Untangling the Processes of Leaving a Member-Abusive Organization

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Abstract
Prior to its dissolution, Mars Hill, a former megachurch, developed a reputation for abuse and dictatorial control, creating an organizational environment from which many sought to exit. However, for those members desiring to leave, exit was far from straightforward. Our interpretive analysis of former members’ stories revealed tension as Mars Hill cast out members who wanted to stay (involuntary exit) while pressuring those who wanted to leave (involuntary staying). Former members used a form of faith-based reasoning (spiritual rationality) to manage this tension. Finally, members described ways they simultaneously experienced identification and disidentification with the organization in the face of abuse and control, a phenomenon we characterize as uncoupled identification. We discuss these findings in light of the literature on employee-abusive organizations and identification.

Keywords
abusive organizations, identity, identification, churches as organizations, organizational exit

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“You want to leave? No, you aren’t hearing God’s will for you. You need to stay. But since you’ve been willful and disobeyed your leadership, you are going to be put on discipline.”

—Former member of Mars Hill Church speaking on the church’s response to exit

Lying, deceit, bullying, verbal and spiritual abuse, vulgar rants, inappropriate use of organizational monies, and allegations of plagiarism, all contributed to the toxic culture and ultimate undoing of the now disbanded Mars Hill Church (Kiley, 2012; Welch, 2014). Murmurs of the controversial policies and practices began around 2007 with the firing of two key individuals in leadership and came to a head in 2014 when the ever-mounting scandals caught up with the polarizing pastor Mark Driscoll and his church. As of January 1, 2015, the former megachurch, which boasted 13,000 parishioners across 15 campuses and five states, was no longer (Welch, 2014). Even before its official closing, member after member exited the church, some of their own volition and others under duress, some quietly scaling back attendance and looking elsewhere for religious fulfillment, and others actively warning people to stay away. Ultimately, what linger are the stories of those leaving the megachurch, both of the ousted and the whistleblowers, the faithful and the newly faithless. Their stories of exiting offer a critical case in which to examine the processes of exit from an abusive organization.

Over the last decade, the field of organizational communication has seen a sharp increase in scholarship focused on organizational incivility, emotional manipulation, bullying, and other destructive workplace behaviors (see Kassing & Waldron, 2014, for a review). However, much of that research focuses on negative behavior in workplaces; far less extends to less traditional organizations. Accordingly, the present study extends the work on employee-abusive organizations (EAOs) to investigate experiences in what we refer to as member-abusive organizations (MAOs), which, like EAOs, are hostile spaces where members “experience persistent harassment and fear . . . because of the offensive, intimidating, or oppressive atmosphere [therein]” (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008, p. 305). Given the ways in which church members’ identities may be deeply integrated with church discourses and practices (Hinderaker, 2015), there may be even more potential for abuse in this type of organization.

In particular, we make two main contributions to the field of organizational communication. First, we continue the scholarly conversation surrounding abusive organizations, extending beyond the rich work being done on employee–employer organizations to include member-based operations such as churches. In doing so, we also investigate the process of leaving this unique
form of organization. Second, we contribute to the literature on organizational identification, disidentification, and identity by complexifying member experiences in an organization that is value driven and identity-embedded.

**MAOs**

The last decade has seen an explosion of work on instances of bullying and abuse in organizations focusing on the degree and impact of bullying (Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracy, & Alberts, 2007), empowered possibilities for those who are bullied (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2011), and victim responses (Djurković, McCormack, & Casimir, 2006), among others. Many studies focus on bullying at the individual level of analysis, often examining victims’ responses to bullying without considering the organizational efforts and/or responses. For instance, D’Cruz and Noronha (2010) examined coping responses to workplace bullying and found that targets progressively experienced confusion, pursued organizational options to deal with the bully, withdrew from social connections, and finally exited the organization. The authors described the exit choice as an often unappealing action given salary and timing constraints but one that may be worth the trade-off for self-interest preservation. As another example, Lutgen-Sandvik (2006) investigated the resistance efforts of bullied workers and the outcomes of such resistance. Exodus was among the most prominent responses, where exodus included quitting as well as threatening to quit, requesting a transfer, or helping others to leave the organization.

While Lutgen-Sandvik (2006) focused on the “communal impact of bullying” (p. 426) on witnesses, others examined larger organizational contexts to understand employee abuse. Lutgen-Sandvik and McDermott (2008) studied how members of an EAO made sense of the abuse, finding that an abusive supervisor was often understood in the context of an omniscient but unresponsive upper-management system. That is, employees saw a single abusive supervisor as indicative of a system that enabled that abuse. Particularly relevant to the present study, Lutgen-Sandvik and McDermott articulated the following definition of an EAO:

EAOs are hostile work environments in which employees experience persistent harassment and fear at work because of the offensive, intimidating, or oppressive atmosphere. In EAOs, workers are the object of persistent targeting for abuse, which can include work obstruction, verbal abuse, social ostracism, personal criticism, and, at times, physical aggression. This abuse can occur in a variety of situations and communicative events and target multiple employees. (pp. 305-306)
Though Lutgen-Sandvik and McDermott (2008) made important strides in identifying the organization’s role in bullying, they focused exclusively on employment organizations. This type of abuse may be even more prominent in member-based organizations such as churches where membership is often based on deeper identification (Hinderaker, 2015). Kramer (2011a) illustrated the differences between voluntary membership organizations and employment organizations. He found that exiting a voluntary organization such as a community choir was different from exiting an employment organization. Community choir members ceased attending the choir’s meetings without formally breaking their membership, which left the door open to rejoin the organization in the future. Kramer’s study also revealed that members’ identification with the values of the organization bound volunteers to the organization and complicated the exit process. Such an informal exit would not be possible in most employment situations, though it might occur in other member-based settings like churches. In this vein, Hinderaker and colleagues explored the exit process from a totalistic organization (i.e., the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints) where organizational values and activities consumed inordinate amounts of members’ time and attention (Hinderaker, 2015; Hinderaker & O’Connor, 2015). Leaving such organizations is difficult because of the long reach that these organizations had into members’ lives (Hinderaker, 2015) and because of the organization’s abusive practices (Hinderaker & O’Connor, 2015).

Taken together, these studies emphasize the role of organizational form in understanding abusive practices in organizations and exit as a response to those practices. In particular, the narratives in Hinderaker and O’Connor’s (2015) data belie the potential for abuse in member-based organizations. Therefore, in the present study, we chose to extend Lutgen-Sandvik and McDermott’s (2008) definition to what we will call MAOs or those that meet the criteria set forth above but exist outside of paid employment situations. The current literature illustrates that one of the most prominent ways to deal with or address bullying and abuse is to exit the organization (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). Accordingly, we chose to hone in on members’ experiences of exit as a context in which to study MAOs, and posed the following research question:

**Research Question 1 (RQ1):** How do former members describe the experience of leaving an MAO?

Berkelaar (2013) noted that research on nonemployment exit is warranted because member identity in such organizations can complicate exit. Consequently, we next move to discuss the intermingling of exit from an
MAO with organizational identification, disidentification, and member identity.

**Identification, Disidentification, Identity, and Organizational Exit**

Almost inarguably, the nexus of identity, organizational identification, and exit can be understood as nuanced and complex—even more so when the organization in question is member-abusive, value-laden, or totalistic in nature (e.g., see Hinderaker & O’Connor, 2015). Scott, Corman, and Cheney (1998) provided scholars with a heuristic framework for thinking about the complex relationship between identity and identification, likening it to Giddens’s (1984) duality of structure. In short, where Giddens talks about the duality between structure (rules and resources) and systems, Scott et al. address the duality between identification and identity, which they posit “involves the appropriation of identities in the expression of identifications, which in turn serve to reproduce, regionalize, and unify identities” (Scott et al., 1998, p. 306). That is, an individual’s identity (the structural element) is shaped by rules (norms, values, beliefs) and resources (for engaging with others). These identities are then enacted and shape an individual’s identification, which represents creating, maintaining, or shifting links between people. The relationship is recursive in that identification is produced by and produces identity. For example, a person’s faith (an identity rule) may prompt that person to join a church, participate in that church’s activities, and internalize the values of that church (all part of identification). The identification with the church will then reshape the individual’s understanding of their own faith values and their enactment of their own identity.

Beyond this duality, the identity management process is further complicated when multiple identities exist. Scott et al. (1998) referred to this as the regionalization of multiple identities. Regionalization shatters the perception that identities are all alike and instead contextualizes individual’s constructions of identity and identification in situ. In this sense, regionalization attends to the need to assess connections and contradictions among multiple identities. For instance, Kramer (2011b) theorized that members of voluntary organizations (which would include churches) experienced unique membership roles within a particular organization (i.e., prospective, new, established, transitory, former members), across multiple organizations (where their socialization experiences in one organization are influenced by their memberships in another), and within a peer group that spanned multiple organizations. Similarly, Meisenbach and Kramer (2014) captured how community choir members described their identities in terms of the choir, in terms of
music, and in terms of family activities. In their data, choir members identified with the choir itself but nested that identification within broader identifications of musician and family member that cut across multiple identifications. For example, church members might identify with the church and could simultaneously identify with a small group Bible study and an outside campus ministry. Identification with subgroups may help members more closely identify with the church, or the small group identity could replace identification with the larger organization (Silva & Sias, 2010).

This regionalization also highlights the presence of front and back regions where members “draw on the same identity during the expression of identification or disidentification with any one target” (Scott et al., 1998, p. 315). Disidentification is more focused on the situations where “individuals’ social identities and self-concepts are defined by the groups or organizations from which they perceive their identities to be separated” (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001, p. 394, emphasis in original). That is, rather than simply leaving an organization and removing it as an identity or identification target, in some cases, a significant part of one’s identity is that of “ex-member.” For instance, Hinderaker and O’Connor (2015) noted strong disidentification during organizational exit stories from individuals leaving the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (LDS). Rather than being able to completely separate themselves from their church (i.e., deidentification; Ashforth, 2001), exiting members were defined by what they had been. Instead of omitting their LDS identities, former members defined themselves as ex-members of the LDS church.

Taken together, the duality between identity and identification as well as regionalization leads us to a richer understanding of the complexity inherent in negotiating issues of identity in organizations. Building from this understanding, one can contemplate how these nuances might play out for individuals exiting an MAO. For instance, in what ways might an individual’s activities (e.g., expressing dissent, telling people they are leaving, ceasing participation in bible studies) influence their identity, thus shaping their identification toward the larger church organization? Moreover, how might they begin to draw on more back region disidentifications (Scott et al., 1998), thereby shaping their own identity as a person of faith and related activities as they leave (e.g., determining whether and/or how to share their stories)? Value-based memberships and relational ties could also further complicate member exit (Hinderaker, 2015) in that, while members may leave a church, they might continue to have strong identity ties to their friend groups or even the broader faith group that comprises their (former) church. Thus, instead of moving from member to nonmember, these individuals may develop identities and disidentifications based on their status.
of former member, in which their organizational membership remains a salient part of who they are.

In sum, the intersection of identity, identification, disidentification, and exit is complicated due, in part, to the duality of identity/identification and to the regionalization of identities and likely further complexified in MAOs. It is in an effort to more deeply understanding liminality inherent that we posed the following research question:

**Research Question 2 (RQ2):** In what ways do former members of an abusive organization describe managing their identity/identification throughout their exit experience?

**Method**

**Historical Background on Mars Hill**

This study is part of a larger project exploring the very public collapse of the megachurch, Mars Hill, as it played out in the public sphere online. Founded in 1996, Mars Hill (MH) grew rapidly under the leadership of their lead pastor, Mark Driscoll. Driscoll was particularly polarizing with his extreme Reformed Christian rhetoric and, consequently, was an in/famous name in Christian circles. Some Christians celebrated his ability to speak biblical truth, while others recoiled at his dictatorial methodologies and chauvinistic beliefs (Welch, 2014). At its zenith, MH boasted 13,000 members spread across 15 different churches in five states (Welch, 2014). During his rise to fame, Driscoll became a regular in the media boasting appearances on shows like *Nightline* and CNN and penned pieces for newspapers including the *Washington Post* and the *Seattle Times*. Then, starting in 2013, questions began to emerge about the megachurch and its leader; Driscoll faced plagiarism allegations and was accused of using church funds to boost the sales of his books. At the same time, stories of top-down bullying plagued the pastor and his church. After two church leaders (Paul Petry and Bent Meyer) underwent a very public ousting, Driscoll came under fire for his handling of the situation. Although the church board of elders concluded that Driscoll’s behavior had not disqualified him from pastoring the church, they did note that he was “guilty of arrogance, responding to conflict with a temper and harsh speech, and leading the staff and elders in a domineering manner” (Board of Elders letter as cited in Shellnutt & Lee, 2014). Together, these events and many others led to Driscoll’s eventual resignation in October 2014, and on January 1, 2015, the network of churches known as Mars Hill closed its doors and was no more (Welch, 2014).
The Case for Mars Hill

Mars Hill is a fitting case to explore processes of leaving an MAO for two main reasons. First, Mars Hill Church meets the definition for an abusive organization set forth by Lutgen-Sandvik and McDermott (2008). Instances of offensive behaviors and intimidating language enacted by church leadership engendered a fear-based culture which was well-documented online. The organization was experiencing a large-scale organizational exit with leaders noting that “attendance and giving had plummeted so fast that it would have to close several Seattle branches and cut its staff 30 to 40 percent” (Welch, 2014, para. 8). Second, church organizations, like Mars Hill, depend on member identification for their existence and survival, and the public nature of these struggles made this the perfect context to study issues of identity, identification, and disidentification. For these reasons, Mars Hill was an ideal case study through which to examine the experiences of leaving an MAO and the identity, identification, and disidentification issues therein.

Data Collection

As the controversy over Mark Driscoll and Mars Hill Church was reaching its height, both authors scoured the Internet for relevant artifacts (October 2014 to February 2015). Because this was a current and ever-evolving issue, we knew that websites might be taken down or altered during our study. Accordingly, we used Evernote (an online platform used to archive, organize, and share content) to preserve significant stories, documents, and websites for further analysis.

We began with a Google Search with the terms Mars Hill, Mars Hill Church, Mark Driscoll, and story individually and together. From that search, we reviewed the first few pages of hits and determined blogs and websites that included former members’ stories of leaving Mars Hill. Most of our data were drawn from three primary websites: Joyful Exiles, We Love Mars Hill, and Mars Hill Refuge. The first website (Joyful Exiles) was penned by Paul Petry—a former MH staff member who was fired and eventually came to share his story online—and his wife Jonna. This site included primary documents (e.g., copies of emails from leadership to members concerning how to shun former members) collected by the Petrys to tell the story of their exclusion from Mars Hill as well as reflections on their experiences. The second site (We Love Mars Hill) did not identify an author or site manager, only an aspiration: to “provide a platform for healing and change,” and housed the stories of former members. The third website (Mars Hill Refuge) was written by a former, unidentified member of Mars Hill. In addition to sharing her
story on the site, the author also included a tab called “more stories” where she posted stories that were submitted to the website for wide circulation. In total, we collected stories from 40 individuals from these websites for inclusion in our analyses. In addition to these stories, we coded other content that was available on these sites including a timeline of events in the fall of the church, archived church documents (e.g., bylaws, appeals, membership covenant), and copies of emails exchanges shared across church leadership and church members. Finally, we also clicked on all of the links on the three primary blogs. When the linked content was relevant to the research question posed in this study, it was also coded for analysis, and a few quotations listed below come from these secondary links. A full list of websites coded is available from the authors. In total, when the data were transferred to Microsoft Word, it comprised approximately 700 pages.

**Data Analysis**

Our overall approach to analysis was interpretive and emergent in nature; it resonated with both Glaser and Strauss’s (1967) sensitizing concepts which “effectively help narrow and focus perception in research scenes that are complex, chaotic, and overflowing with multiple issues” (Tracy, 2013, p. 28) and with Tracy’s (2013) basic approach to coding. First, we familiarized ourselves with the two most prominent blogs related to the case (Joyful Exiles and Mars Hill Refuge) as they included more detailed descriptions of events, personal experiences of former members, official organizational documents, and communication between members and leaders than other sites. This initial pass, consistent with what Tracy (2013) called the “data immersion phase” where researchers are encouraged to “marinate in the data” and document any initial impressions and ideas, revealed several ideas (e.g., silencing of members’ dissent, membership and member-shunning, identification/disidentification, exit, and lingering) which became sensitizing concepts as we then proceeded through the corpus of data through several coding phases (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Tracy, 2013). Notably, the unit of analysis ranged from a phrase to several sentences; that is, we coded sections of text that hung together in some meaningful way. Second, we divided the data in half, and each author engaged in a round of primary-cycle coding (Tracy, 2013) where we immersed ourselves in the data and assigned initial “words or phrases that capture[d] their essence” (p. 189; for example, going public, blaming, using the Bible as a weapon, using hateful language). We spoke several times during this primary-cycle phase to discuss what we were starting to see in the data. During these sessions, we would talk about particular excerpts and discuss the developing codes. After reviewing our corpus of data, we collaboratively created a Google
Docs document to capture the oscillating stream of ideas and themes, to allow us to keep our data in one place, and to be able to concurrently code the data in one virtual space. Accordingly, both authors were able to engage with all of the data, and we regularly shifted data pieces to new codes as they emerged.

Using this document, we collaboratively proceeded through several rounds of secondary-cycle coding (Tracy, 2013), collapsing some ideas, creating subthemes, and inserting quotations that seemed to exemplify each theme. We used the comment boxes in Google Docs, phone and email conversations, and colored text notes to help us asynchronously, yet collaboratively, co-code during these phases in an effort to interrogate the developing themes and come to a deeper understanding of our data. For example, one author initially coded “the use of scripture” under the broad theme of identity/identification. After discussion, however, both authors agreed that former members’ use of scripture in those instances was more closely tied to a broad theme about sensemaking in organizational exit. Our final round of focused coding occurred in the writing of the results where we immersed ourselves in the literature on identification, bullying, and socialization. For the first research question, which focused on members’ descriptions of exit, two broad themes emerged: organizational orchestration (where Mars Hill tried to control the exit process by forcing individuals to stay or leave involuntarily) and individual sensemaking (where members made sense of their decision to leave through confrontive and conciliatory spiritual rationalities). For the second research question, which focused on managing identity/identification during exit, two themes emerged: Former members described their continued identification with Mars Hill, despite their efforts to disengage with the church while also emphasizing a schism between how they now identify with Mars Hill and their previous identification.

Throughout the project, we strove to engage in ethical and rigorous qualitative research. We were particularly attuned to the “sincerity” criterion which Tracy (2013) characterized as being achieved through two interrelated practices: self-reflexivity and transparency. In an effort to remain self-reflexive about our conservative Christian identities, we played devil’s advocate with one another to interrogate our initial leanings based on our own faith and preproject perceptions of Mark Driscoll and Mars Hill Church. Moreover, we discussed our interpretations with colleagues who held different faith backgrounds in an effort to interrogate our findings. We also practiced transparency, as evidenced above in our detailed account of our methodological and analytic choices. In addition to sincerity, we also employed credibility (e.g., thick description), data triangulation (i.e., the inclusion of varied blogs managed by church membership and former leadership), and researcher triangulation (Johnson, 1999; Tracy, 2013).
Results

Research Question 1—Leaving an MAO

In the stories of those who left Mars Hill, we noticed two overarching answers to Research Question 1: (a) the data spoke to the ways in which the organization tried to control the exit process, which we call organizational orchestration, and (b) the data spoke to the ways in which exiting members tried to make sense of leaving, which we call individual sensemaking. Within these broad themes, several subthemes emerged in answering Research Question 1. In describing how the organization tried to orchestrate the leaving process, former members explained how Mars Hill leadership insisted that members stay (involuntary staying) or alternatively forced them out of the organization (involuntary exit). In describing their sensemaking, former members cited both confrontive and conciliatory spiritual rationalities that they used to normalize and accept their ultimate exit. The following sections describe these ideas in more detail.

Organizational orchestration. Regarding the organizational role in the exit process, some members described a relatively straightforward exit. One person explained, “As I reflect on my experience I see that in comparison to many others, I was fortunate. I left quickly, and managed to avoid church discipline” (Mars Hill Refuge). Another commented, “Friends of mine have told me that my peaceful, amiable transition out of Mars Hill without bad blood and with mutual respect and affection was pretty much a miracle” (wenatcheethehatchet.blogspot.com). However, as these instances imply, such experiences were the exceptions, not the rule. Just as organizations are actively involved in the anticipatory and encounter phases of socialization (Kramer, 2010), it was striking that the Mars Hill organization was a co-participant in the exit phase. This involvement was seen in contradictory moves of both pushing members away while seemingly making it difficult for other members to leave. The next paragraphs describe involuntary exit and involuntary staying in more detail.

Involuntary exit. Member narratives illustrated the involuntary nature of the exit process in that they were forced or pressured to leave Mars Hill Church. The most commonly mentioned occurrence of this in our data was the 2007 firing of church staff members Paul Petry and Bent Meyer. Prior to that event, Petry and Meyer had expressed concerns about new bylaws that were being considered. They were told by a senior member of leadership, “If you men do not agree with the new bylaws that are being proposed, then you need to resign” (Joyful Exiles). When they continued to voice concerns, they
were told, “If you choose to remain defiant to godly council, then you will be removed from membership and fellowship at Mars Hill” (Joyful Exiles). The leadership followed through with its threat.

Other members similarly described being forced to leave. One of them, Karen, worked for the church as an administrative assistant and described praying with two women about leadership. During their prayers and related conversations, Karen noted concerns that Driscoll needed people around him as checks and balances. According to Karen, one of the women “shared our conversation with her husband and he felt that it showed ‘disloyalty’ on Karen’s part, was gossip, and that it needed to be brought to Mark, which he did. Karen was fired” (We Love Mars Hill). Karen and her husband felt forced to resign their membership as well. Another member reported a pastor emailing her, saying

The biggest problem is you creating division through your hiding from leadership while calling those in the flock and venting your frustrations . . . because of this, we are removing you from the CG [Mars Hill’s small group network] and The City [Mars Hill’s social media site]. (Mars Hill Refuge)

Interestingly, involuntary exit seemed to be embedded in the fabric of the organization as illustrated by the following statement made publically from the pulpit by Pastor Mark Driscoll:

Too many guys waste too much time trying to move stiff-necked, obstinate people. I am all about blessed subtraction. There is a pile of dead bodies behind the Mars Hill bus, and by God’s grace, it’ll be a mountain by the time we’re done. You either get on the bus, or you get run over by the bus. (Joyful Exiles)

Similarly, immediately before firing Petry and Meyer, Driscoll preached a sermon on dealing with insubordination, saying that when confronted by people who disagree with him, “I break their noses . . . some men need to be confronted, some men need to be rebuked because of that stubborn, stiff-necked attitude” (Joyful Exiles).

**Involuntary staying.** In addition to descriptions of involuntary exit, members described the ways in which the organization was actively involved in pressuring them to remain, which we call involuntary staying. Narratives that fit this theme gave examples of leaders’ attempts to exert influence over individuals including those who no longer considered themselves part of Mars Hill. Members were dissuaded from leaving as the organization ultimately refused to let the relational membership end. To the bitter end, Mars Hill
continued their pursuit as evidenced by the following email received after an individual officially resigned his membership:

If this is your decision [to exit], you need to know you are leaving as a member under discipline not as a member in good standing . . . If this is your final decision, you will also need to know this will not be our final communication as this is not an instance where you can walk away from the mess you have helped create and leave many issues unaddressed. (Mars Hill Refuge)

In this example, Mars Hill leadership would not let the person sever ties completely with the church until he fixed the “mess” he created.

In another example, an article in a Seattle newspaper reported the story of two former members who tried to leave Mars Hill. Illustrative of the concept of involuntary staying, the article explained “Lance quit the church. But the church didn’t quit him. Not only was he barred from speaking with his now-former friends at the church, Lance says his pastor threatened to contact any future church that he might attend” (Kiley, 2012, para. 9-10). Mars Hill attempted to use ostracism from friends who were still members as pressure to remain in the church. Although not explicitly stated, the sentiment was “return to the church in order to maintain these friendships.” The article also reported that another former member, Andrew, had a similar experience, where he tried to leave the church but church leaders sent messages to members explaining that he was still under church discipline. In other words, in both these cases, there was a forced and continued relationship that lingered after the membership contract was dissolved.

Still other examples demonstrated less overt and more nuanced efforts at keeping members unwillingly in the organization. For instance, a former member received the following email:

We are very sad and surprised to see you go. I have no desire for you to stay at Mars Hill if [God is] calling you elsewhere. If he is calling you somewhere else, we want to bless you and send you out joyfully. If he’s not, then you are endangering your family and hurting the church for your own motives. (Mars Hill Refuge)

In this instance, church leadership enacted a subversive threat to encourage—or perhaps guilt—members into involuntarily staying.

**Complicating involuntary exit and staying.** As aforementioned, former members described the organization’s efforts to push them toward exit (involuntary exit) as well as to prevent them from exiting (involuntary staying).
Although these might seem like contradictory processes, that was not always the case. In fact, the frequent practices of church discipline and shunning exemplified both of these subthemes concurrently. More specifically, Mars Hill had a policy of “shunning” members who violated what its leadership considered standards for appropriate behavior. The most common examples of such unacceptable behavior included disagreeing with church leaders (because disagreeing with leaders was seen as disrespectful) and talking with other members about those leaders (any conversation about a leader without that leader present was labeled as gossip). While officially shunned members were still members, church leaders’ instructions on how to shun often made the ostracized individual feel as if he or she was no longer a member. In one case of shunning, leaders sent an email to members explaining,

we no longer have normal, casual fellowship with the believer . . . we are to treat them as if they were enemies of the gospel . . . Because sharing a meal with a person is symbolic of a hospitable and cordial fellowship, it is not to be allowed under the circumstances. You treat him like an outcast. (Joyful Exiles)

Such ostracism was intended to be a push toward involuntary exit. At the same time, shunned individuals were still considered “members” according to church terminology but were “under discipline” for “unrepentant sin.” Church leaders explained to other members, “Although Paul’s Petry’s request to remove his membership has been accepted by the elders, Paul remains unrepentant, and therefore we are accepting his resignation as a member under church discipline” (Joyful Exiles, emphasis added). In this instance, Paul was still considered a member by the church even after resigning (an example of involuntary staying).

Complicating the process even further, Mars Hill took to putting nonmembers under church discipline as well, thus attempting to keep them involuntarily tied or linked to the organization. For instance, an individual who formerly attended but never officially joined Mars Hill learned that “the leader considered us to be under church discipline, even though we had never become members” (Mars Hill Refuge). The following member’s story exemplifies this crux of this theme:

“You want to leave? No . . . you aren’t hearing God’s will for you . . . You need to stay . . . but since you’ve been willful and disobeyed your leadership, you are going to be put on discipline.” . . . and even though it should be obvious, after months and months of communicating exclusively with people inside Mars Hill, it becomes very hard to unwind. When they start acting as though they are going to decide whether or not we should or even are allowed to leave, you’ve
almost lost the critical thinking skills to tell them it’s not their decision to make . . . It’s hard to break the fog. (twocleareyes.blogspot.com)

Recall that Research Question 1 focused on the experiences of those leaving an MAO. In addition to organizational efforts to orchestrate the exit process, members also recounted their own sensemaking efforts as they left. These individual moves also provided an answer to this first research question.

**Individual sensemaking.** As former Mars Hill members spoke about the process of untangling from the church, they leaned on confrontive and conciliatory spiritual discourses to describe and rationalize their decision to leave Mars Hill. Spiritual rationalities, then, served to justify, bolster, or account for their choices, actions, decisions, and the like. In other words, (former) members talked about how their faith, belief systems, religious texts, and/or spirituality helped them make sense of their past experiences and present circumstances.

**Confrontive spiritual rationalities.** Some former members used Scripture or spiritual discourses to confront either Mars Hill in general or Mark Driscoll specifically and to express discomfort, frustration, anger, and/or sadness over the actions of the church or its leadership. We identified these instances as confrontive spiritual rationalities. Regarding confrontations, one former member noted,

> It took me a few months [of attending the church] to become uneasy. I began to have some serious concerns. There was a definite sense of elitism, pride in Mars Hill, and belief in the clear perfection of their doctrine. (Mars Hill Refuge)

That person went on to say, “At the community group meetings, there was a lot of debate about doctrine, review of Mark’s teaching, and not a whole lot of bible teaching.”

Another example occurred when church leadership reached out to a fired pastor explaining that he would no longer be under discipline (although still fired) if he would apologize for his sin (questioning senior leadership) and repent. In response, the fired pastor sent an email to all of the leadership in which he “confessed,” although it was hardly a mea culpa. The email used scripture to further rationalize his decision to leave:

> My greatest sins, however, are not what I have said and done but what I have failed to say and do. I failed to speak up to confront and resist the abusive
spiritual authority and false teaching about authority that has infected the hearts and imaginations of Pastor Mark, the Executive Elders, and other elders who have bought into it, even though several of you have privately expressed grave reservations—namely, the “domineering over” (1Peter 5:2) which has grown increasingly worse, which is clearly forbidden of elders who are called to serve like Christ, laying down their lives for the sheep. (Joyful Exiles)

Similarly, several websites included open letters addressed to Mark Driscoll that used spiritual bases as confrontations toward the pastor, Mark Driscoll. One began, “Mark, you are very familiar with the qualifications of an elder. Here are the charges Karen and I bring against you” (Joyful Exiles), while another stated,

Per Article 12 of the Bylaws of Mars Hill Church, I hereby file formal charges against Pastor Mark Driscoll, the primary preaching and teaching pastor for the Church that, if investigated and found to be true, could disqualify him from his position as an elder in the Church, based on the biblical requirements of an elder. (Joyful Exiles)

Some letters went beyond accusations to calls for repentance, even removal from the pastoral post:

You MUST repent—fully, totally and completely. You must resign your pastorate, take a sabbatical to be with the Lord, and allow Him to show you the error and, indeed, the deadly sin of your ways and to re-make you into the man He has truly purposed you to be. (We Love Mars Hill)

Together, these examples illustrate how former members wielded the Bible and theology as weapons to discredit and at times attack the abusive organization from whence they came.

*Conciliatory spiritual rationalities.* In contrast to the former members above, other individuals moved beyond attacks and criticisms to look at how God could be honored in this difficult situation even though their emotions were similar to those using confrontive spiritual rationalities. We labeled these conciliatory spiritual rationalities. One person explained (using the open letter to Driscoll format),

When I watched the ‘apology’ video, you looked so tired and broken down. The burden is getting too heavy. Give it to Jesus. You don’t need Mars Hill, your book sales, your social media followers, the multiple campuses, the conferences, the podcasts, the speaking engagements. Those don’t define you. It’s okay to take a rest in Jesus. (We Love Mars Hill)
Likewise, the wife of one of the fired pastors, though plainly hurt, wrote,

   Trying to do everything just right . . . we did not mass email all our friends and acquaintances in the church (hundreds of them) to tell them what had really happened to us . . . we purposed to only speak about these matters to our church friends if they came directly to us with questions, believing that reconciliation would come soon. (We Love Mars Hill)

Other conciliatory spiritual rationalities, though marked by sadness, were focused on prayer and healing regarding the situation at Mars Hill Church, as a former member shared:

   I have prayed for Mark and the church occasionally as stories would pop up, and as one friend after another left. I’ve been hoping that the proclamations of repentance and change are true. Hoping that the brilliant young preacher that is Mark Driscoll would mature into a Keller. Maybe even a Billy Graham one day—that he would add compassion and kindness to the power and strength. I’ve been hoping that one day even the split of 2007 would be repented of, healed and moved on from. In recent months that hope has dwindled to just a breath—just a whisper. I pray Mark steps down on Sunday . . . I’m sad for what it all became. I’m sadder for what it could have been—though part of me holds on to the hope that, by God’s grace, it could still one day be. For now, it seems to be just another failed experiment. Another Tower of Babel. (We Love Mars Hill)

These spiritual rationalities were often present as members’ unraveled their identities/identifications from Mars Hill. That process unfolded for many in ways that seemed complex and contradictory. The next section discusses data that focused on members’ and former members’ shifting disidentification with Mars Hill.

Research Question 2: Managing Identities/Identification After Exiting Mars Hill

The processes of managing identities and identification were complex as members left (either voluntarily or involuntarily). Former members paradoxically and often begrudgingly described their identities as both still entwined with Mars Hill as well as changed in light of their departure. In response to the second research question regarding how members managed identity/identifications during exit, two themes emerged. First, exiting members described how, despite their efforts to separate their identities from Mars Hill, they still remained tied to the organization. We called this
tethered identification. Second, former members described how leaving Mars Hill dissolved past relationships, and these individuals explained how they now sought new targets with which to identify. We labeled this theme shifting targets of identification.

Tethered identification. The tethered identification theme includes references to the entanglements that make separating one’s identity from the organization (deidentification) or identifying as an ex-member (disidentification) difficult or impossible. In this theme, former members often described a desire to disidentify from MH and concurrently confessed that some of their identifications lingered. This is unsurprising, in part, due to the deep identity ties that members constructed while they were participating parishioners in the church.

As previously mentioned, one member who was threatened with church discipline noted, “even though it should be obvious, after months and months of communicating exclusively with people inside Mars Hill, it becomes very hard to unwind” (twocleareyes.blogspot.com). Someone else explained,

It becomes difficult to see the truth. Think about if all your daily interactions (besides work) are focused around Mark Driscoll and his followers . . . You hang out with other Martians every night. You spend almost all of your free time with them. Month after month, year after year. And any time you try to get a viewpoint that isn’t part of Mars Hill accepted views, it’s impossible because you are surrounded by people who parrot the same thinking back to you . . . Year after year, floating in an ocean of Martians till you’ve been out to sea for so long, you no longer see land on the horizon. (twocleareyes.blogspot.com)

Members were expected to spend a lot of time with other members, which gave rise to deeply felt identifications, as one person described, “Over time it seemed that being involved with Mars Hill took over our lives. I found myself with the women of my community group up to 4 days per week” (Mars Hill Refuge). These individuals were so highly identified with the church and the church body that it was difficult to imagine their lives without it. Other former members reported how relationships with friends and family continued to keep their identification somewhat tethered to Mars Hill.

One individual who was forced to leave the church described a particularly interesting example of maintaining a connection to the organization despite efforts to separate from it. Karen had been fired for questioning leadership, and members had been told to shun her and her husband. Consequently, they resigned their membership. At that time, their son was on the staff of Mars Hill church. The elder who accused Karen of refusing to submit to authority was her son’s boss for a time. Karen explained,
Part of my own story is about the balance of being spurned and shunned by Mark and other elders and their wives, while continuing to uphold our son in his walk with God . . . I have watched the unfolding of the events at MH both as an insider and as an outsider who was “tethered” to the church through my son and his family. (We Love Mars Hill)

In the above example, Karen describes the tension she experienced as she struggled to untether her identity from Mars Hill. She described the experience of attending events that focused on her son’s ministry, saying “These were bittersweet services for us to attend, as they were special family milestones but also painful reminders of our very difficult experience at MH.”

Karen’s case is a clear example of tethered identification, in that, her family ties maintained her continued identification to MH while at the same time, her own experiences pushed her to want to completely separate from the organization. Even as Karen wanted to remove this identification target entirely, the church identification felt inescapable.

**Shifting targets.** While some current and former members explained how their identities were still tethered to the organization, others described a painful fracturing of their identity as they exited Mars Hill and were now trying to rebuild who they are by establishing new targets of identification.

Many of these member stories began by describing broken relationships. For instance, one former member shared,

> After attending MH for so many years, building relationships and serving, overnight we were shut out by most of our Mars Hill family. We were shunned and spoken to unkindly, guilty by association. People that were in our wedding never spoke to us again. People we broke bread with, played in bands with, brought meals to, prayed with and cried with were silent. And to this day some of them remain silent. (We Love Mars Hill)

This was not the only example of relational dissolution being associated with the fracturing of identity and loss of identification with their church and their people. Another former member explained, “The assault on our reputation and the spin from the elders had been extremely effective. Only about a third of those we pursued in love were willing to remain in friendship with us—another heart wrenching reality” (We Love Mars Hill).

For these individuals, part of managing their identities after leaving MH was building new relationships and finding new targets of identification, like new churches, to replace what was lost in their exit experience, as in the case of one former member who said,
I know that I’ve had a difficult time healing from the shunning that followed my questions and concerns. Friendships that were immeasurably precious to me ended without explanation. But God is so faithful and has brought me to a church where I have been able to establish deep friendships with women who are not afraid to speak honestly and love even through disagreements. (We Love Mars Hill)

After leaving MH, the above former member sought out other identification targets at a new church. Another former member described the experience of finding a new church with which to identify:

With the church we ended up in being populated by many ex-Mars Hill folks, my eyes were quickly opened to the reality of the mountain of bodies being left behind the Mars Hill bus. It was like a glass of ice water to the face. The last three years have felt like a detox. It was like turning on fluorescent lights after years of living by candle-light and seeing how dirty the walls were.

While some former members sought other churches as identification targets, others shifted away from identifying with Christian institutions entirely. One person stated,

I was aware as I walked down that hallway toward the EXIT sign that I very well may be walking away from Sunday morning church for the last time. . . My Mars Hill experience was the first domino in a series of events that began the deconstruction of my faith. (Mars Hill Refuge)

Another former member wrote, “I no longer consider myself a Christian” (Mars Hill Refuge), and a third person explained,

The decision to walk away from institutional church is a difficult one to make . . . But for me personally, it is no longer life giving. I went through a really hard time. I was very depressed and sought out counseling. I found that I was experiencing a form of PTSD from the move, the Mars Hill experience, the unofficial shunning, loss of friendships back home. (Mars Hill Refuge)

These individuals were so shaken by their experiences that they not only dissolved their identifications with Mars Hill but with the greater Christian church and their own faith as well. Thus, for many former MH members, their Christian faith was no longer a target of identification. Overall, former members described the ways in which their identities remained tethered to Mars Hill Church despite their efforts to de-identify. Others sought alternative identification targets to help manage and reshape their identities as they exited the church.
Discussion and Theoretical Implications

These results make two contributions to communication research. First, we extend the research on abusive organizations beyond employment organizations to broader organizational forms, focusing here on a church organization. Second, we illustrate the complicated nature of identity and identification in a value-driven and identity-embedded organization. In what follows, we discuss our results, unpacking the implications of these findings and linking them to relevant literatures.

Exit From MAOs

Similar to previous studies on workplace bullying (e.g., Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, & Alberts, 2006), former members’ stories indicate that bullying occurred at the individual level at Mars Hill. However, these analyses also allow us to step back to see how bullying (and targets’ responses to bullying) affects larger organizational processes (organizational exit, in this case). For instance, our data demonstrate how organizational exit was complexified by organizational leaders’ attempts to control members’ exit. In addition, while Tracy et al. described the emotional experiences of bullying targets and while Lutgen-Sandvik identified exit as an option for those targets, the present study connected the exit response with an extension of those emotional experiences by exploring the ways former members describe exit and the rationalities that they use to make sense of that strategy.

The present study also provides an enhanced understanding of exit from a nonemployment, MAO, moving beyond workplaces which are often the setting for research on organizational bullying. Our findings suggest that the experience of leaving an MAO is fraught with tension. For instance, tensions between wanting to stay but being forced to leave and wanting to leave but being pressured to stay reveal something of a push-pull force in the voluntary and involuntary nature of exit. This finding is in line with what Cruz (2013) calls the paradox of involvement, where individuals want to volunteer for non-profit organizations but are sometimes pushed away by poor organizational practices. Our data affirm this tension between membership and organizational practices as some members wanted to maintain their membership status with Mars Hill but were pushed out by the organization. Former members vividly described the pain of being cast out of the organization and the negativity associated with the institutionalized shunning that could accompany involuntary exit. On the other hand, others described wanting to leave but feeling entangled by organizational efforts to maintain control. This could include threats and
even church leaders placing exiting members “under discipline” as attempts to pressure these members to remain with Mars Hill. This second dimension of tension between membership and organizational practices emerged as a unique feature of this type of value-embedded organization and represents an added layer of complexity to Cruz’s paradox of involvement. While Hinderaker and O’Connor (2015) noted similar feelings in their study of narratives from members leaving a totalistic organization, Kramer (2011a) found volunteers in a community choir experienced a much more passive exit. It seems as if members of churches, or perhaps even certain churches in particular, experience exit differently from other organizations. In these data, part of that difference seems related to the abusive nature of Mars Hill toward exiting members.

Also unique to churches, our results demonstrate a new approach to sense-making that we term, *spiritual rationality*, which speaks to the ways in which individuals draw on their faith, belief systems, religious texts, and spirituality to make sense of their past experiences, present circumstances, and possible future actions. Past scholarship has extensively explored notions of rationality, which in its purest form is “the set of skills or aptitudes we use to see if we can get from here to there—to find the courses of action that will lead to the accomplishment of our goals” (Simon, 1993, p. 393). Discussions of instrumental rationality (i.e., focused on efficiency, productivity, logic, and objectivity; see du Gay, 2000) have expanded to include alternate logics such as intuition (Khatri & Ng, 2000) and emotionality (Dougherty & Drumheller, 2006; Mumby & Putnam, 1992) and have even shifted beyond traditional frames to include aesthetic sensibilities (Harter, Leeman, Norander, Young, & Rawlins, 2008). Koschmann (2013) found that religious members of organizations used religious values to make sense of uncertainty and change. In his data, participants saw confusing circumstances and situations as directed by God’s providence, and our data correspond with his idea of faith as a sensemaking tool. In the present study, participants drew upon religious beliefs to interpret what was happening in the organization. The addition of spiritual rationality as a new alternate logic resonates with the work being done on spirituality and spiritual discourses in the discipline related to member identity (McNamee, 2011) and, more broadly, the macro-discourses of corporate spiritualism that pervade modern organizations (Holmer Nadesan, 1999). In all, the addition of this new spiritual rationality can richly enhance the understanding of disengagement as well as augment the repertoire of logics related to other lived organizational experiences.

**Identity and Identification**

Our data also point to the contradictory and fluid nature of members’ identities and their targets of identification. Previous research has clearly demonstrated
the nuanced and multifaceted relationship between identification and socialization (e.g., Gibson & Papa, 2000; Gossett, 2002), even in exit (Davis & Myers, 2012). Scott et al. (1998) used structuration theory to conceptualize the relationship between identity and identification as identities are used to construct identifications which then reproduce those identities. An important element of this structuration process includes front regions of identity which tie to organizational beliefs and values and back regions of identity which emphasize breaks from organizationally sanctioned identity practices. In the case of our data, members expressed being tethered to Mars Hill while also expressing a desire to de-identify (remove MH as a target) or disidentify with the organization (identify as an ex-member). All too often, though, they were unable to fully extricate themselves from the organization. In structuration terms, tethered identification refers to former members who drew on the front region of their identity in describing their exit from Mars Hill. These descriptions described the ties and commonalities with other Mars Hill members that lingered. By contrast, the theme of shifting targets of identification included data from former members who emphasized a back region of identity. These former members emphasized distance from Mars Hill as they sought new identifications from other sources. Importantly, some former members described both tethered identification and shifting targets.

Together, we call these tension-filled experiences uncoupled identifications, or those identifications that exist in liminal space: both for and against a particular target, person, or organization. This finding resonates with what Elsbach (1999) referred to as “schizo-identification” which is “a cognitive state of simultaneous identification and disidentification with a single organization” (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001, p. 407). Considering issues of ethicality and stigmatization, we chose to embrace the new term, uncoupled identifications, to represent a similar phenomenon. In the case of former Mars Hill members, many individuals spoke about both identifying with Mars Hill while simultaneously identifying with “not Mars Hill”—seeking to disidentify from the abusive organization while at the same time unable to fully do so.

Recall that regionalization of identity and identification resulted in multiple identities that might be salient at any given time. Other scholars have also examined nested identities (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Kramer, 2011b). Such nesting partially accounts for the increased impact of member-abusive practices in totalistic organizations. Members’ identities are tied to the organization in multiple, and at times conflicting, ways because totalistic organizations are built on common values and common peer groups. Disengaging from the organization is more complicated because such disengagement can mean a severing of friendship or familial ties and of spiritual values in addition to a change in
organizational membership. The management of multiple identities appears in our data in Karen’s case as she was shunned by the organization and her peers while maintaining a tie to Mars Hill through her son’s employment. Our findings also resonate with Silva and Sias’s (2010) work, which found such small groups within churches may enhance or substitute for members’ identification with their church. In much the same way, former members in our data did strongly identify with small groups in addition to (or in some cases instead of) identifying with the larger church. Former members described pressure from small group leaders to conform to organizational expectations or face discipline. Still other former members described how one identity (Mars Hill ex-member) then shaped another identity (Christian) as they struggled with whether to leave Christianity altogether. Together, these examples demonstrate the complexity underlying nested and multiple identities in this organization.

**Practical Implications**

The findings from this study speak to practical applications for individuals in MAOs. Unfortunately, leaving such an organization is difficult, and these results do not offer a panacea. The former members in this study almost universally described exit as a painful and tenuous process that involved a tension between staying and leaving, which necessitated a revision of their identities and identifications. Individuals in transitions such as these would benefit from having strong support systems in place to help them renegotiate their identities/identifications, especially in times of duress (although it should be noted that some of these former members thought they had such support before losing it through shunning). Those contemplating exit from an MAO might begin the process of separating themselves from the organization as much as possible ahead of any formal exit so as to gradually untangle identities. These results also suggest that developing relational ties within and outside of value-embedded organizations may buffer the effects of MAOs. Of course, developing such connections is difficult in totalistic organizations that discourage outside relationships.

While not providing simple solutions, the present study does provide the beginnings of a vocabulary for those trapped in MAOs. From structuration theory, one way in which systems change is through the reflexivity of organizational members. That was true in the case of Mars Hill. When members and former members reflected on their ideal view of “church” and compared it with their present circumstances, they noticed a disconnect. Over time, and in part because of the number of people reflecting on that disconnect, organizational change occurred. In this particular member-abusive situation, the abusive organization ultimately imploded. The quiet din of voices eventually rose to a level
where they could no longer be ignored. The collapse of Mars Hill Church could offer hope to other individuals struggling in their own MAOs. This case also demonstrates the utility of online blogs and forums as spaces for expression when face-to-face communication fails achieve desired outcomes.

Finally, leaders in all organizations (not just MAOs) would do well to understand the complexities of identification. Leaders in voluntary organizations face particular challenges in negotiating involvement with and managing voluntary members (McNamee & Peterson, 2014). These data demonstrate how entanglements in an organization tethered the individual to the organization even when that tie was not desired by the individual. Such entanglements, sometimes advantageous, sometimes not, are an important part of identification, and leaders should heed members’ connections as part of the identification process. In the case of Mars Hill, leaders exploited members’ identifications to punish those who tried to exit or who refused to submit to leaders’ directives. However, one might also picture organizations where members exit on better terms but still leave behind strong ties to others in the organization. Our data reveal the difficulty in separating from such organizations. In positive applications, leaders could find ways for exiting members to maintain ties during transition times.

**Conclusion**

The present study analyzed former members’ stories of leaving Mars Hill Church. This analysis extends research on emotionally abusive organizations by focusing attention on a nonemployment setting. These results demonstrate a tension between staying and leaving as members who wanted to stay were forced to leave while members trying to leave were pressured by the organization to stay. In doing so, these results contribute to the discussion of decision-making rationalities by illustrating a spiritual rationality. Finally, our findings highlight processes of tethered identifications and shifting identification targets during the exit process as members attempted to leave an organization that is centered on values and identity.

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