

Human Rights Collaboration and the Communicative Practice of Religious Identity

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Abstract: Increasingly, human rights collaboration involves faith-based organizations whose members see social activism as an extension of their religious identities. This raises an immediate tension because collaboration requires negotiation of identities, challenging the convictions that motivate religious believers' involvement. Thus human rights collaboration offers an important context to explore tensions of identity and religious faith. This study reports on a human trafficking collaboration in Mexico, with a particular emphasis on the communicative tensions of integrating a distinct religious identity while collaborating with others. Grounded Practical Theory is used to identify practical challenges, communicative responses, and situated ideals that constitute this problem domain. *Keywords:* collaboration, religious identity, grounded practical theory.

Introduction

In a series of articles written throughout the 2000s, *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof (2002, 2004, 2010) referred to evangelical Christians as the “new internationalists” because of their work on a variety of human rights and humanitarian issues throughout the world. Recent legislative accomplishments, such as the International Religious Freedom Act (religious persecution) and Victims Protection Act (sex trafficking) are further examples of this form of religious engagement. In fact, it is difficult to comprehend international relations today without understanding the growing faith-based movement in human rights work (Hertzke, 2004). For many people, religious faith provides a strong sense of identity (Pecchenino, 2009), and involvement in human rights work is an extension of this identity—an attempt to integrate religious convictions with social activism (Howell & Dorr, 2007).

Additionally, human rights work often involves collaboration, as churches and faith-based organizations partner with non-governmental organizations (NGOs), government agencies, and other relevant stakeholders to address a number of complex social problems throughout the world. But this raises an immediate tension

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because collaboration requires the negotiation and transformation of identities (Beech & Huxham, 2003; Lewis, 2006), thus challenging the convictions that motivate religious believers in the first place. Many collaborative partners do not share the beliefs of religious activists, and many collaborators work for organizations or government agencies that restrict the influence and expression of religion in their work. Thus human rights collaboration offers a valuable context to explore the tensions of identity and religious faith.

This study reports on the work of one such collaboration, a loose network of partners tackling the issue of human trafficking in Mexico. The purpose of this research is to explore issues of identity and religious faith in human rights collaboration. In particular, I focus on the religious representatives of this collaboration and emphasize the communicative tensions of integrating a distinct religious identity while collaborating with others. Existing research on religion and human rights work is concerned primarily with single organizations and has not adequately considered collaboration. Previous research is also overwhelmingly descriptive and structural, focusing on categorizing and classifying the religiosity of various organizations (e.g., Berger, 2003) and treating religious faith as an organizational property (e.g., Thaut, 2009), but saying little about the practice of religious faith in situated interaction. Additionally, the literatures on collaboration and identity rarely discuss the involvement of religious faith, other than to indicate the religious designation of various collaboration members. Therefore, the lack of research at the intersection of religion, collaboration, and identity represents an important gap in the literature that warrants scholarly attention.

A communication perspective offers a helpful framework to explore this intersection, given the communicative nature of both collaboration (Keyton, Ford, & Smith, 2008; Hardy, Lawrence, & Grant, 2005; Lewis, 2006) and identity (Jung & Hecht, 2004; Kuhn & Nelson, 2002; Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). Additionally, I work from the premise that religious faith is not merely an organizational property, but rather a situated communication practice—a framework for constructing social reality that people enact in daily interactions (Buzzanell & Harter, 2006; Smith, et al., 2006). My goal is to develop a better understanding of the communicative challenges people face as they integrate religious faith into the work of human rights collaboration and to identify pragmatic solutions that can enable people to communicate and collaborate more productively.

I begin with a review of literature related to collaboration, identity, and religion, as well as communication research on spirituality in organizations in order to contextualize the current project. The gaps in this literature enabled me to articulate research questions that informed my empirical investigation. Next, I present the results of a qualitative study of a human rights collaboration among faith-based organizations, a secular NGO, government officials, and local community members who work on the issue of human trafficking in Mexico. I conclude with a discussion about the theoretical and practical implications of this research.

Collaboration and Identity

Increasingly, collaboration is conceptualized as inherently communicative (Keyton, et al., 2008) and discursive (Hardy, et al., 2005). That is, collaboration is primarily an emergent social process comprised of human interaction and meaning

negotiation—a conversational accomplishment that draws upon existing discourses. One of the most important communicative dimensions of collaboration is identity, especially the construction of self and others through collaborative interaction (see Lewis, 2006 for a review). Collaboration involves multiple parties and their interests—as well as the interests of the collaboration itself—and the ways these parties identify themselves and each other plays a significant part in the success of the collaboration (Beech & Huxham, 2003). This often involves managing tensions between individual and collective identities—how people maintain a sense of self and fidelity to their home organizations while also developing a shared sense of self or “we-ness” and communal goals that are necessary for effective collaboration (Hardy, et al., 2005; Zhang & Huxham, 2009).

In much of the collaboration literature, identity is a functional concept related to peoples’ positions, the roles they fulfill, and the interests they represent in a collaboration (e.g., Huxham & Vangen, 2005; Lewis, 2006; Zhang & Huxham, 2009). In other research, identity is often linked to categories of race, class, or gender (e.g., Alcoff, 2006; Alley-Young, 2008; Powell, 1995). Missing, however, is an examination of the influence of religion on identity. This absence is notable for at least two reasons: one, the prevalence of religious involvement in collaboration, especially in social service provision and human rights work (Clarke, 2006; Frumkin, 2002); and two, the significant influence of religion on group and personal identity (Gebelt & Leak, 2009; Paloutzian, & Park, 2005). Therefore, more research is needed that looks at religion and identity within the context of collaboration.

Religious Faith and Organizing

Previous research on religion and organizing is mainly structural and descriptive, identifying the religious affiliation of human rights or humanitarian organizations or developing various classifications and typologies for religious NGOs. For example, Berger’s (2003) extensive review maps the “uncharted terrain” of religious NGOs, developing an analytical framework to assess the religious and organizational nature of these organizations. Other studies in this line of research include Sider and Unruh’s (2004) typology of religious social service organizations; Monsma’s (2000, 2002) religious attribution scale; Ebaugh, Chafetz, and Pipes’ (2007) survey of organizational characteristics of faith-based social service collaborations; Smith and Sosin’s (2001) continuum to classify the religious coupling of service organizations; Googin and Orth’s (2002) faith integration scale; Thaut’s (2009) taxonomy of Christian faith-based humanitarian agencies; and Jeavons’ (1997) spectrum of religious dimensions for organizations. The common theme across all these studies is that religion is treated as a descriptive variable to classify people and organizations. Though helpful, this research has two important shortcomings that limit our understanding of religious faith and human rights collaboration.

First, previous research on the work of religious organizations is overwhelmingly focused on single organizations, despite the fact that much human rights and humanitarian work happens in collaborative relationships between various nonprofits, NGOs, government agencies, and community groups. More research is needed that examines the distinct context of collaboration because collaboration

magnifies issues of identity beyond the work of single organizations. Members have to interact and cooperate with other people who have different interests, values, and loyalties, and these interactions create tensions that need to be managed communicatively. Second, the focus on description and classification in previous research ignores the dynamic and situated aspects of religious practice. Religious faith is not necessarily a stable attribute that can be attached to an organization and/or its members. Like all concepts, religious faith has its existence in the ongoing negotiations and symbolic representations that are manifested in a variety of social contexts (Rodriguez, 2001). Even if an organization has a particular religious designation, how the members actually practice and experience their religious faith can vary substantially (e.g., Kirby, et al., 2006; McGuire, 2010). Therefore if we want to better understand the role of religious faith and identity in collaboration, we need to look beyond typologies and classifications. We need to explore the micro- and meso-level interactions that constitute the actual work of collaboration and look at how religious faith is practiced in specific situations in response to the tensions of collaborating. Communication scholars are well-positioned for this kind of work, and the growing body of communication research related to spirituality in organizations provides a helpful starting point.

Religious Faith and Communication

Communication researchers have developed a fair amount of recent scholarship related to religion and spirituality (see Rodriguez, 2001; Sass, 2000; also a 2004 special issue of *Health Communication*; 2006, 2007 special issues of *Communication Studies*; and a 2011 special issue of the *Journal of Applied Communication Research*). For the present study, recent communication scholarship on spirituality in organizations is most relevant. This literature seeks to disrupt the “secular hegemony” in the workplace by highlighting how people incorporate spiritual practice into multiple aspects of organizational life (Buzzanell & Harter, 2006, p. 1). Studies in this literature explore topics such as organizational leadership (Frye, Kisselburgh, & Butts, 2007; Goodier & Eisenberg, 2006; Pokora, 2001), the notion of ‘calling’ and the framing of career discourse (Scott, 2007; Smith, et al., 2006), incorporating spiritual and religious beliefs at work (Considine, 2007; Kirby, et al., 2006), religious congregations as sites of organizational communication (McNamee, 2011; Southwell, 2011) mission building at religious institutions (Bonewits-Feldner, 2006); problematizing public/private distinctions in organized religion (Leeman, 2006); and reframing organizational communication constructs in terms of their spiritual underpinnings (Krone, 2001).

Despite these diverse topics, *tension* is a prominent theme across this research, especially the ways in which organizational constraints limit or shape the practice or integration of spirituality in the workplace. For instance, Considine (2007) describes the tensions care providers faced as they confronted competing discourses about how to incorporate their spirituality into their care provision, and the tension of balancing the spiritual needs of their clients with their own spiritual needs. Other tensions arise in religious organizations where members struggle to live out the ideals of the institution in everyday practice. For example, Kirby, et al. (2006) explain how faculty members at a Jesuit university work to construct their identities in relation to the organization and its values. Tension is also framed as spiritual labor, which

entails the management and control of members' spirituality and religious practice. McGuire (2010) illustrates this concept in her study of employees at a religious boarding school, showing how the regulation of spiritual expectations created normative pressure resulting in dissonance and hypocrisy.

The key insight from this literature is that tensions of workplace spirituality are never solved or eliminated but instead managed communicatively through various discursive strategies, an idea that is consistent with other lines of organizational communication scholarship (e.g., Trethewey & Ashcraft, 2004). Accordingly, themes of negotiation, language use, social construction, and enactment are common throughout the literature on spirituality in organizations. The value of this communication scholarship is that it moves us beyond seeing religious faith as merely a structural property of an organization or a point on a continuum used to categorize organizational programs or initiatives; instead religious faith is seen as a framework for constructing social reality that we enact in daily interactions (Buzzanell & Harter, 2006; Smith, et al., 2006). This research helps us see religious faith as created and sustained through communication (Goodier & Eisenberg, 2006) and helps us understand how people re-create notions of self and spirituality as they reposition themselves to their work (Scott, 2007).

However, previous communication scholarship is primarily concerned with spirituality *in* organizations, focusing on the spiritual nature of people and their work, or investigating communication phenomena in religious organizations. This focus on established organizations misses important dynamics of alternative organizational forms, especially when authority structures and institutional patterns have yet to be established. Previous literature is also limited to single organizations and has yet to explore collaboration as a context for organizing. However, collaboration offers an important site for examining the communicative practice of religious faith because collaboration involves tensions of identity that go beyond the circumstances of single organizations.

In summary, my research is informed by four key ideas from previous literature: (1) the prevalence of religious faith in human rights collaboration, (2) the importance of identity in collaboration, (3) the impact of religion on identity, and (4) the communicative underpinnings of collaboration, identity, and religious practice. Yet previous research has not explored the intersection of these ideas, so the gaps in the literature offer important points of departure to guide future research. Accordingly, several research questions guided my analysis: What communication practices are associated with religious identity in human rights collaboration? How is religious faith practiced in the situated context of human rights collaboration? How does the situated context of collaboration shape the communicative practice of religious faith? What tensions influence the situated practice of religious faith in human rights collaboration? How can religious believers communicate and collaborate more effectively with people who have other beliefs or restrictions on religious expression? Answers to these questions will provide valuable contributions to the literature and enhance our understanding of religion and identity in human rights collaboration.

Method

Data reported here come from a case study of a human rights collaboration working on issues of human trafficking in Mexico, what Walcott (1995) would call a micro-ethnographic account. This collaboration is comprised of faith-based organizations, a secular NGO, Mexican government officials, and a grass roots community organization. Using Grounded Practical Theory, I analyze field notes and interview transcriptions to identify practical dilemmas and communicative responses that characterize this problem domain.

Research Site

The Mexico Human Trafficking Partnership¹ (MHTP) is a collaboration of Christian churches, nonprofit organizations, government agencies, and community members working to combat human trafficking in Mexico. The MHTP began in 2008 as a loose connection of pastors and lay leaders of Christian churches in a metropolitan area in the Western United States. At that time there was a general motivation to develop some sort of partnership around an international human rights issue in order to unify the area churches and leverage their resources for a worthy cause. Through their individual networks and previous associations this initial group of pastors and lay leaders established connections with people in Mexico City working on the issue of human trafficking. Shortly thereafter they invited a secular NGO called Protecting Children to be involved in the partnership. Protecting Children is an arts-advocacy organization that produces short documentary films and art exhibits (photographs, artifacts) to create awareness for the issue of human trafficking. Even though MHTP is currently involved in several projects and activities, this collaboration was still in a formative stage where they continued to negotiate their membership and scope of involvement; no formal operating agreement or memorandum of understanding had been created, and there were no formal membership requirements.

Currently, MHTP works to support a safe home for girls rescued from trafficking and prostitution, they raise money to expand the safe home's operations, they operate a micro-financing program to provide vocational training for the safe home girls, and they work with the Mexican Congress and law enforcement officials in support of federal legislation to combat human trafficking in Mexico. The MHTP also works to support the larger "Blue Heart" program, the United Nations-led campaign against human trafficking. In Mexico, two children per minute are trafficked each day, and Mexico is on virtually every top ten list of countries with human trafficking violations (UNICEF). Yet the country has little or no legislation and few organized efforts to address the problem.

Data Sources and Analysis

My analysis for the present study focused on a five-day trip to Mexico City with a delegation of American MHTP members to observe their collaborative work with partners in Mexico. This may seem like a relatively short amount of time

¹ All organization and individual names are pseudonyms.

compared to other ethnographic studies, but it involved intimate access and over eighty hours of field observations since I was able to spend the entire time with the MHTP delegation. The present study is similar to other ethnographic studies focused on relatively brief but intensive episodes of in-depth analysis (e.g., Dempsey, 2010; Simonson, 2010).

Members of MHTP have traveled to Mexico City several times since the formation of their partnership. The purpose of this trip was to support the ongoing work of the collaboration and build new relationships for future projects. This involved participating in a high-profile summit of government leaders on the issue of human trafficking, including members of Congress and the First Lady of Mexico; collecting artifacts and film footage for future advocacy campaigns; visiting girls at the safe home; meeting with safe home directors to negotiate aspects of the micro-finance program; meeting with the director of a government-run orphanage to discuss their future involvement in MHTP; and several other impromptu meetings and events that were not on the formal itinerary. The delegation consisted of a representative from a partner church who led the collaboration, two freelance photographers, and the executive director and a staff member of Protecting Children, the secular NGO that recently joined the collaboration. This trip was significant because it included a larger delegation of MHTP members than previous visits. I also chose to focus on this trip for the main part of my analysis because MHTP members themselves indicated that this trip was a key part of their partnership development.

Data came from two primary sources: ethnographic field observations of MHTP activities and informal interviews with MHTP members. I received permission to video and audio record some of the MHTP activities, such as conversations at conferences and debrief meetings after discussions with Congressional representatives. When I could not record, I took detailed field notes and kept an audio journal of my observations. Interviews were semi-structured and informal, often as impromptu discussions after meetings or during van rides to subsequent events. Although there was some ambiguity about what counts as an actual interview in this context (vs. an informal conversation), approximately two dozen interviews were conducted with MHTP members. Interview questions were mostly open-ended, asking participants to reflect candidly about their experiences and the challenges of human rights collaboration, religious identity, etc. All together my field observations and interviews from the Mexico City trip resulted in 56 pages of single-spaced text. Similar to other case study approaches, analysis was concurrent with my data collection (Patton, 1990).

Defining the Practice and Positioning the Analysis

My analysis centered on the enactment of religious faith and identity in the work of MHTP, with a particular focus on the religious members of MHTP and their attempts to integrate their religious faith in their collaborative work. Originally, I entered this research site with a broad interest in collaboration and communication. Following the conventions of inductive, practice-based research (Craig & Tracy, 1995), I sought to identify practical dilemmas that practitioners were facing and to see what specific issues would emerge to guide a more targeted investigation. As I attended MHTP meetings and talked with various members prior to the Mexico City

trip, it became clear that tensions of identity and religious faith were salient in this collaboration. In particular, MHTP members seemed aware of differing attitudes towards religion (especially Christianity) and tried to work together in ways that did not cause conflict. For example, one of the church representatives told me, “We just have to be careful not to get too churchy around people who aren’t religious,” when I asked him about how he works with others from outside his religion. When asked a similar question, a nonreligious MHTP member said, “As long as they don’t get all religious about everything, I’m fine working with anyone.” Comments like these during the initial stages of my research (before the Mexico City trip) helped define the practice under examination and provided a framework to position my analysis. Therefore, I developed my subsequent investigation around the idea of religious faith as a situated communication practice, grounded in the literatures on collaboration and identity. This framework informed my research questions and directed my empirical analysis.

Grounded Practical Theory

Because of the inductive nature of my investigation and my focus on situated, practical communication challenges associated with religious identity and human rights collaboration, I employed Grounded Practical Theory (Craig & Tracy, 1995) as a methodological approach to guide my analysis. The purpose of Grounded Practical Theory (GPT) is to develop a theoretical reconstruction of practical issues through the investigation of situated communication practices at three interrelated levels of analysis. First, the problem level is comprised of interconnected dilemmas or difficulties practitioners experience that bring about normative reflection and planned reaction. Next, the technical level involves specific communication tactics routinely available and employed within a particular context. Finally, the philosophical level involves the normative ideals and overarching principles that provide a rational for problem resolution. Thus a practice can be theoretically reconstructed by explaining these situated ideals as specific philosophical positions (Craig & Tracy, 1995).

In this study, managing religious identities was a central problematic for the MHTP members I followed, especially since this collaboration involved Christian churches, a secular NGO, government agencies with explicit restrictions on religious practice and identity, and individual members with various levels of religious commitment. At the problem level, I compared transcripts of interviews, field notes, and audio journals to discover how certain MHTP members understood the role of religious faith in this collaboration. It became clear that integrating religious faith was a tension in this collaboration that was managed through a variety of communicative practices. At the technical level, I identified various strategies and tactics that MHTP members utilized to negotiate the tension of religious faith in collaboration. Lastly, at the philosophical level, I focused on implicit member ideals, or what the problem and technical levels of analysis implied about what MHTP members held to be true about integrating religious faith in collaboration. From this I was able to infer ideal principles that MHTP members oriented to in their collaborative work. My goal was not necessarily to speculate about personal religious belief, but rather to focus on how religious faith actually showed up in this collaboration through communicative practice, and what I could reasonably conclude

about religious identity as I observed and interpreted how MHTP members worked out practical solutions to the tensions they experienced. In this regard I considered these strategies as social accomplishments and focused on the functions they served instead of member intent (see Ashcraft, 2001, 2006 & Dempsey, 2007 for similar approaches to GPT research).

As I investigated the problem and technical levels of analysis of the MHTP, I identified several themes related to religious faith and identity in collaboration. Themes were derived by coding transcript data and using the constant comparative method of qualitative data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990), where new data was compared to previous data in an ongoing process until specific themes emerge. These themes enabled me to infer situated ideals that seemed to underwrite the communicative actions of MHTP participants in their domain of practice. I distinguish between a “theme” and a “situated ideal” in my findings. By “theme,” I simply mean a general way of characterizing a practical dilemma at the problem level of analysis in combination with the corresponding communicative tactics at the technical level of analysis. By “situated ideal,” I denote the underlying assumptions that provide a rationale for problem resolution within a particular theme. I introduce this distinction between themes and situated ideals because it is useful to differentiate among the practical dilemmas and communicative tactics employed across different contexts. In this way themes can be understood as descriptive categorizations of the problem and technical levels of analysis, while situated ideals are corresponding normative principles at the philosophical level of analysis. Thus a theme is constituted by a practical dilemma and a set of corresponding communicative tactics, whereas a situated ideal is a philosophical justification of the communication practices within a particular theme.

Findings

I present my findings thematically, weaving together first-person narratives and analysis to achieve a detailed description of the problem domain. I explain two themes of religious faith and identity negotiation in collaboration derived from the problem and technical levels of analysis: (1) faith as *discourse*, and (2) faith as sensemaking. These themes emerged as I analyzed MHTP members’ communicative practices in a variety of situations where they expressed notions of religious faith in their collaborative work. Though presented as analytically separate, these two themes actually work together in situated practices. From these themes I then articulate the situated ideals of “strategic authenticity” and “providential attribution” as pragmatic, normative principles for the communicative practice of religious faith integration and identity negotiation in collaboration. These themes and situated ideals help answer the research questions listed above and constitute my theoretical reconstruction of the problem domain under investigation (summarized in Table 1).

Table 1 Theoretical reconstruction of religious faith, identity, and communication in human rights collaboration

Theme	Problem Level	Technical Level	Philosophical Level
Faith as <i>discourse</i>	How to communicate with different audiences, yet still remain true to religious beliefs and convictions	Redemption Restoration Abolition	Situated Ideal: Strategic Authenticity <i>Communicating in ways that are appropriate for a particular audience, but also true to personal beliefs and convictions</i>
Faith as sensemaking	How to make sense of the consistent uncertainty and change that is inherent to human rights collaboration	Calling Divine plan	Situated Ideal: Providential Attribution <i>Attributing the meaning of circumstances and situations to God's divine wisdom and plan when making sense of uncertainty and change</i>

Theme #1: Faith as *discourse*

From my analysis of the problem and technical levels discussed below, I identified “faith as *discourse*” as a theme to describe part of the practice of integrating religious faith in collaboration. This theme captures the practical dilemma of talking about religious faith in MHTP and the communicative tactics employed by collaboration members in response to this dilemma. By discourse, I refer to ways of talking and interacting in everyday situations, what Alvesson and Karreman (2000) refer to as “little *d* discourse” (p. 1133). Discourse in this sense entails detailed language use in specific conversational settings. This is distinct from “big *D* discourse,” which refers to culturally-embedded ways of constituting certain phenomena and broader determinations of social reality through historically situated practices (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000). The theme “faith as *discourse*” does not delve into the larger political dimensions of *Discourse*, but instead focuses on situated communication practices and contextualized ways of talking. The communicative challenge for religious MHTP members was finding ways to talk about their human trafficking work in ways that enabled them to negotiate their religious identity in relation to their collaborative work.

Practical dilemma. For many religious MHTP members, one of the main practical challenges of managing their religious identity involved finding ways to talk about their religious faith in different contexts. There were several instances in my field notes and interview data where MHTP members explained how they adapted their communication in response to situational constraints. For example, during the van ride to the congressional summit I spoke with Anders, the executive director of Protecting Children. Anders is a former Christian pastor and Protecting Children receives much of its support from Christian organizations and individuals, even though it is a secular NGO. Some of the artists that Protecting Children works with (film makers, musicians, photographers, etc.) are non-religious (or at least non-Christian), and much of the work they do at the grass roots level involves partnering with people who have different religious beliefs or working with government agencies with restrictions on religious expression. They also do a substantial amount of work that is not at all connected to MHTP or other religious organizations. I asked Anders how he communicated about his involvement with MHTP to the multiple stakeholders he works with. “It’s a struggle. I’ve got [Christian] donors who want to know why the word ‘Jesus’ doesn’t show up anywhere on our website or our materials,” he told me as we sat in the morning traffic of Mexico City. “But at the same time I’m working with people who work for governments that have strict laws about church-state separation, so our public image has to look totally neutral.” “So how do you handle that?” I asked. “I don’t know. How do I convince some donors that this is somehow a ‘Christian’ thing while not offending the non-Christian artists working for us, or getting people in trouble that have to be careful about their religious involvement?” We talked a little more about this issue, but Anders did not seem to have any easy answers, just more questions. His comments suggested an ongoing tension between portraying a distinct religious identity to certain donors and supporters, and projecting a broader—even secular—identity to other stakeholders.

In another episode, I talked to Alejandro, a congressional staffer for Luis Martinez, the Mexican MP (Minister of Parliament) in charge of Mexico’s human trafficking task force and a key member of MHTP. We were setting up the MHTP exhibit at the congressional summit when he approached our delegation, anxious to introduce himself when he heard of our arrival. He explained that MP Martinez would be arriving soon and wanted to schedule lunch with us after the summit. As the MHTP team was working on their exhibit, I had a chance to ask Alejandro about his role on Mexico’s human trafficking task force and his connection to MHTP. I was especially interested to hear how he explained his religious identity in relation to his involvement with the MHTP collaboration.

In broken English, Alejandro talked about the challenge of integrating his religious motivations for the issue of human trafficking with his position in the Mexican government, which has strict church-state separations laws (see Goodrich, 2010). “I’m very passionate about [the topic of human trafficking] and it’s a privilege to work with [MP Martinez] on the task force,” he told me. As delegates filed past us into the convention hall, I asked where his passion came from. “I was abducted as a child and luckily was rescued after a several weeks of intense pressure and involvement from my local government and police.” He also talked about his religious faith and how this influenced his involvement in human trafficking work. “A lot of my motivation is from being Christian and wanting to serve God by helping

others,” he explained. I asked how he incorporated these religious motivations into his daily work as a government employee. “I have to be careful about religion in my work. I want people to know I really care and I need to be persuasive, but I have to do that in ways that aren’t too religious.”

Alejandro recognized that the success of his work in Congress and with the MHTP depended on his ability to communicate in ways that were passionate and persuasive, but also did not violate restrictions on religious involvement for government officials. He admitted this was difficult because he saw his job in some ways as an extension of his religious convictions, but his involvement with MHTP required him to be cautious in the ways he expressed his beliefs in relation to his work. Our conversation ended when Alejandro received a call on his cell phone and said he had to leave to meet some other delegates. He apologized for the interruption but thanked me for the conversation. I was left to think about Alejandro and others like him who bring a religious identity into collaboration, but have to find ways to manage that identity that both sustains their religious convictions and enables them to cooperate with others who do not share their beliefs.

Non-religious members also felt they had to adjust their communication to adapt to those with religious beliefs, but without being insincere. Consider the following episode with Isabelle, a free-lance photographer who traveled with the MHTP delegation to Mexico City. One afternoon several of us traveled to a mid-town hotel to collect artifacts and take pictures for an MHTP display, and to film brief scenes for a future documentary. Isabelle and I stayed in the van with our driver while the others went inside to complete the work. The hotel provides the backdrop for the story of Juanita, a young girl rescued from human trafficking and now living at the safe home supported by MHTP. Several months ago she was kidnapped and forced into prostitution at this hotel. A hotel staff member eventually became suspicious and helped her escape, first hiding her in the laundry room and then in the trunk of his car as he drove her to the police. Now she lives at the safe home when she receives therapy and legal support. MHTP wanted to highlight Juanita’s story in order to raise awareness about the issue of human trafficking and illustrate the work of the safe home. As Isabelle told me more about Juanita’s story, our conversation turned to her involvement in MHTP. Isabelle does not share the religious beliefs of other MHTP members but still wants to be involved in the important work of the partnership as they address the issue of human trafficking. I asked her how this affects her relationships with other people in MHTP. She explained,

I’m not into the whole Christian thing like a lot of these guys. But they’re cool to work with, and I get to be involved in some great projects that I couldn’t do anywhere else. So I don’t want to offend them by saying something wrong about religion or something, but I also want them to know I really think this is important stuff and I really want to be involved.

Isabelle wanted other MHTP members to know she was “one of them,” but at the same time did not want to be disingenuous about her religious beliefs and imply she was something she was not. As we talked more about her involvement in MHTP, it seemed Isabelle also wrestled with the tensions of identity negotiation related to religious faith (or lack thereof) that others expressed to me during this trip.

Communicative response. At the problem level of analysis, MHTP members sought to find common ground, a *lingua franca* that allowed them to manage the tensions of identity negotiation and communicate meaningfully with

various stakeholders. What communicative strategies did MHTP members employ in response to this dilemma? At the technical level of analysis, I observed how MHTP members converged around a shared vocabulary when discussing their work. Three terms that stood out in the coding of my field notes and interview transcriptions were “redemption,” “restoration,” and “abolition.” These words showed up repeatedly as MHTP members discussed the work of their collaboration, from promotional materials for financial donors to personal stories of members explaining their involvement. For example, the MHTP website mentions the importance of “child restoration” in several places, at a dinner to conclude our Mexico City trip the MHTP leader toasted the “work of abolition,” and a speaker at an MHTP fundraising event encouraged people to join the “important work of redemption.”

After I returned from Mexico City and finished the preliminary coding of my data, I asked some of the MHTP members if they were aware of the prevalence of these terms, and if they were deliberate in their use. An MHTP member named Steve explained:

It wasn't like we set out to deliberately use those words, but I think we all subtly began to recognize that words like this were good for many different people and seemed to be a good way to talk about [human trafficking] in ways that weren't too religious or too secular. But I suppose now a lot of us are pretty intentional about using words like this.

Comments like this showed that MHTP members were aware of the practical challenges of religious faith and collaboration, and communicated in specific ways in response to these challenges. Additionally, non-religious MHTP members seemed comfortable with this vocabulary, even using the terms redemption, restoration, and abolition themselves. They too saw themselves as “modern-day abolitionists” and were motivated by “stories of redemption” and recognized the “redeeming value” of their work. Some of these MHTP members told me they did not see anything particularly religious about these terms; they were just “good words” to help “describe the work they do.” Yet these words simultaneously enabled religious MHTP members to connect their religious beliefs to their human rights activism. As such, the terms redemption, restoration, and abolition seemed to provide a *discourse* to help MHTP members sustain their work. “Redemption” and “restoration” have a rich tradition in the Christian theology of grace, forgiveness, and new life. Additionally, the term “abolition” suggests a connection to efforts to abolish the slave trade (particularly the work of William Wilberforce in Great Britain and Christian activists in the United States such as William Lloyd Garrison). Yet these words are not exclusive to Christianity. The concepts of redemption and restoration are evident in other religious and secular traditions, and the work of abolishing the slave trade was certainly not limited to Christians or even religious believers. Therefore these terms enabled multiple entry points and justifications for the MHTP regardless of religious identification. Redemption, restoration, and abolition provided meaning and significance for religious members, while concurrently serving as valuable terms for non-religious members without requiring a sectarian interpretation.

My interpretation was that terms like this enabled MHTP members to discuss their collaborative work in ways that integrated their religious convictions but also did not offend others or limit the involvement of people with alternative motivations. It allowed them to sustain a sense of identity that was true to their religious (or non-

religious) convictions, while also conveying an identity to others that was more inclusive. I saw this first hand when the American delegation planned an event after the Mexico City trip. The purpose was to share stories and demo media they created as a fundraiser to sustain their efforts in Mexico. The terms redemption, restoration, and abolition were used repeatedly by speakers on the stage to describe the content and purpose of their work and to appeal to the audience for money to support their projects. The executive director of Protecting Children later told me: “I guess it’s a way to signal to our Christian supporters that we’re part of their tribe, but it’s also okay for a broader audience because it’s not too religious.” In this way MHTP was able to develop a pragmatic solution for one aspect of the problem of religious identity in human rights collaboration.

I suggest this vocabulary of redemption, restoration, and abolition constitutes a *discourse* because it involves a particular way of talking, a “local achievement” (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000) in response to specific situational constraints. For these practitioners religious identity seemed rooted in expression, and the challenge was finding ways of talking about religious faith—*discourse*—in multiple situations that were appropriate for multiple audiences. The theme “faith as *discourse*” provides a descriptive characterization for the practical dilemma and communicative responses for this characteristic of the MHTP.

Situated Ideal: Strategic Authenticity

Having identified the theme “faith as *discourse*,” I then sought to articulate the normative assumptions that seemed to provide a rationale for problem management in this domain of practice. I offer the concept of *strategic authenticity* as a situated ideal to help theoretically reconstruct the communication practices of MHTP in this context. I label this as “strategic authenticity” because I identified an underlying ideal of planned, deliberate, calculated communication as MHTP members interacted with various stakeholders in different situations. Yet there was also a genuine desire to remain true to core principles of religious faith (or lack of religious faith) and not be perceived as *merely* strategic. Thus I interpreted “strategy” and “authenticity” as underlying motives that influenced much of the communication among MHTP members as they attempted to integrate their religious identities in their collaborative work. Consider these comments from a MHTP member named Randi that illustrate the situated ideal of strategic authenticity. I asked her how she felt about discussing her religious faith and involvement with MHTP with different people. “Just because I talk about things differently with different people doesn’t mean I’m any less sincere,” she responded. “It just means I’m aware of the situation and what I need to do to make it work. But it’s not like I’m going to say things I don’t believe or be phony.”

The situated ideal of *strategic authenticity* offers an underlying assumption that helps explain the communicative practices of MHTP members in this problem domain. Strategic authenticity also functioned as a normative principle to guide future interactions. Strategic authenticity was normative in the sense that MHTP members felt an obligation to be genuine about their religious identity, but also a responsibility to adjust how they conveyed this identity to others. As I talked to MHTP members about their work, many of them offered explanations that suggested a sense of both calculation and sincerity when they communicated about religious

faith or when they talked about things that had religious implications. Religious faith was intrinsic to the motivations and identities of many MHTP members, yet their work involved collaborating with others who did not necessarily share their religious convictions; the challenge was negotiating their religious identity by communicating in ways that accomplished both authenticity and strategy. Strategic authenticity did not simply resolve the problem, but it did provide a situated ideal to guide future communication to manage the tensions of religious identity and collaboration.

Theme #2: Faith as Sensemaking

In addition to the challenges of faith as *discourse*, I discovered another theme related to the practice of religious faith and identity in collaboration. “Faith as sensemaking” emerged from the problem and technical levels of analysis in my data. By sensemaking, I refer to the ongoing retrospective process to rationalize what people are doing and experiencing (Weick, 1995). This theme involved ways in which certain MHTP members came to terms with the circumstances and uncertainties of their work and how they interacted with each other to develop shared understandings about their experiences. This second theme is limited to the religious members of MHTP because I had the most access to them and could hear how they talked informally after various meetings and events. As such, this theme does not involve collaboration directly (i.e., give-and-take interactions), but rather the sensemaking that happens amongst a particular in-group apart from exchanges with other collaboration members.

Practical dilemma. Collaborative human rights work is often spontaneous, ad hoc, impromptu, and improvised. Representatives from multiple organizations and geographic locations are trying to serve needy and under-privileged populations with limited resources and a variety of unexpected constraints. As a result, there is an ongoing need to adapt to changing circumstances and figure out what is happening at any given moment. This certainly was the case with the MHTP. During my brief time in Mexico City with MHTP, we experienced continual changes to the schedule, plans falling through, and prior arrangements being revised or cancelled. We also experienced a number of serendipitous events where unexpected circumstances led to favorable outcomes. At the problem level of analysis, the issue for MHTP members was making sense of these times of uncertainty and talking about these situations in ways that were meaningful. For example, during a lunch meeting I had a side conversation with James, an MHTP member who had been to Mexico City before. We spoke informally about all the things we experienced so far that week. “There’s a lot going on here and things rarely go according to plan,” he explained. “If you’re not careful it can really wear you out. I think you need to have a good sense of what you’re doing and how everything fits together even when things get crazy.” His comments described the challenge of finding ways to make sense of changing circumstances in meaningful ways.

As I connected similar episodes from my data, I concluded that for certain MHTP members a key challenge of managing their religious identities and their human rights work was finding a coherent narrative to structure their changing circumstances. Their work was complicated, emotionally draining, and overwhelming at times. Not being able to make sense of changing circumstances was

taxing, but a number of communicative tactics enabled them to manage these tensions and negotiate their identities.

Communicative response. How did MHTP members communicate in response to the practical dilemma of making sense of uncertainty and changing circumstances? At the technical level of analysis, I observed how several MHTP members employed religious language to explain why certain events happened the way they did or as a frame to clarify their understanding of a particular situation. As I combed through the interview transcriptions and field notes, I noticed that much of the communication around sensemaking was coupled with religious language of calling and divine purpose. For example, when an important meeting was cancelled, the coordinator of our American delegation said, “Looks like God has other plans for us today.” When we unexpectedly got an invitation to join a congressional representative for a private dinner to talk about the work of MHTP, another member said, “Who knew we’d be called for such a time as this?” (referring to the Old Testament story of Esther who was called “for such a time as this” to confront the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar). When a conflict arose between the American delegation and a potential collaboration partner in Mexico, the American coordinator told the group, “God must be moving him in a different direction, and we need to respect that.” When one of the directors of the safe home for rescued girls told us why he left a lucrative legal practice to manage the legal affairs for the safe home, he said, “I just knew God had called me to do something different.” And when the First Lady of Mexico gave a presentation at the congressional summit that MHTP was involved in, several MHTP members commented on how “God is working” to elevate the issue of human trafficking among Mexican officials.

Religious faith provided a lens through which many MHTP members saw their work, and when they communicated about their circumstances to each other, they often framed their comments with religious language. For instance, as we waited in the airport prior to our departure back to the United States, I asked some members of the MHTP delegation about their experiences in Mexico City during the past week. “With how crazy this work can be, it’s nice to know that God is in control and we don’t have to worry about the details or get stressed out when the unexpected happens,” responded Martha, one of the church representatives. “It’s all part of the big plan,” she continued, and others nodded along.

Obviously, the truth or validity of these claims is beyond the scope of this analysis. What is important for my purposes, however, is that this is how many religious MHTP members communicated during times of uncertainty, changing circumstances, and opportune moments. I concluded that this was a key aspect of managing religious identities in this human rights collaboration. Accordingly, my analysis of the problem and technical levels led me to identify “faith as sensemaking” as a theme to describe this feature of the practice of religious identity in the work of human rights collaboration. This theme describes the practical dilemma of needing to make sense of the complications and uncertainties of human rights collaboration, and the religious language of calling and divine purpose that was employed by many MHTP members in response to this dilemma. Consider the series of events listed in Figure 1 that illustrate this theme, as recorded in my field notes [see next page].

Figure 1
Excerpt from Field Notes

Thursday morning I met the American delegation in the hotel lobby in preparation for the day's events. The plan was to visit the Justice Center near the capitol building to set up a human trafficking exhibit for law enforcement officials and congressional representatives, a key initiative in MHTP's efforts to influence the development of new human trafficking legislation in Mexico. However, as we waited in the hotel lobby we received a phone call saying that the event had been cancelled. The group was clearly frustrated and struggled to make sense of the situation. "Why would God drag us all the way down here just to have the event cancelled?" one member remarked. As they discussed their situation, one of the MHTP coordinators concluded by saying that they had to "trust that this is still part of a bigger plan" and "we'll just have to be patient and see what comes out of this." We returned to our hotel rooms and waited for further instructions.

An hour later we received a phone call about a unique situation and we re-assembled in the hotel lobby. A few days ago a new girl was taken to the safe home after being rescued from a brothel on the outskirts of Mexico City. However, the girl had a 1-year old daughter that was still in captivity because they had been separated since her birth. Apparently the "pimp" who ran this brothel got the girl pregnant and took her baby as leverage so the girl would continue working as a prostitute (we learned from law enforcement officials that this was a common practice). But last night the police raided a second brothel connected to this operation and rescued the infant daughter. Mexican officials were in the process of facilitating a reunion between the girl at the safe home and her recently-rescued daughter. They requested that a small film crew from MHTP to come downtown and document the reunion.

Everyone in the group was immediately excited about this new development because of the wonderful story of "restoration" that was unfolding; also because of the unique opportunity to get a first-hand look at the grass roots work being done to rescue girls from forced prostitution and bring justice to human traffickers. We loaded into our van and drove to a coffee shop to meet up with MP Martinez, the congressional representative who heads Mexico's human trafficking task force, and Ramón, one of the safe home directors, who were both involved in arranging this reunion. From there a two-person film crew from Protecting Children went with MP Martinez and Ramón to the Justice Center to document the reunion. The rest of us went back to our hotel until the film crew returned. In the van ride back to the hotel, one of the MHTP members remarked to another member, "See, I told you God had something cooking today." This was followed by back-and-forth among several MHTP members about "God's work" in Mexico and their "being called" to be part of this "plan."

Later that day we met up with Ramón (the safe home director) and the film crew to hear about their ordeal. It was an emotional conversation and these men held back tears as they recounted their experiences. Ramón even told us how he rode in the police van with the arrested "pimp" who ran this brothel operation. Ramón said he "wanted to kill this guy" for what he did to Elana (the girl from the safe home). But as he rode in the van on the way to the Justice Center he said he "felt compassion for this troubled man" and that he felt "called to pray for him and his family." When I asked Ramón about this later, he explained that he was "called to forgive others," and that he could never do this kind of work if he was not able to see "God's full plan" for "justice and redemption."

After comparing these incidents in my field notes and interview transcriptions, I concluded that Ramón and the others were making sense of this situation by communicating with each other through religious language that conveyed a sense of calling and divine purpose. After this event, there seemed to be a tremendous sense among the MHTP members that they were part of something special, a “unique plan” that they were “called” to be part of. This religious language appeared to help them make sense of the complicated and unexpected circumstances of their human rights collaboration and was a way of incorporating their religious identity in their work. At face value these may not seem like “collaborative” strategies because they are not practiced in formal meetings with all other members. However, these tactics are a valuable aspect of any collaborative endeavor because they relate to the negotiation of “particularized membership ties” and “private constructions” among in-group members that Hardy et al. (2005) say are critical for successful collaboration.

Situated Ideal: Providential Attribution

Just as with the previous theme of “faith as *discourse*,” I wanted to articulate the normative assumptions that seemed to provide a rationale for problem solving related to the theme of “faith as sensemaking.” I offer the concept of *providential attribution* as a situated ideal to help theoretically reconstruct the communicative practices of certain MHTP members in this context. I label this as “providential attribution” because I identified an underlying motive of attributing various circumstances to some aspect of divine providence. There may be several reasons why situations unfolded the way that they did, but for many of the MHTP members I observed, there was a reluctance to consider that their experiences were random or without greater meaning and purpose. Instead there seemed to be a clear norm of attributing most circumstances to divine wisdom, guidance, and purpose. The situated ideal of providential attribution is an underlying assumption that can help explain the communicative practices of MHTP members in this problem domain.

Providential attribution also functions as a normative ideal to guide future interactions. It may not be very surprising that religious people would make sense of their experiences using religious language. However, I observed that MHTP members were more likely to employ this religious language when communicating with each other, as opposed to speaking with me individually. This suggested more than just personal religious conviction, but rather a normative assumption that arose during specific times of situated communication practice. I concluded that this aspect of religious faith, (i.e., sensemaking) was more a property of group interaction and group identity than merely the personal beliefs of individual members. These moments of sense-making with the group were a part of the ongoing negotiation of religious identity. Providential attribution appeared to be an underlying assumption that guided the communicative resolutions of the practical dilemma of making sense of uncertainty and also provided a way to build solidarity with other members in the collaboration and affirm their religious identity. Again, providential attribution does not eliminate the practical dilemma of making sense of uncertainty, which is intrinsic to organizing and human experience. Rather, it offers a situated ideal to inform communication practices in response to these challenges.

Discussion

A growing trend in international human rights collaboration is the involvement of faith-based organizations whose members attempt to incorporate a distinct religious identity in their work. This creates a tension, however, because collaboration requires the negotiation and transformation of identities, thus challenging the convictions that motivate the involvement of religious believers. Accordingly, human rights collaboration offers a valuable context to explore the tensions of identity and religious faith. Previous research on religious work tends to focus on single organizations (not collaboration) and treats religion primarily as a structural property to classify organizations and programs (not a situated communication practice). Furthermore, the literature on collaboration and identity does little to examine religious faith, other than to indicate the religious designation of various collaboration members. A communication perspective provides a useful framework to address these gaps in the literature, given the communicative nature of both collaboration and identity. Therefore, the present study offers an important contribution to existing scholarship by exploring the role of religious identity as a communicative practice in human rights collaboration. My primary claim is that the negotiation of religious identity is a central problem for human rights collaboration, and this tension is managed through communicative practice. To this end, I offer a grounded theoretical model of communication and religious identity in human rights collaboration, which I discuss below.

A Grounded Theoretical Model of Communication and Religious Faith in Human Rights Collaboration

Starting with practical problems in the everyday world and using a methodological procedure of close analysis of situated interactions, the goal of grounded practical theory is to theoretically reconstruct a particular communication practice and develop a reasoned normative model to inform praxis and critique (Craig & Tracy, 1995). I began with the problem domain of religious integration and identity negotiation in human rights collaboration. I was interested in the practical challenges that certain MHTP members faced as they tried to integrate their religious faith in their collaborative work and to communicate appropriately in a variety of situations. My investigation of the problem and technical levels of analysis enabled me to identify two themes related to the practice of religious identity: “faith as *discourse*” and “faith as *sensemaking*.” These themes are descriptive characterizations of the practical problems and corresponding communicative tactics employed by practitioners. Although presented as analytically distinct, these themes work in tandem in situated practice. That is, we are not “discursive” creatures at some times and “sensemaking” creatures at others, but instead we are always both/and—we are enmeshed in a world of language and interpretation that can only be made sensible by looking backward yet can only be experienced living forward (à la Kierkegaard). This involves an ongoing dialectic between how people make sense of their collaboration experiences and the discourse used to articulate these experiences, with discourse then shaping subsequent sensemaking in a recursive process. Thus an important identity issue is how collaboration members manage this

dialectical tension. From these themes of *discourse* and sensemaking, I was then able to articulate the situated ideals of “strategic authenticity” and “providential attribution” as underlying assumptions that explain communicative practice and that function as normative principles to guide future interactions.

Therefore, my theoretical reconstruction of the problem domain of religious faith in human rights collaboration involves responding to the practical dilemmas of *discourse* and sensemaking with the situated ideals of strategic authenticity and providential attribution. Table 1 summarizes this theoretical reconstruction. Of course there is always more than one way to approach a problem and more than one situated ideal that could be used to warrant different approaches. As such, the theoretical reconstruction depicted in Table 1 is not intended as a simplistic reduction, but rather a summary of how and why specific practitioners responded to the communication challenges of their problem domain. Thus my theoretical reconstruction is consistent with other Grounded Practical Theory studies that provide a narrow—though not excessively reductive—approach to problem domains and communicative responses (e.g., Craig & Tracy, 1995; Dempsey, 2007).

Theoretical Implications

The present study contributes to existing research in at least three important ways. First, I examine the notion of religious faith in collaboration. As mentioned previously, the extensive literature on collaboration is relatively silent on the role of religious faith. Previous literature has much to say about competing values and rationalities in collaboration, and the contrasting institutional logics that influence the collaborative process (e.g., Austin, 2000; Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2006; Palmeri, 2004). Yet little is said about the influence of religious faith. This omission is surprising, given the widespread involvement of religious organizations in human rights and humanitarian collaborations. Therefore, this study offers an important contribution to the collaboration literature by providing an initial look at the role of religious faith in collaboration and developing a theoretical model to understand situated communicative practices.

Second, this study adds to previous research on identity in collaboration. As explained above, identity is a key topic of investigation in the collaboration literature, but most research focuses on the formation of a collective identity among collaborators or the construction of individual identities in collaboration. The present study is less focused on the construction of identity (though still working from a constructivist approach), but rather the enactment of identity in situated practice. The case of MHTP reported above complements previous research on identity formation by providing empirical examples of identity negotiation in context (particularly among the religious representatives). The present study also shows how communication practices help sustain the constructed identities of MHTP members as they manage the tensions of religious identity in collaboration with others. Even though some of this happened outside formal collaboration meetings, it is important to recognize the value of this in-group identity work. Collaboration members need space amongst themselves to work out various positions and interpretations and to chart their next steps—in ways that might sometimes be detrimental to collaboration if done in full view of everyone else. As Hardy et al. (2005) propose in their theoretical model, these sorts of in-group conversations are a necessary component of

effective collaboration. Recognizing the value of this kind of identity work also helps prevent a false dichotomy between “actual” collaboration and behind-the-scenes interactions, as if they were less important and do not “count” as collaboration. In fact, in-group negotiations and identity work are essential if collaborations are to transcend the personal identities of their members and become more than just an aggregation of individual interests. Therefore, the present study offers an important contribution by demonstrating how in-groups members (i.e., religious representatives of MHTP) negotiate their identities in relation to the broader collaborative effort.

Finally, this study goes beyond seeing religious faith as merely a property of an organization or a characteristic of an individual. Previous research on religious work focuses overwhelmingly on categorizing the religiosity of various organizations and their specific programs. This gives us informative typologies to classify various organizations and the degree of their religious involvement but tells us little about *how* religious faith influences their actual work or, conversely, how the work of these organizations affects the religious faith of their members. Instead of seeing religious faith as a stable property or characteristic, the present study portrays religious faith as a situated communication practice that is continually worked out in interactions with others. I am not questioning the beliefs and convictions of any individual or organization, but rather suggesting that the meaning and practice of those beliefs exist within continual efforts to develop pragmatic communicative responses to situated practical dilemmas. Therefore, this research is an important contribution to organizational scholarship because it demonstrates how religious faith is more than just an organizational property; it is also a key aspect of organizing.

Practical Applications

The nature of grounded practical theory is such that the research findings and corresponding theoretical reconstruction should be inherently practical. The situated ideals that emerged from this investigation offer normative guidelines for practitioners in human rights collaboration. First, the notion of strategic authenticity suggests that practitioners need to find ways of talking about their work that is true to their personal beliefs but also is appropriate for various audiences and stakeholders. Practitioners need to be able to express the passion and conviction that is necessary for human rights work, but in collaboration they must also think strategically about what they need to accomplish in various situations and how their language helps or hinders goal achievement. Members of MHTP coalesced around the language of redemption, restoration, and abolition to help them integrate their religious convictions but also to accomplish strategic ends. Originally, this was not an intentional effort by MHTP members but rather a realization that emerged from paying attention to their communicative environment. Practitioners in other collaborative endeavors could follow this example in order to develop their own productive *discourse* for collaboration.

Second, the concept of providential attribution suggests that practitioners could engage in collective sensemaking in order to maintain a coherent narrative about the meaning of their work. Human rights collaboration is complicated and frustrating due to the intensity of social problems and the uncertainties of working with multiple stakeholders. Practitioners need to find ways of talking with each other

that provide a sense of consistency about their unexpected situations and emotional experiences, and that motivate them for future action. This is especially valuable for various in-group members that represent a particular constituency within a broader collaboration, such as the religious representatives of MHTP. For them this involved attributing the meaning of their circumstances to a divine plan. Believing that their work was part of a divine purpose enabled them to persevere through difficulties and inspired their subsequent efforts. Additionally, it was not just having this belief at a personal level, but also sharing this perspective in interactions with others that sustained sensemaking norms. Other collaboration practitioners could develop similar ways of making sense of their experiences through interactions that reinforce a coherent narrative about the meaning of their work, which can help them manage the tension between their particular in-group identity and the collective identity of the broader collaboration.

Finally, the insights from this study can inform future communication research. I offer a methodological contribution to grounded practical theory by combining the problem and technical levels of analysis into a single thematic description. This makes it easier to differentiate between practical dilemmas and corresponding communicative strategies that may be present within a single problem domain. I also provide a visual representation of the theoretical reconstruction that clarifies the process of grounded practical theory to inform other researchers.

Limitations and Future Research

Despite the contributions of the research discussed above, this study does have limitations. First, I only investigate one human rights collaboration for a relatively brief period of time. Although generalizability is not the main goal of qualitative ethnographic research, it would be helpful to have more case studies as a measure of comparison. Future research should investigate situated communication challenges in other human rights collaborations, especially involving religious faith, as well as explore whether or not the theoretical reconstruction I developed is relevant across other contexts. Second, this research placed more emphasis on the religious organizations and individuals involved in the MHTP. This was mainly a practical constraint, given the fact that I was traveling with the American delegation comprised mainly of church representatives, as well as the language barrier that prevented me from having more informal conversations with Spanish-speaking MHTP members. Future research should do more to help us understand the perspectives of non-religious collaboration members or members who have more organizational restrictions on their religious expression.

Finally, the present study occurs within the context of collaboration but does not always examine collaborative interactions per se. Again, this was a practical constraint because I usually did not have access to certain meetings and negotiations, only members' accounts of these events. Future research should investigate specific instances of collaborative interaction and decision making to gain further insights about religious faith and identity negotiation in collaboration. However, as I explain above, the data offered here regarding sensemaking and in-group conversations are key aspects of the broader collaboration process and must be understood in order to practice collaboration more effectively. Collaboration is not limited to what happens when participants interact (though it certainly is at least that); it also involves all the

situations where participants make sense of those interactions on their own and with other members of various in-groups and how that sensemaking then shapes subsequent interactions. Although future research will always benefit from more analysis of actual collaborative interactions, we should not overlook the importance of sensemaking and in-group conversations that provide the context for these interactions.

Conclusion

Religious faith is an important factor in collaborative human rights work. As more organizations and people with religious convictions get involved in human rights work, it is increasingly important to understand the role of religious faith and identity in collaboration. Religious faith is not just an organizational property or an individual characteristic; it is a living, evolving part of the social reality that shapes collective action. Religious faith influences how people make and justify decisions, how they resolve conflict, how they make sense of their circumstances, and how they interact with multiple stakeholders. These are all essential communicative practices associated with collaboration, and communication scholars are well-positioned to advance our understanding of human rights collaboration and identity if we pay more attention to the role of religious faith. The present study is one step in this direction.

After this research concluded the Mexican congress passed a landmark anti-human trafficking bill that establishes preventative and punitive measures and provides aid to victims. The bill was signed by President Felipe Calderón. MP Martinez led the effort as head of the Special Committee to Combat Human Trafficking, and credits the Mexico Human Trafficking Partnership as a key influence in getting this legislation passed.

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