to Grow. As Jacob's story suggests, employees also interpret managers as helping to frame the meaning of experiences through the lens of FinCo Adage, thereby swaying employees to construct growing in an organizationally endorsed way. For example, as a sales director at FinCo, Pete talks about becoming a new manager with little experience and his struggle to lead his team. Top management took notice of Pete's ongoing failures, prompting the CEO to leave Pete an angry voice mail. Pete interprets this message as an important catalyst to address his struggle, turn his team around, and, as a result, construe himself as achieving:

There was a time where, in the position that I'm in now, when I first started the position it's not an easy position to start a team and grow a team and get up to speed as fast as possible. It's not easy. And in the beginning I had never really been a manager before. Wasn't great, I wasn't a great interviewer, and I made some bad hires. And for about a year I was really struggling. The team was struggling. They were struggling to find success and things like that. And one day our CEO left me a voice mail at night and basically called me out, asked me, "What in the hell do I think I'm doing?" I listened to the voice mail probably 15 times that night. It was a little more extensive than just, "What the hell are you doing?" Definitely caught my attention, and the next morning I was in his office, and from there I went to our VP's

office, who I'm pretty close with, and we talked about it, and I just started making some changes. And from there, in the next 12 months, from there I took the team to one of the top three or four teams in the company out of probably 25 teams . . . What's going through my mind is "I want to win." And I delivered that message to the people who are currently on the team. It's like, "Here's where we're going. Here's where we're going to be six months from now, twelve months from now. If you're coming, great. If you're not, great." And every day just focusing on getting better and making the people around me better and growing . . . If you're not growing, you're dying. That's very, very true, especially here.

In this example, Pete makes the decision to overcome the challenges of starting a team and succeeds, ultimately leading his team to become one of the top teams in the company. The communication from the CEO and Pete's interaction with the vice president (VP) remind him of the importance of achieving and, in his estimation, prompt him to take actions to live up to that interpretation of achievement. His story reserves an important place for his agency; after all, in the story it is Pete's decision to turn the team around (even if he is strongly encouraged to do so). However, the story also suggests the constrained way employees interpret their growing at FinCo. Pete's story ends with the same binary distinction that Cindy provided: at FinCo, you are growing (i.e., achieving) or you are dying. Pete's interpretation was limited in the sense of how it would end—he would either grow or die because of interactions that present such a binary choice.

Accepting FinCo's Preferred Interpretation of Growing. As Pete's story suggests, even within a context that frames a strongly delineated interpretation of growing, FinCo employees interpret some sense of agency through the decisions they make. More specifically, FinCo employees see themselves as making a choice to either accept or reject FinCo's preferred interpretations of growing, prompted at least in part because the organization presents them as an all-or-nothing deal (growing or dying). For example, Jason, who works on process improvement, interprets the importance of choosing to buy into FinCo's preferred interpretation of growing:

There comes a point where there's a level of trust, and you have to kind of make that leap of faith. I think the company has asked me to do this to help the company grow, and they will help me grow . . . And I think, again, they create the environment for you to grow. I've seen people who choose, who don't seem to make the choice to grow.

Jason interprets that he must make the choice to grow even as he recognizes his choice set is limited. That is, Jason has to "make that leap of faith" and buy into the FinCo definition of growing but, in return, the company will help him grow. Thus, FinCo employees sometimes interpret having to consciously accept FinCo's preferred form of this type of self-change.

Rejecting FinCo's Preferred Interpretation of Growing. A few employees recognize the typical type of growing at FinCo (and the success that achievement brings) while also questioning the personal sacrifices sometimes required to grow in this organization. Tina's story exemplifies this type of interpretation. Her story begins by interpreting growing as achieving, an affirmation of FinCo's preferred interpretation of growing. But her story takes an unexpected twist as she begins to reassert her own sense of self (now as a parent, versus as a FinCo employee) at the story's end:

I have a B.A. in communications. No math background whatsoever. And this job is mainly all math... but I was so determined to be number one that I was willing to sit there, and I would cry all the time... My manager would be like, "You've got to do this. You've got to do this." And they were tough on me because I was selling more than a lot of the people that had started. But I was so willing to, I had a fire in my belly to succeed... In the beginning it was very difficult... And then after that I just started succeeding and succeeding and growing... The company is, the thing I will say about this company, it's very unique in the way they treat the employee. They're very tough in that they have very high expectations of the employee. They have very high expectations. But if you produce and you give back to the company, they treat you like royalty here... They have this fine line of "You will produce." But they will give you all the tools you need to produce... They're all about, "Whatever you think, if you think it you can produce it. You can accomplish it..." [M]y manager... was very strict with me. He would not allow my mind to say I couldn't do it. He would be like, "You sit there and you figure it out. And if you still can't figure it out, I will come and help you."

Tina describes her manager's tough love and how his high expectations reinforced her achieving at high levels. She fully embraces these expectations, stating a desire to be "number one" and crediting the organization with creating a "you will produce" mentality. At this stage, Tina's story resembles many others we observed in the organization, such as how the CEO and VP strongly prompted Pete to achieve. However, this quest for growing also leads Tina to personal health problems and a sense of sacrifice that ultimately causes her to reject FinCo's preferred interpretation of growing as achieving:

Every day for me is stressful here... You're only as great as your last month. So for me, I take it to heart so much that I'm on blood pressure medication. I was a little before that, but I have to stay on it now because of the stress of the job. And I'm in great shape, and I still can't control that blood pressure. And part of it is this job, you know, I allow it to get to me... There are times when I walk in, and I've maybe had some problems with my kids or something... last month was hard. My daughter, my middle school child, was suffering. Her best friend decided not to be her friend, and I was crying at work about it. It broke my heart. And I still had to produce

over that. That was very difficult... it was the last straw for me knowing that I had to spend more time with my family.

Tina's interpretation interweaves her personal struggles to spend time with her daughter with her professional struggle for perpetual achievement. She raises further doubts about her growing self-construal by suggesting that achieving must be ongoing, month after month and without carryover. What is noticeably absent from her interpretation is a FinCo Adage that might have helped her transcend this constructed binary between family and job to give her the optimism necessary for her to straddle both domains of her life and therefore still interpret a growing self-construal consistent with common interpretations at FinCo.

FinCo Summary. Table 1 summarizes employees' interpretations of the different ways they credit themselves and their organization as shaping their growing self-construals as achieving. At FinCo, employees interpret the content of their growing as achieving, and most employees interpret the organization as the primary active agent in growing—that is, as the central shaper of their growing interpretations. More specifically, employees interpret the organization as a venue in which they can participate in activities (such as orientation) that provide them with symbols (a vocabulary, such as FinCo Adages) or rituals (FinCo chant) that foster interpretations of achieving as well as interactions with managers who communicate the value of achieving. At the same time, employees also participate in activities that provide tangible skills (FinCo University), assets they interpret as important to achieve promotions. Employees limit interpretations of their personal contributions to shaping growing to choosing whether or not they will embrace FinCo's preferred interpretations of growing. This sense of agency—how employees privilege their own role in shaping their growing—is very different from the agency we found in employees' interpretations at ChemCo. In fact, as we discuss below, the relative importance of the organization versus the individual in employees' interpretations is reversed at ChemCo.

ChemCo: Growing as Learning

ChemCo is a chemical company that both manufactures and distributes products for a variety of industries. At ChemCo, employees' growing self-construals emphasize learning—that is, as construing a change in self in terms of someone who is improving in knowledge and skills. ChemCo employees' interpretations emphasize their individual initiatives and backgrounds; employees see the organization as playing a more supporting role by having managers create a safe learning environment.

Managerial Interactions That Support Employees' Growing. At FinCo, managers push to get employees to achieve (such as when Tina describes her boss as not letting her fail and the phone call Pete received from the CEO). However, at ChemCo, employees interpret supervisors as playing a supporting role in their own growing. In this context, employees interpret supervisors as enabling a safe learning environment necessary for *independent* exploration. For example, Kevin elaborates on how his manager facilitated his learning by being patient, tolerating mistakes, and giving him the opportunity to grow on his own:

When I first came here...I was a little anxious. You know, because I had never worked in a chemical plant before...we have hazmat here, so you have to be careful about what you're shipping out and how you're shipping it out... So I got as much input as I possibly could and as much information as I possibly could. I was continually going to my supervisor and asking him, "Hey, is this the way I should ship this here? Can I ship it this way?" So forth and so on... So it was an ongoing situation learning that you have to learn daily because things are constantly changing... [Kevin's boss] tolerated mistakes and let you be independent... "Hey, don't take it as a mistake, take it is a learning process. Look at it as a learning process."

Kevin recognizes that ChemCo is a potentially dangerous place to work. He takes the initiative to learn as much as he can to avoid mistakes and accidents. Given the hazardous nature of the work and the need to learn new job skills, the lack of formal training is striking, especially when contrasted with FinCo's institutionalized training. Kevin does not interpret his boss as directing him to learn but instead as supporting him. By being available to answer Kevin's questions and tolerating the mistakes inevitable in independent exploration, Kevin's boss thereby fosters a safe learning environment. Kevin recognizes this opportunity as geared toward being an independent contributor:

I was trying to be as fast as everybody else, and when I found out, when I seen within myself that I wasn't as fast as they were, [my boss] would come up to me and say, "Hey Kevin." I said, "Yes." He said, "Don't worry about speed. Worry about doing the job efficiently and getting the job done by the end of the day." Well by that is to take my time and learn the process, and then I will develop speed later... They all have the patience to work with you as long as they know and see you are determined to do your best. They give you the opportunity to grow and be independent but still be a part of the work for the benefit of the company.

As Kevin's story describes, his supervisor is patient, a characteristic that supports independent learning. The organization gives employees opportunities to grow but in way where they can be "independent." As a result, when Kevin interprets his growing, he does so in a way that privileges his own actions in learning independently with modest support from the organization.

Seeking Out Growing Initiatives. In addition to interpreting the organization as playing a supporting role, ChemCo employees see themselves as playing a primary role in shaping their growing. Consider the account offered by Dianne, a purchasing manager at ChemCo. She uses the phrase "interjected myself" to signify taking ownership of her growing at the company by creating an opportunity to learn a new set of skills:

I interjected myself into the transition of this company from QS9000 to TS[1]6949. It was something that I was not asked to do; I did it on my own. I felt that there was need, and if we didn't get more resources dedicated to the transition it wouldn't be successful in the timetable that we had established. So I spent a week at a very comprehensive training session and successfully completed that and came out the only certified auditor in the company, but it helped to bring a lot of the concepts together, and I think it allows me to be a greater cheerleader and a greater champion for our quality system... I was challenged, somewhat overwhelmed, because I got into some areas that I hadn't been in before.

Dianne elaborates on how she pursued an opportunity to do something beyond her job description based on a need she identified herself. She goes on to describe the outside training she completed on her own to learn something that would help address the need she identified. She interprets her growing as learning new areas of expertise. When asked to describe what she thought contributed to her growing, Dianne said,

Just my taking the initiative and not being asked to get involved, but interjecting myself... With this company you need to show initiative, you need to be a self-starter, and those that tend to get self-involved or have the need to be told and directed, high-maintenance people, they tend not to thrive as well in this company.

Dianne interprets ChemCo as an institution that values "self-starters" and does not tolerate those who do not take initiative. As a result, Dianne interprets herself as taking responsibility to grow on her own, but in doing so, she interprets the growing as involving her own independent learning.

Harris, promoted from the warehouse and now in shipping, aspires to learn something new, preferably in accounting. Below, Harris talks about seeking out an opportunity to learn new tasks and having to approach human resources to do so—again, a noticeable departure from FinCo, where employees interpret institutionalized training (i.e., FinCo University) as providing them with opportunities to grow:

I start to look for more things to add to the job. I was considering it at that point, because it was probably around December or so, and that's when I started talking to HR... and then just talking to my boss also, just telling him I'm willing to do other things for him, add to my daily tasks... just to try to learn something new.

According to Harris' interpretation, employees self-create opportunities at ChemCo. Employees position the organization as the holding space for initiating and pursuing growing on their own.

Drawing from Personal Backgrounds. At ChemCo, employees interpret themselves as learning on their own as the organization embraces independent skill acquisition. Thus, individuals credit aspects of themselves as important for their growing. This was in noticeable contrast to FinCo, where the organization "provided" employees with attitudes and beliefs. Tricia, an administrative assistant, interprets her early childhood experiences as essential for shaping her growing self-construal:

Any job I had I always gave my all to it. If I don't feel like I'm giving my all, I'm the first to come to me and say, "Hey, you know what? I'm not doing my job." If I'm late, I'm like, "Hey, you may not know this or not, but I've been late several times this week." I'm the first to tell [Tricia's supervisor] myself. I don't wait for someone else to relay the message. I'll tell you. I'm an honest person. Any job that I have if I feel like I'm not giving my all to it, just like if I get bored with a job, I will go say, "Hey, Sam. I need something to do. I feel like I'm ripping you off." [He says,] "Everybody needs to be like you."...I had to be born this way, because even growing up and everything and doing housework around the house and maybe it wasn't acceptable to do something and not do it right the first time because you will get called back six and seven and eight times to do it the right way... So maybe my mother trained me that way, where she's like, "Okay. I want that stereo cleaned off and I want it shining, and I want the photos and the knickknacks and everything polished." Do it right, or my mother was the type that would make you do it over again. So maybe that was instilled in me to do it right the first time.

Tricia talks about the positive attitude she brings to work. Significantly, Tricia credits her background outside her immediate work context at ChemCo for instilling in her a sense of "giving my all to it." Observe the contrast between this interpretation and the FinCo Adages at FinCo, where employees credit the company with giving them a positive attitude (versus employees bringing a positive attitude at ChemCo). Tricia offers several explanations for the origins of this belief, first suggesting that she "had to be born this way" and then suggesting that perhaps "my mother trained me that way." In either case, Tricia interprets these beliefs not as coming from ChemCo but rather from her personal life.

ChemCo Summary. As we show in Table 1, ChemCo employees interpret their growing as a largely independent endeavor supported and encouraged by the organization. By drawing from their personal backgrounds and interpreting their own involvement in seeking out learning, they position themselves as the primary active agent in growing. Yet even though ChemCo employees

interpret growing largely as a personal initiative, similar to employees at FinCo, they develop interpretations of growing that move closer to the organization's widely shared growing self-construal as independent learning.

SocialOrg: Growing as Helping

SocialOrg is a consortium of social services agencies with a primary focus on providing basic life services to clients. The nature of SocialOrg's work brings employees in close contact with a vulnerable population often in need of great help. Whereas FinCo employees see the organization as the primary shaper of their growing, and ChemCo employees see themselves as the primary shaper of their growing, SocialOrg employees' interpretations suggest a more mixed set of influences, seeing both the organization (by providing access to clients in need and managerial interactions that facilitate perspective taking) and themselves (by reframing the job as a social worker and drawing from personal backgrounds) as shaping their growing self-construals.

Providing Access to Clients in Need. At SocialOrg, employees interpret the organization as playing an important role in shaping their growing self-construals through providing access to clients in need of help. Some job roles, such as those of social workers, have an explicit mandate to help, whereas other job roles do not specifically focus on helping clients. Even so, those employees whose job descriptions involve non-helping support functions (such as administrative) also interpret their growing as helping. For example, despite working in a maintenance position that does not explicitly serve clients, Sam interprets his growing as helping. He reflects on the pleasure he derives from seeing himself as helping:

A lot of those seniors, a lot of things they couldn't do for themselves. And a lot of times they need stuff from the store, and they have no family members that they can call. So a lot of times me or some other maintenance guys would go to the store for them and get them things that they need, run out, pick up their prescriptions. And I just like doing things for people that put a smile on their face.

Sam credits the needs of seniors as prompting him to start helping. Along with observing his colleagues doing much the same, Sam interprets the organization as putting him in contact with those in need.

Supervisor Interactions Facilitate Perspective Taking. As Sam's story continues, he also credits his supervisor with prompting him to take the perspective of senior citizens. In taking their perspective, Sam also comes to interpret himself as growing to be a helper:

[I said,] "No way. I'm not doing that." So my supervisor, he done it. And he came back, and he asked me, "You plan on getting old one day?" I told him, "Yeah." He said,

“Well one day, when you get older [you’ll want someone to help you].” . . . That hit home that day. . . . When I see that [my coworkers are helping], it makes me try to do it more.

Sam interprets his growing toward a helping self through how his supervisor encourages him to help others. In this sense, Sam views his supervisor as communicating the value of helping by making it very personal for Sam, who will be a senior one day and will perhaps face circumstances similar to those of SocialOrg’s clients. As employees are put in positions where they can help others (even when such help is not part of their formal job descriptions) and are further prodded by supervisors who communicate the value of helping, employees come to interpret themselves as helping others. The organization engages in serving needy clients; the intention is not to facilitate growing but rather to facilitate the type of work the organization does. But in doing this work, and in encouraging all employees to participate in helping clients, employees come to see the importance of helping and construct themselves as developing a helping self.

Reframing Job as a Social Worker. Sam’s story highlights how the organization helps and encourages employees to take the perspective of those in need, but employees also see themselves as playing a more direct role in shaping their growing by actively seeking out opportunities to grow through helping, similar to how employees at ChemCo actively seek out opportunities to learn. SocialOrg employees do this by reframing their jobs as social workers. That is, by viewing themselves as social workers, they come to see themselves as someone who can help. Nathan’s job as a maintenance worker at SocialOrg provides limited interaction with clients. Nevertheless, Nathan describes a time he provided a humanity-restoring service for a terminally ill client of SocialOrg:

Well, once we had a senior here that came in through one of the organizations, and he didn’t have any clothes or anyone really to take care of him. He was more or less assigned to a social worker here. And he had come here one day, and I guess he was toward the end of his life. I later found out that he had cancer and all. I remember that he came here, and he had wasted all over himself that day and didn’t have a change or whatever. And they really didn’t know what to do. So he come, and we happened to have a room that had extra clothing and so forth. So I ended up being somewhat of a nurse or a clean-up person for the gentleman. And before he passed, he wrote me this letter—also the supervisor wrote me this letter, this is how I found out that he had passed—how thankful he was the last parts of his life, which I did not know. . . . at the time because some of my thoughts at the time that I was cleaning him up wasn’t, you know, about the fact that he was dying or anything. But that was really rewarding to me. As a matter of fact, I kept the letter.

By providing help beyond the scope of his formal job responsibilities and restoring the dignity of a man in need, Nathan expands his job in a way that allows him to see his role—and therefore himself—differently. The letter reminds Nathan of the fragility of life, but more important, his work restores dignity to a life through a small but consequential moment when he sought to alter his role to help a client in need. This shows how Nathan embraced an opportunity to grow at work, even when his role did not demand it.

Marcia answers the phones, makes coffee, cleans the kitchen, and enforces parking regulations around handicap spots. Yet to call Marcia a receptionist—her formal job title—misses the point. Like many of the nonsocial workers at SocialOrg, Marcia offers accounts of her work experiences that include growing self-construals developed in the course of helping others—even when such helping was not a formal part of her job description. Marcia explains how she, like Nathan, engages in helping work, and it is through this work that she comes to understand her own growing:

People who come, they got to where they liked me and then enjoyed talking to me. So then whenever they had some problem, they’d come up and talk to me about it. If it was something that I could not talk with them about and I felt that they needed to go upstairs to a social worker or needed specific, as a matter of fact . . . they [social workers] call me their mini-social worker because when they have people up there that really don’t require them to do a whole, set up a whole, what can I say, set up a whole paperwork on them, set up a folder on them, they’ll send them down to me. They’ll call and tell me, “I’m sending so-and-so down and they need to know about such and such, and I know you know about that so talk to them about it. Blah, blah, blah.” . . . So when there are certain issues that come up, they know that I happen to know that because I’ve given them some of the information that I have gotten through, like, classes, and so they send them to me, and then I just give them what little information I have, and then they go on and go back up, “Hey that did it. That’s great.”

Marcia interprets how she views her job as providing her with the opportunity to help clients. As a receptionist, Marcia is often the first point of contact for clients at SocialOrg. This leads clients to approach Marcia with problems they have. Marcia comes to see herself as a “mini-social worker” by drawing from how her colleagues label her as such. By adopting this label as a mini-social worker, she comes to take on a role beyond her formal job description and grows from a receptionist to a social worker who helps.

Drawing from Personal Backgrounds. Employees at SocialOrg (similar to ChemCo) also credit their personal backgrounds for shaping their growing. For example, Jesse, a social worker at SocialOrg, describes selecting his profession because of his personal struggles and a

social worker who helped him to cope with those challenges. Because of this previous relationship, he is able to grow by entering the field of social work and becoming a helper himself:

I was given my last rites. I was 19, just out of the service...I could tell that none of the RNs or doctors [were] concerned about the emotional tunnel that I was in. But there was, they call them, aides on the unit; it was just a male gentleman who had the compassion and sincerity to actually sit down and talk to me about issues that I was dealing with, who was genuinely concerned about my well-being, who gave me that lift and that counseling that others who were professionals couldn't do. After I had gotten older, I walked up to him and I says, "You know what? I want to do what you do." And about four weeks later I was enrolled in college. So it was heavy. It was heavy. I was pretty, I was pronounced dead that one time and given last rites. But...this guy's compassion and concern and devotion to what he did inspired me.

Jesse explains how he became a helper as a result of a near-death experience and the emotional support he received from a social worker. Building from this experience, Jesse is able to construct himself as someone who has positively changed to become a helper. When asked where his growing comes from, Jesse explains,

[Growing] comes from the soul. It comes from your own life experiences. Your own difficulties and strains and hardships and faults. And when you find something that you're really getting that umph from, you grasp it and you hold onto it and you don't want it to go. And it gives you that compassion, concern, dedication, euphoria that drugs and sex and alcohol don't give you. And when you feel that, you just want to keep on going.

Jesse's description credits his own soul for his growing, illustrating that, as we saw at ChemCo, SocialOrg employees interpret their idiosyncratic beliefs as important for shaping their growing. Still, Jesse's story shows a connection between these personal beliefs and work context, as his story constructs himself as growing in ways consistent with the organization's very purpose—to help those in need. Organizations, through the work they engage in (i.e., servicing clients), provide contexts in which employees can realize their interpretations of growing by providing employees with opportunities to fulfill their aspirations through the work they do. SocialOrg provides some of the raw materials for this—clients, a job, work tasks—but Jesse's interpretation of growing toward helping others is something distinctly personal based on his life history. This intertwining of personal beliefs, aspirations, and work context illustrates that even when employees primarily see themselves as shaping their growing, their organizations still provide interpretive materials for employees to develop a growing self-construal in ways that lead them to see themselves as growing into a particular type of self.

SocialOrg Summary. As we summarize in Table 1, employees at SocialOrg interpret both the organization and themselves as active agents in shaping their growing interpretations as helping. Employees interpret SocialOrg as providing a context that makes growing possible—in this case, through providing access to clients in need. Similar to FinCo, we also find that SocialOrg employees interpret managerial interactions as encouraging a particular type of growing self-construal, but this time it is helping. Nevertheless, unlike FinCo and similar to ChemCo, SocialOrg employees claim a strong individual role in their growing—both through how they interpret taking on helping tasks beyond their job responsibilities and through crediting their own backgrounds as a catalyst for developing into a more helping self.

Building Theory About Employees' Growing Self-Construals

In this section, we develop theory around how employees construct their growing self-construals by drawing from resources—that is, concepts, actions, stories, and symbols that help them construct meanings of their experiences at work (Weber 2005). What we label contextual resources are those that employees interpret as unique to the organization, such as its culture and work. What we label personal resources are those that employees interpret as unique to themselves, such as their backgrounds and histories. These resources help shape both the content and causes of growing interpretations, such that FinCo employees interpret growing as achieving directed by the organization, ChemCo employees interpret growing as learning directed by themselves, and SocialOrg employees interpret growing as helping directed jointly by themselves and the organization. Individuals within each organization offer unique accounts (e.g., idiosyncratic anecdotes, using some resources versus others) that nonetheless interpret growing in a relatively homogeneous fashion. This is because employees in a particular organization draw from a similar cultural toolkit in each organization (e.g., Swidler 1986, 2001), but we find that this toolkit is relatively narrow.

When individuals draw from contextual resources, they see the organization as the active agent in shaping growing because these resources are viewed as unique to the organization, but when they draw from personal resources, they see themselves as the active agent in shaping growing because these resources are interpreted as specific to the individual (see Table 1). However, regardless of the combination of resources from which they draw, individuals often interpret their growing in ways that construct themselves as moving closer to an organization's shared view of a growing self-construal. Yet when individuals draw from contextual and personal resources, they still exercise their agency. That is, following Swidler (1986, 2001), they select which types of

resources to draw from to explain their experiences as growing within their organization. In doing so, employees affirm agency through how they “weave ‘narratives of self’ in concert with others and out of the diverse contextual resources within their reach” (Alvesson et al. 2008, p. 8).

Contextual Resources That Shape Growing Self-Construals

As described previously, at FinCo, the contextual resources included the vocabularies (i.e., FinCo Adages) from participating in institutionalized training and learned through conversations with managers. By using FinCo Adages to interpret their experiences, employees move closer to an achieving self in a way that takes into account their unique experiences (e.g., specific jobs and goals) but shapes the meaning of these experiences in an organizationally endorsed way (i.e., as achieving). Similarly, the job skills that employees interpret as essential for promotions (an indicator of achieving) come from institutionalized training provided by the organization, which employees interpret as helping them prepare for *their* next job (a type of achievement).

FinCo’s contextual resources provide the content of the growing self and the interpreted causes of growing. More specifically, the contextual resources at FinCo facilitate interpretations in which employees see themselves as *depending* on the organization for their growing. For example, FinCo Adages are developed, learned, and spoken within the organization. Managerial conversations push employees to achieve, thereby leading employees to interpret the supervisor as an essential stimulant to becoming an achiever. The skills learned at FinCo University occur through formal training programs, and thus an employee relies on the organization to run these programs to become more of an achiever. And rituals, which involve a range of FinCo employees, occur on site, thereby further implicating the organization’s formal involvement in facilitating growing. Thus, at FinCo, employees interpret the organization as the predominant active agent in their growing.

At ChemCo, employees interpret growing as independent learning. For example, we found that employees interpreted managerial interactions as emphasizing a safe learning environment. This interpretation not only helped employees construct growing around learning, but it also helped them interpret their learning as something they did with only minimal support from the organization. In the case of ChemCo, employees interpret the organization as simply providing the context for independent skill acquisition. Unlike at FinCo, where employees imbued institutionalized training as important for their achieving, at ChemCo employees interpreted the organization as allowing them to learn safely but on their own. Although employees predominately

implicate themselves as the active agent of their growing (i.e., *independent* learning), it is important to point out that this interpreted agency is nevertheless a consequence of the contextual resources at ChemCo. This is because the organization provides limited contextual resources for enabling employees to interpret a direct role of the organization in facilitating growing. At the same time, ChemCo provided some contextual resources that foster interpretations of growing as *independent* learning. This may reflect Bourdieu’s (1990) contention that individuals’ agency may nevertheless remain wedded to a particular culture. Thus, ChemCo enables employees to become an active agent in their growing through the contextual resources it provides (and does not provide).

At SocialOrg, employees interpret growing as helping jointly shaped by the organization and themselves. Similar to FinCo, employees interpret supervisor interactions as important for growing, but in this case, by fostering a perspective that moves employees toward becoming more of a helping self. By imbuing these interactions with meanings in which the organization (represented by the supervisor) facilitates this perspective, SocialOrg employees interpret the organization as the active agent in their moving toward a helping self. Another resource that SocialOrg employees rely on is the structure of work. SocialOrg employees are in everyday contact with clients in need, and employees interpret themselves as responding to those needs. Here, employees do not see the organization as explicitly pushing them to pursue a helping self. Rather, the context around them (i.e., clients in need) leads them to see themselves as becoming more of a helper, as this is simply what the organization does.

Personal Resources That Shape Growing Self-Construals

Up to this point, the theory that we are developing suggests that employees view their growing interpretations as embedded in organizations, such that organizations shape employees’ interpretations of growing by making contextual resources available. For FinCo, this means not only interpreting growing as achieving but also doing so in a way that credits the organization with fostering this growing. At ChemCo, growing emphasizes learning but in a way that distances the organization from contributing to this growing. At SocialOrg, employees interpret growing as helping by drawing from contextual resources (such as the work the organization does) and relying on supervisor interactions in ways in which the organization is seen as contributing to the shaping of growing. But we also find that among the relatively homogeneous interpretations of growing within each organization, employees draw from personal resources to shape their growing self-construals. This allows individuals to interpret their agency even while still (in most

cases) constructing a self-concept that in important ways is consistent with the organization's common growing self-construal. We describe three ways in which this happens: infusing the self, adopting the organization's preferred growing, and resisting the organization's preferred growing.

Infusing the Self. When employees infuse the self, they see their growing as intrinsic to who they are as people through implicating their own personal histories (such as experiences or beliefs). We found infusing the self most prominently at ChemCo, where employees interpreted their personal backgrounds as well as their work activities—particularly the initiatives taken by individuals to learn—as shaping their growing. In fact, ChemCo encouraged this type of agency by providing contextual resources in which individuals could construct themselves as learning independently. Thus, in a somewhat counterintuitive fashion, at ChemCo, the organization's contextual resources shape employees' growing such that employees draw from personal resources to see themselves as agentic in their own growing. As a result, individuals' growing self-construals reference interpretations idiosyncratic to the employee. Individuals credit their backgrounds, but they do so in a way that interprets the self as someone who grows in ways that are acceptable within the organization.

We also found infusing the self at SocialOrg, where individuals credited their own beliefs (e.g., personal backgrounds) as well as their unique approach to work tasks (e.g., reframing their jobs as social workers) as shaping their growing. Similar to ChemCo and in contrast to FinCo, SocialOrg employees lacked access to contextual resources that led to interpreting the organization as playing a dominant role in their growing.

However, in contrast to ChemCo, there were fewer contextual resources that directed employees toward interpreting themselves as the active agent in growing. Although beyond the scope of our study, employees may have drawn from broader cultural resources in Western societies about the role of the self in shaping one's own destiny (Markus and Schwartz 2010). This type of agency may also be a type of bricolage (Ashforth et al. 2008) or identity enriching (Pratt et al. 2006) that shapes growing self-construals as employees interpret their personalities, histories, experiences, and previous actions as critical to explaining how they have positively changed.

Adopting the Organization's Preferred Growing. At FinCo, employees also see themselves as making choices about adopting an organizationally prescribed way of growing. This may be because, of the three organizations we researched, FinCo employees pointed to the strongest expectations of growing in particular ways. Thus, agency at FinCo involved making the choice to accept the preferred interpretation of growing provided

by the organization. More generally, this type of interpretation suggests that individuals can construct themselves as the active agent in their growing by simply making the active choice to accept the organization's preferred type of growing. Nevertheless, this type of agency was noted only at FinCo (and was still quite rare), as most individuals do not explicitly acknowledge adopting a preferred type of growing. This may indicate that such interpretations around this choice are often automatic and intuitive (e.g., Vaisey 2009).

Resisting the Organization's Preferred Growing. A final way of asserting agency is through resisting, which we found at FinCo. In this form of interpreting the self as the active agent in shaping growing, individuals explicitly reject organizationally endorsed forms of growing. Resisting may be a way for employees to avoid having their sense of self subsumed by the organization (Kreiner et al. 2006). Given the bounded contextual resources from which individuals could construct a growing self (recall Tina's story in which she struggled with a self predicated on being a good mother), employees turned to interpretations in which they positioned themselves in contrast to the organization. This form of agency may suggest the difficulties some employees have in constructing alternative growing self-construals in organizations with contextual resources that limit the content and causes of growing, leaving employees with little choice other than simply rejecting these resources and replacing them with another way of constructing a growing self-construal—one that may ultimately suggest that the employee leaves the organization.

Developing Theory Around Constructing Growing Self-Construals

Growing self-construals shed light on how employees try to find their agency while interpreting themselves as each growing into an organizationally sanctioned self. Organizations shape employees' interpretations of growing by making available contextual resources that individuals use in interpreting their growing. These contextual resources, although variant across the three organizations, facilitate a constrained set of employees' interpretations of growing. This creates a key challenge for employees, who might want to construct their own agency in growing. Whereas individuals (particularly at ChemCo and SocialOrg) can infuse their selves into growing interpretations, they do so in a way that takes their agency—that is, their interpretation that they are the active agent in their growing—and tries to make it workable within a context that supports or encourages a particular type of growing self-construals. For example, at ChemCo, individuals see the importance of their personal backgrounds as fostering independent learning, which, incidentally, is consistent with the organization's encouragement of growing as independent learning. Similarly, at SocialOrg, employees interpret past

experiences as formative for developing the type of self that works within a context in which helping is valued. This suggests that employees' interpretations of their growing, even when they position themselves as the active agent of that growing, nevertheless attempt to work out ways to make their idiosyncratic interpretations viable within contexts that provided limited contextual resources and to encourage or support particular types of growing.

At FinCo, we also found a handful of examples where individuals interpreted themselves as not wanting to embrace what employees interpreted as the organization's preferred interpretation of growing. For example, Tina's interpretations involved eventually rejecting the achieving growing self-construal. We also found at FinCo instances of employees seeing themselves as moving toward an achieving self and *actively* choosing to do so. These findings suggest that employees use quite an elaborate process of interpreting their experiences in ways that make their idiosyncratic experiences consistent with the organization's preferred form of growing interpretations. This process is guided by the contextual resources employees have available to explain their experiences, but there might be a motivational component to this as well. For example, scholars suggest that individuals are motivated to create interpretations in ways that position themselves coherently (Shipp and Jansen 2010), such as in ways consistent with how an organization encourages growing. Regardless of motives, our data show that individuals are quite adept at using their idiosyncratic experiences to draw from an array of resources in affirming a sense of their own agency while being consistent with the organization's understanding of growing.

In summary, individuals draw from personal and contextual resources. Personal resources, such as their idiosyncratic backgrounds, lead individuals to interpret the causes of their growing as largely a function of themselves. On the other hand, contextual resources lead individuals to interpret the causes of their growing as largely a function of their organization. As a result, when individuals interpret their growing by drawing from personal resources, they affirm their agency. On the other hand, when they interpret their growing by drawing from contextual resources, they affirm the embeddedness of their growing interpretations.

Regardless of which type of resource individuals draw from, we find that they often develop growing self-construals consistent with other members of the organization. Possible reasons for this consistency include (1) the contextual resources individuals access within an organization are quite limited (e.g., they point to specific content and causes of growing), (2) individuals may have a motive for coherence with the organization (Shipp and Jansen 2010), and (3) individuals may be encouraged

by coworkers and supervisors to interpret their experiences in ways favored by the organization. For example, at FinCo, managerial interactions, rituals, and formal training privileged growing as achieving dependent on the organization. At ChemCo, managerial interactions portrayed growing as independent learning with limited organizational support. And at SocialOrg, managerial interactions suggested that helping was the an important type of growing at the organization. But even when individuals draw from personal resources around learning independently, such as at ChemCo, this interpretation of growing is often consistent with other employees' growing self-construals at that particular organization. This arises because although individuals construct agency in growing, this agency is constrained (see Bourdieu 1990). For example, at ChemCo, the agency around individual learning is a consequence of the organization's support of *self-directed* learning. At FinCo, the agency around adopting is limited to interpreting oneself as actively choosing to grow in *accordance with FinCo*. At SocialOrg, the agency around crafting one's job and drawing from personal backgrounds is limited to the type of helping self *in line with the organization's type of work*. It is only in the rare case of resisting that we find stronger cases of agency, whereby individuals not only credit themselves for their growing but also do so in a way that departs from organizational features.

Discussion

By examining employees' interpretations about the content and causes of growing, we expand on researchers' attempts to develop interpretive approaches to growing that contrast with the largely psychological accounts found in the literature. We elaborate on how employees' growing occurs not only psychologically but also interpretively, as individuals draw from contextual and personal resources to develop growing self-construals that resonate within a particular organization. In doing so, we provide a view of growing that differs dramatically from psychological accounts and makes important contributions to a more understanding of employees' interpretive experiences in organizations.

Contributions to Research on Growing

In contrast to the view of growing as an intrapsychic process largely under the purview of the individual (Button et al. 1996, VandeWalle 2003), our study portrays growing as an interpretive accomplishment involving employees' construction of a self deeply situated in organizational contexts in ways that go beyond learning (e.g., Lave and Wenger 1991) to include achieving and helping. As an important domain in work, and in life more generally, how employees interpret growing can speak to their core self-concept. Our findings that this personal search can also be understood as a social

exercise consistent with an organizationally widespread growing self-construal recasts how scholars think of growing. For example, this view suggests that growing may be much more of a collective process than psychologists theorize. Whereas individuals' growing self-construals inevitably reflect their own experiences (e.g., the specific rituals they participate in, the conversations they have with others, their personal backgrounds), employees interpret these experiences in ways that attempt to figure out what type of growing will work within an organization that offers limited contextual resources. While individuals interpret themselves as shaping their growing, in many cases this type of agency masks the fact that the organization is playing a large role in shaping growing self-construals, something that was most prominent at ChemCo. It was only in the rare case of resisting at FinCo where we saw individuals exercise a type of agency that prominently challenged the type of growing supported at the organization, but with this rejection of prescribed ways of growing came the likelihood that an employee would leave the organization.

To elaborate further, individuals drew from resources in ways that differentially credited themselves as shaping growing. These different forms of agency affirm Carlsen's (2008, p. 57) assertion that "agency is integral to the experience of authoring." However, these particular forms of agency still bear distinctly organizational signatures. For example, when individuals interpreted discretion in self-designed growing opportunities (such as learning independently at ChemCo), they used organizational materials (such as language) and engaged with organizational employees (such as supervisors), and they did so on organizational grounds. At FinCo, the sense of agency they interpreted in terms of how they approached the work they did suggests a culturally prescribed meaning that contributes to employees' interpretations of growing. In other words, the agency that employees exercised was most often organizationally constrained, which helps to explain the dominance of the core themes of growing as achieving, learning, or helping. For example, when employees' interpretations emphasized individual mechanisms, such as at ChemCo, the content of the growing self-construals nevertheless contained similar interpretations of growing as being about learning. Thus, even when employees' interpretations feature relatively individualistic processes, organizations subtly shape interpretations of growing. Although we found variety in both the way employees interpreted the content of growing and the process through which those interpretations were shaped *across* organizations, we found much less variance *within* organizations. This follows from sociological work that suggests that organizations can provide cultural raw materials or cultural repertoires (Somers 1994, Swidler 1986) for individuals to draw from in constructing a self, but it departs

from this work in suggesting that there may be quite a narrow band of credible interpretations of these contextual resources. As a result, our findings affirm anthropologists' observations about how the cultural worlds of individuals shape the self (e.g., Holland et al. 1998) and how organizational contexts embed employees' sense of self (e.g., Carlsen 2006, Michel 2007, Pratt 2000).

We have argued that agency can be elusive—after all, even when employees interpret their agency, they nonetheless interpret their growing in ways consistent with others in the organization—however, it still has important implications. When individuals see themselves as the primary active agent in their growing, they may more likely take the initiative to grow on their own by seeking out opportunities themselves. On the other hand, when employees see the organization as the primary active agent in growing, employees may simply wait for opportunities to come to them, such as through a training program or a promotion. For example, at ChemCo, employees may be more inclined to seek out opportunities themselves and worry less when the organization does not offer opportunities to grow. At FinCo, employees may be predisposed to leave the organization if they believe their interpretations of growing are at odds with those preferred by the organization. Finally, at SocialOrg, employees may be more likely to go beyond their formal job roles to help those in need and thus grow in a way valued by the organization, i.e., developing a helping self. Thus, the interpretations that employees make can have material consequences at work, shaping not only their self-concept but also the actions they take to enact that self-concept. Moreover, how employees construct growing self-construals can shape the interpretive reality of others. For example, when employees share with others their interpretations of growing, it can influence the growth of the listener. This relationship was implied through how supervisors at FinCo, ChemCo, and SocialOrg influenced their employees by constructing growing in particular forms.

Contributions to Understanding Employee's Interpretive Experiences at Work

Scholars in organization studies have increasingly suggested that individuals are cultural agents, in that they draw from culture in diverse ways (Swidler 2001, Weber 2005). Our research finds that although individuals within a particular organization draw from such resources, they nevertheless end up with relatively homogeneous interpretations. We found that these resources do not afford much interpretive diversity, as they suggest specific themes about the content and causes of growing. This observation, perhaps coupled with a motivation for coherence in interpretations about growing, restricts the types of interpretations employees offer. Nevertheless, our findings show that individuals eventually reach interpretations of growing that are

deeply organizational, but how they get there is an elaborate journey in which individuals work hard to interpret their own idiosyncratic experiences in ways consistent with others in the organization. This is important because when employees can select among personal and contextual resources to craft an interpretation of their growing that coheres with the organization, they may be able to view their organization as a good fit for them (Shipp and Jansen 2011), which may have material consequences for their satisfaction, performance, and retention (Kristof-Brown et al. 2005). At the same time, the idea of being able to interpret growing in ways consistent with the organization may suggest why it is often hard for employees to adapt to change. Change implies that employees must undertake significant efforts to recraft one's growing self-construal to make it coherent with new features of the organization. Not only is this difficult interpretive work that requires revising a core part of one's self-concept, but the organization may, especially at the onset of change, lack the contextual resources to help facilitate this transformation.

Our research also adds to studies of post-traumatic growth at work (e.g., Maitlis 2009, 2011) and indirectly addresses the identity adaptation (Ibarra 1999, Pratt 2000, Pratt et al. 2006) and best-self development literatures (Roberts et al. 2005). Our study suggests that employees see themselves growing in a variety of situations at work, many of which are routine and mundane. Thus, rather than assuming that trauma or jolts are necessary for self-change to happen, our research suggests that growing self-construals may be part of the everyday self-sensemaking that happens as individuals engage in rituals, take on discretionary work, respond to bosses' directives, etc. In fact, the everydayness of the types of situations that are part of growing self-construals suggests that researchers interested in linking employees' self-concepts to organizational conditions would do well to consider the incremental and often invisible ways that organizations shape self-sensemaking not only when individuals are new entrants (e.g., Ashforth et al. 2007), face trauma (Maitlis 2009), receive an intervention of positive feedback (Roberts et al. 2005), or participate in major events such as organizational change (e.g., Fiol 2002). Rather, by focusing on how everyday actions are tied to an employee's growing self-construals, we can better see the ongoing self-modifications of individuals and how they often change in ways that advance toward improvement along some organizationally valued dimension, such as achieving, learning, or helping.

Limitations and Future Directions

Our research only considers interpretive processes around growing at three organizations. As a future direction, it would be worthwhile to explore whether employees' growing self-construals vary across occupational, national, and/or industrial cultures. Future research could

also consider more macro-level influences, such as broader cultural metanarratives (Somers 1994). In fact, one potential explanation for our identification of three primary growing self-construals could be that all three organizations were embedded in a shared U.S. cultural narrative that suggests growing at work is exemplified by learning, achieving, or helping. This metanarrative could limit the types of growing self-construals that U.S. employees identify and describe. Future research may also consider narrower repertoires, such as those based on role, status (Holland et al. 1998), or job function (Dougherty 1992). Additionally, we collected our data during a snapshot of time. To capture the more dynamic and contested nature of growing self-construals, researchers should conduct future work across time (e.g., Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003).

Also, an empirical investigation of how and why growing self-construals matter would be highly valuable. Do individuals who have particular growing self-construals experience greater levels of well-being or resilience? McAdams et al. (2001) find that construing oneself as growing is associated with increased psychological well-being and manifests as greater life satisfaction and self-esteem, a sense of coherence, and lower levels of depression. Accordingly, employees' growing self-construals may help unravel the relationship between interpretations of growing and well-being at work by providing more context around what growing means and how employees arrive at these interpretations. For example, it may be that growing as achieving relates more strongly to employee well-being in institutional or national cultural contexts that are more individualistic than collectivistic. In contrast, self-construals of growing as helping may foster well-being more strongly for employees working in more collectivistic cultural settings. These predictions, based on the view that self-construals are partially culturally embedded and determined (Markus and Kitayama 1991, Plaut et al. 2002), suggest that different growing self-construals may produce different emotional and behavioral implications in different contexts and thus may result in differing levels of well-being. Another type of investigation of outcomes could examine whether employees who reveal growing self-construals that coalesce with their organization's shared growing interpretation experience a greater level of engagement or commitment at work. In other words, can growing self-construals serve as an indicator of a culturally appropriate self (e.g., Kunda 1992), thus signaling how well or poorly an employee experiences fitting in at a particular work organization? Our example of Tina at FinCo suggests that not having an interpretation of a culturally appropriate self can lead to stress or even an intention to leave the organization.

Our study also did not address the likely reciprocal processes by which employees' growing self-construals create some of the resources that in turn shape

employees' growing self-construals over time. For example, some researchers have argued that growing self-construals are a type of positive identity narrative that shapes the building of social resources (Dutton et al. 2010). Thus, we ask, do growing self-construals have a formative impact on the resources inside organizations over time? Our hunch is that they do, something exemplified by strong consistency of interpretations within each of the three organizations.

Also, our three different organizations varied in size, with FinCo being much larger than either ChemCo or SocialOrg. Whether these differences in size, and the fact that we interviewed more participants at FinCo because of its relative size, influenced our findings is an important limitation of our work. On the other hand, it might suggest a different set of contextual resources available at larger organizations. Finally, it would be interesting to better understand how organizational leaders purposely and even strategically shape employees' growing self-construals as a form of a control system (Fineman 2006, O'Reilly and Chatman 1996).

Conclusion

Employees' growing self-construals are useful windows for examining how employees see themselves as growing at work. A focus on employees' interpretations of growing facilitates theory development about how employees interpret a sense of progressive self-change. This focus invites researchers to investigate how work contexts both constrain and enable employees' interpretations of self-change. At the same time, a focus on growing self-construals encourages further inquiry into how employees participate in interpreting their own self-change. As long as growing is a human developmental ideal, organizational researchers can offer a deeper understanding of how individuals interpret this critical human experience.

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Endnotes

¹The interview guide included both focal and optional questions. The focal questions asked participants about their "thriving experiences," which we define as "growing in a positive way." Participants were asked to (1) tell a story about a time when they were growing at work, (2) explain how they knew they were growing, (3) describe what enabled and

constrained their growing, (4) discuss what outcomes flowed from their experiences of growing, and (5) define "growing." The optional questions, which were posed as time allowed, asked participants to (6) describe their responsibilities, (7) discuss whether other people in the context were growing and why, (8) articulate when, where, and why they were growing the most across different occupational and organizational contexts, (9) discuss whether they were growing currently, (10) explain how thinking about growing has affected them, and (11) answer demographic questions about education, age, and departmental affiliation.

²All names are pseudonyms; personally or organizationally identifiable information has been altered to maintain confidentiality.

³Note that grammatical errors in the interview transcripts have not been altered to preserve the original language of the informant. Punctuation has been corrected where necessary to improve clarity.

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Scott Sonenshein is an assistant professor of management at the Jesse H. Jones Graduate School of Business, Rice Uni-

versity. He received his Ph.D. in 2007 in management and organizations from the University of Michigan. His research interests include the examination of change and ethics from sensemaking and narrative perspectives.

Jane E. Dutton is the Robert L. Kahn Distinguished University Professor of Business Administration and Psychology at the University of Michigan. She received her Ph.D. from Northwestern University. Her research interests include positive identity construction processes, compassion at work, and high-quality connections. She is deeply committed to ideas arising from positive organizational scholarship.

Adam M. Grant is a management professor at The Wharton School, University of Pennsylvania. He received his Ph.D. from the University of Michigan in organizational psychology and his B.A. from Harvard University. His research focuses on prosocial helping and giving behaviors; job design; work motivation, initiative, and proactivity; and employee well-being.

Gretchen M. Spreitzer is a professor of management and organizations at the University of Michigan's Ross School of Business. She also received her Ph.D. from the Ross School of Business. Her research focuses on employee empowerment and leadership development, particularly during times of change. She is part of the Center for Positive Organizational Scholarship, where her recent research is on enabling employee thriving at work.

Kathleen M. Sutcliffe is the Gilbert and Ruth Whitaker Professor of Management and Organizations at the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan. Her research focuses on processes associated with team and organizational learning and resilience, high-reliability organizing, and investigation of the social and organizational underpinnings of organizational mishaps. She is currently studying these issues in healthcare, wildland firefighting, and the oil and gas industry.