Microentrepreneur Identity in Appalachian Ohio: Enterprising Individuals with a Regional Flavor

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This dissertation titled
Microentrepreneur Identity in Appalachian Ohio: Enterprising Individuals with a Regional Flavor

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ABSTRACT

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This study articulates the connections between material and symbolic conditions of work and identity construction through recognizing the effects of language, discursive practices of work, and societal discourses on microentrepreneurialism in Southeastern Appalachian Ohio. Microentrepreneur identity is understood as a communicative construction drawing upon material, relational, and reflective dimensions in interaction over time. The situated discursive work practices of microentrepreneurialism in Southeastern Appalachian Ohio constructs the ontological conditions for a microentrepreneur identity in the region. This study views microentrepreneurialism as both a discourse and a practice that draws upon U.S. societal discourses and allows for participation in the socio-economic structure of U.S. society. The theoretical framework relies on an interpretive modernist conception of a moderate form of social constructionism informed by American pragmatism.

Using Southeastern Appalachian Ohio as the site of research, this study applies a grounded theory methodology in the analysis of textual data and participant interviews. Findings show that the construction of a microentrepreneur identity has a positive impact on the work lives of microentrepreneurs and the local economy. Using the three dimensions of identity, participants socially constructed a microentrepreneurial identity through identification with aspects of the material world in Southeastern Appalachian
Ohio, through collaborative work practices in relationships with other microentrepreneurs, and by reflecting on one colonizing aspect of how to succeed as a microentrepreneur. Implications of this study are discussed, along with limitations and future directions for research.
DEDICATION

This is dedicated to Ay.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to acknowledge the help of my professors who did not give up on me when I was ready to give up on myself. Without them, I would not have gotten this far. Also, this study would not have been possible without participants. I thank them for sharing aspects of their work life with me to make this study possible.
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CHAPTER 1: RATIONALE AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

Modern social science, du Gay (1996) explained, has created the human category of work as not only a “livelihood, but also as a stable, consistent source of self-identity” (p. 9). There exists a relationship between who Americans are and the paid labor they engage in (see, for example, Jorgenson, 2002; Kuhn, 2009; Lair, Sullivan, & Cheney, 2005; Larson & Pearson, 2012; Nadesan, 1996; Nadesan & Trethewey, 2000; Trethewey, 2001). What these articles have in common is an analysis of the relationship between a particular discursive practice of work and identity construction in corporate settings. Discursive practices of work provide ontological conditions of being and understandings about work life (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004) as well as insight into the intersections between work and personal life (Medved & Kirby, 2005; Medved & Rawlins, 2011). In so doing, these discursive practices refer to both symbolic and material conditions of work in relation to identity construction (Casey, 1995). It makes sense, then, for organizational communication scholars to examine connections between discursive practices of work and identity construction. The focus of this study is the discursive practice of microentrepreneurialism as a form of work, particularly as it draws upon the societal discourse of the American Dream.

Microentrepreneurialism is a form of entrepreneurialism where individuals create microenterprises that can benefit from start-up loans of under $35,000 and employ less than five employees (Association for Enterprise Opportunity [AEO], 2005). These microenterprises are not limited by industry or business sector and come from economically disadvantaged families (Servon, 1999). My father is an example of a microentrepreneur who was the sole operator and worker of his business. My father’s
microenterprise provided full-time employment that allowed him to support our family. Having no formal education or assistance, I saw him struggle in starting and running his business. I remember thinking of my father as a successful entrepreneur since I saw an accumulation of material wealth for my family. Looking back now, I can see a connection between his work, his identity, and his participation in the American Dream.

Scholars interested in studying discursive practices of work and identity construction tend to be interested in social constructionism and the effect of language and social interaction on organizational life (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Gergen, 1999; Heracleous, 2012; Philips & Hardy, 2002). Scholars must be careful, however, not to assume that organizations are nothing but discourse (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2011; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Mumby & Clair, 1997; Phillips & Oswick, 2012). I would also argue that identity is not solely constituted by discourses. Rather, it is constituted through three dimensions (material, relational, and reflective) in interaction with others (Seigel, 2005). Yet, discourses do provide a useful lens to help microentrepreneurs understand the ongoing activities of their organizational lives (Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001). To date, organizational communication studies have focused on the discursive practices enacted in one specific kind of organization (Kuhn, 2009; Nadesan & Trethewey, 2000; Lair et al., 2005; Trethewey, 2001), while others explore how people use discourses to organize as a collective (Aden, Pearson, & Sell, 2010; Cheney, 2001; Harter & Krone, 2001). Broader societal discourses, such as the American Dream, however, are also important to the construction of work and personal identity in the United States (Lucas, 2011). These discourses provide an enduring system of thought on
how Americans should live their lives (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). This is a narrative that must be acknowledged in studies of work and identity. Microentrepreneurs do not just utilize discourses to understand their lives, though. They also draw upon material conditions in conjunction with symbolic constructions to understand both their work and non-work lives. This study seeks to more richly articulate a connection between material and symbolic conditions of work and identity construction.

The first chapter of this study begins by describing the problem I see between discursive practices of work and identity construction in the U.S. today. Next, I describe the purpose of the study as well as a brief summary of the theoretical lens for the study. Finally, I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the potential significance of this work.

Statement of the Problem

U.S. society tends to emphasize paid labor. Work and its related actions and interactions consume our waking hours. Corporations even influence our lives outside of work through dictating working hours, wage standards, product advertising, and sponsoring legislation (Deetz, 1992). Who Americans consider themselves and others to be is frequently articulated in relationship to their work activities (see, for example, Casey, 1995; du Gay, 1996). Identifying a person by their location in paid labor runs the risk, du Gay (1997) argued, of essentializing qualities of the type of work done to the individuals doing the work. An additional risk comes about when societal discourses are used to label certain types of work as “a real job” and other types of work as “not” (Buzzanell & Lucas, 2006; Clair, 1996) or as a responsible career (Tams & Marshall,
2011) versus a less responsible career. If certain types of work can be labeled as “a real job,” than certain identities can be labeled as “a real identity” while others are not (Medved & Kirby, 2005). If Americans construct their identity primarily based on their work, how do individuals unable to find stable employment come to create or maintain a sense of self?

The Changing Face of Work

Work in U.S. society is currently in flux. The changing global economy and advances in computer and communication technologies have shifted advanced capitalist societies from goods-producing to service-producing economies and knowledge-based economies. This has restructured economic opportunities for many Americans. For some individuals, the changes have been for the better while a great number of people have seen a drastic loss in employment opportunities or the reduction of wages and benefits (Magdoff & Magdoff, 2004). Many employment opportunities for blue collar workers, for example, have shifted from well-paying manufacturing jobs to low-skill service, retail, temporary worker, and laborer occupations. Globalization and advances in computer and communication technologies have also changed the location of work and ways of doing work. Corporations, both large and small, are moving their manufacturing plants and call centers abroad or are automating different features of work in an effort to keep labor costs down. These moves have exacerbated individuals’ chances of finding stable employment, especially in economically depressed areas such as the site for this study—Appalachian Ohio.
Theorists such as Harvey (1989) and Jameson (1991) have posited that changes in the methods of production are a result of the globalization of capitalism and have brought about an epochal shift in society. While I do not adopt a postmodern stance in this study, I do adopt Casey’s (1995) term *post-industrialism* to refer to current conditions of work in a global society. My use of post-industrialism does not reject industrialism, per se; rather, I use that term as a way of broadening our understanding of how paid work is currently being reorganized and the influence that it has on workers and their understanding of self. Work in a post-industrial society, Casey (1995) argued, is characterized by advances in computer and information technologies in production “and the restructuring of work tasks, occupations, and organizational practices” (p. 5). These changes in work also require a change in workers who must now be able to operate advanced technologies at work and/or acclimate themselves to working in nonpermanent, flexible positions (Casey, 2012; Gossett, 2001, 2006; Nadesan, 2001). Using the term post-industrialism allows me to recognize the transformative dynamics and contradictions of capitalism and western modernity as they go global (Giddens, 1990; McGuigan, 1999) while also avoiding the modernity-postmodernity dichotomy (Delanty, 2000; Mumby, 1997)².

Rural areas of the U.S., in particular, have been hit hard by the upheaval of global economics, especially where the local economy is not diverse and people often rely on one industry or employer for a majority of employment opportunities (Billings & Tickamyer, 1993). Rural areas in the U.S. tend to have a disproportionate number of the country’s poor (Tickamyer & Duncan, 1990). Appalachia is one such region in the U.S.
that has been hard hit by globalization and deindustrialization (Billings & Blee, 2000; Eller, 2004; Tice & Billings, 1991). Living in a post-industrial Appalachia presents myriad identity construction challenges to people not able to find work or maintain stable employment due to conditions beyond their control (see, for example, Tickamyer, 1992). One form of work that rural Appalachians are increasingly being offered as an alternative by economic development centers, and subsequently many identify with, is microentrepreneurialism. Microentrepreneurs tend to be the sole owners and operators of family businesses that have low start-up costs. Many rural working poor can start microenterprises in their homes often to subsidize full-time, low wage jobs to help make ends meet.

The Appalachian Region of Southeastern Ohio

According to the Appalachian Regional Commission or ARC (n.d.[a]), Appalachia is comprised of a 205,000 square mile region that follows the spine of the Appalachian Mountains from southwestern New York to northeastern Mississippi. Appalachia encompasses all of West Virginia and parts of 12 other states (Alabama, Georgia, Kentucky, Maryland, Mississippi, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia), including 410 counties in primarily rural areas of the United States. Located in the northwestern corner of the Appalachian region is Appalachian Ohio. Appalachian Ohio consists of 29 counties running from Clermont County in the southwest to Columbiana County in the mid-east (see Appendix A for a map of Appalachian Ohio). Of those 29 counties, ARC (2012) labels 7 of those counties as distressed. The distressed counties are: Adams, Athens,
Meigs, Morgan, Nobel, Pike, and Vinton. Distressed counties, according to ARC (n.d.[b]), rank in the worst 10 percent of the nation and are the most economically depressed counties in Appalachia. ARC (n.d.[b]) determines whether or not a county is distressed by comparing “each county’s averages for three economic indicators—three-year average unemployment rate, per capita market income, and poverty rate—with national averages” (¶1). Athens County, the primary site for this study, has been on the ARC’s distressed list since at least Fiscal Year 2002 (ARC, n.d.[c]).

Poverty in this area affects people from different backgrounds and ages. Census figures show that, in 2010, 30.3% of people in Athens County lived in poverty\(^3\) compared to the State of Ohio poverty rate of 14.2% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012a) or the United States poverty rate of 13.8% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012b). To give this some perspective, in 2010, the Appalachian Ohio poverty rate was 16.4%, while the poverty rate for the Appalachian region itself was 15.6% (ARC, n.d.[d]). Private sector jobs in Athens County, according to Athens County Department of Jobs and Family Services, do not pay well (Claussen, 2002). In the first quarter of 2011, the average weekly wage for Athens County was $676 compared to the State of Ohio average of $819 or the United States average of $935 (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2011).

Additionally, employment opportunities for many people in Athens County have been declining since 2000 because of factory and store closings, business layoffs, and federal, state, and county government budget cuts (Claussen, 2001 October). Local newspaper articles report that international economic treaties, such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA), the Free Trade Area of the Americas
(FTAA), the Central American Free Trade Agreement (CAFTA), and the World Trade Organization (WTO), have contributed to employment problems in Athens County by encouraging companies in the area to outsource jobs abroad (Claussen, 2001 July; Philips, 2004).

Demographically, Appalachian Ohio is primarily white. Census figures show that, in 2010, 91.8% of residents identified as White, 4.3% identified as Black or African-American, 1.6% identified as Hispanic or of Latino origin, and 3.2% identified as other ethnicities out of a population of 2,043,040 (Pollard & Jacobsen, 2011). Athens County in Ohio, the primary site for this study, follows a similar pattern. Census figures show that, in 2010, 90.3% of residents identified as White, 3% identified as Black or African-American, 1.7% identified as Hispanic or of Latino origin, and 5% identified as other ethnicities out of a population of 64,769 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012a).

Historically, the name “Appalachia” evokes images of hillbillies, coal, and poverty. One aspect of Appalachia identity that these images generate for the region is a pattern of culturally based economic life and activities that leads, according to Cattell-Gordon (1990), to the exploitation of people in the region through economic and political subordination (see, for example, Cooke-Jackson & Hansen, 2008). Appalachian poverty scholars Duncan (1992) and Haynes (1997) explained how this image is readily apparent in such popular books as Harry Caudill’s (1963) Night Comes to the Cumberland, John Fetterman’s (1967) Stinking Creek, and Jack Weller’s (1965) Yesterday’s People. Unfortunately, these images tend to paint a picture of Appalachians as being “broken in spirit and body” (Duncan, 1992, p. 112). Even though these images might be negative,
they are not the only images of Appalachia. Other images of Appalachia display the beauty of the countryside, the connection people have with the land, and the importance of family relationships (Eller, 2008; Emery, Fisher, & Macke, 2003; Williams, 2002).

**Theoretical Framework**

There has been a renewed emphasis on language and social interaction taking place in the field of communication studies (Eisenberg, 2001; Galanes & Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009). This study fosters that emphasis by taking an interpretive modernist perspective to social constructionism as informed by pragmatism (Cronen, 2009; Mumby, 1997). I argue that lay actors experience and understand their identities in a particular way that often contradicts particular scholarly definitions (James, 1907/1977a). Through a focus on language in use and commonsense, everyday knowledge can allow scholars to more richly understand how lay actors articulate their notions of identity (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Following Mead (1934), I argue that society is not comprised of many individuals who happen to come together; but rather, society predates an individuals’ entry into it. We are all born into a language community that exists in a specific historical and cultural milieu with already formed concepts. In addition to the discursive practices of that society, there are material practices that also influence a society’s understanding of different concepts. Both must be understood together to more richly comprehend the communicative practices of any given society (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Bartesaghi & Castor, 2009).

The start of any understanding of a society or its concepts begins with understanding notions of self in that society. A social constructionist notion of the self
recognizes that people use culturally available discourses, such as the American Dream, to construct their notions of self. The self, as such, is based on relationships with others in interaction over time (Gergen, 1991; Mead, 1934) in which individuals’ lived experiences in a society help them to understand their identity in that society (Dewey, 1929/1958). The problem is to figure out which material and discursive practices provide a better future for the society (James, 1907/1977a). Pragmatism helps social constructionism do this by providing one method for determining the value of truths.

**Identity and Organizing**

Identity is very much a concept of Enlightenment, and the development of identity has been examined extensively by scholars (see, for example, Gergen, 1991; Giddens, 1991; MacIntyre, 1984; Seigel, 2005; Taylor, 1989). Identity refers to notions of what it means to be a human agent or ontology. I argue that identity is a social process that places communication with others as central to the development, experience, and maintenance of an individual’s personal sense of self (Baxter & Montgomery, 1996; Mead, 1934). As a concept in common, everyday discussions, too often an individual’s identity is defined as certain enduring, fixed, or essential characteristics that are central or distinctive to those individuals and which distinguishes those individuals from the rest of society (Christensen & Cheney, 1994; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994). Indeed, U.S. notions of individualism have made identity an individual project (Bauman, 1996), a project that allows psychologists, counselors, and self-help gurus, who work from a positivist modernist perspective, to claim expert knowledge about who a person should be or how they should live, whether in their work, home, or social lives (Giddens, 1991; see also
Arthurs, 1994). These “experts,” Taylor (1989) argued, provide a utilitarian outlook that tends to commercialize life, emptying life of its richness, depth, and meaning.

This popular understanding of identity does not seem to take into account the historical development of the very idea of identity. Nor does it seem to recognize the effect of language, discursive practices of work, or societal discourses on the development of identity across certain societies or historical milieus. In a society where middle class American’s have learned to understand who they are and their relative place in society by what they do for a living, the above notion of identity formation presents challenges for the working poor in the United States (Williams, 2000). A different way of understanding identity development is needed to help understand how the changing realm of work is influencing microentrepreneur identities in Appalachian Ohio. In a post-industrial society, it can be difficult for microentrepreneurs to achieve coherence and consistency in their everyday lives when they are divided by internal tensions and external pressures brought on by globalization and advances in computer and communication technologies at work.

I recognize and understand that work is not the only source of a microentrepreneurs’ identity. They also develop their understandings of self through interactions with family, friends, and activities outside of work. As this study focuses on microentrepreneurialism as a form of organizing, it focus more on the discursive and material practices of work in post-industrial Appalachian Ohio as one way of constructing work identity. But, the study also recognizes that work identities are not always separate from personal or familial senses of self. Microentrepreneurialism, I
argue, is an organizing process that draws upon various notions of material and individual success in the American Dream. As such, microentrepreneurialism is both a discourse and a practice. As a discourse, microentrepreneurialism constitutes the relationship between society and organizing in the U.S. (Mumby & Stohl, 1996) while, as a practice, microentrepreneurialism constructs U.S. notions of work and self and the forms they take (Alvesson, 2010; Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004).

Purpose of the Study

If I am to claim identity construction is a social process, I need an appropriate ontological stance. The common ontological stance in modernity as fixed, objective, and rational does not work. That stance is based on Enlightenment thinking that assumes knowledge of reality is based on an external material objectivity and views our mind as a mirror in which language accurately reflects the material world around us (Gergen, 1999; Rorty, 1979). Instead, I argue that social constructionism represents a range of perspectives that offer a more nuanced way of understanding the connections between identity and work in a post-industrial society. In the field of communication studies, social constructionism tends to be viewed in opposition to positivist modernism and can be used in a variety of ways (e.g., interpretive modernism [Leeds-Hurwitz, 1995; Mumby, 1997; Putnam, 1983], critical modernism [Allen, 2005], postmodernism [Stewart, 1995]). However, I argue that its premises constitute an interpretive modernist discourse since its focus is on how individuals use commonsense knowledge to understand what is “real” and meaningful for their language communities. Putnam (1983) described how interpretive modernism focuses on how individuals make sense of their
world through their communicative practices. Social constructionism allows me to reclaim the reasoning individual as rooted in and constructed through communication. That is, social constructionism’s focus on knowledge and language in use provides “the ontological force, where language constitutes existence, and communication makes Being be” (Shepherd, 1993, p. 90, emphasis in original). For the remainder of this section, I describe how I position myself within interpretive modernist social constructionist thought before connecting it with pragmatist philosophy.

Social constructionism is a meta-theoretical perspective that challenges our commonsense, everyday knowledge of the world and how that knowledge guides our conduct within society. Berger and Luckmann (1966) argued that we live in a world of signs and symbols in which language constitutes everyday life. Language, as a social activity that can transcend the here and now, builds up classification schemes which accumulate into social stocks of knowledge. Knowledge is constructed by social processes and then maintained, modified, and reshaped by social relations. It views our common way of understanding the world as being historically and culturally specific and sustained by social processes that societal discourses such as the American Dream provide (see also Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1999). From this perspective, knowledge construction and social interaction go together.

Drawing on social constructionist thought allows me to problematize the view that people exist as separate, discrete individuals with essential inner selves as modernity suggests (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1999). By using the term *identity* versus *personality* or *self-identity*, I seek to avoid the essentialist connotations of personality or individuality.
and make notions of identity implicitly a relational concept. Language is viewed as a social process and social interaction is important for identity construction from a social constructionist perspective. Eisenberg (2001) argued that communication scholars can better understand identity construction with an emphasis on language and social interaction, since identity is both a process and outcome of our knowledge and use of language in interactions (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987).

Be it noted, however, that I want to avoid falling into a strong social constructionist or postmodernist perspective that would state everything is a discourse (see, for example, Biever, De Las Fuentes, Cashion, & Franklin, 1998; Gergen, 1999). To avoid doing that, I must recognize that identity is a key element of subjective reality and is also in a dialectical relationship with society and the environment (Mead, 1934). Berger and Luckmann (1966) explained how individuals exist in an interrelationship with their environment, meaning that neither humans nor the physical world can make sense of one another or exist without the other. Identity should not be thought of as a dualism of either internal or external, but rather as consisting of three dimensions: material, relational, and reflective (Seigel, 2005). Drawing on these three dimensions in constructing identity allows me to avoid a strong social constructionist perspective since their use recognizes that individuals use more than just discourses in constructing identities. Seigel (2005) explained how individuals draw on these three dimensions in constructing their identity, but the three dimensions do not create a seamless image of the self. Instead, social constructionism’s focus on language “in use” explains how our
identity appears to remain consistent over time and in different contexts (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1991; Mead, 1934).

Even though I find merit in social constructionism, it is not without its criticisms. There are three key criticisms of social constructionism that interpretive modernist scholars need to address. These include questions on determining truth, neglecting material realities, and relativism. One way to address these criticisms is through integrating a pragmatist philosophy. As a uniquely U.S. philosophy, pragmatism provides a U.S. perspective for understanding microentrepreneurial identities in Appalachia. Pragmatism can address these criticisms since it is a philosophical stance used to determine the value of truths and is a pluralistic philosophy that places communication central to its theorizing. Pragmatist philosophy provides a way for people to use their experiences to negotiate truths through communication (Dewey, 1929/1958; James, 1909/1977b). Truths are made out of experiences from living in material worlds (James, 1907/1977a). Pragmatism explains those truths as comprising parts of reality instead of reality as a whole (James, 1909/1977b). The more important question from a pragmatist perspective, according to James (1907/1977a), is “what are the consequences of believing something to be true?” This helps me understand the intended and unintended consequences of microentrepreneurial identities in Appalachian Ohio for both the individual and society. Constructions of identity in modernity, Taylor (1989) argued, tend to focus on how to live the good life, and social constructionism does not necessarily change that focus. I agree with Taylor (1989), who stated, it is better to determine what it is good to be rather than how to live “the good life.” Pragmatism can help me determine
the value of such distinctions, since James (1907/1977a) explained how what we consider to be a truth should lead to a better future for both microentrepreneurs and Southeastern Appalachian Ohio.

My concern in this study is with recapturing social constructionist notions of identity and work in modernity and away from post-modernity. More specifically, I seek to understand a narrow and specific form of identity known as microentrepreneurs in Appalachian Ohio. I am interested in examining which discourses microentrepreneurs use in constructing their identities, whether personal, work, or societal. My goal is to see how microentrepreneurialism in Appalachian Ohio is used to articulate notions of self and success in one slice of rural United States.

Significance for Doing the Study

Since I want to study microentrepreneurialism, which is a form of economic development or empowerment in Appalachian Ohio, I can use the Grameen Bank in Bangladesh studies (Papa, Auwal, & Singhal, 1995, 1997) and the Women Dairy Farmers in India studies (Papa, Singhal, Ghanekar, & Papa, 2000; Shefner-Rogers, Rao, Rogers, & Wayangankar, 1998) as examples of similar research problems and contexts. These authors examined the economic and social empowerment of Indian women through theories of identity, class, and concertive control systems. I seek to extend this thinking by better understanding the ability of microentrepreneurialism to empower the lives of the working poor in Appalachia by examining theories on identity, entrepreneurialism, and the American Dream. This allows me to understand the broader social context of microentrepreneurialism in Southeastern Appalachian Ohio. I believe that the findings of
this study have significance for the field of communication studies. There are four contributions my study makes to the field of communication studies.

First, communication scholars have not heavily studied the Appalachia region. While searching for articles on Appalachia, I found fourteen that were written by communication scholars. Three articles examined how the media represented historical events in Appalachia (Mitchell & Schnyder, 1989; Moon & Nakayama, 2005; Smith, 1997). Two articles examined religious life in Appalachia (Coopman, Hart, Houglan, & Billings, 1998; Dorgan, 1987). Two articles examined the stereotyping or marginalizing of Appalachians in entertainment media (Cooke-Jackson & Hansen, 2008; Podber, 2008). Two articles examined how media use affected perception and attitudes (Donohew, 1967; Riffe, 2006). One article examined lifestyle communication in Appalachia (Donohew & Singh, 1969). One article examined nonverbal communication in an Appalachian community (Ray, 1987). One article examined a women’s grass roots peace campaign (Eblen & Dillman, 1996). And, one article examined the making of a movie about Appalachia (White, 2007). More specifically, my study seeks to examine one type of organizing process in Appalachian Ohio – microentrepreneurialism. As noted above, popular understandings of Appalachia tend to be negative and lead to a false impression about living and working in Appalachia (Duncan, 1992; Haynes, 1997). Researchers, Deetz (1992) argued, should seek to organize their research agendas toward useful social responses. Focusing on organizing processes in Appalachia can offer a broader picture of or ways of talking about living and working in Appalachia.
Second, entrepreneurialism is an understudied discourse of work in U.S. society. Some studies in organizational communication draw upon entrepreneurialism to help explain a more central concept under study. For example, Nadesan (1999) used entrepreneurialism to help explain corporate spiritualism. Nadesan and Trethewey (2000) used entrepreneurialism to help explain gendered strategies of success for women at work. Trethewey (2001) used entrepreneurialism to help explain how women resist a narrative of aging at work. Carl (2004) used entrepreneurialism to help explain e-commerce in a multilevel marketing organization. Reed, Heppard, and Corbett (2004) used entrepreneurship to explain social networks in the rock and roll industry. And, Scott (2007) used entrepreneurial discourses to help explain the metaphor of a calling in careers. While all of these studies draw upon entrepreneurialism to help explain the central focus of their studies, entrepreneurialism as *an organizing process* is not the main focus in these studies. Focusing on microentrepreneurialism as both a form of work and a discourse is another way my study can contribute to the organizational communication literature. As Barker (2004) explained, entrepreneurialism “represents a key focus point for creative and innovative organizational communication” (p. 449). Entrepreneurialism is usually seen as a way to personal and economic success in the U.S. (Fisher, 1973; Kao, Kao, & Kao, 2002), but it does not recognize the existence of unequal access to opportunities in the U.S. (Chenoweth, 1974; Tickamyer & Duncan, 1990). Studying microentrepreneurialism as an organizing process allows me to link the material and symbolic worlds of the working poor in Appalachia together and explain how they construct and use their knowledge of work, self, and society (Bartesaghi & Castor, 2009).
Third, linking identity in organizations to the marketplace in post-industrial societies extends the research on identity in organizations (Casey, 1995; du Gay, 1996; du Gay & Salaman, 1992; Lair et al., 2005). This may also attend to the negotiated nature of some class, race, and gender work identities (Emmett, 2000; Nadesan & Trehewey, 2000; Lair et al., 2005; Parker, 2003). This is important, I believe, since economic activities are a necessary factor for participating in U.S. politics and society. An economic identity is also present in the economic colonization of the self (Deetz, 1992) and the commercialization of the private self (Hochschild, 2003). A microentrepreneurial identity draws upon a market metaphor in describing itself, and microentrepreneurs can symbolize both a privilege as well as a marginalized status in society (Clair & Thompson, 1996) as they construct their relationship with employment (paid work) and the other aspects of their lives (Deetz & Hegbloom, 2007; du Gay, 1996, 2000). As a result, microentrepreneurial identities are distinct from other types of organizational identities (e.g., class distinctions [Nadesan, 1996] or gender distinctions [Bruni, Gherardi, & Poggio, 2004]) and scholars need to understand them.

Fourth, my study can also extend the work done on non-traditional forms of organizing. This is a line of work distinct, at times, from feminist organizations, non-profit, or non-governmental organizations. Microentrepreneurial enterprises, whether existing in the home or in a shop, are for profit organizations that are undertaken for the sole purpose of generating income. It contributes to the literature on work and family life since microentrepreneurs’ enterprises tend to be coupled with their home life as Edley (2004) demonstrates in her study on entrepreneurial mothers. It becomes problematic to
differentiate between their private and public lives and selves as microentrepreneurs when they are tied together on a daily basis. Not everyone considers microenterprises as work, especially when they are done in addition to a “day job” or simultaneously with full time child care responsibilities (Clair, 1996; Edley, 2004; Medved & Kirby, 2005; Medved & Rawlins, 2011). Learning how working poor microentrepreneurs deal with this tension is important.

In the final analysis, I hope to be able to speak more broadly to what microentrepreneurialism communicates about broader discourses of success and the self in modern U.S. society. Microentrepreneurialism, as an abstract relationship, implies cooperative activities and relationships between self and others within society (Mead, 1934). The central questions asked dealt with what discourses (work, personal, or societal) microentrepreneurs use to construct their identities in relationships with others (e.g., customers, family members, loan officers, suppliers) and to exert control over their economic destinies. Ultimately, I seek to theorize how a microentrepreneurial identity is a culturally and historically malleable category in the U.S. that reflects the material and symbolic conditions of working poor Americans.

The remainder of this dissertation unfolds in the following manner. Chapter Two provides a review of the relevant literature, including previous research in the areas of social constructionism and pragmatism, identity, the American Dream, the working poor, and microentrepreneurialism. The chapter concludes with the research questions that guide the study. Chapter Three outlines the methodology used in conducting this study.
Chapter Four describes the results of the data. Chapter Five provides a discussion on the impact of this study along with limitations and future directions.
CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews the literature that is related to social constructionism and pragmatism, identity construction and work, the American Dream, the working poor, and microentrepreneurialism. First, the literature on social constructionism and pragmatism is used to provide a complementary theoretical frame work for this study and as a lens for understanding identity and microentrepreneurialism. Next, I explain how identity has been traditionally conceptualized and how I conceptualize identity at work. A description of the American Dream and the working poor in Appalachia, then, provides the societal context for understanding the relevance of the microentrepreneurialism context. Out of that comes a description of the literature on microentrepreneurialism that establishes why this context appears well suited for a study on identity construction and work. Finally, I share the research questions that guide this study.

Social Constructionism and Pragmatism

Ideas in modernity are stereotypically derived from Enlightenment thought which privileges rationality and universalism. Gergen (1991) equated scholarly thinking in modernity with positivist modernism. This is especially true, Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) explained, when scholars of various social constructionist persuasions tend to equate contemporary social science with positivism as a way to discredit both. Gergen (1991) fell into this trap when he explained how modernist scholars seek grand theories of self and society that rely on the possibility of scientific design and progress in which ideas become mass produced or manufactured to fit a mold. The self in such thinking has an essence – a fundamental thing-in-itself – that only needs to be discovered through an
individual’s reasoning ability and looking inward. While I find the positivist modernist subject-object split limiting, I believe interpretivism is part of the Enlightenment project. In Gergen’s (1991, 1999) arguments, social constructionist thought is considered part of the postmodernism project (see also Biever et al., 1998, Stewart, 1995). While his perspective has merit, Gergen is stuck in the modernity-postmodernity dichotomy and creates a false understanding of both modernity and postmodernity (see, for example, Alvesson & Deetz, 1996). In fact, pragmatism, as a modernist philosophy, seeks to do away with such dichotomies because they reduce our understanding of lived life (James, 1909/1977b). Key social constructionist (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Mead, 1934) and pragmatist texts (Dewey, 1929/1958; James, 1907/1977a, 1909/1977b), I argue, do not equate either social constructionism or pragmatism with postmodernism. Social constructionism and pragmatism seek to avoid nihilism while offering a sceptical theory of knowledge, a critique of essentialism and foundationalism, and emphasizing the contingencies of language and context (Cronen, 2009). Indeed, their work is modernist in nature and can be describe through Putnam’s (1983) description of interpretivism and Leeds-Hurwitz’s (1995) description of social approaches to communication (see also Cheney, 2000). This study seeks to reclaim these texts for interpretive modernism.

Interpretive modernism provides an alternative to accepting the modernity-postmodernity dichotomy. As part of the Enlightenment project, interpretivist studies in organizational communication posit an ontology of communication for human existence (Leeds-Hurwitz, 1995; Pacanowsky & O’Donnel-Trujillo, 1982; Pearce, 2009; Putnam, 1983; Trujillo & Dionisopoulos, 1987). The focus is on language in use to construct
communities and identities while recognizing and exploring the materialities of such constructions. This provides a more nuanced view of social constructionism and pragmatism which engages and challenges the modernity-postmodernity dichotomy. Social constructionism, argued Gergen (1999), brings about a shift in cultural beliefs. It does this by challenging scholars and lay actors to step outside of their “realities” to ask significant questions about ideas in modernity. What are the repercussions of our current ways of communicating? Who gains, who is hurt, or who is silenced? Which traditions are sustained and which are undermined? By asking such questions, interpretive modernist scholars hope to understand how people work together in constructing their understanding of reality and, more importantly, to offer alternative constructions for any given reality.

This section first, provides a description of the premises or assumptions of my understanding of social constructionism. Next, I relate how understanding social constructionism requires an understanding of self in society. Then, I relate how social constructionism draws upon discourses to understand both material and symbolic realities. Finally, I relate how American pragmatism complements my view of social constructionism by helping it overcome some popular criticisms of social constructionism.

Describing Social Constructionism

Though a recognized theoretical perspective within the field of organizational communication (see, for example, Galanes & Leeds-Hurwitz, 2009), social constructionism is typically only given a casual cite by researchers without explaining the
nuances of how they are using this perspective (see, for example, Buzzanell, 2000; Russell & Babrow, 2011; Shuler, 2001, Suter & Ballard, 2009; Sypher, McKinley, Ventsam, & Valdeavellano, 2002). While social constructionists do share assumptions in common, they are not a unified group. In general, social constructionists examine the commonsense, everyday knowledge people have and how they use that knowledge in constructing their understanding of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Berger and Luckmann (1966) describe how everyday items, objects, and phenomena become natural and obvious to the people of a certain culture or society based on their shared use of language. This happens, Berger and Luckmann (1966) argued, because our language provides us with social stocks of knowledge that we use in interactions to bring things into being. Moreover, once constructed, those things are internalized as objective and people respond to them as such. From a social constructionist perspective, language does not mirror life or equate to a correspondence theory of truth (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1999). That is, language is not a transparent medium that makes our thoughts and feelings readily available to others. Rather, language is a social phenomenon that occurs between people and pre-dates our entry into a given society. Gergen (1991) described language as an inherent form of relatedness or connectedness that we use in understanding our commonsense notions of reality. It is through this alternative view of language, Gergen (1999) argued, that we enter into the realm of social constructionism.

Since social constructionism is not a unified theoretical perspective, there is not one position considered as social constructionist. Social constructionist arguments tend to be classified into groups of either strong/weak or macro/micro (see, for example, Allen,
2005; Burr, 2003; Pearce, 1995, 2009), even though most scholars take a moderate approach to social constructionism (Allen, 2005). No matter where you fall, most social constructionists share some common assumptions. Gergen (1999) described any approach as social constructionist if it has as its foundation one or more of the following four assumptions. First, the terms we use in understanding our world and our self are not required nor demanded by “what is” (Gergen, 1999). This assumption explains how there are an unlimited number of descriptions or explanations for any state of affairs. That is, all descriptions could be different since nothing in a particular construction demands a certain understanding. In theory, though not practice, these different descriptions are equal in status (Gergen, 1999). These descriptions we use in our commonsense ways of understanding the world, including its categories and concepts, are culturally and historically specific (Burr, 2003). Not only are these understandings culturally and historically based, but they are also viewed as products of a particular culture and history that are dependent upon the prevalent social relationships at that time. Second, our modes of description, explanation, and representation are constructed in relationships (Gergen, 1999). This assumption explains that what we take to be true about the world is not the product of any one given mind. Rather, it is through relationships with others that we come to understand the meaning of things (see also Mead, 1934). Our relationships with others are inseparable from the language we develop and use together. That is, our shared language allows us to sustain knowledge of the world in social interaction (Burr, 2003). Third, we fashion the world and our future around us “as we describe, explain, or otherwise represent” (Gergen, 1999, p. 48) it in interactions with others. This assumption
explains how our knowledge and practices of language are bound within our broader social processes. Our interaction patterns and understandings of the world at any given time are the current acceptable ways of understanding and interacting in the world. These interactions and knowledge of the world sustain certain understandings while excluding other understandings. Fourth, it “is vital to our future well-being” (Gergen, 1999, p. 49) that we, as members of society, continuously reflect on our commonsense understandings of the world around us. This assumption explains how the tradition we use in constructing the world closes off other potential traditions and constructions or that some traditions are valued more than others. Because of this, we need to be vigilant in not blindly taking-for-granted the assumptions of our traditions and broader social practices by taking a critical stance toward the world around us (Burr, 2003). Reflectivity by both scholars and lay actors is necessary in suspending the obvious and questioning one’s premises about the ideas, concepts, or traditions that are taken-for-granted by us as natural and obvious.

As abstract as these four assumptions might be, if taken to heart, they have profound implications for how scholars and lay actors understand the world around them. These four assumptions do not represent truths; rather, they are an entry point into the social constructionist conversation (Gergen, 1999). What all this means is that social constructionism offers an alternative to the commonsense understanding of modernity and positivist modernism without entering into postmodernist thought. Social constructionism takes an anti-essentialism approach and questions realism. Knowledge of the world around us and what is true is specific to a historical and cultural milieu. It
places language as the element that brings us together with others and the conceptual frameworks and categories we use to understand our realities. The social constructionist argument emphasizes how the use of language encourages us to identify and see the world in a certain way (Burr, 2003). Finally, social constructionism focuses on our interactions with others and the social practices a society engages in. The rest of this section describes how I position notions of self within the social constructionist conversation. It focuses on the importance of what it means to be a person and our use of discourse in understanding the world around us.

**Constructing the Self**

Our conception of what constitutes a person tends to be the starting point for our understanding of the world around us. Common assumptions about what constitutes a person are difficult notions to change, Gergen (1999) argued, because our assumptions about selfhood are tied to our notions of truth and to institutions within society. Any reconceptualization of what constitutes a person, regardless of its source, can be threatening to both scholars and lay actors. Still, understanding what constitutes a person is a good starting point for my entry into the social constructionist conversation. The rest of this subsection describes how I position the self within social constructionism.

To begin with, I must get out of thinking about the self in terms of personality. Burr (2003) described the commonsense view of personality as a more or less unified, stable set of traits that are brought together to form a coherent whole self that does not change much over time. This is an essentialist view of personality that sees it as a biologically-given construct that exists inside a person (Burr, 2003). With this view, for
example, one can describe a person as shy, caring, friendly, aggressive, or thoughtless. What this view of personality fails to take into consideration is the social nature of our environment. We do not live isolated, independent lives. Instead, our lives are immersed in interdependent relationships with others (Gergen, 1991). The descriptions of a person as shy, caring, friendly, aggressive, or thoughtless has no meaning outside of interactions with others (Burr, 2003). These are descriptions of behaviors and not essential traits of people. Social constructionism, on the other hand, problematizes this understanding of personality by preferring to use the term *self* instead. How, then, does social constructionism view the self?

There is a connection between a society’s notions of self and its patterns of social processes. From a social constructionist perspective, society is not comprised of discrete individuals living together. Instead, Mead (1934) explained how social processes exist before the self. The self emerges out of social processes and is maintained, modified, and reshaped in those ongoing social processes. The self is not an essence held by someone; rather, it is a process that emerges through interactions in relationships with others. This definition of self is used in this study to understand how microentrepreneurial selves emerge and are sustained. For Mead (1934), the self that emerges in interaction is an expression of the social processes in that situation. The self is only “a development and product of social interaction” (Mead, 1934, p. 191) and we can only know ourselves in relation to others (see also Gergen, 1991; du Gay’s [1996] contingent identity; Richey & Brown, 2007). Mead (1934) was describing how the self is a social creation and, as a social creation, cannot be identified with personality, consciousness, or the private,
subjectiveness of a person. Once the self emerges, though, it can take on the characteristics of a coherent whole (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Mead, 1934).

This is important because it is our use of language and discourse that provides us with a commonsense understanding about what constitutes a person. Language is essential, Mead (1934) argued, for the development of the self (see also Burr, 2003; Gergen 1999). In U.S. society, for example, the language and discourses of capitalism and economics provides a common set of symbols and a social stock of knowledge for understanding personhood in the United States. These common economic symbols are what make the entrepreneurial self and activities possible as a U.S. self and way of life. Keep in mind that these social stocks of knowledge do not stay the same over time. They are specific to a cultural and historical milieu. Similarly, the language and discourses used by individuals to construct an economic understanding of the self in the U.S. has changed overtime. This is readily seen when one examines ideas of paid work in the cottage industries of the 1700s, in the industrial revolution of the 1800s, and in post-industrialism today. Each period uses a different discourse to explain what constitutes paid work or labors. These different cultural and historical milieus allows for different constructions of the self based on the understandings of the culturally available discourses of that time (Burr, 2003). A self can only construct an identity that is available by the culturally and historically available discourses (Gergen, 1991). In the U.S., many times, the understanding of self is economically based, since economic activity is part of the socializing process in U.S. society.
This all points to how the self in social constructionism is relationally based. The self as socially constructed informs patterns of action based on the culturally available discourses (Burr, 2003; Gergen, 1999; Mead, 1934). The self defined as relational is immersed in interdependent relationships with others and emerges overtime through our interactions and experiences with others (Gergen, 1991; Mead, 1934). Indeed, the self is dependent on social relationships and language in the cultural for it to emerge. Burr (2003) described one type of self that emerges in capitalistic or economic relationships as a self focused on individualistic differences. That is, people view their idea of self as differing from others that allows them to “compete” with others for jobs, promotions, material wealth, and social status. These differences are not essential features of the self; rather, they are products of the capitalistic society people live in America.

The emergence of a self in relationships over time would view communication as the primary phenomenon of self-construction (Mead, 1934). The idea of the self, and its social significance, as being formed in relationships points to how it is a consequence of discourse in interactions (Carbaugh, 1996). This seems to privilege the discursive or symbolic elements of life. While a social constructionist stance, and various social constructionist stances do differ, does focus on the discursive or symbolic elements in life, it still does recognize that a body and material reality exist and that they are important to understanding the symbolic elements of life (Bartesaghi & Caster, 2009). Berger and Luckmann (1966) and Mead (1934) both recognized the body in the development of the self (see also Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). These scholars place the physical body and the relational self in a dialectical relationship with one another and use
language as a mediating feature to resolve the tensions that exist. Organizational communication scholars are well positioned to understand how lay actors use language in mediating the tensions between material and symbolic worlds of the self (see, for example, Lair et al., 2005; Nadesan & Trethewey, 2000; Trethewey, 2001). It is important to acknowledge that neither the physical nor the symbolic elements of the self or reality can exist without the other. I discuss this further below, but first, I discuss in more detail the symbolic element of reality.

**Describing Discourses**

The term *discourse*, often times, is inaccurately treated as if it has a clear and broadly agreed upon meaning (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000, 2011; Jian, Schmisser, & Fairhurst, 2008; Putnam & Fairhurst, 2001), but this assumption is far from true. Ambiguous use of the term runs rampant and, as a result, discourse runs the risk of standing for everything, while meaning nothing at all (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000, 2011; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004). Up to this point, I have been using the term *discourse* without really clarifying my definition. This subsection focuses on defining discourse, its related terms, and their use in relation to my social constructionist stance.

In their article about the varieties of discourse analysis in organizational theory, Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) distinguished between *discourse* and *Discourse*. For Alvesson and Kärreman (2000), discourse, with a small “d,” refers to the social practices of talk and text in action. Scholars operating with this view of discourse see it as a medium for social interaction and are concerned with the use of language and interactional processes as a local accomplishment (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004). In
contrast, Alvesson and Kärreman (2000) refer to Discourse, with a capital “D,” as a general and enduring system of thought used in the formation and construction of ideas or selves in a specific cultural and historical milieu. Scholars operating with this view of Discourse see it as ordering and naturalizing notions of self and reality in particular ways (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004). Since both types of discourses are used by social constructionists (Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Mead, 1934) and are in line with my theoretical framework, I also be drawing upon both types of discourses in my study on microentrepreneurs in Appalachia.

In the U.S., Casey (1995) argued, events and processes that constitute the self occur in the everyday practices of work. I choose to follow Casey’s (1995) example and call these events and processes *discursive practices of work*. By discursive practices of work, Casey (1995) was referring to the “communicational and symbolic relations in production and work organization” (p. 11) that constitutes self and individual understanding of reality. In turn, these discursive practices of work “affect the social relations and organizational practices of society” (p. 11). These discursive practices of work are discourse with a small “d” and microentrepreneurial activities and processes are an example of these discursive practices of work. Microentrepreneurial activities and processes explain how microentrepreneurs experience and understand work. The American Dream, on the other hand, is a culturally and historically specific Discourse, with a capital “D,” which ascribes a certain way of being that pertains to notions of individual and economic success, as well as symbolic and material success, in the United States. Changes in the way of working in post-industrial U.S. have revealed the
constructed nature of this dream, since it has yet to be rearticulated to fit with notions of success in post-industrial United States. Thus, work practices of microentrepreneurs (or discourses) and the American Dream (or Discourse) can be co-constructive.

The primary premise of my study is that the material and discursive practice of microentrepreneurialism fundamentally influence the construction of social reality and self in Appalachian Ohio, and the U.S. more broadly. By referring to microentrepreneurialism as both a discursive and material practice, I am referring to it as both a form of communication and a form of work (Clair & Thompson, 1996; see also Kuhn, 2006; Wieland, 2010). As communication, microentrepreneurialism articulates a way of life and self in the economic society of capitalistic United States. As work, microentrepreneurialism is part of the socio-economic organization of self and society. By understanding and explaining the discourse of individual microentrepreneurs in Appalachian Ohio, I hope to be able to speculate as to how microentrepreneurialism articulates (or does not articulate) a meaningful message about work identity in U.S. socio-economics. Next, I more strongly connect how symbolic and material phenomena are used together by individuals to understand and construct the world around them.

*The Discourse and Material Connection to Lived Experiences*

Epistemology creates a false dilemma between realist notions of knowledge and social constructionist notions of knowledge in the academy. The question should not be which one better “captures” or “explains” phenomena. Rather, the question should be which one is more “valuable” or “helpful” in understanding the lived lives of individuals (James, 1907/1977a). What draws me to moderate forms of social constructionism is how
they do not assume there is anything innate to reality or individuals and, when not taken to the extreme, recognize that individuals use both the material and symbolic worlds in understanding reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1966) and notions of self and other (Mead, 1934) in relationships with others. What this means is that social phenomena (e.g., the organization, the economy, the self) do not have an independent existence outside of either the material or discursive worlds. Individuals understand their lived experiences through encountering the material aspects of reality and labeling them through their symbolic understandings of reality (Dewey, 1929/1958; Gergen, 1999).

Now, material reality does not just refer to a physical world of rocks and water, for example. I follow Ashcraft and Mumby’s (2004) explanation of the term material. According to Ashcraft and Mumby (2004), material reality refers to such things as the economic conditions individuals live in, the political arrangements in society, along with micropractices that deal with the body and sexuality. This clarification is important in understanding how individuals come to understand their lived experiences. According to Ashcraft and Mumby (2004), the material world around us provides the “impetus for communication” (p. 175). They went on to explain how communication arises in response to perceived material conditions and how communication is embedded in a historical and cultural context. In this sense, communication is a material act itself. Communication scholars, as such, are well situated to understand the material and discourse connection and to use it in explaining how the discursive practices of microentrepreneurialism and societal Discourses constructs identities and a material existence for some people in Appalachian Ohio. I am not arguing that communication
alone constitutes a microentrepreneurial subjectivity or material condition; rather, communication is a social process used in the negotiation between the situated material and symbolic worlds in historical, cultural, and political epochs (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Gergen, 1999). In this sense, communication does not just lend meaning to an already existing world. It is entangled in people’s attempts to “authenticate” their lived experiences (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Dewey, 1929/1958). Next, I explain the value of understanding the lived experiences of people as more than abstract constructs by scholars.

**Pragmatism Explained**

As a theoretical perspective, social constructionism offers a way for scholars to understand how individuals in relationships with others construct and understand the world around them. As James (1907/1977a) explained, lay actors understand their lives and its consequences differently than scholars. It is only scholars who live in a world of abstract notions of time and space. Pragmatism offers a way for scholars to connect their abstract constructs to the lived experiences of people. Pragmatism is also part of the modernist project that fits with my conceptualization of interpretive modernism. Both James and Dewey, to varying degrees, believed in the Enlightenment ideas of using science and progress to create a better world. But, positivist modernism’s “quest for certainty,” Dickstein (1998b) argued, is a misguided remnant of an outdated metaphysics that focuses on predicting totalizing systems and unified narratives. Pragmatism starts by critiquing positivist modernism’s focus on the Cartesian dualism. Pragmatism does this by not viewing concepts in isolation (Dickstein, 1998b). Instead, pragmatism places
concepts into their context so that lay actors can see the truth of things as dynamic and always in formation.

Pragmatism is a uniquely, though not solely, American philosophy that is undergoing a rediscovery (see, for example, Craig, 2007; Dickstein, 1998a; Perry, 2001; Russill, 2005). Though misunderstood at times, pragmatism is not a U.S. philosophy of practical expedience or inherently anti-theoretical. Pragmatism does reflect modernism’s break with tradition, but it also includes “the historical consciousness in American thinking” (Dickstein, 1998b, p. 3) through the U.S.’s dialogue on social inequality and civil rights. As a U.S. philosophy, pragmatism is well suited to help explain U.S. Discourses and practices of success, identity, and work. It provides a fresh escape from a pessimistic, maybe nihilist, European tradition and allows for an optimistic, U.S. self-definition that translates our thoughts and behaviors into meaning and action (Dewey, 1929/1958).

Pragmatism is a pluralistic philosophy that places communication central to its theorizing. Pragmatism offers a skeptical theory of knowledge along with a critique of foundationalism and essentialism that does not devolve into nihilism like strong versions of social constructionism. Pragmatist philosophy provides a way for people to use their experiences to negotiate truths through communication (Dewey, 1929/1958; James, 1909/1977b). If nothing else, pragmatism provides us with the possibility for viewing our world differently. In this section, I relate pragmatism to my understanding of social constructionism. First, I explain the importance of experience in pragmatism. Then, I describe how truth is understood in pragmatism. Next, I explain pragmatism’s view on
existence. Finally, I describe how pragmatism informs social constructionism.

Pragmatism is used to inform social constructionism because it provides a moral dimension to social constructionism that is otherwise left untheorized. Pragmatism forces social constructionism to evaluate the construction, whether as process or product, of truth, knowledge, and their uses.

*Experience and Pragmatism*

Social constructionism places an importance on knowledge in use in understanding ourselves and reality. For pragmatism, the purpose of knowledge is both the “assimilation of what is” and the “transformation of the world into a better place to live” (Seigfried, 1995, p. 118). The value of any type of knowledge is to figure out, when it is referred back to ordinary life-experiences, does that knowledge render those experiences more significant and fruitful for us (Dewey, 1929/1958). Social constructionism does not ask that question. What is more significant for knowledge is not the knowledge itself, but what that knowledge makes possible. Pragmatism allows me to more fully articulate the significance of microentrepreneurialism and a microentrepreneurial identity in Appalachian Ohio, than just using social constructionism alone.

In order to do this, pragmatists argue, you cannot separate experience from culture. According to Dewey (1929/1958), “experience is of as well as in nature” (p. 4a, emphasis in original). What Dewey meant is that we do not actually experience experience; rather, we experience culture. That is, communicative practices, relationships, meanings, and things interacting are what we experience. Both Dewey
(1929/1958) and James (1909/1977b) attest that what we do experience is “real” and that you cannot separate the subjective and the objective natures (of what is experienced from how it is experienced) of experience. Therefore, experience is not complete without both and the reflective process individuals use to understand both aspects of the experience (see also Mead, 1934). And, as a reflective process, experience becomes constitutive of the experience itself. As such, pragmatists argue that experience and experiencing is a mode of knowing. Life-experiences, then, become a valid form of knowledge for research.

This notion of knowledge would support the social constructionist view that ideas result from human action. As such, pragmatists recognize that our knowledge of reality is precarious. James (1909/1977b) explained how our thoughts influence our acts and how our acts influence our understanding of reality. As we continue to have new and old experiences and reflect on them, we might and can change our understandings of our experiences, and as such, our knowledge of reality and the world. This is not a problem from a pragmatist’s perspective, since we can only ever know the world in parts. For pragmatists such as James (1909/1977b), the world and experience is pluralistic in which the world is loosely connected by patterns of experiences. This means that we can never actually experience the “sum-total” of a reality. We experience reality as disseminated, distributed, and incomplete. And, by adapting one world view, we can preclude the acceptance of another (Leonhirth, 2001). Next, I shall explain how pragmatism’s conception of truth helps social constructionist understand how lay actors come to believe a truth.
Pragmatic Truth

Truth in social constructionism is an outcome of culturally and historically situated knowledge. Pragmatists, like social constructionists, do not believe in a correspondence theory of truth. For pragmatists, truth does not represent some reality “out there.” There is no common, universal human nature to discover. As such, truth is not an inherent property of an idea: “Truth happens to an idea. It becomes true, is made true by events” (James, 1907/1977a, p. 430, emphasis in original). An idea becomes true and is made true by experience that is verified in the process of living and made available to others in interactions. Just as a pragmatist version of experience is pluralistic, so too is a pragmatist version of truth pluralistic. James (1907/1077b) explained how the possession of a truth is not an end in itself. Rather, the value of a truth is derived from its practical importance to use. The term truth, then, just becomes a verification process of our experiences. Truths emerge from experiences, while experiences reflect back on truths. New truths are built on old truths. It is better, James explained, to call truths “half-truths” since they are open to change as we have new and different experiences. Critics of pragmatism view this as a form of expedient relativism, while pragmatists do not. James (1907/1977a) explained how a truth whose claims are “conditional” are constantly evolving. As such, truth cannot be absolute or abstract. Pragmatism, then, is an account of the relation between the “truth” of an idea and the object referred to by the truth. When pragmatists discuss truth, argued James (1907/1977a), they are referring to the workableness of the idea and not about the object referred to by the truth. Once
Pragmatists “believe” that an idea is true, they agree to what it says about that object until a new experience “happens” that causes them to alter this belief.

Since pragmatists talk about the plurality of truths, they need a way to determine how a successful truth “works.” James (1907/1977a, p. 311) contended that pragmatism asks key pragmatic questions to determine the value of truths: “Grant an idea or belief to be true, what concrete difference will its being true make in anyone’s actual life;” or, “What experiences may be different from those which would be obtain if the belief were false?”. What these questions are attempting to get at is the consequences of an idea. If, for example, there is no difference in consequences between two alternative ideas, then the alternatives make no sense. James referred to this way of determining the value of a truth as the pragmatic method. The pragmatic method is an “attitude of orientation” (p. 380) in which you look toward the consequences of an idea first. For pragmatists, truth is a form of good and not distinct from good. As James summarized, an idea is “true” only as long as it is beneficial for society to believe in it. Once an idea is no longer beneficial, then it should no longer serve as a truth for society. For pragmatists, the belief that provides the best promise for the future is the better belief than one that does not. This allows me to ask what the benefit of having a microentrepreneurial identity is. Now, I shall describe how pragmatism’s view on existence informs my social constructionist view on reality.

*Pragmatism and Existence*

Reality, for pragmatists, is only encountered and understood through our experiences of it. Both Dewey (1929/1958) and James (1907/1977a) described how
reality is a perspective we have and how that perspective influences our experiences and understandings of truths. The way we conceive of both realities and truths make them palatable for our purposes (James, 1907/1977a). For pragmatists, reality is always being constructed. The completion of reality is always somewhere in the future. This makes clearer how social constructionist argue that reality is continuously being constructed through interactions.

Both pragmatism and social constructionism conceive of the individual as having agency. For a free-will, pragmatic agent, “the future may not [be] identically repeat[ed or] imitate the past” (James, 1907/1977a, p. 403). Free-will, pragmatically conceived, provides the possibility for improvement in individuals’ lives and the world. Since pragmatists view the world as pluralistic, the world is composed of an “additive constitution” (James, 1907/1977a, p. 418, emphasis in the original). In other words, the world is incomplete and subject to addition or loss of both knowledge and experiences. As such, concepts, ideas, and identities are never finalized. There is always the possibility for us to change, to grow, and overcome differences. Pragmatists, James especially, provide human agents with extraordinary power to bring about a better life for themselves, others, and the world (Seigfried, 1995). In order to do that, pragmatists acknowledge that we live in social processes that are connected to the society we live in (Dewey, 1929/1958; Mead, 1934). Within this social context, there exist both an internal and external world and that both of those worlds can be experienced by people (James 1907/1977a; Mead, 1934). Finally, I can now relate how pragmatism helps overcome some criticism of social constructionism.
**Pragmatism Informs Social Constructionism**

Whereas pragmatism is a philosophical stance towards understanding truth through our experiences in reality, social constructionism is a theoretical perspective that examines our commonsense, everyday knowledge of the world and how that knowledge guides our conduct within society. Pragmatism helps us to question the “truths” constructed through our everyday interactions.

First, since no ultimate truth is posited, critics of social constructionism wonder how one can determine what is true if different groups in society can have different constructions or interpretations of the same event or idea. Pragmatism as a philosophical stance deals with notions of truth and what it means for something to be considered a truth answers this question easier than social constructionist thought. Both perspectives state that ideas and truths are negotiated through interaction with others. But, pragmatism asks the important question whereas social constructionism does not. “What are the consequences of believing something to be true?” That is the true question of concern here. This connects truth to the experiences of lay actors. By asking that question, I can better understand what a microentrepreneurial identity and microentrepreneurialism communicates about Appalachian Ohio and the U.S. more broadly.

Second, if reality is constructed through the symbolic realm of language, then how can social constructionism account for a physical or material reality? From a pragmatist perspective, reality is known through language and experience with things outside of us (Dewey, 1929/1958; James, 1909/1977b), whereas, social constructionism tends to fall back on how material reality becomes internalized and reified through
subjective language processes. In a sense, both a physical reality and a subjective reality can exist alongside one another. It is how people live with and understand those two realities together that matters. As explained above, the lived experiences of microentrepreneurs, both material and discursive, are negotiated through interactions with others, and communication is what connects those two realities together.

Third, social constructionism is critiqued as being relativistic. Relativism is the claim that every idea or belief is just as good as any other idea or belief. According to Rorty (1982), though, “No one holds this view. Except for the occasional cooperative freshman” (p. 166). The real concern is not about whether two incompatible opinions on microentrepreneurialism are good, but rather, whether scholars should explain reality as a whole (i.e., as an absolute) or in parts (i.e., as pluralistic). Since pragmatism is pluralistic, pragmatists seek to explain things in parts. Even though pragmatism has been criticized for being relativistic, pragmatism has developed a way for individuals to decide upon which ideas are better for their particular community or society. And, that way is though communication. For pragmatists, communication becomes the link between individuals’ experiences and their ability to make decisions on what is good and just for their society or community.

Social constructionism, as informed by pragmatism, forms the theoretical understanding of my study on microentrepreneurial identity in Appalachian Ohio. The focus here has been to reclaim social constructionism and pragmatism for interpretative modernism. By having pragmatism inform social constructionism, I am able to avoid feelings of nihilism when offering a skeptical, yet optimistic, theory of knowledge and
critique of essentialism and foundationalism while emphasizing the contingencies of language. This has allowed me to develop a more nuanced understanding of self and how we understand the conditions of our lives. I can now conceptualize how I view identity and organizing for this study.

Identity and Organizing

In the context of organizational communication, problems of identity and work have most often been couched in the language of organizational identification (Barker & Tompkins, 1994; Bullis & Tompkins, 1989; Cheney, 1983a, 1983b; Cheney & Tompkins, 1987; Gossett, 2002; Russo, 1998; Stephens & Daily, 2012; Tompkins & Cheney, 1983, 1985). Organizational identification studies stress the interrelationship between symbolic action (communication or interaction) and social/organizational structures (Conrad & Haynes, 2001). That is, organizational identification is more of a linguistic construction and not primarily dependent on a social structure. Cheney and Tompkins (1987, emphasis in original) argued, organizational identification is a process of identifying with and a product of identification towards an organization. In using Cheney and Tompkins’ (1987) conceptualization, organizational identification is a way of analyzing the individual-organizational relationship. Cheney and Tompkins (1987) also place language as central to their study of organizational identification like I do in my notion of identity as a social process.

Overtime, research on organizational identification grew to encompass organizational and individual identity. This area of research developed a link between the organization and the individual by examining organizational identity (Cheney &
Christensen, 2001; Christensen & Cheney, 1994; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994; Frandsen, 2012). In so doing, organizational communication scholars viewed organizational identity as a coherent single identity that organizations attempted to create for different categories of stakeholders, instead of organizations providing their different stakeholders with different views of their identity at different times in the organizational life cycle (Cheney & Christensen, 2001). Organizational communication scholars have also recognized that individuals in an organization do not just identify with their work organization. Instead, individuals are struggling with competing tensions between various targets of multiple identifications whether they are identifications at work, home, or social (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Barker & Tompkins, 1994; Russo, 1998; Scott, 1997; Scott & Stephen, 2009; Scott & Timmerman, 1999; Williams & Connaughton, 2012). In this sense, organizational members are actively engaged in “identity work” in which competing targets of identification via for dominance in forming and maintaining their identity (Kuhn, 2006).

Organizational identification, as discussed above, has its roots in the rhetorical tradition of Burke (1955). Burke examined how the rhetorical use of everyday language is able to create identification with a group and its ideology. The everyday language used by individuals allows them to create identification with a group while, at the same time, excluding other ideologies, terms, and groups (i.e., congregation and segregation). Burke’s (1955) rhetoric of identification is receiver oriented and emphasizes the actual act of identifying and this is how organizational identification is used primarily by Cheney and associates. Identification can be argued to become a part of a discursive
process displayed during our interactions (Kuhn, 2006, 2009; Kuhn & Nelson, 2002). This can be seen in how individuals communicate, and display these discursive processes, in their organizational lives.

With the recent changes in organizational and occupational structures in post-industrial United States, it seems more appropriate to expand notions of identity and work as an outcome of modernity’s notions of private and public (Casey, 1995; du Gay, 1996) instead of organizational identification. The emergence of modernity, Arendt (1958) argued, blurred the boundaries between our public and private lives. With the rise in importance of paid work in the U.S., the public life of work has colonized and commercialized our private lives outside of work (Deetz, 1992; Hochschild, 2003). As paid work has taken on more importance in the lives of Americans, it has become the location where our needs for acceptance and inclusion are increasingly meet. Whereas many Americans engage in paid labor outside of the home, what about those whose work life and home life exist in the same space? One such group could be microentrepreneurs, whose identity and work can be seen as transforming through negotiating their blurred private and public lives. Microentrepreneurs, I argue, engage in a culturally, specific discourse of success, however defined, that is based on the historic and cultural milieus in America (Burr, 2003). This study seeks to better understand how microentrepreneurs negotiate their blurred private and public selves in Appalachian Ohio.

Because of the blurring of their private and public lives, microentrepreneurial identities are formed in relationships with multiple others (e.g., family, customers, and local economic development centers). It is a social process in which experience and
“behavior reflects, and is constituted by, the organized relational” patterns of society (Mead, 1934, p. 201). Identity and organizing cannot be divorced from action and meaning in context. Identity is not a static creation that reflects the objective characteristics of microentrepreneurs. Identity is a fluid concept that should be investigated as a component of everyday practices in the context of lived experiences with others.

So far I have been discussing identity and self without defining them. In clarifying terminology, I follow Seigel’s (2005) use of these terms. When referring to the self, I am referring to an individual’s personal understanding of what it means to be a person in modernity. Even though it is a personal understanding, one can only understand self in relations to others. When referring to identity, I am referring to the social and relational understanding of what it means to be a person in modernity. In most instances, these terms can be used interchangeably. When the self or identity is constituted through language and relationships with others, that process does not guarantee fragmentation and a loss of affiliations or social solidarity as post-structuralism might argue (see, for example, Gergen, 1991). Instead, self or identity constituted through language and relationships with others places an importance on communication and community in the realization of a microentrepreneurial self and identity (Dewey, 1916; 1929/1958).

For the remainder of this section, I articulate how I view identity as a social process. First, I argue that identity should be constituent of three dimensions. Then, I expound how identity is a quest. Finally, I relate how this explains a microentrepreneurial identity.
Dimensions of Identity

One problem with modernist thought, at times, is its tendency to create dualisms like mind and body or individual and society where the two concepts are separate and independent of one another. Doing this limits our ability to understand the complicated and related nature of the concept under study. Instead of limiting our understandings of concepts, we should allow ourselves to explore the interrelated aspects of concepts. Identity, for example, should not be thought of as a dualism of either internal or external, but rather as a component on three dimensions: material, relational, and reflective (Seigel, 2005).

Seigel (2005) described these three dimensions of the self simply enough. The material or bodily dimension of self involves the physical, corporal existence of individuals and objects in the world. This dimension houses the self in the body or physical world and is shaped by bodily needs and desires. The relational dimension of self involves the social, cultural, and linguistic relations between people (e.g., Burr, 1995; Gergen, 1991). This dimension views the self as what the relationship with society and others allows it to be. The reflective dimension of the self derives from our ability to make our world and existence as objects of our inquiry (e.g., Mead’s [1934] notion of the generalized other). Subjectivity is tied to this dimension, which is an active process that views the self as an agent of its own realization (Mead, 1934; Seigel, 2005).

These three dimensions work together, but do not create a seamless image of the self. What they do, though, is allow scholars to either create a one-dimensional or multi-dimensional view of the self. The dimensions chosen and the way they are understood...
determine the implications of any given conception of the self. For example, the bodily dimension is privileged and understood in a certain way when Freud viewed it in terms of needs and desires. Similarly, the relational dimension is privileged and understood in a certain way when Marx viewed it in terms of a class division or conflict. The more dimensions a scholar draws upon, the greater the complexity and understanding of self and identity.

My social constructionist conceptualization of identity attempts to draw upon all three of Seigel’s (2005) dimensions of self. Social constructionism allows me to recognize that there is a material reality (e.g., the economic conditions we live in or the micropractices of our sexuality) that individuals deal with on a daily basis (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). These conditions have an influence on understandings of self and other. Recognizing the material dimension of identity, distinguish between the mechanics of the body and the uses of the self. Additionally, Berger and Luckmann (1966) argued that people exist in an interrelationship with their environment; meaning that, neither humans nor the physical world can make sense of one another or exist without the other. The relational dimension is the easiest to recognize from my social constructionist perspective, since I privilege language in use and interactions with others (Gergen, 1999). I am also drawing upon the relational dimension when I refer to how certain discourses are drawn upon by individuals in specific historical and cultural milieus (Burr, 2003). Lastly, when social constructionism challenges our commonsense notions of self or the world, it is drawing upon the reflective dimension. Reflectivity is an essential dimension of selfhood and exists in a relationship with the material and relational dimensions of
selfhood (Mead, 1934). As important as reflectivity is in identity formation, it is
constrained by material and relational forces. This containment is what grounds identity
to our lived experiences (Dewey, 1929/1958; Mead, 1934). Reflectivity, understood this
way, allows a pragmatic agent to recognize the emergent nature of any identity (Mead,
1934). In explaining a microentrepreneurial self or identity as comprised of these three
dimensions, I am able to generate a more nuanced understanding of
microentrepreneurialism as a discourse and practice drawn upon by individuals as they
participate in U.S. society.

Identity as a Quest

Bauman (1996) explained that the problem with modernity’s notion of identity is
its concern with constructing a stable, solid identity, and then keeping it that way. From a
social constructionist perspective, this is problematic. A microentrepreneurial identity is
not a given in nature. Identity is a social process, and individuals can only understand
their identity in relations to others (Mead, 1934). As identities arise in social interactions,
differentiation or individuation is accomplished through communication and the
discourses available in an historical epoch (Bauman, 1996; Hall, 1996). This means that
identities are connected to the culture or society in which they arise. That is, the
conditions are already present to construct that identity in that culture or society (James,
1907/1977a; Mead, 1934). Additionally, the identities that are constructed in any given
culture help explain why individuals “act” the way they do and justify cultural
understandings of the self in society (Dudley, 2003). As Hall (1996) explained,
identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language, and culture in the process of becoming rather than being” (p. 4).

Hall (1996) conceptualized identity as a meeting point between the discourses and practices that construct subjectivities that can be articulated in any given culture. Identity is not a place that is ever reached; rather, it is a quest (Bauman, 1996; MacIntyre, 1984). As a quest, identity construction is something that develops over time. Identity is not something that individuals are able to search for, and once found, remains the same. MacIntyre (1984) offers an alternative to searching for our identity. He argued that our life is a constructed quest in which we are always seeking our identity. During this seeking, we encounter a variety of obstacles that must be overcome.

It is in the course of the quest and only through encountering and coping with various particular harms, dangers, temptations, and distractions which provide any quest with its episodes and incidents that the goal of the quest is finally to be understood. A quest is always an education both as to the character of that which is sought and in self-knowledge. (MacIntyre, 1984, p. 219)

MacIntyre’s idea of the quest suggests that what is sought, our identity, is defined through the process of actually formulating our identity itself (Christensen & Cheney, 1994). Identity construction, then, becomes a continuous learning process that evolves over time in which microentrepreneurs determine what it means to be a microentrepreneur. The goal of the quest, Taylor (1989) argued, is not to know how to
live “the good life” but, rather, to know what it is good to be. Viewing identity as a quest also demonstrates how our notions of self change as our relationships with others change.

**Microentrepreneurial Identity**

In a market-oriented society, the logic of capitalism demands consumer goods be produced. Microentrepreneurialism deals with producing goods. Typically, though, people tend to be either consumers or producers of goods. Microentrepreneurialism changes this equation so that microentrepreneurs, working by themselves, become both consumers and producers at the same time; whereas, factory workers, service industry workers or knowledge workers are only consumers (Lea & Webley, 2005). This has implications for how microentrepreneurs understand their place in U.S. society (du Gay, 1996, 2000).

Microentrepreneurialism, as an economic process, carries individuals beyond class and social boundaries in society by forcing individuals to take the attitude of the other in order to engage in cooperative activities (Mead, 1934). As Mead (1934) would say, microentrepreneurs realize who they are by what they do in their relationships with others. More specifically, a microentrepreneurial identity is an identity of one or “I” that comprises an organization. After all, the organization is called a microenterprise and the person is a microentrepreneur. The microenterprise organization is the person in interaction over time (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994; Wieland, Bauer, & Deetz, 2009). Microentrepreneurs’ sense of self, then, is linked to the identity of their enterprises (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Gill & Ganesh, 2007). This view of microentrepreneurs positions them as enterprising subjects (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2008;
Fenwick, 2002; Nadesan & Trethewey, 2000) who are situated in a historical and cultural context (Carbaugh, 1996). Microentrepreneurial identity would not solely be a discursive identity. Microentrepreneurs do not just rely on a microentrepreneurial discourse in constructing their identity (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Kuhn 2009), but also rely on material conditions, reflectivity, and relationships with others and society in constructing and understanding their identities as microentrepreneurs (Mead, 1934; Seigel, 2005). At heart, microentrepreneurs are attempting to control their economic destiny (Lair et al., 2005) and can provide an examination of class and gender distinctions about identity and work (Bruni et al., 2004; Nadesan, 1996; Nadesan & Trethewey, 2000; Trethewey, 2001).

To better understand microentrepreneurialism in Southeastern Appalachian Ohio, the remainder of this chapter examines how microentrepreneurialism is connected to the American Dream and the working poor in Appalachia.

American Dream

A society has Discourses that its citizens draw upon to understand who they are as both individuals and a nation. These Discourses are used by citizens to organize a society politically, socially, and economically (Moore & Ragsdale, 1997). Though a common rhetorical strategy for divergent political, social, and economic goals, these Discourses provide material and symbolic conditions of existence for citizens of a society. Even though these Discourses exist, their meanings are not uniformly agreed upon by citizens. One such Discourse in the U.S. is the “American Dream.” The American Dream, I argue, is one possible discourse that supports and fosters microentrepreneurialism in Appalachian Ohio.
In the U.S., the American Dream is conceived through two complimentary versions. Fisher (1973) described one version as materialistic and the other version as moralistic. Fisher’s (1973) materialistic version emphasizes the rags to riches materialistic success through hard work or good fortune which Reich (1987b) called the “Triumphant Individual.” According to Fisher (1973), the materialistic version is based on Weber’s (1904/1958) protestant work ethic and contains values such as persistence, initiative, and self-reliance. In the materialistic version of the dream, competition and the capitalistic nature of the U.S. economy are emphasized as the way to achieve status and freedom in the U.S. social-economic hierarchy. Fisher’s (1973) moralistic version emphasizes egalitarian values found in the U.S. Constitution and Bill of Rights (e.g., values such as tolerance and regard for the dignity and worth of every individual) which Reich (1987b) called the “Benevolent Community.” In the moralistic version, endeavors are emphasized that inspire the guarantee that all citizens will be treated equally and efforts should be taken to help “those who are less fortunate than others” (Fisher, 1973, p. 162).

Both of Fisher’s (1973) versions of the American Dream represent freedom, happiness, and success in the U.S., just in different ways. The materialistic version does this as individuals having “freedom to do as one pleases,” whereas, the moralistic version does this as society having “freedom to be as [it] conceives” itself to be (p. 162, italics in original). It is important to realize that these two versions are not separate and should not be viewed as a dualism. Fisher (1973) argued, individuals do not grab onto both versions equally; rather, individuals will lean more toward one or the other. Both versions work
together to provide symbols that represent “the kind of America we want to live in” (p. 164).

The American Dream is really about opportunity. This dream tells us that “Americans are on a progressive journey to a better society” (Rowland & Jones, 2007, p. 430), a society where someone “with strong personal values can attain great ends because of shared societal values” (Rowland & Jones, 2007, p. 431). In this sense, the American Dream provides an ideological impetus by which Americans have pursued economic achievement and societal-betterment (Thio, 1972). In order for the dream to continue, ordinary Americans need to have faith in the idea that hard work and struggles have the possibility of producing a better life for all.

On a basic level, the American Dream is an ideology of success and failure in the U.S., both materialistically (i.e., economic achievement) and moralistically (i.e., societal-betterment) in terms of directing careers, choice of work, and social mobility (Lucas, 2011). This success, however it is defined, is built on elitist notions. It emphasizes a conflict as to who is responsible for success in America: the individual or society (Rowland & Jones, 2007). Chenoweth (1974) explained how a “success ethic promotes elite interests under the guise of boasting” (p. 10) how average Americans can advance as far as they wish. From an elitist view, the struggling achiever is more important than the downtrodden failure (Chenoweth, 1974). This view posits that anyone in the U.S. can succeed if they just try hard enough through their own efforts. Americans are taught this as children through Watty Piper’s (1961) book The Little Engine that Could and the idiom “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” (see also Arthurs, 1994). This elitist view
creates a dialectical tension between Fisher’s (1973) materialistic and moralistic versions of the American Dream. This dialectical tension also creates competition between the materialistic and moralistic views in which all Americans are not provided with dignity. Unfortunately, this tends to be the U.S. working poor who are “living to work” instead of “working to live” (Kochan, 2005). The American Dream serves the interest of capitalism by maintaining class distinctions between people while fostering a formula for success that does not work (Emmett, 2000).

The idea of success, then, in the American Dream ignores class, race, and gender distinctions and issues of poverty in the U.S. (Hochschild, 1995; Tickamyer & Duncan, 1990). The American Dream assumes equal access to opportunities for all individuals in the United States. Class background, race, connections, and inheritance, unfortunately, are better indicators of access to “success” in the U.S. than the Dream itself (Chenoweth, 1974). The chances for success in the U.S. are uncertain and dependent on cultural factors other than on personal behavior (Chenoweth, 1974). The problem, according to Hochschild (1995), is that sometimes Americans, given our focus on competitive individualism, are unwilling to see race, gender, or class issues as impeding anyone’s chances at achieving the American Dream. This assumes that everyone starts at the same place with the same preparation. Socio-economic status levels point to how that is not true. What the American Dream does is provide an easy solution to societal problems of different levels of access to societal and economical resources (Emmett, 2000). Until these inequalities in access to opportunities for all Americans are resolved, the American Dream will only be an ideological impetus that defines and serves the aspirations of elite
Americans and not the reality of living in the U.S. (Thio, 1972). It must be understood, though, that even if access to opportunities is equalized for all that does not guarantee success in the United States. “True” or not, possible or not, the American Dream often provides a meta-narrative of hope, and source of frustration, for the working poor.

**Working Poor in Appalachia**

Work is a large part of people’s lives in the U.S. So much so, Deetz (1992) argued, that it colonizes our lives. According to Arendt (1958), people work to construct or fabricate the world for their use and to meet life’s necessities. One aspect of its use, Arendt (1958) argued, is to provide people with a sense of permanence and stability that the natural world does not. People also define their identity and relationship to others in the U.S. through their work. Workers are members of society who should be allowed to participate in society. Arendt (1958) demonstrated how working allows people to participate in a public sphere – an economic public sphere of exchange. People can become isolated in Arendt’s (1958) view when they live in poverty. The inability to find employment impedes participation in society. The Appalachian region of the U.S. is one such area where poverty impedes people from participating in society. There are two competing explanations for poverty in Appalachia: a culture of poverty approach and a limited opportunity structure approach.

**Cultural of Poverty**

The culture of poverty approach argues that the problems of the working poor result from deviant or pathological values and beliefs in individuals (Katz, 1989). The culture of poverty approach posits, Katz (1989) explained, that the behaviors caused by
these deviant or pathological values and beliefs are the source of poverty for people; that is, the behaviors and conditions of poverty are constitutive of one another. These deviant or pathological values and beliefs are not compatible with mainstream economic, political, and social values, since they are not conducive to upward mobility and financial prosperity (Kelso, 1994). Haynes (1997) explained how the culture of poverty approach implies that the working poor are dependent on welfare (Tickamyer, Henderson, White, & Tadlock, 2000), do not have agency to change their lived experiences and material conditions (Handler, 1995), or would not want to engage in supplemental or informal economic activities (Tickamyer & Wood, 2003). The culture of poverty approach should be rejected, Haynes (1997) argued and I agree, because it does not adequately address the economic, political, and social inequalities for living in the U.S. (see also Billings & Blee, 2000; Durlauf, 2012; Gans, 1995; Handler, 1995; Katz, 1989; Tropman, 1998). Instead, this approach places the blame for poverty on the individual. The culture of poverty approach also creates a homogenous view of the working poor and Appalachian region (Servon, 1999; Tice & Billings, 1991; Tickamyer & Duncan, 1990).

Just as you cannot identify the Appalachian region as a whole with a unique “ethnic” identity, Appalachia is not a culture of poverty. While engaging in a class struggle, Appalachians are not deflating their own aspirations or retreating into self-defeating fatalism (Haynes, 1997). Instead, Duncan (1992) explained, “limited opportunity for steady work and income means that control over jobs is a source of wealth and power” (p. 111). Inequality is apparent in Appalachia and can be seen by differences in employment opportunity structures partly caused by place-based
development projects. As Tice and Billings (1991) explained, it is more important to understand how inequalities are handled in the region.

*Limited Opportunity Structure*

A limited opportunity structure approach to understanding poverty in Appalachia examines how employment opportunities are based on social, political, and economic inequalities (Duncan, 1992; Lionas, 2011; Tickamyer & Duncan, 1990; Tickamyer & Tickamyer, 1988). Industrialization and modernization were supposed to convert Appalachia from a subsistence economy to a market economy and allow it to join the modern capitalist economy of the United States (Eller, 2004, 2008; Lewis, 2004). Instead of Appalachians making a livelihood in the uncertainty and hardship of subsistence farming, they switched to the uncertainty and vulnerability of seeking work in volatile and oppressive industries such as coal and timber (Eller, 2004). Kahn (2012) explained how place-based development projects helped industries moved into the area to stimulate economic, social, and political growth, but that did not trickle down to the people of Appalachia. As Tickamyer and Duncan (1990) explained, rural poverty is not simply the result of a lack of economic growth, income, or employment. Rural poverty is also “the result of inequality in the distribution of income, jobs, and resources within communities as well as regions” (p. 80). To understand the opportunity structures in a rural region, scholars need to understand the historical and political aspects of the economy along with the economic activities in the area.

The economic conditions that the working poor find themselves in many rural regions today is the result “of a historical process of uneven development” in the U.S.
(Lyson & Falk, 1993, p. 2). The different trajectories of growth and development in different regions of the U.S. are the result of different social, economic, and political processes, not on working poor individuals themselves. For example, Appalachia’s industrialization mainly consisted of integrating the region into the national U.S. economy for a narrow set of purposes. Those purposes primarily included the extraction of natural resources such as timber and coal and the access to low-cost labor for manufacturers (Lewis, 2004). The situation was compounded when corporate owners were absent from the region and now that modernization and globalization have taken jobs out of the region (Eller, 2004). Because of this, sources of poverty in Appalachia are typically found in the structure of the local economy, the type of local employment opportunities available, and the links the local economy has to the larger national economy (Billings & Tickamyer, 1993; Kahn, 2012). This creates structural factors that are beyond the individual’s control.

The limited opportunity structure approach does not just examine structural inequalities. It examines the tensions that exist between the individual and the structure of the local economy. The opportunity structure of the local economy equates to the availability, amount, type, and wages of employment options in the local labor market, as well as, the socioeconomic characteristics of the region such as population composition, education levels, and quality of educational facilities (Kahn, 2012; Tickamyer, 1992). There is also a spatial dimension to opportunity structures that deals with the degree of industrial diversity (e.g., the economic base and competing industries) in the area, the availability of social services in the area, the distribution of jobs, the structure or
composition of the community, and how isolated the community is from other areas (Kahn, 2012; Lionas, 2011; Tickamyer & Bokemeier, 1993). Combined, these influence the likelihood of anyone being able to find and maintain a job. It seems likely that people who have limited access to resources are more isolated and confined by local conditions and more affected by the limited opportunity structure of the local economy, than those who have access to resources (Pemberton, 2011).

Economic opportunity for some is also bound by the area they are able to travel in search of work. The lack of a vehicle or access to public transportation prevents many from traveling very far to find work. The scarce job opportunities that exist because of a limited opportunity structure in the local economy can create a system where jobs are obtained by who you know and not by what you can do. Duncan (1992) described Appalachian coal and timber towns as stratified and patronage driven communities where elites control jobs and pass them on to family members and political allies. She also described these communities as closed communities where stigma is attached to family background. This can create a cycle where the haves continue to obtain jobs while the have nots continue to struggle to find work.

Keep in mind, as Gorham (1992) pointed out, that individuals can work full-time year round and still be poor, especially when all they can find are low-wage service sector jobs (e.g., retail, food, entertainment). The limited opportunity structure approach is a better way than the culture of poverty view to understand the conditions of the working poor in rural Appalachia. The limited opportunity structure approach demonstrates how communities are formed and sustained by work, while social and
spatial relations of communities shape work and economic activities (Durlauf, 2012; Falk, Schulman, & Tickamyer, 2003). A limited opportunity structure also allows for the understanding of formal, informal, and political activities over time to see how an area provides livelihoods for people. This approach also contextualizes the conditions the working poor exist in Appalachia. One economic endeavor that the working poor can use in an attempt to overcome their situation is microentrepreneurialism.

Entrepreneurialism

The spirit of entrepreneurialism is a societal discourse that comes out of the American Dream that offers a chance at a better life for Americans. Reich (1987b) explained how the U.S. national self-image is based on “a nation of humble, immigrant origins, built out of nothing and into greatness through hard work” (pp. 4-5). Reich calls this the triumphant individual. For Reich, this is the “story of the little guy who works hard, takes risks, believes in himself [sic], and eventually earns wealth, fame, and honor” (p. 9). This is the parable of the self-made individual who overcomes the odds and proves “what can be done with enough drive and guts” (p. 9). Entrepreneurialism is a contemporary organizational manifestation of this idea in U.S. society. This story gets played out in both work and U.S. economic policies in which wealth accumulation signals both success and status as an American. As Reich points out, entrepreneurialism fits well with U.S. notions of rugged individualism, self-reliance, responsibility, and initiative.

Entrepreneurialism has been a part of U.S. society from the beginning when the American colonies were driven by two desires: the desire to own and to create. These two
desires are fundamental to the spirit of entrepreneurialism. Kao et al. (2002) explained how ownership is not just the holding of property. It is also the right to make decisions about one’s life or the right to free choice. Creating or innovating, they argued, is not just making something completely new. Creating or innovating also involves taking something that already exists and altering its form to bring something else into existence. In the process of owning and creating, entrepreneurs add value to society (Kao et al., 2002). Entrepreneurs add value to society, since they are engaging in entrepreneurial activities out of both their own self-interest and in society’s interest. The spirit of entrepreneurship, argued Kao et al. (2002), is not just about profit (see also Morris, 1998). Rather, it is a wealth creating process for individuals that contribute to the common good of all. By wealth creating process, Kao et al. (2002) were not just referring to the accumulation of money. Wealth also refers to “public recognition, a well-rounded family life, attainment of knowledge or wisdom, or spiritual development” (p. 43). By accumulating these things, entrepreneurs contribute to the stability of society and not just to their pocket book. In their view, entrepreneurial activity should encompass a relationship in which individuals, society, and the environment benefit from ownership and creation. Entrepreneurialism, in this view, is a promise of a better life and world for both individuals and society.

Keep in mind that lay definitions of entrepreneurs or entrepreneurialism typically deal with capital gain ventures in which individuals obtain large sums of capital to risk on an economic endeavor. However, I argue, entrepreneurialism is not just about gaining access to capital venture opportunities. In today’s post-industrial society, Casey (2012)
argued, the world of work is changing due to advances in technology and methods of production, along with changing the location of production. These changes are making it harder for some disadvantaged populations in U.S. society to find and maintain stable employment. The Appalachian region, for example, is one such population. This transformation in work has implications for how social and cultural life is organized (Casey, 1995, 2012). No longer can employees expect to receive a contract of employment or even an assurance of benefits (Buzzanell, 2000; Casey, 2012; Conrad & Poole, 1997; Gossett, 2001, 2006). Entrepreneurialism becomes an alternative for some workers to gain stable or additional employment to become self-sufficient (Banes, Wheelock, & Oughton, 2011; Burnier, 1998; Servon, 1999; Servon & Bates, 1998). In our post-industrial society, Kao et al.’s (2002) definition of an entrepreneur as “a person who undertakes a wealth-creating and value-adding process through developing ideas, assembling resources and making things happen” (p. 42) seems more appropriate. One form of entrepreneurialism that both creates wealth and adds value to the community is microentrepreneurialism.

**Microentrepreneurialism**

Microentrepreneurialism is a specific form of entrepreneurship with the goal of helping low-wage laborers to earn extra income to become self-sufficient or providing the flexibility a family needs to balance home and work responsibilities. In essence, microentrepreneurialism empowers disadvantaged populations by allowing them to participate more fully in U.S. society and economics while fulfilling personal, family, and community needs (Nembhard, 2011). A microentrepreneur is defined as someone who is
a sole proprietor or owns a family business with less than five employees and can benefit from start-up loans under $35,000 (AEO, 2005). A majority of microentrepreneurs are sole operators and workers of their businesses (AEO, 2005) and come from economically disadvantage families (Servon, 1999). Edgcomb and Klein (2005) estimated that there are at least 20 million microentrepreneurs in the U.S. today who have started their own business or use their existing skills to supplement their income and Holley (2005) estimated that there are approximately 15,023 microentrepreneurs in Appalachian Ohio. This helps disadvantaged populations to succeed in U.S. society by helping them have control and freedom over their lives. This ideal of success can be traced back to early pioneers and settlers who wanted to go beyond what had already been done as Americans expanded westward (Dudley, 2003).

Individual microentrepreneurs do not have to identify business opportunities to pursue and act upon them alone. Non-profit organizations as well as local, state, and federal governments foster entrepreneurialism as a job creation strategy to promote economic development. This sometimes views all entrepreneurs as large-scale venture capitalist which ignores the reality of U.S. businesses and limited opportunities for rural citizens (Tickamyer & Duncan, 1990). There are two different and competing goals espoused by policy makers and microenterprise organizations regarding microentrepreneurialism (AEO, 2005; Servon, 1999; Servon & Bates, 1998). Policy makers tend to tie microentrepreneurialism to economic development theories whereas microenterprise organizations view it as a poverty alleviation strategy. Microentrepreneurialism as economic development seeks to create jobs for the working
poor, while microentrepreneurialism as poverty alleviation seeks to “reform” people and move them off of welfare (Servon, 1999). Certain issues are ignored when policy makers view entrepreneurialism as a means of escaping poverty for the working poor (Servon, 1999). First, the working poor are not a unified group and, as a result, they have diverse needs that must be served by different types of interventions. That is, varying social, political, and historical conditions need to be taken into consideration when policy makers create programs that combat poverty (see also Hochschild, 1995; Nadesan, 2010; Tickamyer & Duncan, 1990). Second, the goal of entrepreneurial programs and microentrepreneurial activity is often to move individuals from public dependency to self-sufficiency and allow for entry into the mainstream U.S. economy while at the same time participating in American democratic ideals.

This is done by providing microentrepreneurs with outreach services, training and technical assistance, access to markets, capital, asset development, and continuing education (AEO, 2005). Even though this may go against U.S. notions of the rugged individual, it makes sense that microentrepreneurs do not have to go at it alone, since the U.S. economy places the entrepreneur on center stage (Reich, 1987a). From a rugged individualist perspective, Americans would say that the government or an organization only needs to provide the context, while the individual must seize the opportunity (Guest, 1990). Providing an alternative interpretation, von Bargen, Freedman, and Pages (2003) and Coontz (1992) argued the real story is one of relationships in economic endeavors that include tax codes and governmental programs that started during the depression and after World War II. Microenterprise organizations build off of this idea of economic
relationships by helping microentrepreneurs through team work and collaboration for continuous innovation and creation (Miles, Miles, & Snow, 2005; Morris, 1998; Reich, 1987a). It takes more than just the entrepreneur to succeed. The sharing of information and knowledge allows for jointly generated ideas that benefit all parties involved through learning from one another and applying proven best practices to microenterprise development (Miles, Miles, & Snow, 2006). Viewed from this lens, microentrepreneurialism exists as a relationship between the common good (i.e., the welfare of the community) and private interest of the entrepreneur (Kao et al., 2002). By working as a community of networked individuals, sustainable economic growth is possible. It becomes a vehicle to economic freedom, self-reliance, and responsibility to oneself and one’s community.

Microentrepreneurialism as a Discourse and a Practice

Viewed in this lens, I see microentrepreneurialism as both a discourse and a practice of organizing tied to American democratic ideals and economic development theories. Both the ideas of microentrepreneurialism and American democratic values encourage individuals to participate in society and feel in control over life’s opportunities. I am attempting to point out both the symbolic and material worlds of microentrepreneurialism. Ashcraft and Mumby (2004) argued, there is a “reciprocal, dialectical, and mutually defining character of the symbolic/discursive and material conditions of organizing” (p. 123). This means that the symbolic world is used to define and explore the material world. Material activities only have meaning insofar as there is a discourse that enables us to interpret such activities as meaningful. Communication about
microentrepreneurialism, from Ashcraft and Mumby’s perspective, is also a material act that “constitutes the day-to-day practices of” (pp. 123-124) microentrepreneurs and microentrepreneurialism itself.

As a discourse, microentrepreneurial practices constitute rather than reflect the organizational and society relationship (Mumby & Stohl, 1996). Microentrepreneurs’ knowledge of self, work, and society construct a coherent social reality for them in interactions with others that frame their understanding of who they are through the use of a microentrepreneurial discourse. A microentrepreneurial discourse is a dynamic process in which microentrepreneurs tie their contextual, situated knowledge of self, work, and society to their interactions that generate microenterprise organizations (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004). As a practice, a microentrepreneurial discourse shows how society narratives construct U.S. notions of work and self and the forms they take (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004). Microentrepreneurialism links particular organizational subjectivities to historical and material conditions that construct identities and practices of work in U.S. society (see, for example, Lair et al., 2005; Nadesan & Trethewey, 2000; Trethewey, 2001). It needs to be acknowledged that scholars cannot overlook material and discursive practices of work and identity that are developed in situated contexts. By discursive practices of work, I am referring to communicational and symbolic relations that produce practices and understandings of work. I agree with Casey (1995) who argued that a focus on symbolic practices that are linked with material practices enables new understandings of practices of work and identity construction. This allows for the articulation of how
microentrepreneurialism is both a discourse and a practice and to explore the impact of economic policies and endeavors on the lives of microentrepreneurs in Appalachia.

Microentrepreneurialism is simultaneously a product of and a producer of particular material realities. Certain ways of constructing what microentrepreneurialism is and what it can do for disadvantaged U.S. populations are a product of the conditions of poverty and changing economic realities in the U.S. The opposite is also true. How we talk about economic development and forms of organizing have a constitutive effect on the lives of individuals in poverty. Microentrepreneurialism is a current articulation of accepted socio-economic practices in the U.S. and meaningful (or not) messages about the socio-economic organization of U.S. society (Clair & Thompson, 1996). Microentrepreneurialism is not only an outcome of communication, but is also itself a form of communication (Clair & Thompson, 1996). As such, I conceptualize microentrepreneurialism as a current practice that allows me to ask what microentrepreneurialism communicates about U.S. society. I seek to understand how communication by microentrepreneurs and other stakeholders (i.e., policy makers, researchers, loan officers, family members) about microentrepreneurialism itself constructs the meaning and application of microentrepreneurialism as an identity and way of organizing in Appalachian Ohio.

Microentrepreneurialism enables and constrains particular understandings of identity in the U.S. In fact, in the late twentieth century, business entrepreneurs were seen as the new incarnation of the American hero (Kao et al., 2002; Reich, 1987b). For microentrepreneurs in particular, constructing a sense of self can present some unique
challenges and come at great personal cost. For example, because of the nature of these small businesses, work and home may often be co-present. Work life can colonize home life (Deetz, 1992) and strongly couple their intimate life to their work life (Hochschild, 2003). Even so, microentrepreneurism might hold promise for allowing the working poor to participate fully (or more fully) in society – economically, politically, and socially. Thus, microentrepreneurism can empower new and fulfilling ways of constructing and enacting the self for these individuals. People can only fully participate in a democratic society like the U.S. if they feel fully human (Arendt, 1958).

Research Questions

This study views identity construction as a potential problem in post-industrial United States. Due to changing economic conditions because of the U.S.’s continuous participation and competition in a global economy, some people may be hard pressed to find stable employment that provides a living wage. In such cases, people may turn to microentrepreneurialism in an attempt to participate and compete in U.S. society. The broad, overarching question that I used in my study asks what microentrepreneurialism communicates about identity and work in U.S. society. This question is designed to allow me to understand why people in Appalachian Ohio embrace microentrepreneurialism. Ultimately, my study seeks to theorize the interconnections between self-formation processes, work practices, and the social organization of society.

Research Question One

Living in post-industrial Appalachia, I argue, presents myriad identity construction challenges. Identity construction is a social process in which experience and
“behavior reflects, and is constituted by, the organized relational” patterns of society (Mead, 1934, p. 201). The changing work environment in Appalachian Ohio, I argue, is causing a change in the way individuals view their notions of self. As their work practices change, so too do their articulations of self. It is important to understand how microentrepreneurs currently understand their notions of self. As such, research question one asks:

RQ1: How do microentrepreneurs articulate their notions of self in post-industrial United States? How is a microentrepreneur identity produced and reproduced in their practices as microentrepreneurs?

Research Question Two

In post-industrial Appalachia, I argue, understandings of work are changing due to the U.S.’s participation in the global economy and advances in computer and communication technologies. In order to stay competitive, U.S. corporations are outsourcing many jobs aboard or creating more nonpermanent, flexible positions (Gossett, 2001, 2006). Since May 2007, Ohio has lost approximately 277,400 jobs (Perkins, 2012). More and more, small businesses are being used to create economic opportunities for workers in Southeast Ohio to overcome the loss of manufacturing and governmental jobs. It is important to understand how microentrepreneurs in such an economically depressed region as Athens County, Ohio understand the conditions that foster the type of work they do. As such, research question two asks:

RQ2: How do microentrepreneurs articulate their understanding of their work in relation to economic discourses and conditions in Appalachian Ohio?
Research Question Three

Policy makers, economic development centers, and U.S. culture all foster entrepreneurialism as a form of economic development. Economic development centers and policy makers tend to espouse different and competing goals for microentrepreneurialism (AEO, 2005; Servon, 1999). Policy makers view microentrepreneurialism as an economic development theory that can create jobs for the poor, while microenterprise organizations view microentrepreneurialism as a poverty alleviation strategy used to move people to self-sufficiency. It is important to understand how microentrepreneurialism is framed in a region, since that determines how entrepreneurialism is fostered in that region. As such, research question three asks:

RQ3: How do local economic development centers frame issues of economic development?
CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

This is a study of communication and microentrepreneurial identity in Appalachian Ohio. This research used social constructionism as informed by pragmatism to understand microentrepreneurialism as both a discourse and a practice. I began with the premise, to be supported or challenged empirically, that microentrepreneurs engaged in a culturally specific discourse of success that is based on the American Dream.

This chapter describes the methodology for my study of microentrepreneurial identity in Appalachian Ohio. First, I provide an overview and rationale for my use of interpretivist methodologies. Second, I describe the research site and participants for my proposed study. Next, I specific the procedures used in this qualitative inquiry into microentrepreneurial identity in Appalachian Ohio. Finally, I reflect on my participation in this study.

Overview and Rationale

Interpretivism grew out of a response to post-positivist epistemologies. Though not a unified perspective, most interpretivist theories seek an understanding of how social actors construct meaningful worlds through interaction (Putnam, 1983). Interpretivists believe that an understanding of social life must account for the subjective and personal meanings of individuals. Taylor (1971/1987) identified four principles as central to an interpretivist perspective. First, interpretive studies seek to understand the subjective, situated experiences of participants. Second, the intersubjective creation of meaning is done through the language of a specific historical and cultural milieu. Third, the goal of interpretative research is to seek understanding between researcher and participants.
Fourth, interpretivists seek to learn the interconnections between the knower and what is known.

Generally, what makes a research project interpretive is not the use of qualitative methods, but rather the way the study is conceptualized and the way researchers perform their tasks (Putnam, 1983). Interpretivists, in general, see reality as socially constructed through words, symbols, and behaviors based on historical and contextual conditions. A solely independent, objective reality does not exist. Individuals cannot detach themselves from reality because they are immersed in it. Rather, a subjective, pluralistic reality exists alongside a material reality in which individuals seek shared meanings through intersubjective constructions. Additionally, interpretivists view individuals as having agency or free will. Individuals are able to act on their world, since their world does not solely determine their actions or behaviors. Human agents have both goals and aspirations they enact. Finally, the goal of interpretive research is to reach mutual understanding across differences instead of seeking universal laws for use in prediction and control.

Mumby (1997) described, how in an interpretive perspective, specifically an interpretive modernist position, “reason and truth reside not in the representational mirroring of an already existing world but rather in our ontological status as linguistic beings who engage dialogically with an ‘other’” (p. 6). An interpretive ontology argues that we socially construct our world through communicative interaction. Meaning is created intersubjectively as individuals bring in their own subjective understandings to interactions. Mead (1934) articulated this well when he described how self and society
exist in symbolic interaction with one another and with his concept of the generalized other. Interpretative studies tend to also focus on generating intersubjective understanding between researchers and participants. Schwandt (2000) argued, “interpretivists aim to reconstruct the self-understandings of actors engaged in particular actions” (p. 193). In so doing, inquirers should acknowledge that the way actors make sense of their actions is constitutive of those actions (Giddens, 1993).

For interpretive organizational communication scholars, the organization becomes a social site of inquiry. Pacanowsky and O’Donnell-Trujillo (1982) described their approach to organizational culture as an emphasis on the social and communicative aspects of organizational life instead of an economic view of organizational realities. Deetz (2001) built on this when he argued that communication is considered the central means by which organizational life is constituted. The interpretive perspective aids in our understanding of a world that is socially constructed through communicative interaction by reflecting the complexity of the social world and the social construction process (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Knowledge, from an interpretive perspective needs to go beyond our common-sense understandings by realizing that knowledge generation is a local, emergent, and situated in intersubjective processes, especially with the interpretivist goal being one of understanding instead of explanation.

Research Site

Instead of examining organizing from just “one” site, I am looking at a particular form of organizing across various “locations,” oftentimes in homes (C. E. Medved, personal communication, October 13, 2006). The site for this study of
microentrepreneurial identity is distributed across Southeast Ohio. More specifically, it is Athens County. ARC (2012) labels Athens Country as a distressed county. Distressed counties are the most economically depressed counties in Appalachia. One might not expect to see much entrepreneurial activity in the area because of such poor economic conditions; however, Emery et al. (2003) described the region as being high in entrepreneurial traits and energy. According to Holley (2005), small businesses account for more than 41 percent of new jobs created in Appalachian Ohio, and there are approximately 15,023 microenterprises in Appalachian Ohio. As such, small businesses are very important for the region. This is fueled by the presence of local economic development centers.

There are two local economic development centers in Athens County that I was able to gain access to. Both are in Athens, Ohio: the Appalachian Center for Economic Development (ACEnet) and the Ohio University Innovation Center (OUIC). These organizations contribute to and stimulate the entrepreneurial activity in the region. ACEnet was incorporated in 1985 as a not-for-profit organization. ACEnet provides business incubation, venture loans, e-commerce, and specialty food production services to microentrepreneurs in the art, food, agriculture, and wood sectors of Appalachian Ohio. OUIC has been partnering with microentrepreneurs in information technology, digital media technology, and biotechnology sectors since 1983. OUIC provides business incubation, business training, and coaching services. Both organizations have constructed shared workspaces and focus on providing networking opportunities for both microentrepreneurs and related stakeholders such as banks, venture capitalistic, and
marketers. ACEnet and OUIC seek to develop the entrepreneurial capacity of Athens County and Appalachian Ohio. As such, these organizations provided an important source of background information and data about microentrepreneurialism in the area.

Participants

There were two categories of participants for this study: (1) microentrepreneurs and (2) staff members at local economic development centers. Microentrepreneurs tend to be the sole operators and workers of their business (AEO, 2005). To be considered for participation in this study, microentrepreneurs had to meet three criteria: (1) the microentrepreneur had to be the owner of his/her business; (2) he/she could not employ more than five other people; and, (3) he/she had to live in and operate his/her business in Southeast Ohio. Participants did not have to be from Appalachian Ohio nor did they need to identify as being from Appalachia. They just needed to be ensconced in the culture of Athens County. A total of 29 microentrepreneurs and staff members participated in my study: 25 microentrepreneurs (17 males and 8 females) and 4 staff members (1 male and 3 females) from the two local economic development centers. See Tables 1 and 2 in Appendix B for a description of participants and their microenterprises.

Procedures for Study

Interpretive methods, many times, become synonymous with qualitative methods in social research. Qualitative research is a situated activity that locates an observer in the lived world of the phenomena that the researcher is seeking to understand. Denzin and Lincoln (2000) described how qualitative research “consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible” (p. 3). These practices transform the world
of observation into field notes, interviews, documents, and conversations about things in their natural settings and the meanings that people bring to them. Qualitative research does not privilege any single methodological practice over another. Interpretivists seek any method that allows them to provide important insights and knowledge about the phenomena under study.

As an interpretivist who used qualitative research methods, I stressed the socially constructed nature of our knowledge of reality and that a relationship existed between me and what I study. The analysis that I present is only one possible interpretation based on my attempt to reach an intersubjective understanding with my research participants. If done well, the intersubjective aspect of a qualitative research is seen through researcher reflexivity. Lincoln and Guba (2000) explained how reflexivity is crucial in qualitative research. Reflexivity forces a researcher to come to terms with the research problem, the people with whom we engage in the research process, and ourselves. Reflexivity in the research process requires that researchers take a situated, self-conscious stance in which their biases and personal choices lead to conducting and writing research as presented in the research report (Gergen & Gegen, 2000).

*Using Grounded Theory to Study Microentrepreneurs*

So far in this section, I have been explaining the common features of qualitative research. I now need to focus on how I went about conducting my study. Grounded theory is one interpretive research methodology that, when coupled with social constructionism and American Pragmatism, allows for studying how action and meaning are constructed (Charmaz, 2005; Strübing, 2007). When using grounded theory,
researchers are using an open-ended approach to studying the empirical world. According to Strauss and Corbin (1998), grounded theory allows researchers to focus on data to learn and understand the reality and experiences of participants. As such, researchers are not experts in the field who can pick out meanings simply by watching or asking structured questions. Instead, researchers must simultaneously collect and analyze data. By comparing data throughout the research process, instead of just at the end, researchers are able to alter questions and pursue themes as they emerge. In this way, grounded theory requires researchers to refine their methods as they collect and analyze their data.

Grounded theory is driven by empirical (in the pragmatic sense of Dewey and James) observation and grounded in data that is produced in a systematic way. As Strauss and Corbin (1998) noted, data should be gathered through multiple sources, whether organizational texts, interviews, archival data, or past research on the particular topic. This means that, as I interviewed microentrepreneurs and local advocates of these organizing processes, these individuals pointed me to other potential sources. I followed the trail and data as the study unfolded.

I first gathered past research on microentrepreneurialism as seen in Chapter Two. Next, I gathered printed sources of information (e.g., pamphlets, websites) created by the local economic development centers before I interviewed key personnel in each center. These data helped provide me with a bigger picture of the microentrepreneurs’ lives and constructions of self in Southeast Ohio. These initial steps helped to inform the open-ended interview protocols that I developed prior to engaging in semi-structured interviews (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This helped me to be better informed so that I might
ask more detailed and specific questions that pertained to the actual lives of the microentrepreneurs.

**Textual Analysis**

Texts are commonly analyzed in qualitative research. Prior (2003) argued, the modern world is partially made through the writing or documenting of texts. But, these texts do not often represent objective facts. They are constructed for specific purposes within specific social, economic, historical, cultural, and situational contexts (see also Charmaz, 2006). Texts, as such, provide one form of access to discourses such as the American Dream or entrepreneurialism (Clarke, 2005). Indeed, Charmaz (2006) argued that researchers tend to assume that the texts drawn upon reflect the participants’ reality when, in fact, texts should be more accurately analyzed for what they both say and do not say. As a discourse, texts provide insight into the negotiated context of meaning constructed by different stakeholders.

Texts in grounded theory, whether viewed as an independent source of data or supplemental data, should be analytically scrutinized rather than used for corroborating evidence (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The worst mistake a researcher can make in using texts is not to situate them into the context of the study (Clarke, 2005). Charmaz (2006) offered some questions to consider in situating texts: Where did it come from? Who participated in creating it? What did the authors’ intend by creating it? Who benefits from the text?

*Microentrepreneurial Texts.* ACEnet and OUIC seek to simulate economic development in the region through entrepreneurialism. They both have websites, provide
literature for prospective microentrepreneurs, and provide services to help
microentrepreneurs get started. I collected these materials and descriptions of services to
analysis how they frame and influence entrepreneurial development in the region.

Staff members at both organizations pointed me to their websites for additional
information on their mission, philosophy, and services. I printed off the webpages of the
local microenterprise development centers that pertain to their services and activities for
microentrepreneurs. This gave me 45 pages of documents on which to conduct a thematic
analysis. Themes are present, according to Owen (1984), when three criteria are met.
First, the recurrence of meanings happens when multiple documents bring salient
meanings to the foreground and leaves other meanings to remain in the background.
Second, repetition happens when multiple documents use similar words or descriptions
over and over again. And third, certain words or descriptions are accented through
emphasis. While themes may provide valuable descriptions, description alone is not
enough for grounded theorists to use in develop a theory on microentrepreneurial identity
(Charmaz, 2006).

Interviews

Qualitative interviewing methods also fit well with a grounded theory perspective.
Gubrium and Holstein (2002) noted the value of participants as knowledgeable
informants rather than respondents. Valuing the knowledge of “those in the know”
instead of a priori assumptions of social theorists leads to a democratization of
knowledge gathering and dissemination (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002). The interview has
allowed qualitative researchers to tap into the world of individual experiences that
constitute “the substance of everyday life” (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002, p. 9; see also Weiss, 1994). This linguistic turn allows qualitative researchers to find claims for the importance of collecting data in language forms that allow them to represent their informants’ world in their informants’ language or symbolic constructions. When describing participants’ world in their own language, researchers view participants as active producers of meaning in their lifeworld who they engage in the meaning creation process. This shows how interviewers are not neutral in the research process.

Qualitative interviewing is based on conversations (Kvale, 1996), and it is important for interviewers to establish and maintain relationships with participants (Rubin & Rubin, 2003). The process of designing interviews is not just the asking and answering of questions (Miller, 2000; Rubin & Rubin, 2003; Wengraf, 2001). Kvale (1996) argued that researchers need to think about their topic of interest and its “fit” with participants’ experiences and interview methods in general. Warren (2002) noted that, when designing interviews, researchers must take into consideration not only their perspective, but also their participants’ perceptive. This includes time, access, and language constraints, along with shifting goals and subjectivities before, during, and after the interview.

Heyl (2001) described the goals to keep in mind when conducting qualitative interviews. First, researchers need to listen well and respectively while developing relationships with participants during all stages of the research process. Second, researchers need to be aware of their role in the construction of meaning. Third, researchers also need to be aware that their ongoing relationship with participants can
affect the outcome of research and participants. Fourth, researchers need to “recognize that dialogue is discovery and only partial knowledge will ever be attained” (p. 370). This leads to the importance of researcher and participant reflexivity in the interview process (Gergen & Gergen, 2000) and both researchers and participants should write down their reflections of the interactions they have with one another (Spradley, 1979; van Maanen, 1988).

*Interviewing Microentrepreneurs.* Initial contact with ACEnet and OUIC provided me with my first interviewees of economic development center staff members. Through them, I was able to start gaining access to microentrepreneurs they have assisted. They helped me do this by providing introductions of me to the microentrepreneurs they serve. These introductions allowed me to provide invitations to the microentrepreneurs to participant in my study (Morse, 2007). Initiations were placed in microentrepreneur mailboxes at ACEnet and OUIC, handed out to venders at the Athens Farmer’s Market and Final Friday’s on Nelsonville’s Historical Square, sent via email to microentrepreneurs who had publically available email addresses, and handed out to local businesses in Athens Country. These invitations helped me to first obtain a sample of convenience. Once I started interviewing microentrepreneurs, I switched to snowball sampling as participants identified other microentrepreneurs for me to recruit for participation.

I interviewed 25 microentrepreneurs (17 males and 8 females) and 4 staff members (1 male and 3 females) at ACEnet and OUIC during 2006 and 2012 using a semi-structured questionnaire with open-ended questions designed to get the participants
to more richly articulate their notions of self and understandings of work in post-
industrial United States, as well as their connection to Appalachia. Interviews lasted
between 40 to 90 minutes each. Interviews took place in participants’ homes, places of
work, or in outdoor public places. I sought participants’ permission to record the
interviews to ensure a more accurate record of our conversation. Interviews were
transcribed verbatim. This gave me 627 single-spaced pages of interview transcripts.
When the transcripts did not make sense while reading during analysis, I referred back to
the recorded interview files for clarification. I also talked with participants to clarify any
questions and to ensure I was accurately capturing their perspectives and experiences.
When participants had different interpretations of their experiences, I added their
reflections to my notes.

*Extra Member-Checking Activity*

Due to a break in data collection and analysis, I engaged in extra member-
checking activities. I obtained 1 new participant interview and reinterviewed 6 original
participants in 2012. These new interviews were helpful in ensuring the current viability
of my original data as participants, surprisingly, shared similar identity and organizing
practices in use by microentrepreneurs and local economic development centers as before
in 2006.

Before these new interviews, I shared with participants my preliminary analysis of
the discursive work practices I thought participants had previously expressed. In addition
to answering interview questions, I asked participants to comment on this analysis by
offering critiques and suggestions. I made changes to the analysis to reflect any new
understandings of these practices from the recommendations provided by these participants. While the different methods I employed were executed in a particular order, they built upon each other as I went back and forth between them.

*Using Grounded Theory to Analyze Data*

The research methods described above provided me with systematic, yet flexible guidelines in collecting data. It allowed me to adapt my research methods while working without predetermined categories. That is just the start to using grounded theory, though. Strauss and Corbin (1998) argued, “data collection and analysis occur in alternating sequences” (p. 42). Analysis begins with the first observation or interview. This leads to possibly adapting the next observation or interview, followed by more analysis. In grounded theory, analysis is what drives data collection and allows for the refinement of methods, categories, and questions (Charmaz, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). This interplay between data analysis and collection forces researchers to immerse themselves into the research so that by the end, both they and the data are shaped by this research process (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Grounded theory is about deriving theory from data. Strauss and Corbin (1998) argued that grounded theory can do this since data collection, analysis, and theory development are done in relationship with one another. As much as possible, grounded theorists enter the field without any preconceived theory in mind so that they can avoid forcing their data to fit preconceived codes or categories (Charmaz, 2006). The goal is to build theory rather than test it. This, hopefully, offers greater insight, enhances understanding, and provides a meaningful guide to possible future actions by researchers.
or policy makers (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). I used three practices in analyzing the data I collect.

**Coding**

I started off by coding the data provided by the website text and interview transcripts. Strauss and Corbin (1998) stressed how coding is a dynamic and fluid process. A grounded coding scheme can allow concepts and themes to emerge on their own through the analysis process. According to Charmaz and Mitchell (2001), grounded theory “strategies can aid [researchers] in gaining a more complete picture of the whole setting” (p. 61, emphasis in original). Strauss and Corbin (1998) labeled the analytic process through which concepts, their properties, and dimensions are identified as open coding. This is where researchers start to name and label the classifications found in data. Researchers develop categories and subcategories through open coding. Categories stand for phenomena that are significant to participants, while subcategories provide explanatory power about phenomena or their consequences. Once open coding is done, Strauss and Corbin (1998) advised researchers to engage in axial coding. Axial coding is the process of relating categories to their subcategories by linking them through their properties and dimensions.

**Microentrepreneurial Coding.** Coding of data started when I began developing themes from the local economic development centers’ websites. These themes and interviews with their key personnel provided insight into how microentrepreneurialism is emphasized and developed in the region. The websites helped me during open coding to identify the properties and dimensions of concepts important to microentrepreneurs’
notions of self and understandings of work. Once I started interviewing participants, I was able to start relating the categories and subcategories developed through axial coding to one another through the more detailed understandings of microentrepreneurs’ notions of self and understandings of work.

Memo Writing

I also engaged in memo writing while coding data. Strauss and Corbin (1998) defined memo writing as the written record of the analysis. Memos allow researchers to work with concepts instead of raw data by actively engaging with their material and fine tuning their research project. Memos also allow researchers to reflect on their emerging data and categories with the data and categories already examined. Memo writing also serves as a crucial step between collecting data and writing research reports. Charmaz (2006) explained how successive memo writing keeps researchers involved in the analysis and increases the level of your analysis. Memo writing does this, according to Lempert (2007), by (1) providing a means for researchers to engage themselves in a conversation with the data, (2) explaining and defining data properties and characteristics, (3) recording research progress and directions for further data collection and analysis, and (4) maintaining analytical ideas for sorting, ordering, and retrieval.

_Microentrepreneurial Memo Writing._ Memos included my reflections on my analysis of the data. In the memos, I wrote about what I believed was taking place through my textual analysis and interviews. I ended up with a total of 58 single-spaced pages of memos. They helped me work through both open and axial coding. Memos were also useful for sharing with participants when I engaged in member checking activities,
since they are the start of placing everything together for the final written report. This was the last chance for the participants to ensure I was accurately reflecting their articulations of self, understandings of work, and connections to the local region.

Due to the break in the research process, the original memos were also useful for resuming data collection and analysis. Original memos were used as the starting point to immerse myself into the research process again. They provided the means for me to compare the old data collected in 2006 with the new data collected in 2012 via the constant comparative method of grounded theory.

Researcher Reflexivity

Researcher reflexivity, according to Medved and Turner (2011), is a form of critical self-examination of research pursuits. It helps provide qualitative research with rigor and meaningful analysis. As I am drawing upon social constructionism, I must reflect on how I socially construct this research and its data.

One reason I am drawn to exploring microentrepreneurial identity construction is because my father is a microentrepreneur. I saw him struggle in becoming a microentrepreneur and how that allowed him to craft a new story for himself, one in which he felt as one of America’s “triumphant individuals.” He was different than the participants in this study. He did not seek out help from economic development centers nor did he collaborate with other microentrepreneurs. He struggled by himself to have material success. Participants showed me a different construction of microentrepreneur work practices. I have worked with them to generate an understanding of not only themselves, but also of their lives as entrepreneurs in Southeastern Appalachian Ohio.
Through my studies, I learned that people in Appalachia can be very wary of outsiders (Williams, 2002). Though I tried to learn as much as I can about Appalachia and familiarize myself with Appalachian Ohio, I was still an outsider there. I do not talk like them nor did I try to patronize them by emulating their speech patterns. Many potential participants recognized this. Because of this, I used the assistance of known members of the community (i.e., staff members from ACEnet and OUIC and other local microentrepreneurs) to assist me in contacting participants and to show the good intent of my study. Still, I had some difficulty in recruiting participants when they learned that I was not from the area. While this did discourage me, I came to better understand the difficulties researchers have in being accepted and trusted by potential research participants.

Additionally, I need to acknowledge my own difficulties in completing this research. I started the project in 2006, but was not able to finish it until 2012. The reasons for the break fall under the categories of financial difficulties and motivational problems. While I left graduate school, I did not leave the academy; I worked as an instructor of communication. Staying in the academy allowed me to stay current in research, taught me the need for completing research, and the importance of the Ph.D. degree and my error in leaving graduate school before finishing my degree.

While such self-reflections might be uncomfortable, they are beneficial to researchers as we work through our own biases and difficulties in conducting our research.
Summary

All forms of research need to meet rigorous standards if they are going to be of any use to society outside of the academy. This study is one example of a scholar attempting to meet these standards. Chapter Four explains the results of the analysis for the data described in this chapter, followed by Chapter Five which provides a discussion of the analysis.
CHAPTER 4: RESULTS

The changing nature of work in U.S. society has had an impact on the nature of work in Appalachian Ohio. Local economic conditions in this rural part of America have not been immune to the changing nature of work. Due to a lack of employment options in this non-diverse economy, local economic development centers have promoted the use of entrepreneurialism in the area. The Discourse of entrepreneurialism has significant consequences for individuals in the construction of their work and their identities. This Discourse promotes a particular view of who entrepreneurs are, what they do, and why they do it (Kuhn, 2009; Wieland, 2010). The research questions for this study have attempted to guide an exploration of microentrepreneurial discourse in Appalachian Ohio. The central focus is on how microentrepreneurs articulate their understandings of who they are and what they do as it relates to living and working in Appalachian Ohio.

This chapter reports the results of the analysis of the data collected by discussing microentrepreneur identity in post-industrial Appalachian Ohio. This analysis is only one way of reporting the results, since this study views identity construction through a social construction lens. Different researchers could analyze these data and arrive at a different, but still insightful, interpretation. Recall that RQ1 asked how microentrepreneurs articulated their notions of self; RQ2 asked how microentrepreneurs articulated their understanding of work; and, RQ3 asked how economic development centers framed issues of economic development in Appalachian Ohio. Chapter Five provides a discussion of these results along with limitations and future directions for research.
Microentrepreneur Identity in Post-Industrial Southeastern Appalachian Ohio

My analysis shows that the situated discursive work practices of microentrepreneurialism in Appalachian Ohio constructs the ontological conditions for a microentrepreneur identity. The construction of this identity has a positive impact on the work lives of microentrepreneurs and the local economy. In this section, I first describe how aspects of the material world in Appalachian Ohio socially construct microentrepreneur identities. Next, I describe the relational aspects of being microentrepreneurs in Appalachian Ohio. Finally, I describe one colonizing aspect of microentrepreneur identity that participants were reflective about.

Identification with the Regional Flavor of Southeastern Appalachian Ohio

Social constructionism posits that people construct the world around them through their use of language in interactions with others. Participants’ understandings of the world are not solely based on discursive or symbolic elements of language, though. Understandings are also based on material aspects of reality such as geographical locations, economic conditions, or social status. Microentrepreneurs understand their lived experiences through encountering the material aspects of reality and labeling them through their symbolic understandings of reality (Bartesaghi & Castor, 2009; Berger & Luckmann, 1966; Dewey 1929/1958; Gergen, 1999).

Appalachian Ohio is a geographical location in the U.S.; and as such, it is a place. As a place, Larson and Pearson (2012) explained, it becomes a discursive resource where microentrepreneurs draw “social, cultural, and historical understandings” (p. 245) about the location. The materiality of Appalachian Ohio is embedded with social meanings that
shape the discourse about it just as the discourse of Appalachian Ohio shapes the
materiality of the place. Larson and Pearson explained how discursive resources are
linked to material places to socially construct ontological conditions of being in
Appalachian Ohio. Participants were able to articulate this in our discussions as a source
of identification for wanting to live and work in Appalachian Ohio.

What are some of the material conditions of Appalachian Ohio? In Chapter One, I
explained how it is a rural area in the southeastern part of Ohio with no large cities. Its
beautiful geography is comprised of picturesque forests, hills, and rivers where residents
tend to have a connection to the land and hold to the importance of family relationships
(Eller, 2008; Emery et al., 2003; Williams, 2002). You should also recall from Chapter
One that it is an economically distressed area where poverty affects residents in larger
numbers than in other areas of Appalachian Ohio, and the U.S. (U.S. Census Bureau,
2012a, 2012b; ARC, n.d.[d]). Historically, many residents sought out uncertain and
vulnerable employment in volatile and oppressive industries such as coal and timber
(Eller, 2004). Due to uneven social, political, and economic development, the area
struggles to have gainful employment opportunities with large employers. This has led to
inequality in the distribution of income, jobs and resources within communities in the
region (Tickamyer & Duncan, 1990). Still, participants are staying in the area and
creating employment opportunities for themselves and others.

To understand how these material conditions relate to the social construction of
microentrepreneurial identities in Appalachian Ohio, we need to understand how
participants’ use of language constructs their identification with Appalachian Ohio. When
asked why he has his microenterprise in Appalachian Ohio, Pat⁸, a crafter of whisk
brooms, stated (illustration 1): “It’s unique. It’s different. My broom corn grows here. I
like that.” Bobby, a seller of heirloom flowers and bulbs, summed up participants’ view
of Appalachian Ohio as a different kind of place (illustration 2): “I think Appalachia has
a mystique to it. I think Appalachia has an attractiveness to it. I’m selling the dialect.”
The use of the terms unique and mystique to explain participants’ understandings of why
they operate their microenterprises in Appalachian Ohio demonstrates their
interrelationship with the material reality of being in Appalachian Ohio. Bobby
(illustration 3) demonstrated this interrelationship even further when he explained how he
goes to unspoiled locales in Appalachia to find the wild bulbs he uses to grow and sell his
heirloom flowers. As a discursive resource of identification used by participants, his story
constructs an understanding that the materials used in producing products might not be
the same outside of Appalachia. The uniqueness or mystique of Appalachia is a shared
perceived material condition embedded in much talk about Appalachia; and as such, is a
social construction. The uniqueness of Appalachia has become a truth that participants
use to explain why their microenterprises are economically viable in this region.

The material aspect of living and working in Appalachian Ohio is not only
constructed as unique or part of a mystique by participants. Part of the interrelationship
participants have with Appalachian Ohio is a construction of a specific quality of life
provided by the region. Bates, a freelance digital photographer, explained (illustration 4):
“In the summertime and in the wintertime, I can sit out on my front porch or my back
porch and not see another soul – not anything that anybody’s built, nothing. It’s really
kind of nice.” Or as Bruce, who runs a landscaping business, explained (illustration 5): “Where we bought our land, there’s no one around. We’re happy where we’re at.” Other participants expressed this separateness as not having to “live in town.” Karen, a renewable energy contractor, explained (illustration 6): “We love where we live. I love that my kids are growing up here. … I mean, as a family business, the quality of life is just as important to me as the truck access, you know.” These expressions by participants demonstrate that Appalachian Ohio, as a material location, has a discursive power for participants’ identification with the region. Living away from others is a normal aspect of a rural life where people have historically worked the land, whether through farming, coal mining, or timber removal. This connection with the land is something people from the region find desirable. As such, this separateness from others in providing a certain quality of life in their living arrangements is another discursive resource used by participants in constructing their identification with the Appalachian Ohio region.

Microentrepreneurs also espoused an interrelationship with the land. Rudy, a grower of seasonal organic vegetables, stated this nicely (illustration 7): “For me, it means to live in peace and harmony with soil, with the plants. Trying to live in harmony with nature instead of dominating and controlling it.” Emily, a grower of fresh cut flowers and wreaths, explained (illustration 8):

Plants lead people to a connection that we’re missing today, the connection to the earth, a connection to the weather. It makes a difference whether it rains if you’re going to plant. It makes a difference whether it’s cold or too warm. It gets people
outside. It gives them a continuity. That used to just be taken for granted because people really interacted with their world and less and less we interact with nature. And, it was not just agriculturally oriented microentrepreneurs who identified with the land. Even microentrepreneurs working in technology industries made reference to the environment. Karen identified the green energy work she does as a way to serve both customers and the environment (illustration 9):

The type of business we’re in is not just your everyday business. It’s very rewarding for us to know that we’re helping the environment and that we’re putting clean energy out there and that’s part of our mission. Our mission is to put the most solar and wind power out there that we can. That serves our customers but also serves the earth.

This interrelationship with the land has implications for how microentrepreneurs engage in their work. Rudy uses organic farming methods so that he does not harm the land with chemicals; the weather can sometimes impact when Emily does her work; and, Karen does her work to protect the environment. This interrelationship with the land has participants drawing upon the material conditions of both their work and the region in constructing why they do the work they do. This interrelationship to the land is an important discursive resource of identification in the region when you examine the social, economic, and political history of Appalachian Ohio where many residents have historically worked the land some way, whether that was through farming or in extracting coal and timber from the region. Since Appalachians have heavily relied on the land for their work, it makes sense that residents would feel a connection to the land. It is, then,
unsurprising that people from the area would draw upon it as a source of identification for their work and identity.

Another interrelationship to Appalachia that matches with historical accounts of Appalachia for participants was the importance of family. Burk, an aerospace engineering software developer, expressed this well (illustration 10): “Family is far more important than this job. … My wife likes it here a lot; she doesn’t want to move away. Family’s close by. I don’t have a reason to want to go somewhere else.” Burk’s statement shows that family connections are still important to participants from Appalachian Ohio even when their work could be more easily accomplished elsewhere. In addition to wanting to be near extended family members, participants also wanted to be able to help family members. As Bates shared (illustration 11), “We wanted to be close to our family too when they get older because both me and [his wife’s name] are only children, so we’re it to take care of them.” Having family members close by was also a labor resource available to participants. John, a baker who uses natural ingredients, shared (illustration 12):

We’ve definitely had some family, and I’ve definitely gotten some help from my brother and my wife and here and there my mom or whatever. You know, we’ll be on vacation or coming back on a Sunday night, and I need to go to the grocery stores and check the inventory to figure out what to make the next morning, and, you know, it’s like, “Hey, Mom, can you run by the so-and-so, the grocery store, and check the shelf and just write down everything that’s there?”
Family is a reason participants have chosen to stay in the area instead of relocating to places with greater economic opportunities. Whether it is a desire to stay close to family, being able to assist family, or having family assist them, for participants, family becomes another discursive resource of identification to the material conditions of the Appalachian Ohio region that they use in articulating why they stay and work in the area. Through these identifications, participants are articulating a commonsense understanding of what it means to live and work in Appalachian Ohio.

*The Farmers Market*

In addition to Appalachian Ohio itself being a place of identification, another place that participants constantly referenced was The Athens Farmer’s Market. The Athens Farmers Market (AFM) is an outlet for microenterprise work in the area. AFM takes place every Saturday year round and on Wednesdays from April to December in the parking lot of a locally owned mall. AFM is a non-profit corporation with trade association status and has a board of directors consisting of the sellers in the market. AFM has been in operation since 1972, and currently has 83 registered vendors. The mission of the market is to promote and support “a locally based food economy … by providing a public market that allows direct connections between producers and consumers of local food and agricultural products” (AFM, n.d., New location, new growth Section, ¶6). For participants, AFM has become a model of microenterprise support for the region where microentrepreneurs can publicly participate in entrepreneurial work.
As a place for entrepreneur work, participants are able to directly benefit from the Farmer’s Market. AFM serves multiple purposes: microentrepreneurs can sell their products; microentrepreneurs and customers buy products from other microentrepreneurs; and, microentrepreneurs form relationships with other microentrepreneurs, customers and supporters of microenterprises in Appalachian Ohio. Microentrepreneurs articulated how AFM is used as a discursive resource to socially construct their microentrepreneur identities (Larson & Pearson, 2012). Jake, who co-runs a website and graphic design company, explained the value of AFM in supporting microenterprises in the area (illustration 13):

I think one of the best entrepreneurial organizations in Athens is the Farmer's Market. That is the epitome of – when they get $10 in, how much of that actually drops right into their business, or goes right to the person doing the work. There is no middle people, there is no overhead, and there’s got to be 100 people that are making their living off the Farmer’s Market, if not more. That’s pretty impressive, and you go there and stuff’s a little more expensive, and I’ll pay that.

Even though Jake’s work is not done at the Athens Farmer’s Market, he is able to link microentrepreneur work in the region due to identification with a specific place. This place, the Athens Farmer’s Market, was specifically constructed by the community, local economic development centers and local government to support microenterprises in the region. AFM provides a material condition in response to a perceived need for an organizing process of microentrepreneur work identity in the region.
In socially constructing a microentrepreneur work identity while working at the Athens Farmer’s Market, participants did not solely view it as a place to sell their product. AFM provides a more holistic experience for understanding their lives as microentrepreneurs. Emily expressed this well (illustration 14):

I feel a nice balance of creating an opportunity for a job for myself that blends my love of plants so I can grow a gazillion plants which I love to do and then share these plants in essence and my vision of growth for people at the Farmer’s Market which is a community base. You get to meet all kinds of people. You’re really making friends that come back every year. Then you can hear about, “Well how did that plant do that year,” and so forth.

Emily expressed the value that AFM brings to participants. AFM allows them to experience their microentrepreneurial selves through a direct relationship between the production of their product and the consumption of it by others. This is rewarding for many participants. Their identification with AFM helps participants understand their microentrepreneur identity.

The AFM also serves the uniqueness or mystique of Appalachia by drawing in both local residents and non-local visitors as customers. Participants were aware of this and took advantage of it based on what they produced and sold at AFM. Zach, a seasonal produce farmer who uses natural farming methods, expressed this aspect of the Farmers Market well (illustration 15):

University brings the students. The faculty is a, well, higher class, source of customer. You know, I wouldn't be selling much arugula and some of these
different lettuces to local types of people. They’ll buy green leaf lettuce.

Hopefully, I cater to both kinds of people. Some of the high class organic people,
I’m sure they’re only getting the high class customer. I’m kind of a mix. I get local type people and get university type people.

For Zach and others, AFM gives them a space to sell their product, but it is up to the microentrepreneurs to leverage the advantage provided by the various customers attracted to this type of microentrepreneur activity.

The Athens Farmer’s Market, according to participants, attracts the best of what Appalachian Ohio has to offer for microentrepreneurs. It is a place that constructs a sense of community where participants gather to engage in the discursive work practices of being microentrepreneurs. AFM is a place where microentrepreneurs could locally sell the products they make, where they can form relationships with others, and where they can construct their identities as microentrepreneurs. While doing this, they are also constructing AFM as a place of microentrepreneurial work. As such, AFM serves as a discursive resource for identifying with the Appalachian region.

In summary, the notion of Appalachian Ohio as being unique or mystique serves as a discursive resource drawn upon by participants to communicatively construct meanings of Appalachian Ohio as a place for microentrepreneur life and work. Betty, a staff member of a local economic development center, referred to this sense of place as a (illustration 16) “regional flavor.” The regional flavor of Appalachian Ohio has become a culturally available discourse which constitutes a microentrepreneur understanding of the material reality of living and working in Appalachian Ohio.
Participants’ commonsense meanings for Appalachian Ohio are socially constructed through the material reality of the place. As these specific discursive resources attest, the material and discursive aspects of Appalachian Ohio are communicatively constructed into meanings that guide microentrepreneurs and cultural understandings of living and working in Appalachian Ohio. Following along with the literature on organizational identification, participants’ identification with the regional flavor of Appalachian Ohio demonstrated their interrelationship with the area as a process of identifying with and a product of identification towards living and working in Appalachian Ohio (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987).

While location is normally considered quite vital in entrepreneurial success, it was not constructed that way by microentrepreneurs in this study. Participants’ identification with the regional flavor of Appalachian Ohio goes against the typical logic of entrepreneurialism where life is structured around accommodating work success (Wieland et al., 2009). Instead of subordinating values not associated with paid work, participants constructed a commonsense understanding that aspects of their lives outside of work are greater discursive resources for identification to them than aspects of their paid work. This identification with place was drawn upon as a strategy by local economic development centers as a way to develop the region for economic sustainability using assets within local communities. Participants were given access to resources that enable them to create ownership opportunities for themselves. Participants’ identification with the regional flavor made it possible for them and others to stay in the area and engage in their work. Their identity as microentrepreneurs was not solely as owners of a
microenterprise, but as an owner of a microenterprise in Appalachian Ohio. I now turn to
the relational aspects of being microentrepreneurs in Appalachian Ohio.

*Enterprising Individuals in an Enterprising Place*

These data show that microentrepreneurial identity in Appalachian Ohio is a
relational practice. Whatever microentrepreneurs think and do, they are (re)constructing
microentrepreneurial identities with their discursive work practices in interactions with
others. In this place, participants’ knowledge of self and microentrepreneur work
practices are developed via lived experiences between themselves and others, whether
those others are customers, staff members of economic development centers, or other
microentrepreneurs (Bartesaghi & Castor, 2009; Mead, 1934). These interactions
constitute a social constructionist stance toward ontology for participants.
Microentrepreneur identity in Appalachian Ohio connects constructions of self through
moral action and reflectivity that has consequences for participants in the way they
engage with work (Bartesaghi & Castor, 2009).

In Appalachian Ohio, microentrepreneurialism is a social process. Part of the
reason for that is that long-term poor economic conditions have led to the development of
several local economic development centers, two of which I gained access to for this
study: Appalachian Center for Economic Networks (ACEnet) and Ohio University
Innovation Center (OUIC). These organizations seek to support the development of an
entrepreneurial culture with a regional flavor in the Appalachian Ohio region. Their
primary goal is the “growth of wealth” in the region in order to build a stronger economic
foundation for the region that will lead to quality economic stability for residents of the
area. Both organizations have separately constructed shared spaces in which microentrepreneurs can come together to network, collaborate, innovate, and leverage opportunities for entrepreneurial success.

Outside of the standard business incubation services and policies on economic development, the concept most discussed by staff members of ACEnet and OUIC that I interviewed was the creation of networking opportunities for microentrepreneurs. According to Fred, a staff member at a local economic development center (illustration 17), “there is a network and community being created in the region that supports the development” of the local work force. The networking focus is on sectors, according to Betty, which allows microentrepreneurs to collaborate in peer networks. Networking was not just taking place among microentrepreneurs. These economic development centers were also networking and collaborating with each other. ACEnet’s services are geared to support food, agriculture, wood, and the arts microenterprises, while OUIC’s services are geared to support information technology, digital media technology, and biotechnology microenterprises. As such, staff members interviewed at both organizations reported that they refer clients to one another instead of trying to compete with each other.

For participants in this study, these economic development centers provide opportunities for learning both sides of running an enterprise: (1) the business know-how of running an enterprise through standard business incubation services of marketing, financial, and management assistance and (2) the technical work of an enterprise by providing opportunities for networking, collaboration, and mentoring with other microentrepreneurs. Participants generally found these two entrepreneurial support
organizations beneficial. Jake expressed this when he stated why he uses one (illustration 18):

The whole thing about a business is taking incremental steps to lower your risk or to increase the probability of a good outcome. The biggest thing this place does is lowers risk. That is what the business incubator does for me and for anyone I believe, and that’s the biggest thing.

With the help of these economic development centers, participants are able to increase the chances of their microenterprises succeeding when they take advantage of opportunities, services, and spaces provided by them. By providing assistance in lowering risk for microentrepreneurs, these economic development centers are collaborating with microentrepreneurs to create and sustain real economic wealth in the region through collaboration (Miles et al., 2006). It is these economic development centers in interaction with microentrepreneurs that construct enterprising individuals in an enterprise place.

In learning to be microentrepreneurs, participants consistently explained how being around other microentrepreneurs helps. Participants started off by gathering in places with other microentrepreneurs. Being a microentrepreneur can be lonely work when you are a sole proprietor of an enterprise working from home. Jennifer, an independent business consultant, explained this when expressing why she works out of one of the local economic development centers (illustration 19): “Part of the reason that I’m actually in the Innovation Center here, renting this space instead of working from home, is because, basically, it was so isolating at home.” For Jennifer, being alone at
home was detrimental to the process of being a microentrepreneur. Karen expanded on this when she stated (illustration 20):

We were working in our house at first. When it was just my husband and I, but it was too distracting. …. And this has been the only reason that we’ve been able, well the main reason we’ve been able to grow and have people is because we’re not constricted in the home anymore.

For participants, these economic development centers provide a location and climate in which to engage in microentrepreneurial work practices. By lowering risk, these economic development centers support a climate of acceptance and success for engaging in the struggles of doing microentrepreneur work. Engaging in their microentrepreneurial work around other microentrepreneurs, then, has made it possible for participants to be more successful.

Being around other entrepreneurs also allows for networking opportunities. These networking opportunities provide valuable interactions for (re)constructing microentrepreneur work practices through the sharing of information, especially information on how to solve problems. Jennifer explained the use of networking practices (illustration 21):

Networking with other businesses. … Getting out and talking with other, the other businesses here. … Just sharing. I mean, when we do have networking lunches, just hearing what everybody’s doing and suggestions on ways to do things. I probably take more than I give, but it’s been a real benefit having someone else to bounce ideas off of.
Zach expressed a similar thought when he explained how he learns things (illustration 22): “You learn the most just from your other farmers, just talking. … We visit each other’s farms to see how people do things. That doesn’t mean we’re gonna copy what they do, but you get ideas.” While the economic development centers provide expertise and guidance on running a microenterprise, participants rely more so on other microentrepreneurs in learning how to solve problems related to their specific microenterprise. Learning from other microentrepreneurs goes against Reich’s (1987b) conception of the Triumphant Individual. Instead of solely focusing on their own rewards, participants fostered a value of social contribution that matches more with Reich’s (1987b) Benevolent Community. This construction mimics older Appalachian notions of work where family members would go out of their way to help each other even if it was a hardship for them (Duncan, 1992; Williams, 2002).

One thing I heard over and over in my interviews was that participants “learned a lot by doing.” In order to “do,” though, participants sometimes needed information. Janet, an organic market gardener, expressed this well (illustration 23): “If you want information, you want it from people who’ve done it.” Jake expressed the same idea this way (illustration 24): “The really successful people are already successful, kind of doing their thing. I try to find people that are doing that work to get the inside scoop on it. I don’t need advice from someone who’s never done anything.” While the economic development centers provided business incubation services, participants did not solely rely on their staff when needing help in solving all problems. Staff members interviewed at the economic development centers all expressed the idea of microentrepreneurs
“collaborating” with one another. They provide formal networking opportunities via network luncheons, monthly meetings, clinics, and happy hours where microentrepreneurs and business experts are invited to interact with one another. By providing the space for microentrepreneurs to work side-by-side where informal discussions can take place, a commonsense identity of microentrepreneurs working to give back value to society through sharing their experiences with others was constructed. John summed up his participation in these networking opportunities (illustration 25):

“Taking off one cap and putting on another. … I think it’s kind of fun to be able to foster some people’s talents.” Such networking provides an organized relational pattern of work where microentrepreneurs contribute to the stability of microentrepreneurialism in Appalachian Ohio (Kao et al., 2002; Miles et al., 2005, 2006). This organized relational pattern of work requires them to take the attitude of other microentrepreneurs as they are engaging in entrepreneurial activities out of both their own self-interest and in society’s best interest (Mead, 1934). Collaboration through networking, then, is a discursive work practice that participants used in constructing their microentrepreneur identity.

Collaboration was not solely confined to just learning from one another. Collaboration also included cooperative practices among participants. Cooperative practices included sharing raw materials, buying together, and even selling together. John provided an example of how people in the Food Center at ACEnet engage in cooperative practices (illustration 26): “Today, [name of another microentrepreneur] needed some peanut butter, and I needed some black olives, so we did a swap.” He also explained how
cooks in the ACEnet’s Food Center would buy ingredients from one another (illustration 27):

They may be using a lot of canola oil or something for their salad dressings, and so they ordered a big tote, so many thousands of gallons or whatever it is. And we use it in our bread, so, you know, that’s something that maybe if they’re getting a better price, maybe we could buy it from them.

Reed, a producer of salsa, explained how cooks in ACEnet’s Food Center would order together as they work with distributors to get around minimum order requirements (illustration 28):

So maybe a distributor would have a $250.00 minimum, $500.00 minimum to get a delivery. If they’re coming here anyway, there’s a few other businesses that may tack on an order, and they’ll kind of waive that minimum for somebody, because they’re here anyway.

These cooperative practices also were engaged in by agricultural microentrepreneurs.

Zach explained (illustration 29): “Sometimes we do cooperative ordering. We do a cooperative seed order every spring. There’s a place you get discounts for large orders, so you know, send one order in and divide up the seeds.” Rudy explained how he and Zach engage in cooperative selling practices (illustration 30):

Zach and I have a little informal co-op. We’re supplying [name of local restaurant] right now with their rhubarb. Zach has rhubarb and we have rhubarb. And, like last week, they wanted 100 pounds of rhubarb. And Zach and I talked, “What are we going to do?” He said, well, his rhubarb wasn’t real great. He said,
“How about I take 30.” He’ll take 30 pounds, and he wanted me to take 70, and that worked out okay. So, I took 70 pounds; he took 30.

Cooperative practices were supported by the local economic development centers even though they did not organize any official cooperative practices. It was the microentrepreneurs who sought out and constructed the recurring cooperative practices. These cooperative activities provide opportunities for microentrepreneurs’ to succeed monetarily and for microentrepreneurialism to succeed in Appalachian Ohio. It constructed a commonsense notion of being a microentrepreneur based on experiences working together. As such, cooperative practices become another discursive work practice of microentrepreneurs in Appalachian Ohio.

Participants took these cooperative activities even further by having microentrepreneurs also doing business with one another. Jake explained (illustration 31):

The cool thing about Athens is people really believe the whole buy local thing, and if there is somebody here they can work with, they will try to do that. I’ve never seen that anywhere else, or to the extent. You always hear the buy local thing, but it is so true here. That is one nice thing; all the time people are like, “Oh, I’m so glad I found somebody local to do this with.”

Normally, the buy local slogan is geared towards consumers, but in Athens, the economic development centers also geared that slogan toward microentrepreneurs. They are fostering a “spirit of openness,” according to Rudy, where (illustration 32), “There’s a lot of people, they just want to support what we’re doing, and that’s the way they do it. They buy stuff from us.” This practice causes participants to order from and sell to one another.
Local restaurants go to the Athens Farmer’s Market to buy produce and bread for their meals from participants such as Rudy, Zach, and John. Local bakers, such as John, both buy ingredients from sellers at AFM and sell products at AFM. As Janet summed up (illustration 33):

They really try to involve local growers’ at all different levels in providing local food for all. And, everybody really wants to buy from everybody. They want to support everybody, which is also very good. But it’s difficult. You couldn’t do it if I was just selling at the market.

This work practice of buying and selling from each other allows microentrepreneurs to succeed with their enterprises. It is another way of demonstrating that collaborating is a discursive work practice of microentrepreneurs in Appalachian Ohio. This type of collaboration also shows how microentrepreneurs and their microenterprises are simultaneously both producers and consumers of goods where they take the attitude of other microentrepreneurs in order to engage in cooperative activities (Mead, 1934). Participants are relying on both material and discursive practices to construct the commonsense notion that microentrepreneurs should both buy from and sell to one another.

The final relational aspect of microentrepreneurism for participants was interactions with customers. For participants, interactions with customers brought satisfaction to them from their labors. Rudy explained how he feels when he’s providing food for people (illustration 34): “A woman came to me and thanked me for my asparagus and said how she’s been enjoying it the last couple of days. … That’s really
special. She came to me and thanked me.” Interacting with customers allows participants to foster repeat customers and to share their knowledge of the product. Emily gives an example of how she does this (illustration 35):

[A customer says] “You know, my purple cone flower didn’t come back.” I’ll say, “I wonder if – just what were you watering it?” It’s like, “I’ve got plenty of that. I’ll give you some more,’ because you’re establishing a trust. It’s not like someone’s trying to rip you off because some people will say, “I had it where I grow hostas.” I’ll say, “Oh gosh, I think that’s just too shady for purple cone flower and no wonder it might not have come back. Next time try it at such and such a spot.” I’ve made all the mistakes, but you can profit from it. I’m not a know-it-all, but for these plants I know what they need.

This connection with customers seems to flow from their identification with the regional flavor of Appalachian Ohio. It seems to cause participants to feel socially engaged beyond their work. Zach explained it this way (illustration 36): “Here at the market, seeing my stuff sell out. … It’s most rewarding, you know, dealing directly with the customers and helping to feed all those people out there.” John summed this up nicely (illustration 37): “You know, beyond work, I think sometimes, you know, we definitely are socially engaged and, you know, it does feel like a bigger family than just a business.” For participants, they do not just see their work activities as a way of making a living wage. Instead, they also see it as a way of connecting with the region and participating in the region. Microentrepreneurs’ reflectivity about their relationships with
customers and society is a discursive practice used to construct and understand their identities as microentrepreneurs (Mead, 1934; Seigel, 2005).

In summary, a reviving of the region has taken place where a culture of entrepreneurialism has developed in this area of Appalachian Ohio. It is a culture where microentrepreneurs collaborate with one another. It allows for the empowerment of individuals in constructing their microentrepreneur work identities in relationships with others by providing an alternative model for microentrepreneurialism. It is a model that fosters talents in others and contributes a living wage to people in the area through the social construction of buying local and working with other local microenterprises.

Everyday material and discursive practices used by microentrepreneurs in Appalachian Ohio has constructed a commonsense understanding of a microentrepreneur social reality in Appalachian Ohio, one where collaborative and discursive work practices are part of the microentrepreneur experience in Appalachian Ohio. These experiences seem to have transformed Appalachian Ohio into a good place for a microentrepreneur identity. Microentrepreneurs, as their microenterprises in interaction with others over time, seem to add value to and generate wealth for the Appalachian Ohio region. They are enterprising subjects situated in a historical and cultural context where they are participating in one type of economic life in the U.S. I now discuss one colonizing aspect participants reflected on about being microentrepreneurs in Appalachian Ohio.

Colonization of the Enterprising Spirit

Even though microentrepreneurs in Appalachian Ohio engage in collaborative work practices, they also reproduce, through their language, popular, essentialist notions
of who entrepreneurs are and what entrepreneurs do. This colonization creates a
dialectical tension of accomplishing it together versus going at it alone that exists in
microentrepreneurial identity in Appalachian Ohio. In the previous section, I explained
how microentrepreneur identity in Appalachian Ohio was constructed through
collaborative work practices. Even so, participants still used the language of individuality
and the American Dream when explaining why their microenterprises were succeeding
(Fisher, 1973; Reich 1987b; Weber, 1904/1958). What this tells me is that
microentrepreneur identity in Appalachian Ohio also has colonizing aspects linked to the
instrumental values of production. In this section I discuss this dialectic and its
colonization of microentrepreneur identity in Appalachian Ohio.

A microentrepreneur’s worth is defined by his or her position in the market place.
Paid labor has become a powerful influence on his or her identity in the U.S. Through
colonization, according to Deetz (1992), values not tied to work become subordinated to
work. Here, instrumental values of work dominate microentrepreneurs’ conceptions of
life. Wieland et al. (2009) extended this to careers where production dominates
instrumental values of work and shapes workers’ ways of living. The
microentrepreneurial identity becomes a reflective identity “that steers its life, pursuing
the qualities cherished by the entrepreneurial logic” (p. 106). Participants were able to
make reference to instrumental values of entrepreneurial logic in our discussions:

Even though many participants took part in collaborative work practices among
themselves and the opportunities provided by the economic development centers, they
still drew upon essentialist views of entrepreneurial traits (e.g., risk-taker, responsibility, self-motivated) when discussing what it means to be a microentrepreneur and to have a microenterprise. Jake provided a good example of this when he stated (illustration 38):

Entrepreneurship is about risk, and it’s whether you’re a risk-taker. If you aren’t taking a risk, you aren’t an entrepreneur. … Unless [your] money is on the line, unless you’re not going to eat that next week if that sale doesn’t come in, then you’re not really an entrepreneur.

This statement seems to contradict Jake’s statement from above (see illustration 18) where he discussed why he uses the services of the local economic development center to lower the amount of risk he has to take to succeed. Burk stated it this way (illustration 39):

There’s freedom and control that come with being in this position. But there’s also a tremendous amount of risk. I don’t know who really has job security in life. Nobody in this company really has a guaranteed job, including me. If we aren’t successful in continuing to bring in contracts, we’ll run off the edge of the cliff at some point.

For Burk, his statement recognizes that his enterprise is only successful if he continues to bring in work. Lastly, Kenny, an installer of computer network systems, added the notion of the rewards our society gives risk-takers (illustration 40):

Well, it’s stepping up and assuming those risks, but then there’s the rewards on the other side. … If you aren’t the one that’s signing stuff and responsible for paying the bills, then you’re not the one taking the risk. … The foundation of
capitalism is somebody’s responsible and somebody gets a reward. If you want to deliver pizzas, you’re not going to make $1 million a year because there’s no risk in it.

For Kenny, big rewards are part of microentrepreneurial risk. These statements demonstrate that participants use language to construct views of microentrepreneurs as individuals who are comfortable with risk. While microentrepreneurs might engage in collaborative work practices to lower the amount and intensity of risk they have to accept, participants still construct microentrepreneurs as individuals having control over the risks they engage in for economic success. This reflection on risk by participants demonstrates a continued domination of instrumental economic values on work life in Appalachian Ohio, one where microentrepreneurial worth is partly constructed via them overcoming risk.

In addition to microentrepreneurs having the trait of being risk-takers, participants also used language drawn from discourse of the American Dream (Rowland & Jones, 2007). Terms such as perseverance, persistence, stubborn, and optimist were used by participants to explain what it takes to be a successful microentrepreneur. While Bobby might not view risk as necessary, he does see perseverance as a trait of microentrepreneurs (illustration 41): “I'm not so sure about risk, but perseverance and persistence and focus and thinking of business a lot of the time.” Toby, another grower of seasonal organic vegetables, mimicked Bobby when he shared that microentrepreneurs use (illustration 42) “persistence, tolerance, gluttony for hard work to create it myself” as he explained how he succeeds. Lastly, Janet explained how microentrepreneurs need to
be optimistic (illustration 43): “You have to be an optimist. You have to believe in your abilities to make your own way. You have to be stubborn.” These statements demonstrate that, even though participants used the services of local economic development centers and collaborative work processes, they still described their success as traits of Reich’s (1987b) Triumphant Individual. Such reflective use of language (re)constructs the dominance of Fisher’s materialistic version of the American Dream where individual hard work, initiative, and self-reliance leads to success, a dominance that is in a dialectical tension with the enterprising culture in Appalachian Ohio.

This led participants to discuss how they are self-reliant individuals despite their use of collaborative work process and services from the local economic development centers. John explained how being self-reliant allows him to be engaged in the marketplace (illustration 44):

We’re actively trying to seek new customers instead of just clocking in and clocking out. Some of the bravery just didn’t seem all that strange, you know, to just jump in and be engaged in the process and realize that no one else is gonna do it for me. A lot of our society is so passive.

Not being passive implies that John is being active and in control of establishing his economic future. Karen offered a similar explanation when she described why she has a difficult time relying on others to assist her (illustration 45): “I have a lot of personal investment in it. Who else is really gonna take care of the money the way I am because it’s my money. So, that’s really difficult.” Karen expressed that microentrepreneurs need to be in control because they know what is best for their economic success. Here’s how
Rich, a canner of jams, jellies, marmalades, chutneys, relishes, pickles, and fruit butters, expressed what self-reliant means (illustration 46):

It means I can work by myself. I don’t have to be over somebody or answer to anybody. I can go make one batch or I can stand there and make eight or nine batches. It’s just whatever mood I’m in. I want to be able to do it myself, and I know it’s getting done right, and I’m making a good product and I’m selling it to the Athens area.

Making his own decisions is important for Rich. Lastly, Jake summed up the participants’ notions of relying more on themselves than on others (illustration 47): “They’re going to have a hard time knowing more about my business than me, because I’ve been thinking about it 24 hours a day for four years.” For participants, being self-reliant is an important trait for microentrepreneur success since no one else is as concerned about their microenterprises as they are and no one puts as much effort into it as they do. Again, a dialectical tension is constructed by participants as they reflect on what they need to do to succeed. Their focus on the autonomy and responsibility of individual microentrepreneurs constructs an enterprising self in which participants direct their economic life by following the qualities of entrepreneurial logic previously mentioned (du Gay, 1996). Participants used language to essentialize self-reliant work as part of a microentrepreneur identity where microentrepreneurs are in control of their fate (du Gay, 1997).

The last aspect of the colonizing of the enterprising spirit discussed by participants dealt with running a microenterprise. As owners of microenterprises,
participants did not just show up to work. They also had to take care of running the business side of the enterprise. Wanda, a staff member at a local economic development center explains that (illustration 48) “running a business, it’s a two-sided thing. There’s the working in the business doing the actual technical [work] and then the working on the business side of it.” Wanda is explaining how microentrepreneurs are both worker and owner. They have to assume responsibilities for both providing the product of their microenterprise as well as managing their microenterprise. This is an invisible distinction that places greater demand on participants’ lives than nonmicroentrepreneurs may recognize. Jake explained the work of being a microentrepreneur this way (illustration 49):

Let me explain what’s hard about being an entrepreneur. Being an entrepreneur is three jobs. It’s not one job. You’ve got to work to get work. You’ve got to work to do the work. You’ve got to work to get paid and keep track of all the work.

This creates an environment where the business side of running a microenterprise dominates participants work practices. Cindy, a producer of ceramic dishware and art, explained it this way (illustration 50): “If you’re gonna run your business, you got to run your business.” For Cindy, she cannot just be the artists she was before she started her microenterprise. She now has to make decisions about, be aware of, and engage in business practices such as marketing, accounting, and inventory management, things she did not have to worry about before. McDowell, who co-runs a website and graphic design company, summed up participants’ views of this nicely (illustration 50): “What I like to describe to people is ‘We’re not artists; we’re mercenaries.’ We’re not here to self-
actualize every piece. We’re here to get it done so it accomplishes your goal and we get paid.” These illustrate how participants were reflective about this distinction as an owner-worker as their use of language shows that a commonsense understanding has been constructed on what needs to be done to run a microenterprise. This colonizes participants to engage in the competitive economic practices of U.S. society where they have to take responsibility or ownership for their microenterprise work. At the same time, this colonizes participants to be the triumphant individuals who receive status and rewards when their microenterprises succeed or to be the downtrodden failures who receive blame when their microenterprise fails. This follows the entrepreneurial logic where microentrepreneurs must exercise their choices in appropriate ways if they are to shape their own economic destiny and identity.

In summary, the social aspects of being a microentrepreneur have been colonized by notions of success in the U.S. Participants drew upon Fisher’s (1973) materialistic version of the American Dream to explain what it took to succeed with their microenterprises. It took them accepting the challenge of taking responsibility for creating an enterprise and doing the work themselves. The dialectical tension of accomplishing it together versus going at it alone is not very surprising when Vicky, a staff member at a local economic development center, explained (illustration 52):

Not everybody’s created to be an entrepreneur. It takes skills. It takes guts and a certain personality. So everybody’s not built like that. Willing to take that risk, but it’s gotta be an option. It can be learned but again, it’s just opening people’s eyes and helping them dream larger than what we have here.
While this might seem counterintuitive to their goal of using microentrepreneurialism to create economic diversity and stability in Appalachian Ohio, it does reflect the difficulty of their goal. While microentrepreneurism might be a viable option for people when there are few living wage jobs in an area, it is a challenging endeavor where microentrepreneurs need to have a passion for always being engaged in the marketplace.

Participants’ reflective use of language helped construct the colonizing aspects of microentrepreneur work in Appalachian Ohio through the valuing of individual autonomy in a competitive context. Such a context limits microentrepreneurs’ choices about work where the instrumental values of entrepreneurial culture or logic shape work life decisions and work practices. As microentrepreneurs, participants’ identities are based on their and their microenterprises’ ability to succeed in U.S. socio-economic culture. This success required a focus on instrumental values associated with the entrepreneur logic of risk-taking, individuality and perseverance to shape their identity and worth as microentrepreneurs in Appalachian Ohio (du Gay, 1996; Wieland et al, 2009). Let me now summarize this chapter.

Summary

There has been considerable effort made to create a culture of microentrepreneurialism in Appalachian Ohio with a regional flavor. This was done instead of trying to attract large companies to the area. This strategy has seen some success as a form of economic development for the region. The preceding discussion has shown how the situated discursive work practices of participants provide ontological conditions of being and understanding microentrepreneur work life in Appalachian Ohio.
First, participants’ identification with the material conditions of the place caused them to remain in the area. Second, participants engaged in collaborative work practices to help their enterprises succeed. And finally, participants engaged in a dialectical tension of accomplishing it together versus going at it alone to explain how instrumental values of entrepreneurial logic colonizes what it means to be a microentrepreneur. Together these combine to explain how the use of cultural, institutional, and economic discourses socially construct the identity of microentrepreneurs in Appalachian Ohio.

I now turn to Chapter 5 where I discuss these results along with limitations and future directions for research.
CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This study has attempted to more richly articulate the connections between material and symbolic conditions of work and identity construction through recognizing the effects of language, discursive practices of work and societal discourses on microentrepreneurialism in Appalachian Ohio. The study has attempted to more richly understand microentrepreneurialism as a current construction of accepted socio-economic practices in the U.S. and meaningful (or not) messages about the socio-economic organization of a very specific part of U.S. society (Clair & Thompson, 1996). This research views microentrepreneurialism as not only an outcome of communication, but as a form of communication (Clair & Thompson, 1996). My approach in the following discussion casts a communicative gaze over work and identity in one part of Appalachian Ohio through the discursive work practices of microentrepreneurialism.

It will be helpful to briefly review the theoretical perspective used in examining the interconnections between identity, work practices, and the social organization of society. The framework relies on an interpretive modernist conception of a moderate form of social constructionism informed by American pragmatism. In addition to examining language use in action, the framework also provides a moral dimension so that constructions and their uses can be evaluated. This framework recognizes that microentrepreneurs use culturally available discourses to construct their notions of self. Microentrepreneurs’ notions of self are based on relationships with others in interactions over time (Gergen, 1991; Mead, 1934) in which microentrepreneurs’ lived experiences help them understand their identity (Dewey, 1929/1958). This social constructionist
This theoretical stance acknowledges that there is a connection between societal discourses and material conditions of lived experiences. Microentrepreneurs understand their lived experiences through encountering the material aspects of reality and labeling those aspects through their symbolic understandings of reality (Dewey, 1929/1958; Gergen, 1999). Interaction with others is the social process used by microentrepreneurs in the negotiation between the situated material and symbolic worlds of historical, cultural, and political epochs as microentrepreneurs attempt to “authenticate” their lived experiences (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004; Dewey, 1929/1958; Gergen 1999).

Communication within U.S. society becomes important in the realization of identities that arise in U.S. society. U.S. identities are grounded in material, relational and reflective dimensions of microentrepreneurs’ lived experiences (Dewey 1929/1958; Mead, 1934). The material, relational, or reflective conditions that exist in U.S. society form the basis of the microentrepreneur’s identity construction (James, 1907/1977a). Such conditions help explain why microentrepreneurs’ act the way they do and become a meeting point between discursive and material practices.

One such meeting point in the U.S. is work and its influence on identity. In U.S. society, the language and discourses of capitalism and economics provides a common set of symbols and social stocks of knowledge for understanding personhood in the United
States. These common economic symbols are what make the microentrepreneurial self and activities possible as a U.S. self and way of life. With work having colonized our private lives in America, American’s have learned to define their identity and relationships to others through their paid labor (Deetz, 1992; Wieland et al., 2009). Microentrepreneurs’ sense of self has become linked to their microenterprises where they are attempting to control their economic destiny (Dutton et al., 1994; Gill & Ganesh, 2007; Lair et al., 2005).

As microentrepreneurs construct their understandings of self and society through their labor, they are able to participate in an economic public sphere of exchange. Through such participation, microentrepreneurs are constructing their world with a sense of permanence and stability (Arendt, 1958) thereby allowing them to engage in opportunities afforded Americans by the societal discourse of the American Dream. The American Dream provides an ideology of material or moral success and failure in the U.S. through directing careers, choice of work, and social mobility (Fisher, 1973; Lucas, 2011; Rowland & Jones, 2007; Thio, 1972). Microentrepreneurial practices are a modern enactment of the American Dream, one that provides hope to and frustrations for microentrepreneurs. Current microentrepreneurial practices promote a relationship between the common good for the community and the private interests of the microentrepreneur as a vehicle to economic freedom, self-reliance, and responsibility to oneself and one’s community (AEO, 2005; Kao et al., 2002; Miles et al., 2006).

Viewed from this lens, microentrepreneurialism is both a discourse and a practice which allows individuals to participate in U.S. society and to feel that they can exert
some control over life’s opportunities. As a discourse, microentrepreneurial practices are a dynamic process in which microentrepreneurs tie their contextual, situated knowledge of self, work, and society to their interactions that generate microenterprise organizations (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004). As a practice, microentrepreneurial discourses construct particular organizational subjectivities via historical and material conditions as they reconstruct identities and practices of work in U.S. society (Ashcraft & Mumby, 2004).

In the final analysis, what can we learn about microentrepreneur identity construction in Appalachian Ohio? How can that knowledge allow us to develop a communicative perspective on microentrepreneurism as a way of organizing in Appalachian Ohio? First, I explain the contributions this study makes to scholarship on identity and organizing by examining a model of microentrepreneur identity in Appalachian Ohio. I suggest some ways to translate this research into practical applications for microentrepreneurs and economic development centers. Next, I discuss the limitations of this study. Finally, I discuss future directions for a research agenda for this type of research.

A Model of Microentrepreneur Identity

The theory derived from this study is based on the premise that the situated discursive work practices of microentrepreneurialism in Appalachian Ohio constructs the ontological conditions for a microentrepreneur identity. These ontological conditions allowed for (a) microentrepreneurs’ identification with the regional flavor of Appalachian Ohio; (b) microentrepreneurs to be enterprising individuals in an enterprising place as they engaged in collaborative work practices; and, (c) microentrepreneurs to be reflective
on how their enterprising spirit can be colonized by a societal discourse. In constructing a microentrepreneur identity, participants drew upon Alvesson and Kärreman’s (2000) small d discourses (i.e., social practices of talk and text in action) and big D Discourses (i.e., general and enduring systems of thought used in the formation and construction of ideas or selves in a specific cultural and historical milieu) in interaction with others over time as they sought to construct microentrepreneurialism in Appalachian Ohio.

Microentrepreneur Identity and Microentrepreneur Organizing

One way of viewing the sphere of work is to think of it as a form of participation in an economic public sphere of exchange that gives humans of modernity stability and permanence in their lives (Arendt, 1958). In this sense, the sphere of work is more than just the fabricating of enduring objects possessing value. Work allows for the social inclusion of workers within society’s matrix of work, family, and leisure. This requires processes of communication and organizing in which interactions and meanings shape the “ways people engage each other” (Broadfoot et al., 2008, p. 154).

Due to the distressed economic conditions of Appalachian Ohio, it would not be surprising to find that participants could not participate in local employment opportunities. Instead of exiting the area, their identification with the place of Appalachian Ohio caused them to stay and engage in the marketplace, no matter the struggle. As such, the discourse of Appalachian Ohio was a central influence on their decisions to form microentrepreneur identities in this place. This is partly explained by the social, political, and economic conditions of Appalachia (Eller, 2008; Emery et al., 2003; Williams, 2002). For microentrepreneurs, as noted earlier, identification with the
regional flavor is a process of identifying with and a product of identification towards Appalachian Ohio (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987). As microentrepreneurs interacted with their environment, they are constantly reinterpreting their understandings and identifications (Dewey, 1929/1958; Mead, 1934). This link to the region was a social construction via their relationships and interactions with family, home, and the material conditions of the landscape.

The creation of specific sites of microentrepreneurial work, such as the Athens Farmer’s Market, allowed microentrepreneurs to be socially engaged in society. This led microentrepreneurs to engage the region and the people in economic practices and relationships built from discursive interactions to construct a quality of life in the region that stimulates economic growth and stability for them and others while downplaying “stereotypes of entrepreneurs as greedy and profit driven” (Larson & Pearson, 2012, p. 255) individuals. Instead, microentrepreneurs are able to change power relations from large corporations controlling the social and economic destiny of the region to one where the microentrepreneurs take part in constructing that destiny. As Arendt (1958) stated, the participation in an economic public sphere allows the human spirit to inspire microentrepreneurs to make the best of their work and life situations. As a result, microentrepreneurs are able to apply both social and political forces to improve economic conditions of microentrepreneurs and the Appalachian Ohio region.

One way this is done is through collaborative work practices where microentrepreneurs join forces to better their economic lives. Such collaborative work practices goes against the logic of individual competitiveness prevalent in conceptions of
enterprising selves (du Gay, 1996; Wieland et al., 2009). Through their everyday work and discursive practices, microentrepreneurs seem to be constructing a new model of enterprise and success in Appalachian Ohio, one that interweaves Appalachian cultural traits within a community of entrepreneurial practices. That new model seems to simultaneously represent both an individualistic and collective approach to organizing – helping each other while also competing against each other. Such a form of microentrepreneurialism represents an innovative approach to individualistic competitiveness in U.S. society, one where it is okay for microentrepreneurs to collaborate as they compete against one another for economic success. In Appalachian Ohio, microentrepreneurialism has become a way of organizing economic life for the region.

Microentrepreneurialism as a way of organizing affects patterns of work and workplaces. Selling together, cooperative ordering practices, using shared spaces of production, networking to solve issues are all examples of work and discursive practices engaged in by microentrepreneurs. Instead of thinking how to out-compete other microentrepreneurs in the region, participants thought about how they can work with another local microenterprise for theirs and the region’s success. As microentrepreneurs worked with one another in their economic endeavors, they framed a communicative perspective to the “organization of production, the regulation of work, and the conditions and experiences of” being microentrepreneurs (Casey, 2012, p. 83). Such a communicative perspective views microenterprises as having permeable, looser structures that emphasize synergies between microentrepreneurs and microenterprises.
that extend beyond formal organizational boundaries. The blurring of enterprise boundaries means that what constitutes one enterprise from another in terms of space, personnel, marketing, knowledge, and production may not always be explicitly distinct when working side-by-side other microenterprises. This seems to provide a better alternative for engaging in economic endeavors for microentrepreneurs while still being responsive to local, regional, and national economic conditions.

Even though microentrepreneurs in Appalachian Ohio engaged in collaborative work practices, they still accepted as a given “rigidly prescribed paths” used for microenterprise success or achievement (Wieland et al., p. 112). Because they still drew upon notions of individual risk, persistence, and struggle to explain their success, notions of individuality from the American Dream were still used by microentrepreneurs. This understanding of self-worth as a microentrepreneur shows that an U.S. society Discourse still impacts participants’ understandings of material conditions about microentrepreneurial work. This creates a dialectical tension between going at it alone versus accomplishing it together that participants reflected on. This tension reflects how the understandings of microentrepreneur work and success are not viewed as taken for granted, a priori forces that are somehow deterministic of socio-economic success in U.S. society. Instead, the tension problematizes understandings of microentrepreneur identity and work in Appalachian Ohio. This interrelationship between microentrepreneurs, material practices of work (their own small “d” discourses), and U.S. societal discourses shows that socio-economic success is also a social construction. Meanings and understandings of the social construction of socio-economic success by
microentrepreneurs is constructed at the site of work. Work is not solely a site of economic endeavors.

In summary, du Gay’s (1996) enterprising logic is not an a priori condition of post-industrial work. It is also a social construction. Discursive meanings from it must be understood as material, productive, and economic (Deetz & Hegbloom, 2007). The workplace is “a site of cultural production and not simply the arena of economic life” (Deetz & Hegbloom, 2007, p. 326). The workplace, as a site of production, is important to identity and organizing in modernity. Through their identification with the region and discursive work practices, participants were able to socially construct a microentrepreneur identity for Appalachian Ohio through discursive interaction with other microentrepreneurs, supportive work environments (e.g., ACEnet, OUIC, and AFM), and customers. Collaborative work practices, networking, cooperative buying and selling practices, family, and economic development centers, all served as “safety nets” in the enterprising culture of Appalachian Ohio. Microentrepreneurial activity encompassed an interrelationship in which individuals, society, and the region benefit from ownership and creation. Microentrepreneurialism, in this view, provides promise for a better life and world for both individuals and society (Kao et al., 2002).

**Contributions to Literature**

One contribution this study adds to the literature is a focus on how an identification with a region can lead people to come together to change the structure of the local economy. By creating economic opportunities for themselves and others in the region, microentrepreneurs facilitate people’s ability to get out of a cycle of poverty, to
grow wealth in the region, and to keep talent in the area. That many are “stuck” in the area, for reasons related to an inability to fund a move elsewhere, to desires to remain close to family (both natural and extended), does not serve as a gesture of defeat for all individuals in the region; rather, it serves as the impetus to walk a fine line between individual initiative coupled with a competitive nature and a willingness to collaborate with others who have the same entrepreneurial goals in mind. By doing this, microentrepreneurs are constructing their communities and the spatial relations of the Appalachian Ohio region. This in turn shapes future work and economic opportunities while sustaining Appalachian Ohio for family and work. Practically, this means that organizations and individuals involved in improving economic conditions in the area should consider how they can create a regional identity in their efforts to promote entrepreneurialism as one way out of poverty. By connecting entrepreneurial efforts to what the region has to offer, they are more likely to succeed in keeping people in the region versus struggling to create infrastructure to attract large manufacturing or distributing organizations.

A second contribution this study adds to the literature is a focus on understanding that the enterprising culture in the U.S. does not have to focus on individuals using capital gain ventures to obtain large sums of capital to risk on economic endeavors. Notions of microentrepreneurialism in this study allowed participants to reconstruct what it means to be self-sufficient in Appalachian Ohio. As suggested above, instead of being the rugged individual going at it alone, microentrepreneurs were organizing in collaborative ways to create economic opportunities for themselves and others. Wealth-
creating practices were not the only purpose for doing this. Rather, microentrepreneurs were engaging in value-adding processes for Appalachian Ohio through sharing strategies, assembling resources, and creating economic opportunities in the region. By working as a community of individuals, microentrepreneur practices were constructed to exist as an interrelationship between the common good of the region and the private interest of the microentrepreneur (Kao et al., 2002). The discourse and practices of microentrepreneurialism became a vehicle to economic freedom, self-reliance, and responsibility to oneself and one’s community.

This shows that constructions of microentrepreneur identity were not grounded in a utilitarian outlook on how to live a good commercialized life. Instead, constructions of microentrepreneur identity were developed as a value-added service providing public and private aspects of life with richness, depth, and meaning (James, 1907/1977a; Taylor 1989). This distinction is an important contribution as it shows that the communicative and organizing practices of microentrepreneurialism can construct a better future for both microentrepreneurs and Appalachian Ohio in line with U.S. notions of optimism and equality (Dewey, 1929/1958; Dickstein, 1998b; Seigfried, 1995; Shepherd, 2001). Communication about microentrepreneurialism becomes constitutive of the experiences of microentrepreneurialism as a discourse and a practice that provides a better life experience in Appalachian Ohio. Practically, this means that organizations and individuals involved in microentrepreneur discourses and practices can promote them as offering better life experiences for people in economically distressed areas, through
combining material success with community success in Rowland and Jones’ (2007) version of the American Dream.

Another contribution this study adds to the literature is a focus on a non-traditional form of organizing. The organizational communication literature explains the impact communication has on people’s lives in organizations and society (Mumby & Stohl, 1996). Typically, though, those perspectives analyze the organizing of for-profit corporations and the impact they have on people’s lives. Instead, this study examines how the Appalachian Ohio region has organized discursive practices of work for the benefit of both individuals and the Appalachian Ohio region. Microentrepreneurial enterprises, whether existing in the home, in a shop, or using shared work spaces at local economic development centers are for profit organizations undertaken for the purpose of economic success. This orientation toward individual and regional economic success has allowed microentrepreneurs to participate more fully in the region and U.S. socio-economic structures and to be viewed as more fully human (Arendt, 1958). In turn, this can lead to greater cooperation among microenterprises in Appalachian Ohio that lead to a better life for residents. Practically, this means that organizations and individuals involved in microentrepreneur endeavors should be looking for ways to connect people’s work lives with their public lives. This allows microentrepreneurs to construct the social and cultural values of work as well as motivations and bonds between people and work in the region.
Study Limitations

All research studies have their limitations and this study is no different. These limitations must be outlined and the shortcomings of the analysis need to be explained to meet the rigors of qualitative research (Taylor & Trujillo, 2001). I shall discuss the limitations that arose out of the structure and data of the study.

Structure of Study and Data

The first structural limitation deals with the population sampled in this study. While a saturation point was reached with the current sample size that allowed me to develop the categories in my analysis, the results could benefit from a larger sample size to reaffirm validity and academic integrity of the results. Part of the problem in recruiting participants came about due to a general suspension of outsiders by residents of Appalachia (Williams, 2000). Despite the efforts described in Chapter Three to make myself known to potential participants, many potential participants declined to participate in the study once they found out I was not from the area. This could have led me to find more like minded participants instead of a truer representation of microentrepreneurs in Appalachian Ohio and could limit its generalization to the wider U.S. population.

Because of the homogenous nature of residents’ ethnicity in Appalachian Ohio, there exists an absence of competition and/or helpfulness between microentrepreneurs, consumers, and economic development center support staff of various ethnicities. While this is not specifically a limitation to this study, it would be interesting to conduct a cross-case comparison with non-white urban microentrepreneurs. Additionally, would the results have been any different if participants were all male or all female? Again, while
not a limitation, it would be interesting to conduct a cross-case comparison of all male or all female rural microentrepreneurs.

The second structural limitation arises from a break in data collection and analysis. Due to this break, it was possible that participants’ perspectives, motivations, and practices might have changed. To help minimize this limitation, I was able to engage in one new participant interview and reinterview six participants. By doing this, I was able to compare older data with newer data that grounded theory requires through its constant comparative method. Fortunately, in these six new interviews, the participants expressed similar identity and organizing practices in use by the microentrepreneurs and local economic development centers as before.

One reason for conducting this study was to explore how discursive practices of work socially constructed microentrepreneur identity and organizing practices. One of my arguments is that how microentrepreneur identity is internalized is influenced by U.S. societal Discourses. As such, another limitation to this study is that it had a singular focus on the work lives of the microentrepreneurs and not on any other aspects of their lives such as their home or family lives.

Most likely, this study is not generalizable to microentrepreneurialism’s use in big, urban municipalities with diverse populations. The results of this study are contextual and may only apply to other similar rural areas in the U.S. Despite these limitations, this study still has merit and deserves further investigation.
Future Directions for a Research Agenda

This study has attempted to examine microentrepreneur identity as both a practice and a discourse. There is promise in the study of the communicative construction of microentrepreneur identity. The promise is in how microentrepreneurs and microentrepreneurial identity and work are conceived by and in U.S. societal Discourses. Microentrepreneurial practices not only construct microentrepreneur discourses, but microentrepreneurial discourses construct microentrepreneurial practices. This causes a blurring of distinctions between the public and private lives of microentrepreneurs in organizational and societal processes where work becomes “a key source of personal meaningfulness and identity creation” (Kuhn et al., 2008). Future work needs to build on how intersectionalities between microapproaches (e.g., discursive practices of microentrepreneur work) and macroapproaches (e.g., American Dream) of Discourses used in this study helped to develop an understanding of the meaningfulness of microentrepreneur work in Appalachian Ohio and other regions of the U.S.

Microentrepreneurs’ practices of work construct spatial and economic relations in the Appalachian Ohio region. The discourses and practices used by local economic development centers and policy makers can influence microentrepreneurial practices and discourses over time. While the current enactment of enterprise logic is seen to have a colonizing effect on identity and work practices, notions of impermanence and difference can change that (Kuhn et al., 2008). Spatio-temporal issues may cause the practice and use of microentrepreneurialism to be different in different regions of the U.S. If true, this could lead to the construction of different discourses of microentrepreneur subjectivities.
available in different regions of the U.S. Future work needs to examine how different local economic development centers and policy makers construct and use different microentrepreneur and societal discourses.

The use of enterprise logic colonizes microentrepreneur identity practices and creates a dialectical tension of accomplishing it together versus going at it alone to explain what it means to be a microentrepreneur in Appalachian Ohio. This is also used in making sense of their microentrepreneur work while reproducing broader cultural values. The discursive meanings that come out of this are material, productive, and economic (Deetz & Hegbloom, 2007). Microentrepreneurialism provides a discourse of economic life and discursive interactions between and among various individuals (Broadfoot et al., 2008). Future work should problematize various economic tasks, roles, and identities that are constructed via new and changing work practices and discourses in both Appalachia and the broader U.S.

In the end, organizational communication scholars should be questioning the organizational and society relationship (Mumby & Stohl, 1996). There is need for equal emphasis on understanding the material and discursive practices of work life in U.S. society. Organizational communication scholars are well positioned to do this. One’s involvement in work does not always lead to greater success or quality of life in America. Understanding how people respond to changing economic conditions and work will always be needed.
Conclusion

This study has shown that a microentrepreneur identity is constructed via a variety of cultural, societal, and organizational discourses and work practices. The microentrepreneur subject position highlights how microentrepreneurs are the “sites” for the confluence of discursive and material conditions (Kuhn, 2009). This study makes a statement on the larger socially constructed meanings of organizing, work, and identity (Broadfoot et al., 2008). Microentrepreneur identity is both a product (leaves something behind) and process (an interactive event) of work in Appalachian Ohio (Taylor, 2006). This implies that microentrepreneurialism and microentrepreneurs are constructed through the interpretations of groups of individuals in society (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). From a social constructionist perspective, knowledge about microentrepreneurship is knowledge on how individuals and societies perceive, define, produce, and re-produce microentrepreneurial action in society (Lindgren & Packendorff, 2009).

Understanding microentrepreneurial behavior is viewing human behavior as the action of social agents who have goals, aspirations, and desires. Microentrepreneurs engage in certain activities that constitute both their understandings of microentrepreneurialism as well as reflect back on what it means to be a microentrepreneur in the United States. Microentrepreneurialism as both a discourse and a practice would view microentrepreneurial behavior as both action and meaning in a symbolic and material world. Studying microentrepreneurial behavior from a social constructionist perspective is an epistemological issue at root, but it cannot be separated from ontological issues of communication as constitutive of reality (Taylor, 1971/1987).
This leads to viewing communication as experience in which communication promises the power to construct new interpretations of microentrepreneurialism, self, and society (Shepherd, 2001). As James (1907/1977a) noted, new truths are built upon old truths and that not all truths are possible, but to imply that something is possible is to imply that the conditions that would produce its existence are actually already present. This leads me to the conclusion that we communicatively construct and reconstruct the world we live in and that we can construct a better world for us all. Microentrepreneurialism is an attempt to do just that.

This study has shown one way that microentrepreneurs construct the world they live in. By doing so, microentrepreneurs construct the discursive work practices of being microentrepreneurs in Appalachian Ohio. This construction leads to a communicative understanding of work, one that implies a discursive organizing is necessary to understand the material conditions of work (Miller, 2006). Chapter One laid out the rational and problem statement. Chapter Two provided the theoretical background for the study. Chapter Three described the methods used to conduct this study. Chapter Four analyzed the data collected, while Chapter Five discussed this analysis. I hope that a dialogue can now be started to continue the work done here.
ENDNOTES

1 I use the term Americans in my study to refer to citizens of the U.S. as it has a colloquial affiliation with U.S. citizenry. I use the term America in my study to refer to the U.S. as it has colloquial affiliation with the country of the United States of America. Neither term is meant to discount countries of or ignore citizens of other countries in North, Central and South America.

2 I follow Giddens (1990) example and argue that the globalization of capitalism and western modernity refers to the linking of local practices with global social relations. Neither Mumby (1997) nor Giddens (1990) equates this with postmodernism. My intent is to not misrepresent or provide a generic orientation to the intellectual traditions of either modernism or postmodernism. Using post-industrialism allows me to broaden my understanding of organizing as a defining human activity (Casey, 1995; Mumby, 1997). Post-industrialism allows me to articulate the changing relationships among communication, identity, and work that recognize the continuous blurring of the boundaries between modernism and postmodernism. For example, science and capitalism have not yet been superseded as a way of social development around the world, while, at the same time, there has been a transformation in our knowledge and culture about the increasingly interconnected ways of communicating and working (McGuigan, 1999). Among these changing trends in post-industrialism include changes in the methods of work production, consumption, and communication, as well as, a metamorphosis in our knowledge and culture about notions of social solidarity and self (Casey, 1995, 2012; du Gay, 1996). These changes are taking place in both the material and discursive methods

3 It must be noted that the poverty figures for Athens County are screwed due to the participation of Ohio University students who are not residents of Athens County in local census surveys.

4 Mumby (1997) describes three forms of modernism. Positivist modernism represents the Cartesian dualism, which separates the subject (or individual) from the object (or knowledge) and leads to a representational paradigm and its correspondence theory of truth. Interpretive modernism represents the Kantian notion of the knowing mind as an active contributor to the construction of knowledge and reconciles the tension between the subject and object dichotomy through a “consensus theory of truth” (Mumby, 1997, p. 6). Critical modernism represents the Frankfurt School of critical theory and seeks to more thoroughly articulate “the complex relations among discourse, ideology, and power” (Mumby, 1997, p. 13) by seeking to emancipate people from hegemonic forces in society.

5 I use the term modernism to refer to the philosophical and theoretical ideas that came out of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment project in Europe. Modernism refers to how scholars have theorized and rationalized the modern world and the people in it. I use the term modernity to refer to the epoch and conditions of modern times starting with the eighteenth-century Enlightenment project and continuing to today. Modernity refers to people, events, and processes that have existed or still exist today. I make this important distinction since notions of identity are different in modernism and modernity. Identity in
modernism refers to its philosophical and theoretical development as understood by scholars, whereas, identity in modernity refers to the everyday, commonsense understandings of identity by lay actors.

6 I follow Seigel’s (2005) example and purposefully use the term *reflective* instead of *reflexive*. Reflective implies an active process of intentional purpose, while reflexive implies a passive process of unwilled response to stimulus. The active response of reflective more accurately describes how Mead (1934) and social constructionism (Gergen, 1999) views the formation of selves in relations to others.

7 While I use the phrase *Appalachian Ohio* throughout this study, I am actually referring to Athens County in Southeastern Ohio each time it is used.

8 These names are pseudonyms for the microentrepreneurs in order to protect their anonymity. Additionally, no attempt has been made to clean up the examples in this study. The grammar and spelling of quotations are meant to reflect the flavor of microentrepreneurs’ communicative styles.

9 The term *illustration* is used in this study to let the reader know that primary data, whether textual, interviews, or member checking are being used to explain the category.
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APPENDIX A: MAP OF APPALACHIAN OHIO

APPENDIX B: TABLES

Table 1

*Description of Microentrepreneur Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Microenterprise</th>
<th>Ownership</th>
<th>Employees</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Jake &amp; McDowell*</td>
<td>Website, Graphic Design &amp; Printing Services</td>
<td>Co-Owners</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karen &amp; Craig</td>
<td>Renewable Energy Contractors</td>
<td>Family Owned</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>Independent Business Consultant</td>
<td>Sole Proprietor</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bates</td>
<td>Freelance Digital Photographer</td>
<td>Sole Proprietor</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burk</td>
<td>Aerospace Engineering Software Development</td>
<td>Partner</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emily</td>
<td>Grower of Fresh Cut Flowers &amp; Wreaths</td>
<td>Sole Proprietor</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rudy*</td>
<td>Seasonal Organic Vegetable Farmer</td>
<td>Sole Proprietor</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bobby*</td>
<td>Heirloom Flowers &amp; Bulbs Seller</td>
<td>Sole Proprietor</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>John*</td>
<td>Natural/Organic Bakery</td>
<td>Worker-Owned</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rich*</td>
<td>Cans Jams, Jellies, Marmalades &amp; Chutneys</td>
<td>Sole Proprietor</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Toby</td>
<td>Seasonal Organic Vegetable Farmer</td>
<td>Sole Proprietor</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 1: (continues)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Business Type</th>
<th>Ownership Type</th>
<th>Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kenny</td>
<td>Computer Networking Systems Contractor</td>
<td>Sole Proprietor</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cindy</td>
<td>Ceramic Dishware &amp; Art Producer</td>
<td>Sole Proprietor</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reed</td>
<td>Salsa Producer</td>
<td>Sole Proprietor</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pat</td>
<td>Whisk Broom Crafter</td>
<td>Sole proprietor</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Martha</td>
<td>Herbal Tea Producer</td>
<td>Sole Proprietor</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Katelyn</td>
<td>Alterations</td>
<td>Sole Proprietor</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bruce</td>
<td>Landscaping Services</td>
<td>Family Owned</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>McKenzie</td>
<td>Pet Food Snacks</td>
<td>Sole Proprietor</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ray</td>
<td>Herb Nursery</td>
<td>Family Owned</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Janet &amp; Scott</td>
<td>Organic Market Gardeners</td>
<td>Family Owned</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Zach*</td>
<td>Seasonal Produce Farmer</td>
<td>Sole Proprietor</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: A * next to a pseudonym means I reconnected with a participant for member checking activities.
Table 2

*Description of Economic Development Center Personnel*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Organization</th>
<th>Sectors Supported</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Betty</td>
<td>ACEnet</td>
<td>Food, Agriculture, Wood &amp; the Arts Microenterprises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vicky</td>
<td>OUIC</td>
<td>IT, Digital Media &amp; Biotech Microenterprises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fred</td>
<td>OUIC</td>
<td>IT, Digital Media &amp; Biotech Microenterprises</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanda**</td>
<td>OUIC</td>
<td>IT, Digital Media &amp; Biotech Microenterprises</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: A ** next to a pseudonym means I obtained a new participant interview.