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# Difficult Decoupling: Employee Resistance to the Commercialization of Personal Settings<sup>1</sup>

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The market's tendency to organize personal spheres of life is not always unfettered, and while past studies have identified public discomfort as a bar to market expansion, this study considers a commercialization project that gained public acceptance yet nevertheless failed. The study's key theoretical insight is that the organizational decoupling required for successful commercialization may complicate companies' ability to gain employee acceptance. Rich ethnographic data from Motherhood, Inc., an organization offering support and services for new mothers, is leveraged to identify two conditions under which employee resistance may arise and undermine successful commercialization. This article contributes to sociological understandings by theorizing the important role of employees in commercialization and to organizational theory more generally by specifying conditions under which decoupling may be difficult to achieve.

It's all about creating the mythology of Motherhood, Inc., but we need to do it carefully because whatever you say can be turned around and used against you. (Vice president, Motherhood, Inc.)

It's hard to support moms by upselling. (Salesclerk, Motherhood, Inc.)

The increasing commercialization of personal life can often seem like an unstoppable force in American society. Today deeply private matters like

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a loved one's death involve life insurance payments and expensive funerals (see Zelizer 1978). Caregiving, historically provided by one's kin and community, is now routinely outsourced to paid specialists in child-care, eldercare, hospice work, and social work (Hochschild 2003). Entire professions (e.g., psychotherapy) and industries (e.g., the self-help industry) owe their growth to individuals' willingness to pay for advice and support they previously received free from family and friends (Hochschild 2003). Even the most culturally cherished and intimate matters like children and childbearing have been marketized through paid adoptions and surrogacy and egg- and sperm-donation companies (Zelizer 1985; Almeling 2007).

Yet, despite these and numerous other examples, is the commercialization of intimate life really such an unstoppable force? Do personal spheres always yield to the "relentless encroachment of the market" (Kuttner 1997, p. 57)? Said differently, when and how might attempts to commercialize personal realms of life fail?

This is not an idle question. To say that the market has moved into numerous personal spheres is not to say that it always does or that its colonization of any given setting is all-encompassing. It is now widely accepted to compensate women for carrying surrogate pregnancies, but this does not mean that children and childbearing have succumbed entirely to the market, and certain commercial activities in this sphere—like paying women to give up their own babies—remain culturally and legally prohibited (Zelizer 1985). Likewise, in the realm of bodily goods, certain human body parts (e.g., plasma, eggs, and sperm) are traded for profit, whereas others (e.g., blood and organs) remain largely outside the market, exchanged through voluntary donation systems instead (Healy 2006; Almeling 2007).

Furthermore, talk of the market's relentless march overlooks a crucial fact: the market cannot march anywhere without entrepreneurial actors, yet entrepreneurial actors often fail in their endeavors. Stinchcombe (1965) has noted that the rise of special-purpose commercial organizations that take over functions previously performed by families and communities is

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the writing process. This article also benefited from the thoughtful feedback of the *AJS* reviewers and Michel Anteby, Mary Brinton, Rodrigo Canales, Roberto Fernandez, Sarah Halpern-Meekin, Fiona Murray, Orlando Patterson, Ray Reagans, Mike Sauder, Sara Sternberg-Greene, Jocelyn Viterna, and participants at the MIT Economic Sociology Working Group and TIES Workshop and the Harvard Project on Justice, Welfare, and Economics. Motherhood, Inc., which first appears in the first epigraph above, is a pseudonym, as are the names of individual protagonists used later. Certain identifying details have been left out or modified to disguise the organization. Direct correspondence to Catherine Turco, Department of Economic Sociology, Sloan School of Management, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 12 Clinton Street, Cambridge, Massachusetts 02139. E-mail: cturco@mit.edu

the canonical example of novel organizational form emergence, but he also notes that novel forms face major obstacles to survival. Accordingly, we should not view the market as some amorphous force that inevitably colonizes all corners of social life uniformly and completely, but rather—and as recent work powerfully demonstrates—as a collection of entrepreneurial organizations that take on various forms, deploy a variety of strategies, and, in the process, meet with more or less success (Healy 2006; Almeling 2007; Chan 2009a; Anteby 2010).

Market expansion into personal life, then, is far from inevitable and uniform. Economic considerations and intimate relations combine in myriad ways (Zelizer 2005, 2011), and to understand how and when various combinations will emerge, the analytical challenge is to explain variation in the success and failure of specific organizational projects (Healy 2006; Anteby 2010). The current study contributes to this effort and draws general lessons about how and when commercial projects might fail by exploiting the analytical power of a “deviant case” (Ragin and Becker 1992)—specifically, a commercialization attempt that overcame the main obstacle to success identified by past research but failed nevertheless.

Because Western culture has long cast the market and intimate social relations as “hostile worlds,” with the former “contaminating” the latter (Zelizer 2005, pp. 20–21), the market’s foray into intimate settings is often met with fierce opposition, and existing literature has identified public opposition as the key obstacle to successful commercialization. However, this literature has also specified the mechanism by which such opposition can be overcome: resistance can be neutralized and a project legitimized when commercializers frame their work in a traditional, nonmarket discourse, effectively cloaking their commercial objectives in more euphemistic terms that the public will accept (see, e.g., Zelizer 1978; Hochschild 2003; Quinn 2008; Chan 2009a).

The literature’s focus on the external legitimacy of commercialization projects makes sense because market actors’ toughest challenge is often winning public favor. However, because of its clear importance, and because past work has primarily examined successful cases where public acceptance was necessarily achieved, commercial success has tended to be defined only in terms of this acceptance. The present article moves beyond this definition by considering a commercialization attempt that gained public acceptance yet failed despite it. From this, we learn that public acceptance is necessary but not sufficient for successful commercialization; commercializers must also convert their public demand into profitable demand. Moreover, to effect that conversion, organizations must gain acceptance from not only a potentially hostile public but also their own employees. This article’s key insight is that gaining such employee acceptance can be quite challenging because the very thing past work

identifies as driving successful commercialization—a euphemistic discourse—can actually undermine a project’s commercial viability when employees refuse to perform commercial practices “decoupled” (Meyer and Rowan 1977) from it.

Motherhood, Inc. (MI), is a for-profit company that at the time of this study was attempting to commercialize the support and guidance new mothers had traditionally received from their families and communities. Consistent with past work, MI had neutralized public discomfort with its commercial form and attracted a sizable customer base by framing its project in a euphemistic discourse—it marketed itself as a nurturing haven for overwhelmed new mothers. Despite its success in attracting public demand, however, the commercial project MI was attempting at the time ultimately failed. Key to the failure was the fact that MI’s own employees turned the company’s euphemistic discourse against it, arguing that certain profit-driven practices undermined MI’s role as a safe, supportive haven.

The specific commercial practices that MI employees resisted were those that were decoupled from the company’s euphemistic discourse. Yet an unstated assumption of prior commercialization research is that decoupling is necessary for, and largely unproblematic in, these projects. In this study, I leverage the analytical power of MI’s failed commercialization attempt and tease out the implications of several suggestive insights in the existing literature (e.g., Healy 2006; Chan 2009*b*; Anteby 2010) to demonstrate that, in fact, decoupling is a general challenge for organizations attempting to commercialize personal settings precisely because employees will often have an interest in resisting it.

A full understanding of how and when commercialization succeeds or fails thus requires an understanding of when decoupling will or will not be possible, and to achieve that understanding, we must theorize the role of employee agency in commercialization projects. I make progress toward this goal by drawing on useful variation in the MI data to isolate two general conditions under which employees may resist decoupling: (1) when commercializers recruit employees whose professional projects align with the euphemistic discourse, these employees may refuse to perform practices decoupled from that framing because doing so directly undermines their professional interests and identities; (2) when the organization’s external, euphemistic discourse becomes a tool for coordination among employees, it can expand into a key feature of the organization’s internal, employee culture; as such, it may mark decoupled practices as illegitimate and serve as a vocabulary of motive (Mills 1940) for justifying resistance.

The remainder of this article is organized as follows: I begin by reviewing the literature on commercialization of personal settings, noting certain gaps in it that the MI case exposes and can help address. I then

describe my research methods for the study, following which I detail the MI case, describing the puzzle it poses for existing theory and identifying two extensions it can make to our understanding of commercialization processes. Finally, I engage in a more inductive, hypothesis-generating exercise that draws on internal variation and counterfactuals in the MI data to propose two conditions under which employee resistance to decoupling may emerge. I conclude by discussing the implications of the article's findings for the commercialization of intimate life and organizational theory in general.

## THE COMMERCIALIZATION OF PERSONAL SETTINGS

### Gaining Public Acceptance through Euphemistic Discourse

Market advancement into intimate spheres often provokes profound cultural discomfort. Consequently, scholars have tended to focus on explaining how market actors overcome such resistance and legitimize their commercial projects. In particular, past work has made considerable progress toward understanding how and when commercialization of personal settings unfolds by identifying a key mechanism through which public acceptance for new commercialization attempts can be won: to neutralize cultural discomfort, rent-seeking actors often obscure their commercial objectives, framing their activities in a euphemistic discourse that draws on the values and imagery of the personal spheres they seek to enter.

Scholars have found specific evidence for this in the marketing strategies of companies that have successfully commercialized personal settings. For instance, Zelizer (1978) observes that early life insurance companies overcame public opposition to their product by renaming "death insurance" as "life insurance" and pitching it as part of the sacred rituals of death, where the product itself took on symbolic value (i.e., insurance agents disseminated a narrative in which life insurance signified a good death, leaving the bereaved financially secure and compensated for the emotional devastation of their loss). Quinn (2008) and Chan (2009a) find similar dynamics in the contemporary American and Chinese insurance markets, respectively, and Chan's study demonstrates that the public will reject euphemistic discourses that do not resonate with preexisting cultural values.

Outside of insurance, Hochschild observes that advertisers of certain forms of commoditized care work (e.g., instant meals) often "borrow or steal . . . the sense of enchantment reserved for the home" (2003, p. 14). She also notes that capitalists frequently frame care work in moral and symbolic terms at exactly the same time they organize its outsourcing to paid specialists (Hochschild 2003). Finally, a number of scholars observe

that actors attempting to commoditize human body parts employ the rhetoric of “gift exchange” and “donation” to neutralize public discomfort with the financial incentives driving the commodification (Sharp 2000; Scheper-Hughes and Wacquant 2002; Healy 2006; Almeling 2007).

These various findings are broadly consistent with work in other sub-fields of sociology, where scholars have documented the need for actors to linguistically frame novel activities (e.g., social movements [Snow and Benford 1988], organizational forms [Rao 1998], and morally suspect business practices [Hirsch 1986]) in the existing cultural context to gain legitimacy. The specific takeaway here, though, is that when the goal is to commercialize a personal setting, the linguistic framing scholars identify as effective for gaining public acceptance is one that cloaks the commercial activities in euphemistic garb reminiscent of the traditional sphere being commercialized. As Zelizer writes, to gain public acceptance when entering an intimate sphere, the market must often “disguise its materialist mission in spiritual guise” (1978, p. 605).

The present study will offer support for, and build on, this body of work by analyzing an organization that gained public acceptance through use of euphemistic discourse. However, in this case, the organization’s commercialization attempt failed despite having gained such public acceptance, and this poses a puzzle for the received account. To make sense of this puzzle, we must extend sociological understanding of how and when commercialization of personal settings unfolds.

### Converting Public Acceptance into Profitable Enterprise: The Need for Employee Acceptance

This study will demonstrate that although gaining public acceptance is necessary for successful commercialization, it is not sufficient. Indeed, it should be clear that for any commercialization attempt to succeed, commercializers must convert their project’s public legitimacy into a sustainable, profitable business model. Yet while this insight may seem obvious on its surface, most work to date has overlooked it because of a tendency to select on successful cases where that conversion has necessarily been accomplished (see Zelizer 1978, 1981; Hochschild 2003).

Even recent work that examines variation in the overall shape or success of certain commercialization projects has failed to note this fact, continuing as they have to define success in terms of public acceptance only (e.g., Healy 2006; Almeling 2007; Anteby 2010). These studies helpfully suggest that certain organizational forms (i.e., combinations of discourses, practices, and structures) will be more or less successful than others in attracting public demand, but they say little about what is required to convert that public demand into profitable demand, and so



we are left with an incomplete understanding of how and when commercialization will ultimately succeed or fail.

The case of Motherhood, Inc., advances our understanding by revealing one crucial factor necessary for converting public demand into a sustainable, profitable enterprise: namely, employees who are willing and motivated to execute the commercial project. In other words, commercializers must gain acceptance from not only a potentially hostile public but also their very own employees. This article's key theoretical insight is that cultivating such employee acceptance is likely to be a challenge for many commercialization projects for reasons fundamental to the commercialization process itself. To explain why this is, I draw on the concept of organizational decoupling and highlight its previously unrecognized relevance to the commercialization of personal settings.

### The Challenge of Decoupling

It is a well-established phenomenon that how an organization presents itself publicly to gain external legitimacy and acceptance often runs at odds with what it must do practically to be efficient and profitable, and scholars long ago identified a solution to this challenge in decoupling (Meyer and Rowan 1977).<sup>2</sup> With decoupling, organizational elites make visible, public commitments to satisfy the demands of their external environment, but these commitments are often just "myth and ceremony"; the real day-to-day, behind-the-scenes work of employees is unaffected by them and is organized for technical efficiency and profit instead.

Although it has been unstated in past commercialization studies, once we recognize the need for commercializers to not only gain public acceptance but also convert such acceptance into a profitable enterprise, it becomes clear that the work needed to successfully commercialize personal settings directly implies decoupling: to the extent that commercializers must frame their activities in traditional, nonmarket terms to gain public acceptance but also build viable, profitable businesses, they will need to decouple at least some commercially driven practices from that framing. Said differently, an organization may use a euphemistic discourse and present itself in nonmarket terms externally, but at some point some people inside it will have to behave like it is a business for it to become a sustainable commercial entity.

To fully understand how and when commercialization projects succeed

<sup>2</sup> Some use the term "decoupling" to refer only to cases involving "myths of rationality" (Meyer and Rowan 1977, p. 346). I employ the term here in its more general sense—to refer to cases when what an organization says and does externally to gain legitimacy differs from what it must do for efficiency and profit.

or fail, a key question becomes under what conditions organizational decoupling will or will not be possible. The existing literature overlooks the need for decoupling in commercialization attempts, however, and so does not address this question. However, a careful review of that literature does reveal a few suggestive anecdotes that lead one to suspect that employees might present some unique obstacles to decoupling in commercialization attempts.

For example, Chan's (2009*b*) study could be taken to imply that employees might resist performing decoupled practices so as not to appear disingenuous. In that study, Chinese insurance agents stopped selling to close ties once their compensation structures became publicly known because agents felt their euphemistic message of "selling love and security" would now seem insincere (2009*b*, p. 727). Also, even though Healy (2006) acknowledges that the actual views of procurement organization employees are an open question beyond the scope of his inquiry, he notes that such employees may have become so invested in the cultural account of organ donation as "the gift of life" that they will block financial incentives from being introduced into the system (p. 118). And, in his study of the cadaver procurement market, Anteby (2010) notes that professional employees take a great interest in how their work is morally justified to the public and that this influences the practices included in their professional jurisdictions. Taken together, these observations suggest that employees might resist decoupling if they are more committed to a legitimating euphemistic discourse than the commercial project it was designed to promote.

By clearly specifying conditions under which employees resist decoupling and impede commercialization, this study clarifies and formalizes the intuition behind anecdotes like those above. In particular, useful variation and counterfactuals in the MI data will allow us to identify two specific conditions under which employees are likely to resist performing practices decoupled from an external discourse: (1) when employees' professional projects align with the external discourse, they may feel that performing practices decoupled from it will undermine their professional interests and identity; and (2) when a company's external discourse becomes a key feature of its internal employee culture, it can mark decoupled practices as illegitimate and become a tool employees use to justify resistance when it serves their ends. How these conditions generalize and their broader implications for theories of commercialization and decoupling will be addressed in the discussion section of this article.

## METHODS

This article draws on a 12-month ethnography of Motherhood, Inc. Fieldwork included participant observation of the company's day-to-day operations and over 100 separate meetings and company events. Among other activities, I attended weekly meetings of the company's senior management team, sat in on the CEO's presentation to a potential investor (then subsequently debriefed the investor privately), observed job candidate interviews, shadowed new employees during training and attended new-hire orientation, stocked shelves on the retail floor and worked behind the retail counter, attended evening and weekend staff meetings for the organization's various departments, listened through a headset to customer calls into MI's call center, rode in the company's delivery van to make product deliveries to the stores, served food and drinks to customers at company events, and attended the annual company-wide party.

Participant observation also included stepping into the customer's shoes by attending 22 of MI's prenatal and postpartum courses, including two-day classes on childbirth, six-week support groups for new mothers, evening breastfeeding classes, and weekday child activity classes. This enabled me to meet and study MI customers, and my participant observation also extended to informal customer gatherings outside of MI. For example, a group of mothers whose class I observed at MI invited me to their weekly lunches at a local restaurant. There I served as an extra set of hands holding their babies or pushing strollers, listening as they socialized and noting when and how they talked about MI.

I supplemented participant observation with formal interviews, including 55 interviews with organizational members and 16 with external constituents (e.g., investors in the process of evaluating MI, consultants to the company, local hospital administrators and doctors who refer clients to MI, and directors of local nonprofits that partner with MI as well as those that compete with MI). Also, I had hundreds of informal conversations with customers and employees in the course of my observational work. I used both the formal interviews and informal conversations to probe subjects' interpretations of various elements of organizational life that had surfaced in my observational data (Spradley 1979a; Barley 1983). Finally, I collected over 500 pages of internal company documents, and, because MI added me to all of their internal e-mail distribution lists, I received over 5,000 internal e-mail communications.

The primary data for the study are more than 1,400 pages of field notes and interview transcripts, as well as those internal documents and e-mails. To ensure that I did not overlook any major organizational dynamics, I began by analyzing the data inductively, following semiotic techniques for identifying shared and contested meanings within the organization

(Spradley 1979*b*; Barley 1983; Tavory and Swidler 2009). I next coded for where MI's commercialization attempt was unfolding smoothly and where it was not, analyzing in particular how its discursive commitments and organizational practices were involved in this. As a third step, I coded for counterfactuals, which became key to the analysis that will be presented. The appendix provides greater detail on my methods for gaining access, data collection, and analysis.

#### THE EMPIRICAL PUZZLE OF MOTHERHOOD, INC.

This section describes Motherhood, Inc., and its commercial project. First, I establish that at the time of this study MI was an organization attempting to commercialize a personal setting and one employing the previously theorized mechanism (euphemistic discourse) for gaining public acceptance. Next, I describe how this mechanism helped the organization overcome initial public resistance and gain external legitimacy. Finally, I show that despite public acceptance, MI's specific commercialization attempt failed and that to explain this, we must extend current understandings of the commercialization of personal settings.

#### A Case of Commercializing the Personal

Motherhood, Inc., works because families have splintered. Women don't live near their mothers and sisters. People don't even live in neighborhoods really. . . . [We] fill that gap. (Founder, Motherhood, Inc.)

People's traditional support networks have eroded. . . . They live further away from their families. . . . They haven't been around births and babies like women in a different time or culture might be. . . . So women aren't prepared for the transition [to motherhood]. . . . We offer them a multi-dimensional web of support during this transition. (CEO, Motherhood, Inc.)

Motherhood, Inc., is a for-profit company with locations in several different upper-middle-class neighborhoods of a large, western U.S. city. At the time of this study, its customers were primarily first-time mothers, and typically middle-class or upper-middle class and white or Asian. As the above quotes indicate, the company's founders and executives explicitly defined the company's project as commercializing a personal sphere of life, namely, the support and instruction that new mothers traditionally received from their families and communities. They noted that this space was ripe for commercialization because these more intimate, informal forms of support had eroded in modern times while motherhood had only become more stressful, and thus women might be willing to pay for formal support to fill that void.

In a meeting with a prospective investor, the CEO explained the business opportunity: "We've concluded that our sweet spots are the transitions, these processes that cause stress. And the reason for this is that . . . stress is lucrative. Stress removes barriers to spending. People are willing to spend to minimize stress." The company's strategy was thus to attract customers by offering classes and support services that promised guidance and support during this stressful time and then sell related products through those channels as well. The CEO explained: "The classes are our hook," but product sales are also "crucial." To execute this strategy, the company tried to assume the role of a new mother's "trusted advisor," much like a woman's sisters, mother, or friends did in the past.

Each MI location consisted of a high-end retail boutique that sold "mom & baby" products, such as maternity clothes, breast pumps and nursing supplies, strollers, slings and carriers, diaper bags, and baby blankets and toys. Set directly off of the retail floor in each location (and, thus, requiring customers to walk through the store to reach them) were three to four classrooms and one or two smaller consultation rooms in which MI instructors delivered the company's educational and support services. These included prenatal classes on childbirth, breastfeeding, and infant care, as well as postpartum services like lactation consultations, new mother support groups, and child activity classes.

To deliver these services and sell products, MI employed a range of professionals and paraprofessionals with specialized knowledge in maternal and infant care. For example, MI employed nurses and midwives to teach childbirth, lactation consultants to teach breastfeeding, social workers and therapists to lead support groups, and child development specialists to lead child activity classes. The company also employed dedicated retail managers and salesclerks who worked in the stores; a small corporate staff responsible for merchandising, human resources, accounting, and marketing; and a five-person on-site call center team responsible for enrolling customers in classes. In total, MI employed approximately 150 people, 96% of whom were female and 97%, white. It was headed by a four-person, all-female management team, which included a CEO, a vice president (VP) of education and services, a VP of retail, and a VP of business development.

MI's strategy at the time constituted a clear attempt to commercialize the personal space around motherhood. Because the support services MI offered remained accessible within the personal sphere (e.g., friends' advice about what to expect from childbirth or tips on how to soothe a crying baby) and because women have mothered throughout history without the sort of paid support services and products MI was offering, the project's success rested first and foremost on women choosing to access these services and products in the market at all. Certainly, though, MI

was not the first attempt to commercialize the personal space around motherhood. Nevertheless, history has demonstrated that commercialization is an ongoing and evolving process; the fact that some of the commercialization attempts that emerge over time succeed while others fail means we can learn from analyzing not only the first instances of commercialization but later ones as well (see Quinn's [2008] study of recent commercial innovations in the U.S. life insurance market).

To be sure, other for-profit companies sold the same products that MI did, and many of the support services that MI offered had been in the process of commercializing for a while both within nonprofit and community organizations (e.g., hospitals, which sometimes offer childbirth classes for a fee) and among informal practitioners (e.g., independent lactation consultants and doulas who charge for their services). However, MI's commercial project was novel in its attempt to consolidate and deliver these related services in a for-profit, corporate setting and to combine them with the sale of products. Since its founding, the company's commercial strategy was to both consolidate the area's informal maternal health practitioners under one corporate umbrella and convince nonprofit organizations to outsource their free or nominally priced maternal support services to MI, who would instead deliver the very same services for a fee.

In short, MI represented a novel organizational attempt to commercialize certain activities and relations surrounding motherhood. Investigating how that project fared is a worthy sociological pursuit since recent work has persuasively demonstrated that explaining the success and failure of specific organizational attempts is precisely the challenge scholars must tackle to advance understanding of the commercialization of personal settings (Healy 2006; Anteby 2010). That said, MI did not just represent any case of commercializing personal life; rather it was one employing the key mechanism past studies have identified as the driver of successful commercialization—euphemistic discourse.

### MI's Euphemistic Discourse

Scholars observe that the more culturally cherished a role or sphere of life, the more discomfort society has with its commercialization (Nelson and Barley 1997) and, presumably, the more important it is for market actors to initially legitimate their commercial project in the traditional terms of that sphere. Since motherhood is one of the most sacred roles in Western culture (Taylor, Layne, and Wozniak 2004), and since MI was trying to fill a role previously occupied by new mothers' families and community organizations, it was not surprising then that MI executives believed the company's credibility depended on not being perceived as

blatantly commercial. In my first meeting with her, the CEO explicitly stated that clients “shouldn’t feel like it’s a business.” Instead, to succeed, MI had to disguise the fact that its business model rested on the principle that “stress is lucrative” and frame its project in traditional notions of motherhood, family, and community.

The primary way MI executives tried to accomplish this was by carefully controlling what language the organization used with clients. In particular, they promoted a euphemistic discourse that specified who MI clients were and what MI’s role was in serving them and that obscured the organization’s status as a self-interested market actor. Keying off the idea that motherhood was stressful and traditional supports eroded, they cast MI’s clients as overwhelmed, vulnerable, and fragile; MI as a “safe haven” that offered these women the support and community they otherwise lacked; and MI employees as “trusted advisors” with unique expertise to help lower clients’ stress.

This discourse permeated all of the company’s marketing materials, which employed terms more consistent with intimate relations (e.g., sincerity and helping) than arm’s-length ones (e.g., quality and price) and which promoted the desired image of MI as a nurturing haven offering mothers guidance and support. For example, a promotional video began with a woman explaining how “overwhelming” she found the transition to motherhood but how relieved she was to find “support” and a “safe, warm environment” at MI. Marketing materials promised that MI classes “answer your questions, reduce your fears” and explained that MI’s selection of “safe, nontoxic products” was designed “not to overwhelm you” like the vast selections of big-box retailers. Promotional brochures spoke of MI’s “sincere” and “passionate” mission to “help” new mothers by making motherhood “less stressful.”

Beyond its formal marketing materials, MI used the discourse directly in customer interactions as well. And since employees had the most direct customer contact and were the ones most often delivering MI’s desired external message, executives actively managed employee language to ensure it was consistent with the intended discourse. During my fieldwork, executives distributed a document to staff members entitled “Words to Use and Words to Lose.” It reminded staff to say “clients” instead of “customers,” “community-based centers” instead of “stores,” “gear and toys” instead of “retail products,” “home office” instead of “corporate office,” “center associates” instead of “staff,” and “the consultation line” instead of “the call center.” Executives followed this up with a company-wide staff meeting to reinforce what they called the “MI Voice,” and “Words to Use and Words to Lose” was added as a module in the company’s training program for all new hires.

Furthermore, consistent with recent work that euphemistic discourse

must be concretized in organizational practices and structures to be effective (see, e.g., Healy 2006; Almeling 2007; Anteby 2010), MI's discourse infused a wide range of organizational practices. For one, it was used repeatedly in MI classes. The VP of education explained: "[We] tell women in our classes all the time—it's the first thing we tell them actually—we say 'There is nothing in life more stressful than this. This is a bigger stressor than losing a parent. . . . [It's] a physiological and emotional stressor. It can be isolating. There is all this self-doubt.'" In fact, I observed three ways in which the discourse was delivered to customers in classes as this VP suggested. First, instructors began each class by congratulating clients on getting there because, as one instructor asked customers rhetorically, "It's not easy getting out when you have a little one, is it?" Next, instructors reminded customers that "All mothers cry" and that MI was a safe environment for that. The same instructor explained, "We aren't going to judge you if you cry. . . . This class is about you and what you need." Finally, every class had a designated time during which clients were encouraged to articulate the stresses of new motherhood. Support groups included "weekly check-ins," when the instructor gently prodded each new mother to report "What was hard?" from the past week; and childbirth and infant care classes began by asking clients what they feared most about childbirth or caring for a newborn and then reassuring them that MI would help reduce those fears.

The discourse was also used directly with customers in the company's retail operations. Employees were coached that aggressive verbal sales tactics were inappropriate, and, ironically, the formal MI sales strategy deemphasized selling, encouraging instead a more subtle, euphemistic approach. The training manual instructed: "We are here to build our community of families and help them navigate through childbirth and parenting. We're not about the hard sell. The [MI] selling model is more about creating the relationship with the client. It also is important to help the client feel comfortable taking their time to decide . . . Again it's not about the hard sell." On-the-job training reinforced this use of the discourse with customers: when a recently hired sales clerk greeted a new mother with a boisterous, cheerful hello, her manager pulled her aside and chastised her, saying: "With the new moms you have to lower your tone a bit. They could cry at the drop of a hat, so you have to be gentle."

Finally, even physical features like the layout of MI stores seemed designed to be consistent with—and create seamless opportunities for the use of—the company's euphemistic discourse: store layouts had been constructed to create a "community center feel" more akin to "a YMCA or JCC" than a typical retail environment (according to one executive) or "more like a living room than retail store" (according to a company founder). Amidst the retail offerings, each store had a lounge area with com-



fortable armchairs, footrests, and a coffee table, and, in a training session I observed, staff were told it was standard practice to direct customers to the lounge and explain that it is a “safe, comfortable place to relax, nurse, or just talk with one another.”

### Seemingly Successful Commercialization: Public Acceptance

With its euphemistic discourse, MI employed the strategy past work identified as useful for successful commercialization, but was it actually a successful case? If measured by the ability to gain acceptance from its target public, the answer is clearly yes.

At the time of this study, MI's strategy had proven highly effective in drawing new mothers to its centers. Beginning as just one small store, MI attracted enough early customer demand that investors were willing to provide seed- and follow-on financing to help it expand to multiple large centers and keep up with its growing customer base. During my study, thousands of new customers were joining the company's class rolls each year, representing a significant portion of the total births-per-year in its geographic market and adding to the tens of thousands of women already enrolled in MI classes. One indicator of the company's legitimacy with target customers was that when MI would hold events for the public (e.g., an evening speaker series held at one store), it regularly drew 500–1,000 new mothers at a time, far exceeding the store's capacity. Further, during my fieldwork, the company received numerous calls from mothers in other geographic markets asking when MI would open near them. Finally, among the new mothers it attracted, the company elicited deep loyalty: it was typical for women who met in an MI class to form such strong bonds that they would then enroll as a group in multiple other classes over the next several years, and the local press had coined the term “an MI mom” to describe the organization's particularly devoted customers. Even employees and customers themselves jokingly referred to MI as a cult at times.

As past work predicts, however, this public acceptance was not always immediate; it had, in fact, been greatly facilitated by the company's careful framing of its commercial activities. That is, some potential customers disapproved of MI's “consumerist bent” (as one “non-MI mom” put it to me), and local chat boards occasionally contained posts about the organization's self-interested corporate motives. Even MI's most loyal customers reported having been initially skeptical of its commercial form. However, they described being ultimately won over by its message of support and safety. In a comment representative of what many customers said, one explained: “I was at first very skeptical. My friend told me to check it out, and I really thought it would just be this high-priced racket.

But I walked in and everyone was so nice and focused on me, it just felt like a genuinely supportive, warm environment.”

Indeed, the data suggest that for most customers MI’s discourse of stress deeply resonated with their experience as new mothers. Asked what had attracted them to MI, two customers explained:

It was just so wonderful to have this space where you could go during the most harrowing, overwhelming, exhausting, scary time of your life, and be with these women who were also going through it and share what you were going through. . . . [The instructor] was really helpful and supportive. It was great to have her, who we could ask questions to. (New mother, MI customer)

It’s just such a stressful time, and you’re bombarded with all these messages. All you want is one place to go where you can get all the information and things you need, and where you know they’re not going to judge you. In my [MI] class, the instructor was always saying, “I’m not here to judge you. This is a tough time, and I’m just here to help.” That meant a lot to me. It felt like a really safe place. (New mother, MI customer)

Beyond attracting customers, MI’s discourse also helped establish the company’s legitimacy with other key external constituents. Describing why he eventually outsourced his organization’s new mother support services to MI, the director of a local nonprofit said, “I was skeptical that a for-profit company would take the same interest we do in serving women. Walking through their centers and listening to them talk, though, it seemed like they had people on staff who were really committed to this.” Local health-care providers who referred patients to MI classes reported having been initially skeptical as well. The head labor and delivery nurse at a local hospital commented that she only began referring patients to MI classes after sitting in on their childbirth class herself and becoming convinced of the organization’s sincerity, whereas when MI first approached her, “It was an issue for me, them being a company.”

It is worth noting one other measure by which MI’s project constituted a successful case of commercialization: customers regularly noted that MI was filling a role their families and friends otherwise would, indicating the market had indeed advanced into the noncommercial space and was replacing, or at least reshaping, certain traditional relations. Echoing the statements of many, one customer commented: “I’m a transplant to the area as so many people are, so I don’t have my family around, and it was nice to be able to go to MI and get some of that there.” Customers also reported that MI’s (paid) support groups, where they met other new mothers, offered them the kind of close connections they otherwise would have sought in their existing friendship circles. Further, questions in MI classes commonly began, “My mother said \_\_\_\_\_. Is that true?” or “A friend told me \_\_\_\_\_. Should I worry about that?” suggesting that clients privi-

leged the opinion of MI's paid experts over the advice of their personal relations. Finally, the simple fact that MI customers were willing to pay for the same exact services that some local community organizations offered for free in the area (e.g., child play times, childbirth classes, etc.) suggests a level of success of the commercialization project with customers.

### Failed Commercialization

In short, MI employed the strategy past work identified as useful for successful commercialization, and this strategy helped establish the project's external legitimacy and attract public demand. The case thus supports the work of scholars who have argued that euphemistic discourse (and a range of organizational tactics that concretize that discourse) can powerfully shape public reception to commercialization attempts (Zelizer 1978; Hochschild 2003; Healy 2006; Almeling 2007; Anteby 2010). Nevertheless, MI's project ultimately constituted a failing case of commercialization, and examination of its failure suggests two novel and important contributions to sociological understanding of the phenomenon.

#### *Public Acceptance Is Necessary but Not Sufficient for Successful Commercialization*

Despite its success in attracting public demand, MI was unable to convert that demand into profit, and at the time of my fieldwork the organization was failing. The company's initial growth had been funded by investors, but those investments were made on the basis of a business plan that had MI turning a profit several years earlier, something the company had yet to do. Immediately prior to my study, the company had laid off a portion of its staff to lower costs. During my fieldwork, executives tried to find new investors, and the company nearly ran out of cash at one point, requiring an additional infusion of capital from its existing investors to survive. When I left the field, the company was again running out of cash and again trying to secure external funds to continue its operations.

Following my fieldwork, the company's board and executives recognized that the existing commercial project was not working, and so they decided to abandon their initial strategy and structure and embark on a major organizational restructuring. Among other things, this involved a different external positioning and major personnel changes. The fate of the newly reorganized MI remains an open question and is outside the scope of this study, but the organization's initial commercialization attempt clearly failed, and that is the subject of this analysis.

The existing literature cannot explain this failure. Most studies have overlooked the need for commercializers to convert public legitimacy into

a sustainable, profitable business model because they have focused on cases where that conversion has been successfully accomplished. Even recent work examining variation in the overall shape or success of commercialization projects has focused on variation driven by different organizational strategies for gaining public acceptance (e.g., Healy 2006; Almeling 2007; Anteby 2010). Thus, while these cases helpfully demonstrate that certain organizational instantiations (i.e., certain combinations of discourse, practices, and structures) will be more or less successful than others in attracting public demand (Healy 2006; Anteby 2010), the MI case tells us something different: certain organizational instantiations will also be more or less successful in converting that public demand into profitable demand. The failure of MI's project demonstrates clearly that although garnering public acceptance is certainly necessary for successful commercialization, it is not sufficient.

### *Successful Commercialization Requires Employee Acceptance*

Don't waste your money [on MI products]. People feel they need to have so much stuff these days or you're a bad mother, but it's not true. . . . When you do need something—like a swaddle blanket—you can almost always get what they sell here for much cheaper at Walmart or Target. (MI employee to class of new mothers)

We have the customer piece down, but if we can't fix the employee piece, it won't matter. (MI VP of business development)

Once we recognize the need for organizations to convert public legitimacy into profitable demand, we can become more attuned to the operational challenges entailed in commercialization beyond just what is needed to gain public acceptance. MI highlights one challenge quite clearly: the company's failure to convert public legitimacy into profit stemmed directly from employees' refusal to perform certain commercial practices that were crucial to the organization's long-term financial viability. This suggests, more generally, that successful commercialization requires gaining the buy-in of a group equally important to the organization's target public—its own employees.

Specifically, MI's lack of profitability arose from two operational failures: an inability to run its classes as profitably as its business model required and an inability to drive enough retail product sales to support the business. Employee resistance was key to both. Regarding the former, running MI class operations profitably required careful management of things like classroom utilization rates (since classrooms were fixed costs) and standardization of class content (to centralize purchasing of classroom materials and ensure consistent customer experiences). Yet when MI man-

agement tried to improve utilization by scheduling classes more closely together, most instructors refused to follow the tighter schedule. Likewise, when management tried to introduce a formal, standardized class curriculum, most instructors ignored it, declaring they would never follow a standardized plan in the classroom.

Employee resistance in the retail business undermined MI's profitability even more directly. One simple datum demonstrates the issue: in all but one of the prenatal and new mother classes I observed, the instructor either informed customers that they did not need products sold in MI's stores or, more often—and as the first epigraph to this section suggests—directed customers to other stores. (In the one exception, the instructor simply did not mention products at all.) In a representative class, when a customer asked the instructor about a product she had seen in the retail store, the instructor said: "Oh, you can check on Craigslist. You can probably get it for much cheaper than it's sold here." In interviews as well, employees consistently explained that they had great discomfort with selling the products and generally refused to do so, especially in MI's classes.

This resistance directly subverted MI's business model, which rested upon selling products through its services channel. And it is important to note that the weakness of MI's retail business cannot be explained by inadequate customer demand. For one, given the size of its customer base for classes and services, MI did not need to attract more customers to its stores but rather to convince those already there to purchase its products. What is more, MI customers were generally upper-middle-class women who spent considerable amounts of money on the very products MI carried, and, in classes, these customers routinely asked instructors about retail products they were considering purchasing at MI. Simply put, MI customers appeared willing to buy the company's products, but the company's own staff routinely discouraged them from doing so.

Executives understood that employee resistance was the key obstacle to MI's financial viability, and the VP of business development said in one meeting, "We have the customer piece down, but if we can't fix the employee piece, that won't matter." Further, they attributed the resistance to the fact that employees had not fully embraced MI's commercial project. The VP of retail complained, "For some reason, our employees just have a deep discomfort with the commercial nature of the business." In the next section, I examine why cultivating employee buy-in was a challenge for MI and may be a general challenge for many commercialization attempts. Following that, I use additional data from MI to isolate two specific conditions that are likely to generate employee resistance in these projects.

## EMPLOYEE RESISTANCE: A PROBLEM OF DECOUPLING

I want the moms to trust me. I want them to feel like they are heard, supported, and valued, and if I'm hawking things they won't trust me. If they trust me, then they'll feel like it's a safe place. (MI employee on why she will not sell products)

Maybe MI would benefit from being a non-profit, you know. It would feel more sincere. I think that's the problem. They tell us we're supposed to be supportive of new moms, but it lacks sincerity to us because of the financial goals and focus on selling the product. (MI employee on why she questions the organization's commercial project)

It is puzzling why employees would undercut the financial health of their own employer, and readers may be tempted to dismiss this case as somehow idiosyncratic, unrelated to the general theoretical issues surrounding commercialization of personal settings and due instead to, say, poor management or unusually disgruntled employees. However, two observations prevent us from doing so. First, the employee resistance was directly related to the very framing that MI had used so effectively to garner public acceptance and which past work suggests should have been key to its commercial success. That is, employees justified their resistance to commercial practices by turning the company's external, euphemistic discourse against it, claiming that these practices undermined MI's image as a safe, nurturing haven and their own work as new mothers' trusted guides.

This was displayed during a staff meeting about classroom utilization when an instructor explained angrily why she would not conform to a tighter schedule: "I can't have less than 45 minutes between my class getting out and another one starting. The women need time to linger, talk to one another, nurse, just relax. These classes are emotional, and these women are already exhausted. We can't push them out the door!" Other instructors agreed. Likewise, employees explained their resistance to standardized curricula by saying that to truly support new mothers, they had to respond to women's emotional needs in the moment, not follow a prepackaged script.

Most of all, employees used MI's euphemistic framing to justify their resistance to retail, saying that it was exploitative to push high-priced goods on customers who were overwhelmed and coming to MI for safety and guidance. In staff meetings, employees frequently complained that MI would cease being a haven for women if "people are hawking \$1,000 strollers at them." A retail sales clerk elaborated: "It's hard to support moms by upselling. . . . I can't take advantage of a new mom's anxieties. It's such a stressful period for a woman. . . . And I can't take advantage of that." A childbirth instructor commented: "I don't ever want to give

out the perception that I'm pushing something. I think my relationship with the mothers would be hindered, and that's what I really care about." As both this statement and the epigraphs to this section reveal, employees asserted that selling products directly undermined their role as new mothers' trusted advisors, and they were careful to note that this was a role MI itself had asked them to take on in the first place. I heard the refrain, "I didn't come here to be a salesperson" often, and one store manager explained, "A lot of us feel like we were hired for one job but were then asked to do another."

Certainly, then, we cannot dismiss the case as irrelevant to the theoretical issues surrounding commercialization when the very thing past work identified as driving successful commercialization seems implicated in its failure here. Related to this—and the second reason we cannot dismiss the case as unrelated to general dynamics of commercialization—is the observation that MI employees were directing their resistance specifically toward those commercial practices that were "decoupled" (Meyer and Rowan 1977, p. 356) from that framing, yet an unstated assumption in past studies is that decoupling is necessary for, but also largely unproblematic in, these sorts of projects. As discussed earlier, to the extent that commercializers must frame their activities in traditional, nonmarket terms to gain public acceptance but also build viable, profitable businesses, they need to be able to decouple at least some commercially driven practices from that framing.

Despite what seems a crucial role in attempts to commercialize personal settings, however, decoupling has been mostly overlooked until now. In contrast, the MI case throws employee dynamics into sharp relief and offers a unique opportunity to theorize the important role of decoupling in commercialization projects. It is, after all, precisely decoupling that MI employees were resisting. When management wanted them to decouple the organization's more ceremonial commitments, which were designed to attract public demand, from activities designed to convert that public demand into profitable demand (like selling products or driving higher classroom utilization), employees refused to treat the euphemistic discourse as just "myth and ceremony," insisting instead that their activities be tightly coupled with it.

This suggests, therefore, that to understand MI—and how and when commercialization projects succeed or fail in general—we must begin to identify conditions under which organizational decoupling will be possible. The MI data offer useful variation and counterfactuals that let us generate some hypotheses about this. In the next section, I use these data to engage in an inductive, theory-building exercise, where I propose two conditions under which employees will be likely to resist performing decoupled practices in commercialization projects. I conclude this article by

discussing the implications of this study for commercialization of personal settings and theories of decoupling.

#### ISOLATING THE CONDITIONS FOR EMPLOYEE RESISTANCE

Executives were acutely aware that employee resistance was the key obstacle to MI's long-term financial viability. In an attempt to address the issues surrounding product sales in particular, during my fieldwork the company hired a new head of retail who had extensive experience at large, multinational retail corporations and tasked her with turning around MI's retail business. This development proved analytically powerful, as it afforded me numerous opportunities to observe how employees responded to new commercial practices introduced into the organization and how executives grappled with the resistance that often materialized. In the analysis below, I focus specifically on employee resistance to MI's retail products because of the uniquely rich data this timing of my study afforded. I use these data to isolate two drivers of employee resistance at MI and propose that they may constitute more general conditions under which employee resistance to decoupled practices can emerge in commercialization projects.

#### When Professional Interests and Identities Align with the Euphemistic Framing

Not surprisingly, MI executives were profoundly frustrated by employees' refusal to sell products, and they developed their own theories about what was driving it. Executives concluded that because most of the staff came from nonprofit settings, commercial practices were often foreign to them and, more importantly, that because of their professional backgrounds, employees saw certain commercial practices like retail sales as beneath them. Several months after joining, the new VP of retail complained, "[The staff] sees retail as the crass commercial side. It's lower on the totem pole. . . . It's not seen as a worthy pursuit. . . . MI employees are too good for it, too educated to do retail." She frequently complained that MI employees did not want to "get their hands dirty" by selling products, in effect theorizing that professionals saw retail sales as a form of "dirty work" (Hughes 1971) and the products themselves as contaminating (Douglas 1966).

This argument has a clear basis in sociological theory. The extensive literature on conflicting institutional logics tells us that market and professional considerations often collide (see Thornton and Ocasio 1999) and, specifically, that professional status rests on claims of safeguarding the



public interest and fiduciary duty, not behaving like self-interested corporate actors (Abbott 1981). Consequently, professionals carefully police the boundary between professional and commercial activities and are likely both to resist commercial practices that could be viewed as defiling (Abbott 1981) and to take a great interest in how their work is framed to the public (Abbott 1988; Anteby 2010). Undoubtedly, these dynamics could complicate an organization's ability to employ the discursive and practical mechanisms useful for successful commercialization by motivating professional employees to resist commercial practices that are decoupled from a legitimating, external frame.

Yet professionals are often involved in attempts to commercialize personal settings (Nelson and Barley 1997; Hochschild 2003; Anteby 2010).<sup>3</sup> And if professionals have been used successfully in these projects, then it cannot be the case that they universally reject commercial practices or the sort of decoupling commercialization requires. Indeed, data from within MI suggest that not all professional employees resisted the sale of retail products: there was actually one group of professionals who decoupled unproblematically, promoting products within their classes just as management wanted them to. Analyzing this counterfactual reveals that employee resistance to decoupling is a more nuanced process than MI management suspected, one driven by how employees' specific professional interests and identities do or do not align with the company's external, euphemistic framing. In the next section, I consider those professionals who resisted decoupling. Then I turn to the counterfactual group for comparison.

### *Maternal Support Professionals*

To deliver its prenatal and postpartum maternal support services (e.g., childbirth, breastfeeding, and infant care classes; lactation consultations; new mother support groups), MI recruited a range of professionals and paraprofessionals who specialized in maternal health and well-being (e.g., midwives, doulas, lactation consultants, labor and delivery nurses, social workers, and therapists). These employees reported having entered their fields because of a desire to help women and a passion for women's health or feminist causes, and many devoted their early careers to helping dis-

<sup>3</sup> Some observe that neutralizing resistance to the market may not always be enough to win public acceptance because target customers also need to be convinced that it is worth paying for goods and services they could otherwise receive free from their families or communities. Given this, specialized experts, who claim to deliver products or services of higher quality than those offered via traditional channels, can help establish the commercial project's value proposition (Nelson and Barley 1997; Hochschild 2003).

advantaged or vulnerable populations in particular. Few had ever worked for a for-profit until MI. (The staff included, among others, a former Peace Corps volunteer, someone who ran a home for teen mothers, and a midwife whose private practice specialized in caring for victims of sexual abuse).

Clearly, a euphemistic discourse that cast new mothers as overwhelmed and in need of safe haven and trusted guidance fit well with these employees' professional projects, and they consistently reported that this was what attracted them to MI in the first place. One instructor (a midwife) commented, "I feel like at the heart of MI is a mission to really be a resource for women. . . . It's the exact same thing I love about being a midwife." Another explained that she worked at MI because "I get to do work I find meaningful and that I trained to do."

MI's euphemistic framing not only resonated with these employees' professional projects, it also bolstered them. Because many maternal support workers had historically lacked formal legitimacy within the medical profession, a message that motherhood was stressful and demanding of professional attention—and that MI employees were the trusted experts to deliver that attention—elevated their standing. One instructor noted: "I get to provide advice and support to parents and that's validating. [It] validates my professionalism." MI's management team understood this aspect of their business model, too, with the CEO explaining: "For a lot of these people, until [we] existed, you had to ply your trade not in secret but in a marginalized way. Francis was teaching classes in her basement. Judy was going around doing lactation consultations in people's living rooms. People were teaching childbirth in Y's. But we came along and for them it was like 'Wow, here's this professional organization that does what I do, that legitimates what I've been doing all along.' . . . They thought before they'd have to always work on the periphery. . . . We give them status."

Furthermore, the euphemistic discourse protected these individuals' professional identities by enabling them to recast MI clients as a disadvantaged population. MI's maternal support professionals expressed deep ambivalence about working for a for-profit company and serving an upper-middle-class clientele, but they consistently followed such statements by drawing on the discourse to observe that all mothers—"even MI moms," as one said—were vulnerable and thus worthy of support. A therapist who previously served low-income women said, "I don't want to minimize what the women [at MI] are going through. It is challenging. It is tough. There is nothing harder [than being a new mother]. . . . Across the board, whether it's moms who are incarcerated, moms with children living with special needs . . . it doesn't matter how smart you are or how much money you have."

Finally, much like "The Asshole" construction enabled Van Maanen's

(1978) police officers to see themselves as engaging in real police work, MI's euphemistic framing enabled these employees to maintain a professional image of themselves in the face of potentially discrediting interactions. MI's customers could be extremely demanding, and, in my observations I saw clients ask staff to watch their children as if employees were babysitters as well as berate employees for not accepting returns (including a used potty training toilet) or for scheduling a class at a time that overlapped with their baby's nap schedule. In response, however, employees drew on the euphemistic discourse to cast these clients as overwhelmed and in need of professional support and (patient) expertise. After being yelled at by an irate customer, one employee remarked, "I have to remind myself [that] they're just overwhelmed. . . . We don't always have the class at exactly the right time they want. So you have to help them become ok with the fact that they don't have total control. It's more than just helping them navigate the class schedule and pick the right one. It's getting them to accept the new reality that they don't have control over everything. There's a big emotional component."

In short, MI's maternal support professionals were deeply invested in the company's euphemistic discourse because it aligned with their professional projects, bolstered their status, and protected their identities. For them, the discourse was not a mere tool for attracting customer demand but, instead, precisely how they defined themselves and their work. Consequently, they delivered the discourse and its associated practices to customers energetically and effectively. However, these are the very same employees who most strenuously resisted performing commercial practices that were decoupled from this discourse. Regarding retail in particular, without exception every maternal support professional I spoke with expressed discomfort with the products, noting that selling undermined their work as trusted guides and was exploitative of new mothers. And, as noted, in all but one of the maternal support classes I observed, the instructor explicitly told clients not to purchase products at MI or referred them elsewhere.

### *Child Development Professionals*

We can begin to understand this resistance (and why it is not a simple story of professionals being universally opposed to certain commercial practices) when we observe that, in one particular type of class, MI professionals actually did recommend the products unproblematically and that these professionals had a very different relationship with the euphemistic discourse than did the maternal support employees. MI's child activity classes were taught by child development professionals (individuals with master's degrees in early child development or related fields),

and these professionals defined children, not mothers, as their primary clientele. They did not see themselves as new mothers' trusted guides but as advocates for children, and they believed that their professional duty was to design activities in the classroom that were developmentally appropriate for children, not nurturing of mothers. For example, the head of MI's child development program explained that although mothers often complained that the child activity classes were "boring" because of their heavy emphasis on routines, her focus was on doing what was best for the children, who needed routines at that age.

Because MI's euphemistic framing was not directly related to their professional project, these professionals were less invested in it than the others. They had no stake in seeing new mothers as vulnerable creatures, and they more commonly described them as "pushy" and "entitled"—or, as one put it, "pains in the ass." And, because their interests and identities were not embedded in the discourse, decoupling from it in the form of selling retail products appeared less problematic for them. Unlike their maternal support colleagues, child development instructors regularly recommended MI products to customers in their classes. The instructor in charge of designing each semester's child activity classes explained that she had recently begun structuring the entire curriculum around MI products, creating just the sort of synergies the MI business model was designed to exploit. Another child development specialist explained, "I sort of like selling"; this was because mothers frequently asked her to suggest toys for their children, and she enjoyed pointing them to products in the store that could be developmental tools for the children.

It is worth noting, however, that although the child development professionals could easily decouple from a discourse they were not particularly invested in, this lack of investment also made them somewhat less effective in delivering that discourse externally. One acknowledged that, while she truly cared about the children in her classes, she was just "going through the motions" in interactions with mothers. And mothers themselves regularly noted a shift of tone between the maternal support classes and the child activity ones. The company fielded frequent customer complaints that its child development specialists were not as focused on serving mothers as were its other instructors. One customer, who had attended prenatal and new mother classes at MI before moving on to the child activity classes, explained: "[The child activity class] was a hard transition for me. I really like the [new mom group's] focus on what we're going through in our lives, and [in the child activity class] I kept waiting, saying to myself 'when are we going to talk about me?'"

To summarize, then, MI's euphemistic discourse was less relevant to the professional project of its child development instructors than it was to the maternal support professionals, and, as a result, engaging in prac-

tices that were decoupled from that discourse was less problematic for them. This counterfactual suggests, in general, that the decoupling necessary for successful commercialization may be especially challenging when employees' professional interests and identities are so invested in the external discourse that performing decoupled practices can be interpreted as undermining those very interests and identities. However, it also suggests why organizations might be tempted to hire employees who believe in the external framing and thus why decoupling is likely to be a general challenge in many commercialization attempts; that is, employees whose interests and identities are aligned with the discourse may be the most effective in delivering it externally to attract public demand.

### When the Euphemistic Discourse Becomes Organizational Culture

Not all MI employees were professionals. The company also employed a staff of retail sales clerks whose only job was to work on the retail store floor and sell products. These employees did not have professional backgrounds, and most had worked in commercial retail before coming to MI. Yet, counterintuitively, this group, too, behaved in a way that implied discomfort with MI's commercial project, and they resisted performing certain commercial practices that were decoupled from MI's external, euphemistic framing. During my fieldwork, management inadvertently engaged in something resembling a breaching experiment (Garfinkel 1967) with this group, and the data that emerged can help us probe what was behind this group's puzzling behavior and identify another condition under which employee resistance may surface in commercialization projects.

When the new VP of retail joined MI, she introduced a number of practices into the stores with the goal of promoting the retail business's growth. The changes included using more aggressive sales tactics with customers, shrinking the size of the stores' "lounge" areas to make room for greater product selection, replacing the stores' low desks behind which the sales staff used to sit (more reminiscent of a doctor's office than retail boutique) with high retail counters behind which sales clerks were required to stand, and replacing sales clerks' individual e-mail accounts with one centralized account per center. The VP of retail justified these changes not in terms of the euphemistic discourse but in terms of sales and profitability. Were the retail staff fully on board with performing work decoupled from MI's euphemistic framing, this should not have been problematic.

Instead the retail staff revolted. Employee morale plummeted, and I witnessed numerous employee gripe sessions on the retail floor and in the break rooms. The entire staff of one store threatened to quit en masse, and several long-time employees did in fact resign. And, just as the ma-

ternal support professionals did, these retail employees drew on the company's euphemistic discourse to voice their objections to management, seeming to insist on a tight coupling between their work practices and MI's external framing. Among other tactics, they pointed to the training manual that instructed them to build relationships instead of engage in the "hard sell," and they complained that a new mother would not feel it was a safe, comfortable environment if people were aggressively pushing products on her. In a staff meeting, a sales clerk elaborated: "If we're in her face, she'll leave feeling awful, and she's not going to come back or remember us as a place where she felt supported. But if you can be there with her, it can really mean something, and she'll come back." In an exit interview, a long-time sales clerk who quit in response to these changes summed up the sentiment most retail clerks were expressing:

When I first joined, it was really a wellness center, a place where women could come for support. We had half the [retail] inventory we now have. The lounge area was so much bigger. There was a couch and a rocker and the two chairs that are there now. And women would come and breastfeed and relax. . . . [MI] is now so focused on sell, sell, sell, when it used to be about "We love moms. We are supportive. We have these great new mom groups that help women."

In response to this intense reaction, management capitulated: some of the changes were rolled back; the VP of retail handed over responsibility for store operations to another executive, and she publicly reassured the staff of her commitment to helping new mothers. To accomplish the latter, she "made the rounds" to a number of staff meetings, explaining to me that her goal in doing this was "I want them to see I don't have horns." Most importantly, in these staff meetings she made a point of explaining the retail part of the business and the practices she was implementing in terms of the euphemistic discourse. To a group of employees, she said: "I wanted you to know I was jumping out of bed in the morning to help improve women's lives too. . . . I love what [MI] is about. I am here for the same reason you are—to help parents. And the way I can help is by running the retail business successfully so it can help finance the rest of what we do."

It appeared the VP had unintentionally engaged in a breaching experiment of sorts: she had disregarded the commonly agreed upon rules of engagement in a setting, and, as a result, the smooth interaction screeched to a halt. Not until she framed her behavior in terms of the taken-for-granted discourse was a semblance of order restored. But why was MI's euphemistic discourse taken for granted among its sales clerks whose only job was selling product? In other words, we may be able to understand why maternal health professionals would hold tightly to the company's euphemistic discourse and resist decoupling from it, but why would the

retail staff? To answer this, we must first step back and see how MI's euphemistic discourse had come to operate within the entire organization.

*Co-optation and Expansion of the Discourse*

While management intended MI's euphemistic discourse to be used with customers, most MI employees did not limit their use of it to customer-facing interactions but rather brought it inside MI too, using it as a symbolic tool for navigating and interpreting intraorganizational life. This should not be particularly surprising since, once deployed, symbolic tools are always subject to co-optation for alternative ends (Sahlins 1981). An example of such co-optation at MI was how employees used the discourse as a sort of *lingua franca* on which all could agree to settle internal conflicts. For instance, when MI was first founded, it embraced a very "militant, probreastfeeding" stance, according to an early retail employee, but over time MI therapists and others who opposed this stance were able to use the common discourse to argue that the transition to motherhood was already such a stressful experience that aggressive breastfeeding advocacy would only create more anxiety and insecurity for new mothers. Consequently, the organization came to adopt a "less judgmental" stance than it did initially, even selling bottles in its stores, which was something strongly resisted by the breastfeeding advocates.

Furthermore, through the employees' use of it in interactions with customers and with one another inside MI, the discourse seemed to have seeped deeply into the fabric of MI and come to constitute a key feature of the internal employee culture. For example, the stories employees recounted to one another, and which eventually made it into organizational lore, were those that downplayed MI's commercial activities and depicted it instead as an environment where new mothers came to feel comfortable and safe. Employees repeatedly told one another of the customer who walked up to a salesclerk, lifted up her shirt, and asked, "Can you tell me what size my nursing bra is so I can get another one?" Also, when the company hired a consultant to interview employees and identify what "core values" emerged inductively from their comments, the values that surfaced emphasized concepts like caring, trusted guidance, community building, and personal connections.

The company's "End of Day Reports" offered yet another window into what employees valued. Each store location, as well as the call center, submitted a daily e-mail report documenting the day's sales figures and recounting any meaningful events that happened throughout the day. By far, the most common anecdotes included in the reports—and those eliciting the most congratulatory "reply-all" e-mail responses from other employees—were those that described an overwhelmed new mother coming

to MI and receiving guidance from an employee. One representative report included the following: “Had a mom call in who had left a message on the [breastfeeding hotline], but hadn’t heard back yet, and was getting worried. She began to cry on the phone, and then went into apologies. We talked. I explained apologies were not necessary and that she was part of a large group of women who have some difficulties in getting breastfeeding going and crying is a normal and reasonable response for what she’s going through. She’s getting lactation help and was feeling better by the end of the phone conversation. I definitely care about her!”

These data suggest the euphemistic discourse had taken on a life of its own in the hands of employees. Most importantly, MI’s management appeared to have lost control over it. We saw earlier that management tried to control employees’ language to ensure it remained consistent with the euphemistic discourse, but, in fact, employees regularly turned it around on executives, insisting that their language not stray either. When a manager e-mailed the staff asking how they positioned several products to customers, an employee replied angrily, “Don’t call them products—call them toys. Don’t tell us it’s positioning—ask us what babies respond to.” Also, employees frequently co-opted the discourse to express any number of grievances with management. Complaining about what she felt were excessive demands from management and the company’s “ungenerous” sick leave policy, one sales clerk said, “We’re all about being supportive and nurturing to clients, but [management] doesn’t do that for employees at all.”

### *Euphemistic Discourse as Semiotic Weapon*

The insight that MI’s euphemistic discourse had taken on a life of its own and was used as a weapon by employees to pursue their own interests lets us now return to the VP of retail’s inadvertent breaching experiment and analyze it more thoroughly. In their interactions with management, the retail staff used MI’s euphemistic discourse to justify their resistance to the VP’s new commercial practices. However, in their conversations with one another behind the retail counter and in the break rooms, a second theme emerged. Instead of talking about the impact on customers, they complained that the changes were “demeaning” and “insulting” to them. Their comments reveal that they had come to see themselves just as the euphemistic discourse cast them—as new mothers’ trusted advisors—and, as a result, they felt the new retail practices undermined their status and work, signaling that they were in fact nothing more than “just dumb mall clerks,” as one staff member put it.

In short, more than just an external marketing tool, MI’s euphemistic discourse had become a key feature of the organization’s internal culture,



one that shaped how employees defined their interactions, their work, and themselves. Having invested their identity in the euphemistic discourse, the retail staff now resisted performing practices decoupled from it that would undermine that identity. And, crucially, since management had failed to justify these practices in terms of the discourse, it was available to be picked up by employees and used to justify their resistance and defend their interests.

In light of this, we find another general condition when employee resistance to decoupling may emerge in commercialization projects. A euphemistic discourse deployed externally can be brought inside the organization and become a primary semiotic code in terms of which action will be interpreted and justified (Derne 1994; Tavory and Swidler 2009). When this happens, practices that are decoupled from that code—like MI's product sales—may become "semiotically charged a priori," marked as illegitimate or inappropriate because of their conflict with it (Tavory and Swidler 2009, p. 185; see also Derne 1994; Swidler 2001). Moreover, as the code seeps deeper into organizational life, employees' interests and identities will become more invested in it, and decoupling from it more problematic. At this point, the discourse lies ready to be co-opted as a symbolic weapon for waging resistance to these decoupled practices. In sum, while commercializers may invent a euphemistic discourse to be used externally for winning over customers, to the extent they enlist employees' to help deliver it, they will then need to live with the unintended consequences of having handed employees a symbolic tool that can be used against them.

## DISCUSSION

### Implications for Theories of the Commercialization of Personal Life

Past work has made considerable progress toward understanding how and when commercialization of personal settings can unfold by specifying the mechanisms through which market actors overcome cultural discomfort and gain public acceptance for novel commercial projects (see, e.g., Zelizer 1978, 1985; Hochschild 2003; Healy 2006; Almeling 2007; Quinn 2008; Chan 2009a; Anteby 2010). We have learned from this work that the extent and form of market advancement is a function of the organizations involved and that to advance understanding of the phenomenon, we should examine variation in the success or failure of specific organizational projects (Healy 2006; Almeling 2007; Anteby 2010).

The present study builds directly upon this rich body of work by analyzing an organization that failed in its initial attempt to commercialize a personal setting. On the one hand, Motherhood, Inc., lends support to

existing theory because it successfully neutralized public discomfort and attracted a sizable customer base by employing the very mechanism of euphemistic discourse that past work identified as useful for gaining public legitimacy. On the other hand, MI's specific commercial project failed despite its public acceptance. As a "deviant case" (Ragin and Becker 1992), MI thus provides the analytical leverage to extend theories of commercialization.

In particular, this article has suggested two novel advances to our understanding of how and when commercialization unfolds. First, it has further specified what it means to be a successful case of commercialization. Although public acceptance is clearly necessary, it is not sufficient, and successful commercialization also requires market actors to be able to convert public demand into profitable demand. Second, it has shown that to accomplish this, organizations must gain acceptance from not only a potentially hostile public but also their own employees.

The article's key theoretical insight is that cultivating such employee acceptance may be a challenge for many commercialization projects for reasons that are fundamental to the commercialization process. I have observed that commercialization necessarily requires decoupling an organization's external, euphemistic discourse (designed to win public acceptance) from certain commercial practices (designed to drive profitability and efficiency). To understand why decoupling is a general challenge for the commercialization of personal settings—and not just something specific to MI—it is useful to recognize how attempts to commercialize personal life differ in one key feature from classic examples of decoupling.

In the classic decoupling case, organizational elites speak on behalf of the organization and deliver the company's external, public commitments (Zuckerman 2010), while lower-level employees perform the decoupled activities mostly hidden from public view (Meyer and Rowan 1977). For instance, school administrators deliver external accounts that conform to societal beliefs about rational administration, while teachers do what they must in the classroom to manage and educate students (Meyer and Rowan 1977); senior managers adopt policies to comply with new regulations, but employees persist in using old practices in direct violation of the regulations (Edelman 1992; Kellogg 2009); managers introduce widely touted bureaucratic policies, but workers in the mines and on the plant floors actively subvert them (Gouldner 1954).

This is not so in most attempts to commercialize personal settings. As we see at MI, but also in numerous other commercialization projects (e.g., Zelizer 1978; Almeling 2007; Chan 2009a), an organization's management might settle upon the framing they wish to use with the public, but they will often depend on their employees to implement this framing by using the chosen discourse with target customers. Yet, as in any commercial

organization, they may also need employees to perform certain decoupled practices to run the business profitably and efficiently. Recent attention to organizational practices (see Healy 2006; Almeling 2007; Anteby 2010) helps highlight what is unique about this: in effect, organizations commercializing personal settings often ask their employees to disseminate an external discourse and then tightly couple certain practices to it while simultaneously decoupling other practices from it (practices from which the organization will derive its profit).

Yet general intuition should lead us to think this might be quite difficult to accomplish. First, employees may be hesitant to disseminate a discourse and couple some practices with it while decoupling other practices from it if this means presenting two conflicting faces to customers, since individuals have a socioemotional stake in maintaining face (Goffman 1967). This seems to be what Chan's life insurance agents felt when they refused to pitch insurance to close ties in terms of "love and security" once those ties understood how agents were compensated (2009*b*, p. 727). Ironically, it was precisely the awkwardness of presenting multiple faces in the same interaction that Meyer and Rowan felt decoupling solved. They wrote: "Considerations of face characterize ceremonial management. . . . Assuring that individual participants maintain face sustains confidence in the organization, and ultimately reinforces confidence in the myths that rationalize the organization's existence" (1977, p. 357). Yet we should expect issues of face to reemerge as soon as employees are enlisted to deliver both the legitimating discourse and the decoupled practices.

Second, it is reasonable to assume that employees will be most effective at delivering a euphemistic discourse when their interests and identities align with it. In some cases—like insurance or direct selling—organizations address this through a combination of incentives and training consistent with decoupling (Zelizer 1979; Biggart 1989). (For example, when entering a new market, life insurance companies train their agents to "engage in their vocation with the zeal of a priest, not the cupidity of the average salesman," yet all the while compensating those agents for driving sales volume [Zelizer 1979, p. 125].) In other cases, however, organizations select employees whose professional interests and identities already align with the framing or who in the course of delivering the framing begin to see their interests and identities as tied to it (e.g., Healy's [2006] observation about employees of organ procurement organizations). The challenge then is that to the extent employees are invested in the euphemistic discourse, decoupling from it may, by definition, undermine their interests and identities.

The MI data have allowed us to formalize some of this general intuition and build upon the suggestive anecdotes in earlier work. Specifically, this study has identified two conditions under which employees will resist

performing practices decoupled from the commercial project's euphemistic discourse and, thus, undermine the project's success: (1) when employees' professional projects align with the external framing, they may feel that performing commercial practices decoupled from that framing will undermine their professional interests and identities; (2) when company's euphemistic discourse becomes a key feature of its internal employee culture, it can mark decoupled practices as illegitimate and become a tool employees use to justify resistance when it serves their ends. By uncovering the crucial role of employee acceptance in the success of commercialization attempts and specifying some conditions under which that acceptance may be difficult to achieve, this study makes a novel and important contribution to sociological understanding of commercialization.

### Implications for Organizational Theory

By theorizing the role of employees in commercialization, this study also joins a recent line of research that argues that in order to develop more complete theories of organizational action, we must attend to the individuals who "inhabit" the organizations (Hallett and Ventresca 2006). The article's insights into employee dynamics contribute in particular to organizational theories of decoupling.

Whereas early studies implied that decoupling was widespread (Weick 1976; Meyer and Rowan 1977), more recent work questions this assumption (see, e.g., Scott 2001) and specifies conditions under which it will or will not occur. One of the most consistent findings is that the extent of decoupling is influenced by the interests and power of the organization's relevant employees (see, e.g., Westphal and Zajac 1994; Hallett and Ventresca 2006; Kalev, Dobbin, and Kelly 2006; Sauder and Espeland 2009; Hallett 2010). This article builds on that literature by identifying a previously unrecognized condition under which decoupling may be limited, but one where employee interests and their symbolic resources are absolutely central: as noted, whereas most decoupling studies examine cases where organizational elites adopt an external framing and employees perform the decoupled practices, commercialization studies show that organizations will sometimes enlist lower-level employees to help deliver the external framing as well. Once they do, however, decoupling is likely to become quite challenging. For reasons of professional alignment or internal culture, employees may be more committed to the organization's external framing than any efficiency or profit goals. They may, therefore, resist decoupling, even using the organization's "myth and ceremony" (Meyer and Rowan 1977, p. 340) as a symbolic weapon for waging their resistance.

### Generalizability and Future Research

By noting where else we observe the study's two proposed conditions, we can see how its findings generalize to other attempts to commercialize personal settings and to a range of additional organizational settings. Regarding the first condition, we would expect employee resistance to commercial practices in settings where employees' professional projects align with the euphemistic framing. For example, findings consistent with difficult decoupling have been observed in markets like assisted living or nursing home care (Lopez 2007), alternative health (Kleinman 1996), therapeutic services (Zilber 2002), medical care (Heimer 1999), and the arts (DiMaggio 1991). We would not expect to find employee resistance to commercialization attempts, however, in markets like life insurance, where employees do not have a preexisting professional project, or in markets like home-cooked meal delivery, where the euphemistic framing of comfort is not directly related to employees' professional project of creating innovative, high-quality cuisine. Also, it worth noting more generally that corporations frequently employ professionals to deliver their mission-critical services, and a large literature documents the tensions that can surface in such instances (see, e.g., Thornton and Ocasio 1999). Whereas this work has tended to explain such tensions as arising from clashing professional and market logics, the present study suggests the issue may be more nuanced in certain instances and due to a specific breakdown of decoupling. Given this, future work might investigate whether a decoupling lens can deepen understanding of clashing institutional logics within organizations.

Regarding the second condition, we would expect employee resistance to decoupling in organizations whose external identities are core to their internal employee cultures. Indeed, nonprofits, for-profits that sell culturally cherished products, and for-profit "hybrids" (i.e., organizations that have adopted socially responsible missions but are simultaneously run for efficiency and profit) often have organizational cultures centered around their externally promoted missions and encounter internal obstacles to growth and efficiency (e.g., Kleinman 1996; Miller 2006). Also, organizations in which management has disseminated noncorporate discourses internally but with the goal of promoting corporate motives—for example, promoting participatory teamwork in order to improve employee commitment (Vallas 2006)—sometimes encounter resistance when those discourses get co-opted by employees. In short, many organizations face employee resistance and internal barriers to growth, and this article's insights into the challenges of decoupling may be able to advance understanding of these dynamics. Given this, future research should further

specify and test the conditions proposed in this article across a range of settings.

In sum, scholars have long been preoccupied with the commercialization of personal life. The very birth of sociology was, in fact, animated by concern over the market's seemingly endless expansion and potentially corrosive effects on social life (see Marx 2000; Simmel 2004). However, contemporary scholars have challenged this early perspective and greatly advanced our understanding by observing that, at the level of practice, the market and intimate relations intermingle much more than our disciplinary forefathers realized and in ways that often sustain, rather than degrade, human connection (Zelizer 2005). Nevertheless, the reason this intermingling remains sociologically intriguing is that, at the level of culture, the market and intimacy continue to be deeply opposed logics, and this complicates attempts to combine them.

Because of this, market expansion into personal life is neither inevitable nor uniform, and economic considerations and intimate relations combine in myriad, complex ways (Zelizer 2011). The ongoing challenge for scholars is to explain how different articulations of intimacy and exchange lead to success or failure of specific organizational projects. This article has contributed by theorizing the important role of employees in determining which articulations will be more or less likely to endure, and its findings have implications for a range of organizational settings beyond the commercialization of personal settings as well.

## METHODOLOGICAL APPENDIX

I learned of Motherhood, Inc., while doing pilot interviews for a study of women's career decisions after motherhood. After numerous women spontaneously mentioned the organization as a place where they had found support and guidance during the transition to motherhood, I became intrigued and began to learn more about it. I eventually gained access to MI by approaching the CEO and explaining that I was interested in studying the company's strategy and culture as well as using it as a window into exploring broader cultural issues around motherhood. The CEO was initially responsive but asked that I first meet with the organization's other executives. After those meetings, the management team agreed to let me conduct the study and gave me broad and deep access into the organization.

The study lasted 12 months. During the first eight months, I spent three to seven days per week at the organization, averaging five days a week. Fieldwork during the last four months was less frequent and typically entailed one or two trips to the field per week. Because I wanted to study discourse and how meanings were deployed in interaction and practice,

I tried to capture as much dialogue as possible (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995; Tavory and Swidler 2009). To accomplish this, I decided to carry a visible notebook from the beginning and let people see me jotting notes at all times, in the hopes they would soon come to expect this from me and become less self-conscious. (I worried that jotting things less regularly would make people especially self-conscious as they would wonder why I was recording some things and not others.) In the few instances when note taking was not possible or when I felt it would be too disruptive, I took periodic breaks to jot notes in private and wrote up my complete notes immediately upon leaving the site. I typed field notes at the end of each day, never reentering the field without having first captured the prior day's observations.

People within MI appeared to acclimate to my presence and style of data collection quickly. After two weeks, the VP of business development joked in a meeting to another staff member (as I was scribbling away), "I know she's over there writing whatever it is she's writing, but it's weird how I've already gotten used to it." The other employee agreed. From the beginning, employees introduced me to one another and to outsiders as "the company ethnographer," and, over time, some began kiddingly calling me "the organizational therapist," explaining that people seemed unusually comfortable opening up to me. I believe my somewhat ambiguous professional identity—a sociologist studying motherhood but also someone with an MBA and background in business—helped gain the trust of both MI's most anticommercial employees and the company's senior management team. Likewise, I believe that my position from the client's perspective, that is, a woman of approximately their same age but with no children of my own—allowed clients to feel comfortable talking to me about the many contested and stressful issues surrounding new motherhood (and, related to that, their views of MI). I had not, in other words, "picked a side" on issues like natural versus medicated childbirth or breastfeeding, and so I posed no particular threat to their own views on those matters. (In fact, a number of clients and employees seemed to project their own views onto me.)

I collected data inductively with the aim of capturing as much detail as possible on the interaction order within and around MI. When it came time to analyze my data, I began inductively as well, following semiotic techniques for identifying shared and contested meanings within the organization (Spradley 1979*b*; Barley 1983; Tavory and Swidler 2009). This approach involves first identifying the domains of activities, events, and objects into which organizational actors segment their organizational life and then identifying the interpretive themes that organize these domains. A theme that appears repeatedly—one that organizes multiple different domains of activity—can be considered a defining element of the orga-

nization's culture (Barley 1983). (For example, in Barley's study, "naturalness" was a key element of funeral directors' culture, organizing how they removed the body from the home, posed and prepared the body, and even selected furniture for their funeral parlors.)

Because I was particularly focused on MI's attempt to commercialize a previously personal sphere, I next coded the data looking for where commercialization was unfolding smoothly and where it was not, analyzing in particular how its discursive commitments and organizational practices were involved. I was able to situate this analysis within the larger study of MI's organizational culture, which was particularly fruitful analytically, and I also coded for counterfactuals, which became key to the analysis presented. Coding was done primarily by hand, but, as a final step, I used Atlas.ti to do targeted analysis of the counterfactuals and verify relevant patterns in the data quantitatively.

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