

## JOB TITLES AS IDENTITY BADGES: HOW SELF-REFLECTIVE TITLES CAN REDUCE EMOTIONAL EXHAUSTION

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**Job titles help organizations manage their human capital and have far-reaching implications for employees' identities. Because titles do not always reflect the unique value that employees bring to their jobs, some organizations have recently experimented with encouraging employees to create their own job titles. To explore the psychological implications of self-reflective job titles, we conducted field research combining inductive qualitative and deductive experimental methods. In Study 1, a qualitative study at the Make-A-Wish Foundation, we were surprised to learn that employees experienced self-reflective job titles as reducing their emotional exhaustion. We triangulated interviews, observations, and archival documents to identify three explanatory mechanisms through which self-reflective job titles may operate: self-verification, psychological safety, and external rapport. In Study 2, a field quasi-experiment within a health care system, we found that employees who created self-reflective job titles experienced less emotional exhaustion five weeks later, whereas employees in two control groups did not. These effects were mediated by increases in self-verification and psychological safety, but not external rapport. Our research suggests that self-reflective job titles can be important vehicles for identity expression and stress reduction, offering meaningful implications for research on job titles, identity, and emotional exhaustion.**

I manage six clerical staff, deal with enquiries from the public, and am responsible for a sizeable budget. I particularly hate the word “senior.” It makes me sound old rather than able . . . having the word “manager” in my job title would give an application for a higher-level post more credibility.

Senior administration assistant  
(Krechowiecka, 2010)

Job titles are a cornerstone of modern organizations. As a recognized shorthand for describing a set of responsibilities held by one employee, a job title communicates the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics that employees who hold

the job are likely to possess. Thus, job titles allow organizations to compare different types of contributions to the organization, and are linked to most human resource functions, including selection, performance appraisals, and compensation. Research shows that job titles also are important for coordination in teams, both because they can facilitate the development of trust (e.g., Bechky, 2006; Klein, Ziegert, Knight, & Xiao, 2006) and because they offer a way to manage the differentiation of skills between team members (Hollenbeck, Beerma, & Schouten, 2012). Demonstrating the importance of job titles, the U.S. Department of Labor devoted more than a decade of resources to create the Occupational Information Network (O\*Net) database, a comprehensive tool for job analysis and career exploration that is largely based upon job titles (Peterson et al., 2001).

Job titles also have meaningful implications for employees, both on and off the job. At work, our

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titles are often the first information that we communicate about ourselves to new colleagues, clients, and other key acquaintances. The titles of chef, accountant, engineer, and nurse tell us something about a person's specific knowledge, competencies, status, and values, which can serve as a source of pride and identity for jobholders. Baron and Bielby (1986: 563) suggest that organizations often use job titles "to anchor workers' identities," and Ashforth and Kreiner (1999: 417) argue that job titles serve as "prominent identity badges." Off the job, when we meet people at parties or post personal information online, we share our job titles. In this sense, job titles are important vehicles for identity expression and image construction, serving as core prisms through which we present ourselves to the world. As Ashforth and Kreiner (1999: 417) explain, "in meeting a stranger, we often ask what she or he does, and we expect to be asked the same question."

Despite the many benefits of job titles, they are not always without problems for employees, and can even be a source of frustration and stress. In socially stigmatized jobs, for example, employees may be reluctant to share their titles, which highlight the most unpleasant elements of the work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Even when job titles do not convey direct negative cues, they may be ineffective in conveying the competence and contributions of job incumbents. For example, in hospitals, many patients are confused by the nurse practitioner title, which does not clearly convey advanced training, specialized skills, and prescriptive authority. In the words of one HR manager, it is often necessary to "clarify what the [nurse practitioner] roles are, and what the titles mean" (Reay, Golden-Biddle, & Germann, 2006: 987). Similarly, when one of the authors of this article was an assistant professor, an executive once asked, "Who do you assist, and when will you get to teach your own classes and do your own research?"

Given the close connection between our job titles and our identities, job titles can affect the fundamental human motive to self-express—to communicate our identities and values to others (Brewer, 2009; Elsbach, 2003; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006; Swann, Polzer, Seyle, & Ko, 2004). Job titles serve a self-expressive function, influencing whether employees feel understood and accepted both inside and outside their work. In this way, job titles are an artifact, or symbolic object (Rafaeli & Pratt, 2006), that sends signals about employees' roles

and identities to themselves and to coworkers, customers, friends, and family members. Although job titles have received less scholarly attention than other artifacts, such as possessions and attire (Elsbach, 2003; Rafaeli & Pratt, 2006), titles are important markers of an employee's self-concept because they convey meaningful status signals and are used on a regular basis (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). To the extent that job titles enable employees to self-express, they may help employees channel their attention and energy more effectively, have higher-quality interactions with others, and better utilize their unique capabilities (Kahn, 1990; Swann et al., 2004). This perspective is consistent with Baron and Bielby's (1986: 568) observation that "specialized job titles often serve as 'hedonic wages,'" as they send external signals that are psychologically rewarding to employees.

Recently, a growing body of research has documented the efforts that employees undertake to self-express against the backdrop of standardized, depersonalized work. For example, research on job crafting suggests that employees often modify the boundaries of their tasks to inject meaningful aspects of their identities into standardized jobs, enabling them to express their values, explore their interests, and apply their skills (e.g., Berg, Grant, & Johnson, 2010; Leana, Appelbaum, & Shevchuk, 2009; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Similarly, research on work identities indicates that standardized roles and norms can constrain self-expression by creating identity threats (Elsbach, 2003) and identity violations (Pratt, 2000). In response to these threats and violations, employees frequently take the initiative to engage in identity work, reframing their roles by constructing customized work identities (Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006).

Because job titles usually carry deep social and cultural meaning, the opportunity to create one's own job title may serve as a powerful starting point for job crafting and identity work. In fact, some employees have created their own self-reflective job titles, which we define as a self-generated designation for a work role that is personalized to capture the way an employee adds unique value to the organization. For example, Berkshire Hathaway's event organizer is known as its "director of chaos," Yahoo! spokesperson Heidi Burgett calls herself the "Yahoo! evangelist," a receptionist at Matrix Group introduces herself as a "director of first impressions," and IBM employees have titles such as "data detective" and "creative technologist." Quicken Loans' marketing and sales employ-

ees hold titles of “energy focuser” and “revenue raiser,” and at The Motley Fool, employees’ titles include “people & culture poet” and “chief rabble rouser of the highest order” (Kjerulf, 2008; Krechowicka, 2010; Weiss, 2006).

From an organizational perspective, the creation of self-reflective job titles can be viewed as an identity movement (Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2003) on a micro scale to change how self-concepts and roles are viewed. Conceptually, self-reflective job titles may create a bridge between employees’ desire for authentic identity expression and organizational imperatives for control and coordination. Over the last two decades, self-reflective titles appear to be increasingly widespread in organizations, perhaps as a symptom of trends toward growing customization of individual experiences in organizations (Kimberly, Bouchikhi, & Craig, 2001). For example, it is not uncommon for employees to take on idiosyncratic jobs that lack existing titles (Miner, 1987) and to negotiate idiosyncratic, personalized employment arrangements that make their jobs unique and distinct from others’ jobs (Rousseau, Ho, & Greenberg, 2006). Self-reflective titles also may be a reaction to the flattening of organizational hierarchies (e.g., Ashford, George, & Blatt, 2007): as formalization and bureaucracy decrease, power distance may be reduced, opening the door for employees to supplement official status-signaling titles with more personalized, creative titles. Lastly, it is possible that self-reflective titles are fueled by the premium that members of the Millennial generation place on self-expression (Twenge, 2006).

What are the implications of self-reflective job titles for employees’ experiences of work? To address this question, we conducted an inductive qualitative study at the Make-A-Wish Foundation. We used interviews, observations, and archival documents to develop propositions about the mechanisms through which creating and using self-reflective job titles may reduce emotional exhaustion—the feeling of lacking energy and being depleted, which is the central feature of burnout (Maslach, Schaufeli, & Leiter, 2001). We then tested these propositions in a deductive quantitative study at a hospital, using a quasi-experiment to investigate the impact of self-reflective job titles over time, and in comparison to two control groups. Taken together, our studies explain why self-reflective job titles may play a surprisingly meaningful role in reducing emotional exhaustion in stressful work settings. In contrast to views of job titles as symbols of bureaucracy (Baron & Bielby, 1986) or sources of stigma (Ashforth &

Kreiner, 1999), we propose that self-reflective job titles can be developed and paired with formal job titles as flexible vehicles for identity expression and stress reduction. Our research offers novel insights about burnout, identity, and artifacts, and we begin unpacking these insights by presenting our inductive qualitative study.

## STUDY 1: THEORY-BUILDING WITH QUALITATIVE DATA

We stumbled upon a fascinating opportunity to study self-reflective job titles at the Make-A-Wish Foundation (MAW), a nonprofit human service organization with the mission to “grant the wishes of children with life-threatening medical conditions and enrich the human experience with hope, strength, and joy.” Since its founding in 1980, MAW has grown into 69 active chapters that have granted more than 167,000 wishes. Given their nonprofit status, MAW chapters have limited resources and are frequently understaffed. At the same time, because they are a well-known and highly visible nonprofit, they must be responsible stewards of donations. As a result, the regional chapters are subject to restrictions designed and enforced by a national office. As explained by one insider, “We’re part of a national organization, there are administrative, bureaucratic kinds of things that go on, and that can be draining, and get in the way of things that are more important.” For example, a national policy prohibits employees from calling donors, even when emergency funds are needed to act quickly enough to grant a wish before a child passes away or is medically unable to participate. Because MAW deals with children who have life-threatening illnesses, many employees develop relationships with children and families in tragic conditions, console families after loss, and manage their own feelings of overwhelming sadness and grief.

### Method

Our qualitative study focused on one of the MAW chapters located in the Midwestern United States, and is hereafter referred to as “MAW Midwest” or, simply, “Midwest.” At the time of our research, Midwest employed 31 paid staff members and worked annually with approximately 450 volunteers. In a given year, approximately 800 children in the region were eligible for wishes, but Midwest typically only had the resources to grant

half of these wishes. Some of the children with pending wishes did not survive long enough to see them granted. One staff member explained, “We are so busy, and we always have more kids in the system waiting.”

Our first exposure to Midwest was through a class research project in which two of the authors volunteered their time to study Midwest’s practices for recruiting and utilizing volunteers throughout an academic semester. Through this initial study of Midwest, we learned that the organization and its senior leaders had launched several new initiatives to foster a culture that suited MAW’s mission of creating magical experiences for children—including redecorating the office, espousing new values, and inviting employees to create personalized job titles. We were intrigued by these initiatives to inject personalization into what is often somber, serious work, and saw this as an opportunity to explore an extreme case (Eisenhardt, 1989) of organizational change in an emotionally intense environment. Thus, we decided to further investigate Midwest’s culture by designing an exploratory qualitative study aimed at understanding the meanings, uses, and consequences of these initiatives.

### Data Collection

We gathered three different sources of qualitative data: semi-structured interviews, non-participant observation, and archival documents. We collected our three sources of data over the two years following our initial exposure to Midwest. Using a semi-structured interview protocol, we conducted 22 interviews with Midwest staff members, as well as the president and CEO, board chair, and several affiliated outsiders: volunteers, donors, employees at other MAW chapters, and a freelance graphic designer whose services were contracted by the organization. In creating the protocol, we used Kvale’s (1996) framework of conversational, qualitative interviewing as a guide to ensure that our interviews elicited information relevant to our research questions. Based on these guidelines, we developed an open-ended interview protocol that focused on (a) the work environment, (b) the emotional challenges of the work, and (c) the steps taken to deal with these challenges. Our initial set of questions included: “How would you describe the work environment here?”; “What are the major emotional challenges you face in your job?”; “Have you or others taken any steps to deal with these

challenges?”; and “If so, what have been the consequences of these steps?”

Ultimately, in response to questions about the emotional challenges of the work, each of the 22 Midwest employees we interviewed described the experience of working at MAW as emotionally exhausting. At the beginning of our research, the CEO characterized the work as “emotionally taxing,” and one employee confided that “people are kinda burned out.” Another staff member stated that, as MAW was a nonprofit dealing with severely ill children, she was not surprised that “there’s a big problem with burnout.” Others stated that the office had “a lot of burnout and personal strain” and “the nature of the business lends itself to burnout.” One staff member explained that:

[It’s difficult to] work with so many kids that are sick . . . You don’t want to think about it all the time, because it’s really, really sad. That’s the part that’s most emotionally draining—thinking about what these kids are going through, realizing that they’re in and out of the doctor every day, and the strain that it puts on the parents.

Another staff member echoed:

It can be very hard to deal with children who have life threatening illnesses, which is just heart wrenching. It can be very hard to watch them and their families go through that. It can take a toll emotionally to see this daily.

Another employee, after transitioning from volunteer management to wish services, noticed that “families have expectations that we will not be able to meet, and that can be an emotional challenge.”

In our interviews with Midwest employees, self-reflective titles emerged as a prominent theme and the most salient and potent initiative among those discussed by participants. We learned that approximately a year and a half before our study began, the CEO and a few Midwest senior leaders had attended a development conference at Disneyland. During a presentation, they learned that Disney employees were described as “cast members,” and many had invented their own job titles to describe their unique values, identities, personalities, and talents. After attending the conference, the CEO and other leaders were interested in the idea of self-reflective titles and decided to implement it in their own office.

To align with MAW’s mission of bringing joy, the CEO deliberately selected a lighthearted title—“fairy godmother of wishes”—that would make people smile. She invited all employees to create

their own “fun title” to supplement (but not replace) their formal title, and emphasized that employees had the freedom to personalize a title that reflected their most important roles and identities in the organization. Examples of titles that they chose include “minister of dollars and sense” (COO), “goddess of greetings” (administrative assistant), “magic messenger” and “herald of happy news” (PR managers), “duchess of data” (database manager), and “wizardess of wishes” and “merry memory maker” (wish managers). Employees received business cards that featured their new titles alongside their formal titles, the new titles were added to the chapter’s website, and employees expanded their email signatures to include their new titles below their official titles.

The leaders who facilitated this initiative framed the titles to employees as an opportunity to express themselves in a playful and lighthearted way—they did not frame the titles as a means for reducing stress or emotional exhaustion in particular. However, in our first six interviews, without being prompted by us, all of the participants not only mentioned that the self-reflective titles had become an important and meaningful initiative in the organization, but also that the titles helped them cope with the emotional challenges of their work. Surprised—and a bit skeptical—we followed guidelines for inductive research (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and added questions focusing on the emergent theme of self-reflective titles, including: “How and when do you use your personalized job title?” and “How do you think having this job title affects your experience at work?” Since the interviews were designed to be exploratory, we posed open-ended follow-up questions to probe for more information when responses were relevant to our themes of interest. To foster a balanced perspective, when participants only mentioned positive implications of the self-reflective titles, the interviewer asked: “Have you encountered any challenges or negative consequences associated with the personalized titles? If so, can you please describe them?” The interviews lasted between 35 and 115 minutes each.

In addition to interviews, we conducted 23 hours of observation, which included attending staff meetings and MAW events, as well as observing employees carrying out daily tasks. For the interviews and observations, we alternated between visits as a team and as individuals to balance convergent and divergent perspectives (Eisenhardt, 1989). We tape-recorded and transcribed the interviews and took detailed field notes during the observa-

tions. We also obtained over 100 archival documents, including mission statements, chapter newsletters, event invitations, weblogs, and meeting announcements and agendas. These observations and documents informed how—and how often—employees used their self-reflective titles.

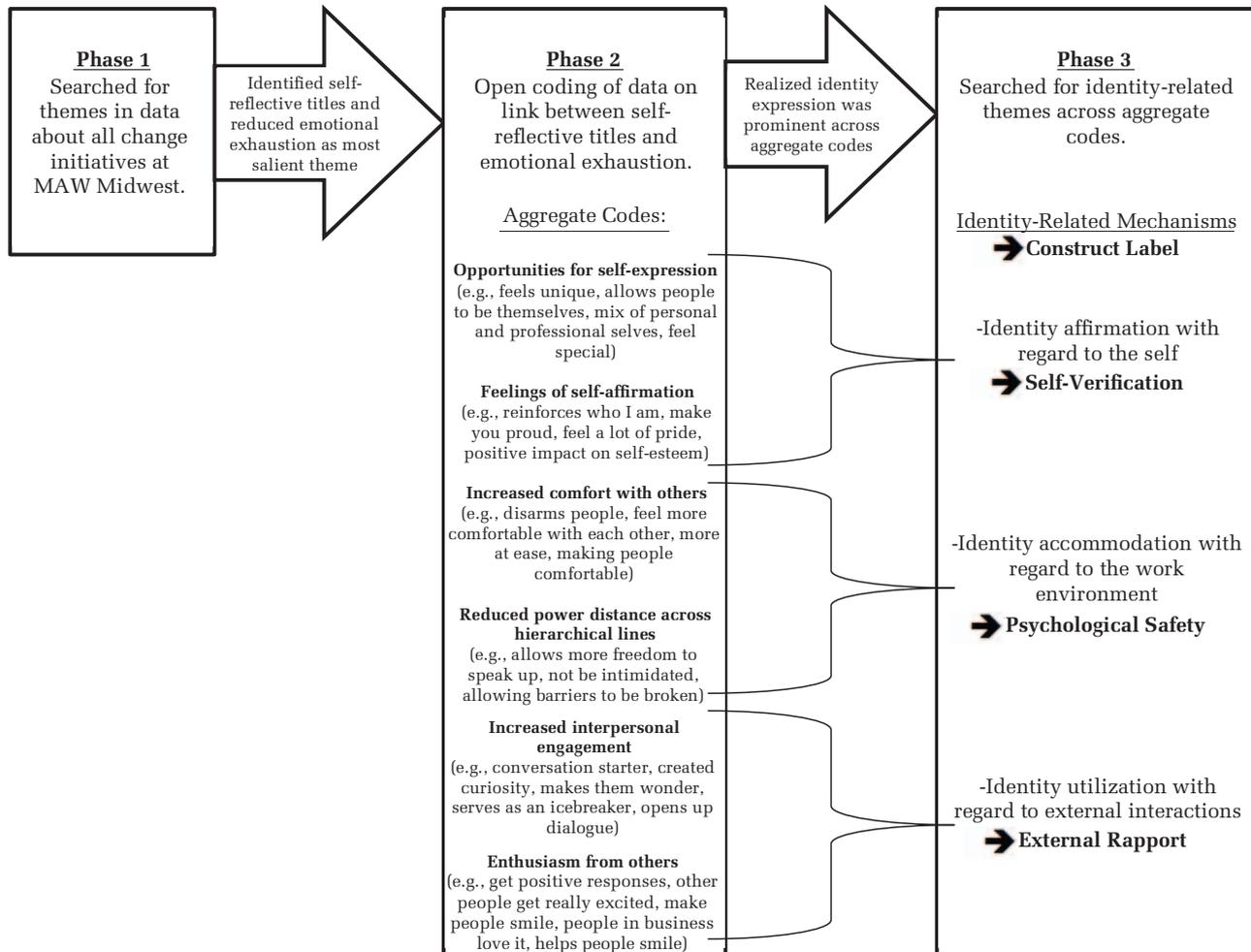
## Data Analysis

We used an inductive analytic approach that involved taking iterative steps between the data, existing literature, and a developing set of theoretical ideas (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). We began our analysis by holding regular meetings to discuss key themes, concepts, and relationships, using the interview data as the primary driver of our theorizing and supplementing these data with our field notes and archival documents. Through these discussions, we developed a general conceptual model and a set of theoretical propositions to explain patterns gleaned from the data. Our analysis unfolded in three main phases; insights gleaned from the data led us to transition to each new phase (see Figure 1).

**Phase 1.** Because our initial intent was to study organizational change in an emotionally challenging context, we began our analysis by culling all the quotes from the interviews that related to a change initiative within Midwest. As we had noticed during the interviews, self-reflective titles were the most prominent change initiative mentioned. In support of this notion, our observations and collection of archival documents suggested that, along with their formal titles, many employees made widespread use of their self-reflective titles—not only on their business cards, but also in internal memos, letters to wish families, and emails and phone calls with volunteers and vendors. To explore this theme further, we focused on the interview quotes in which participants discussed self-reflective titles and their experiences with them.

In searching for themes within these quotes, we noticed that nearly all the participants described how self-reflective titles helped reduce their emotional exhaustion. For example, an employee discussed how having the self-reflective titles “just makes [work] easier and cushions the blow a little bit and keeps things inspiring.” Although the psychological benefits of self-reflective job titles that employees described seemed somewhat implausible at first, our initial uncertainty waned after many hours of interviews in which employees made spontaneous comments about the value of self-

**FIGURE 1**  
**Study 1: Coding Process for Mechanisms**



reflective titles as a way to cope with stress in a heart-wrenching environment, as well as observations in which we witnessed clients and donors responding enthusiastically to the titles. In particular, we noticed that the link between self-reflective titles and reducing emotional exhaustion was salient and consistent in the data, and we were struck by the range of different ways in which participants described self-reflective titles as helping to mitigate their emotional exhaustion. Thus, we decided to delve more deeply into the relationship between self-reflective titles and emotional exhaustion, which led to the second phase of our analysis.

**Phase 2.** To unpack how participants described the link between self-reflective titles and emotional exhaustion, we began categorizing the quotes that

mentioned the relationship between them. This excluded data that separately referenced self-reflective titles or emotional exhaustion, allowing us to zoom in on the relationship between the titles and exhaustion. We used an open coding approach, categorizing these quotes into first-order codes by grouping statements with similar key words and themes related to how self-reflective titles influence emotional exhaustion (Gioia, Thomas, Clark, & Chittipeddi, 1994; Van Maanen, 1979). For example, a quote explaining that the titles “are a conversation starter . . . that helps ease the tension” was grouped with a quote about how the titles “draw people in because they create interest . . . [which] makes the conversation less stressful.” After several iterations, we settled on a set of first-order codes that enabled us to categorize the vast major-

ity of the data into six aggregate codes, which represented different ways in which employees described the relationship between self-reflective titles and reduced emotional exhaustion (see Figure 1).

**Phase 3.** Next, we met to discuss patterns across the six aggregate codes, iterating between the data and existing theoretical ideas. As we worked with the data, we realized that the six aggregate codes and most of the statements in them described different ways in which self-reflective titles provide a vehicle for identity expression. For example, an employee described how having the self-reflective titles “really allows people to be themselves,” which was coded under the “increased comfort with others” aggregate code. Another quote coded under “increased interpersonal engagement” mentioned that the self-reflective titles “make everybody more real.”

The recognition that identity expression was a meta-theme across much of the data led us to search for patterns and similarities between the six aggregate codes with identity expression in mind. After several iterations, we grouped the six aggregate codes into three broader categories based on their relation to employees’ identities and the principal focus of the identity expression. These broader categories included: (1) identity affirmation with regard to the self (opportunities for self-expression and feelings of self-affirmation); (2) identity accommodation with regard to the work environment (increased comfort with others and reduced power distance); and (3) identity utilization with regard to external interactions (increased interpersonal engagement and enthusiasm from others). These three categories allowed us to capture the vast majority of the statements in the six aggregate codes, and only excluded a few statements that were too general to fit these three identity-related categories (e.g., “The titles are just fun and joyful.”).

Lastly, we revisited the literature to search for constructs that were relevant to the theoretical mechanisms described in each of the three identity-related categories. This led us to label the identity affirmation mechanism as “self-verification,” the identity accommodation mechanism as “psychological safety,” and the identity utilization mechanism as “external rapport.” With these three theoretical concepts in mind, we revisited the original interviews, field notes, and archival documents to make sure we did not miss any relevant data. Two of the authors independently coded the data for the

presence of these three concepts, with an agreement rate of 87%, and we resolved discrepancies through discussions. Only three quotes were coded in two categories, and no quotes were coded in all three categories. As a whole, this process enabled us to ground our theorizing in the data and identify areas in which our findings overlapped with and extended beyond the existing literature—we detail the more specific nuances and richness of the three mechanisms in the section below. Lastly, we organized our qualitative findings into theoretical propositions, which we unfold next and then test quantitatively in Study 2.

### Findings

The general theme that self-reflective titles helped employees cope with emotional exhaustion was highly salient within our interviews, and ended up being mentioned by 85% of participants. The self-reflective job titles became an artifact that took on a different and perhaps more significant meaning in the organization than what the leaders who initiated the “fun titles” originally articulated. The titles reminded employees of the MAW cause—why they put themselves through these stressful experiences every day. A volunteering coordinator explained:

It is exhausting to do some of this work . . . to keep your energy up, these things really help . . . [the self-reflective title] is a reminder to me that we are here to be happy and bring joy. The negative feelings don’t last long because it encourages positive thinking. It brings your mind back to the good side of life. It makes me put everything into perspective.

In this way, the titles appeared to help employees engage in cognitive reappraisal (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), defusing stress by deploying attention to the more meaningful and rewarding elements of their jobs (Grandey, 2000; Gross, 1998). Employees appeared to interpret their self-reflective titles as a buffer that helped them deal with the solemnity and gravity of their work, enabling them to focus on how their jobs benefit others (Grant, 2007, 2008). As a volunteer services manager conveyed, “You go through these hard times, and [the title] makes the situation more lighthearted.” A wish manager corroborated that her title “puts things in perspective: this is why I do what I do.” Several other employees highlighted how the titles “help prevent the staff from burning out” and function to “keep everybody’s spirits up . . . We’re working with ill

children, and, obviously, that's saddening." Even external constituents noticed the positive effects of the self-reflective titles. A freelance graphic designer stated:

The staff totally love the fun titles; different people have told me that . . . I think it has a positive impact on their self-esteem and who they are . . . It's a lot of stress to be constantly fundraising and to pull rabbits out of a hat to create miracles for kids . . . I think it's a stress reliever.

A wish training manager underscored that her title "helps you realize that, although this is a severe situation, you can still focus on the joy that is left. Staff may have a hard time doing this if they didn't have these titles." In summary, participants described how self-reflective titles helped them reframe their stressful, emotional work in ways that remind them of its purpose and significance, and of the unique value they bring to the organization and to the people they serve. As such, for reasons on which we will elaborate in the following sections, we started to learn about ways that self-reflective titles may help employees ameliorate emotional fatigue.

*Proposition 1. Self-reflective job titles reduce emotional exhaustion.*

In addition to this general relationship, our inductive findings shed light on three identity-related mechanisms through which self-reflective titles mitigate emotional exhaustion: self-verification, psychological safety, and external rapport. Self-verification captures the *affirmation* of one's identity by others, psychological safety captures the *accommodation* to more freely express one's identity inside the organization, and external rapport captures the strong interpersonal connection that can be fostered by the *utilization* of one's identity in initial interactions with outsiders. We discuss each of these three mechanisms below, and Table 1 includes additional illustrative quotes.

**Identity affirmation: The self-verification mechanism.** One mechanism that emerged from our interviews was that self-reflective titles reduced emotional exhaustion through the affirmation of one's identity within the organization. This mechanism was discussed by 69% of the interviewees. In essence, employees described how the self-reflective titles provided opportunities to experience self-verification, expressing their identities in ways that are recognized and validated by others (e.g., Cable & Kay, 2012; Swann, 1983). Participants described

self-reflective titles as a means for verifying valued aspects of their identities, and, in turn, these feelings of self-verification served as a buffer against emotional exhaustion. As the CEO explained, "The titles make you proud . . . It makes everybody more real. Employees take ownership over their titles—they say, 'This is who I am . . . .' It helps you be comfortable with yourself."

In this sense, self-reflective job titles can be viewed as boundary objects (Star & Griesemer, 1989), functioning as artifacts that can help align employees' self-views with how others see them. Participants described how self-reflective titles not only enabled them to express meaningful aspects of their identities, but also to have their identities understood and affirmed by others (Elsbach, 2003). As a wish manager articulated:

When I tell people [my title], they say, "That's so you—it fits you so well." You fit right in there . . . It makes you want to come into work . . . If [the titles] didn't happen, we wouldn't know each other as well. I don't think it would be as personal for some people . . . It would decrease the morale of the staff. We work really hard . . . [and] I think people would be more burned out.

Similarly, a development team leader explained how using her self-reflective title gave her the chance to bring her personal identity to work, not only her professional identity as a fundraiser, helping her cope with emotional challenges:

My title at first was great and fun and light. I guess now I don't think about it—that is just who I am now . . . It affects my feelings about work because I am appreciative, not all about business all the time . . . I feel like a lot of people have their professional and personal self, but there is more of a mix of the two here at MAW . . . Getting news about our wish kids and their battles or losing their battles . . . is hard to bear for all of us. We try to focus on giving these kids or families a lasting memory and cement some family experiences . . . [this initiative] is what allows us to do what we do.

From the standpoint of cognitive reappraisal theory (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), employees seemed to use the titles as a vehicle for attention deployment (Grandey, 2000; Gross, 1998), shifting their focus to the sources of personal significance that make their stressful jobs worthwhile. Studies suggest that expressing one's identity creates a buffer against stressors (Britt & Bliese, 2003): self-verification can reduce stress by enabling employees to put negative events in context and interpret them in

**TABLE 1**  
**Study 1: Illustrations of Mechanisms**

Mechanism	Quotations
Self-verification	<p>My fun title is “minister of dollars and sense.” I feel special when people see the name; I love being introduced as that. Makes you feel a lot of pride and joy . . . It helps to give me purpose and . . . want to come to work in the morning.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Chief operating officer)</p> <p>We have our fun titles, and everyone has the opportunity to consider their title and come up with something that means something to them . . . My magical title is “lady of laughter and giggles.” The most meaningful and fun thing for me is to hear a child giggle. It brings me up, and makes me feel good, and makes me realize why we are doing this . . . I think it’s unique. I really do feel that having fun and laughing at work is something that needs to happen, and you can’t just sit around and be serious all the time. The work we do is very serious because we have to operate as a business, but you can have fun at the same time. Just having my fun name out there is something that makes me giggle inside and it just adds to that positive environment.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Wish training manager)</p>
Psychological safety	<p>In terms of working with other people in the office, [the titles] create this fun atmosphere, this open atmosphere where you can really talk about different issues. They encourage you to speak up if something’s bothering you, and it gets you on a little bit more of a personal level with other people, in those times when it’s not all about work.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Wish manager)</p> <p>It allows . . . people to feel comfortable with each other. There is not really a hierarchy of staff and we are all the same plane . . . that removes some pressures . . . I just think it allows you more freedom to speak up and not be intimidated by the leadership. You feel more like an equal and that your voice is valued. We are much more willing to listen to each other.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Operations manager)</p>
External rapport	<p>My title is “royal ambassador of really cool kids.” I love it. It makes people smile, and, if not, it will make them wonder—I think it’s unique . . . You had to come up with something about what you do, your personality, and what reflects your job. I like the fact that, when someone new comes into a position, they don’t get the same title—they have to come up with a title of their own. It creates curiosity in the recipient of the email and it’s a conversation starter, and it’s clear that we are here to have fun.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Wish services liaison)</p> <p>When you tell other people, they say, “That’s really cool!” I work in such an awesome environment, and, oftentimes, people don’t realize it until they talk with others outside. It lightens up the seriousness of our work, of the children’s conditions . . . One contractor was really influenced by the playfulness of it. He said, “I can’t wait to work with the ‘princess of magical dreams’” and was really enthusiastic. He ended up donating all of his time.</p> <p style="text-align: right;">(Wish manager)</p>

light of their values (Creswell, Welch, Taylor, Sherman, Gruenewald, & Mann, 2007; Sherman & Cohen, 2006). The manager of operations, who was initially skeptical of the fun titles, described how her title imbues her work with personal meaning, enabling others to understand and appreciate her role and thus helping to stave off emotional exhaustion:

I would describe myself as the “accountant type,” where, if something sounds or seems silly to me, then I wouldn’t be comfortable with that. But being considered “keeper of keys and grounds” doesn’t sound silly to me. It gives a pretty good visual of

what I do. It is actually the title of Hagrid from *Harry Potter* and I love those stories so it has a little extra meaning for me . . . [The titles] allow staff to get to know each other better. If we didn’t have [them], I think we would have higher staff turnover . . . people would get burned out.

**Identity accommodation: The psychological safety mechanism.** Whereas employees described how self-verification serves an intrapersonal function in enabling them to deploy their attention to the meaningful elements of stressful work, employees also expressed that their self-reflective job titles served an interpersonal function. In particular, em-

ployees described how the titles changed their perceptions of the relational climate inside the organization to accommodate freer information sharing. Specifically, our interviews suggested that, for many employees (77%), the titles created a sense of psychological safety to express their identities. Psychological safety is the degree to which employees feel comfortable taking interpersonal risks (Edmondson, 1999).

Midwest employees' accounts suggested that self-reflective titles can enhance feelings of psychological safety by breaking down status barriers. They described how creating and using a self-reflective title opens the door for colleagues to view one another as human beings, not merely role occupants. By displaying one's unique values, a self-reflective title signals a willingness to be vulnerable, encouraging others to view the titleholder as an equal who is fallible and forgivable. In turn, these feelings of psychological safety may allow employees to feel comfortable seeking help and support from others (Edmondson, 1999; Tynan, 2005), which is known to be an important strategy for gaining valuable resources and thus mitigating exhaustion (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004; Le Blanc, Hox, Schaufeli, & Taris, 2007). The CEO provided insight into how self-reflective titles helped foster psychological safety by downplaying hierarchical differences between employees, and how these feelings of comfort mitigate emotional exhaustion:

Every single solitary person on the planet has a story, and [the titles] help you keep that in perspective, because everybody has something . . . It humanizes everyone . . . [and] makes people more comfortable . . . It removes some of the power—it's no longer "I'm up here, you're down there." It breaks down barriers and allows a genuine conversation . . . [and] creates a warm, welcoming, loving environment for everybody so that people feel comfortable . . . What we're doing is so intense . . . you have to create a fun and supportive place for people to feel comfortable so that when they're faced with a tragic situation, they can deal with it.

Employees described how self-reflective titles send a symbolic message that it is safe to take interpersonal risks and open up in sharing their problems with one another, easing stress within the organization. For example, one employee remarked that, "Having permission to take up fun titles . . . It helps to feel more at ease with other coworkers [by] allowing some barriers to be broken . . . that environment encourages people to lay their difficulties

on the table and try to work things out together." A volunteer services manager elaborated:

At first, it took a little while to get used to, coming from a much more business-oriented nonprofit. After I got used to the title, I really appreciated it . . . [it] reminds you that the environment is not so strict . . . The titles have a way of affecting everyone's thought process—people are much more open to ideas . . . It keeps the stress level lower than what it could be—makes it much easier to interact with one another and connect due to everyone being open-minded.

**Identity utilization: The external rapport mechanism.** Whereas employees' descriptions of the self-verification and psychological safety mechanisms were about expressing one's identity within the organization, their descriptions of the external rapport mechanism were about expressing—and utilizing—one's identity in initial interactions with those outside the organization. In particular, most participants (85%) mentioned the self-reflective titles facilitating rapport—defined as the experience of smooth, positive interactions with others (Bernieri, Gillis, Davis, & Grahe, 1996)—by enabling them to express their identities in ways that created enjoyable interactions with outsiders. As the CFO explained, a self-reflective title serves as "an icebreaker for people we meet; it opens up dialogue."

Employees described how increased external rapport in turn helped to reduce their emotional exhaustion. To create joy for wish children and families, employees felt obligated to put on a smile even when they were stressed, depressed, sad, grieving, or dealing with frustrating situations. The rapport cultivated by self-reflective titles helped employees to feel more enthusiastic about their external interactions, which made these interactions more authentic and less stressful. As a wish manager articulated:

We have some magic inside of us. I think having the fun titles gives us an outlet for that. There's nothing better to meet someone new and say, "I'm a wish manager, also known as a fairy tale pixie." It opens up conversation, "Oh, what does a fairy tale pixie do?" Sometimes vendors that I work with to try to get donations will see it in my email and write, "I hope your wings don't get wet, Pixie—it's raining." It gives you a little me pick-me-up when you hear that; it's fun, unexpected, and enjoyable.

In essence, employees described the self-reflective titles as useful in the early phases of interactions with outsiders, enabling them to inject their

identities in a more personal way, which establishes a smoother, stronger, and more pleasant dynamic for the remainder of the interaction. A development team leader explained:

The title is like you can almost have a little superhero cape on and it disarms people when they hear these titles. Most people love to hear these titles, it's fun, different, and magic to these people—they want to be a part of it. It empowers people to have fun and to translate that fun to the community . . . it just makes [work] easier and cushions the blow a little bit and keeps things inspiring.

Similarly, a training manager observed that “just having my name out there,” for people to see, “makes me laugh throughout the day.” The CEO described how self-reflective titles help foster external rapport not only for employees, but also for her, making her own interactions with outsiders less stressful and more enjoyable:

Some people thought the titles were too silly. But when they get really positive responses from cards and emails, other people saying “We want a title, too,” they get really excited. It reinforces it. I can't tell you how many of our families love it. The CFO, his title is 'king of cashola.' If you're a fundraiser, people know you're asking for money, so why not have it? I find that people in business love it . . . They make people smile . . . I've used my title in a media interview. When someone asks me, “As president and CEO of the Make-A-Wish Foundation, how do you feel about this?”, I say, “Yes, but I'm also known as the 'fairy godmother of wishes.’” It opens the door for conversation—“really, tell me more?” It allows a way to engage. It breaks the ice, and it elicits a positive response . . . It helps you start the conversation.

The connection between external rapport and reduced emotional exhaustion that emerged in our data is congruent with evidence that positive reactions from others can reduce strain (Côté, 2005; Gremler & Gwinner, 2000). By eliciting enthusiasm from wish families, donors, and business partners, the self-reflective titles appeared to make interactions with outsiders less stressful and more enjoyable. As a wish manager conveyed, sharing her title with outsiders naturally “puts a smile on your face and a twinkle in your eye.”

Taken together, the insights gleaned from this qualitative study suggest that self-verification, psychological safety, and external rapport each help explain how self-reflective titles reduce emotional exhaustion. Thus, in the language of quantitative research, we propose:

*Proposition 2. The effect of self-reflective job titles on emotional exhaustion is partially mediated by (a) self-verification, (b) psychological safety, and (c) external rapport.*

## Summary and Limitations

Our qualitative research with MAW employees revealed three psychological mechanisms through which employees described self-reflective job titles as reducing their emotional exhaustion. Although these mechanisms are grounded in the experiences of employees in an extremely emotional setting, this initial investigation is subject to several limitations that make our qualitative data better suited to building theory than testing theory. First, to develop our model, we relied on employees' own accounts of exhaustion being influenced by the titles, which may indicate their lay theories without corresponding to how their experiences actually unfold. To provide a stringent empirical test of the conceptual model and support causal inferences, it is ideal to use experimental data with validated measures of key variables at multiple points in time and multiple control groups (Cook & Campbell, 1979).

Second, because the Make-A-Wish Foundation represents an extreme environment in terms of coping and burnout, we wanted to examine the generalizability of the results in another human service environment. Moreover, the benefits articulated by employees may be circumscribed to settings in which interactions with children, or the need for playfulness, are defining features of the work. To ascertain whether the effects of self-reflective titles generalize to employees' experiences in other settings where playfulness is not emphasized, and to examine the relative effects of the mediating variables in a more controlled statistical investigation, we collected quantitative data in a more conventional organizational context.

## STUDY 2: THEORY TESTING WITH QUANTITATIVE DATA

In this study, we sought to test the conceptual framework that we developed with our qualitative research, while addressing some of the key limitations of Study 1. Our aim was to close the loop in full-cycle research (Chatman & Flynn, 2005; Cialdini, 1980; Fine & Elsbach, 2000) by moving from theory building to theory testing. We designed a quasi-experiment to examine our propositions in

the context of a health care system. We invited employees at the experimental sites to develop self-reflective titles, while employees at pure control sites had no intervention at all, and employees at a third set of control sites experienced an alternative intervention. At all sites, we measured emotional exhaustion, self-verification, psychological safety, and external rapport in surveys before and after the interventions.

## Method

**Participants, design, and procedures.** To examine self-reflective titles as an intervention that could reduce emotional exhaustion, it was necessary to start with a context in which employees were likely to experience sufficiently high baseline levels of exhaustion to prevent floor effects from masking changes. We again focused on a human and social service setting, since these occupations have high rates of emotional exhaustion due to frequent, emotionally intense interactions with clients (Maslach et al., 2001). We selected a health care system in the southeast of the U.S.A., as extensive research literature shows that emotional exhaustion is particularly acute in hospital settings (e.g., Duquette, K erouac, Sandhu, & Beaudet, 1994; Prins, Gazendam-Donofrio, Tubben, van der Heijden, van de Wiel, & Hoekstra-Weebers, 2007).

Working with senior managers, we identified nine different research sites within the organization, constituting 224 potential participants. We sent an online survey measuring our focal variables to all prospective participants, using self-generated identification codes (Yurek, Vasey, & Havens, 2008). These codes allowed us to link participants' pretest and posttest responses, but conferred anonymity by providing no identifying information that could trace responses back to participants, which increases the probability of honest responses (Kearney, Hopkins, Mauss, & Weisheit, 1984). We received a total of 169 completed surveys, for an initial response rate of 75%.

At that point, we randomly divided the sites into three different groups, seeking to achieve approximately equal numbers of potential participants in each group. To do so, we used a stratified random assignment procedure in which we listed the nine sites in order from largest to smallest, and then alternated the three conditions so that each condition included multiple sites and similar numbers of potential participants, subject to proximity between sites so that all participants could attend a

single session in each of the two planned treatment groups. To prevent treatment implementation threats such as diffusion and rivalry (Cook & Campbell, 1979), we selected sites at which participants had no contact with sites in other treatment conditions. We assigned three sites ( $n = 55$ ) to the experimental group to create self-reflective job titles, and we assigned four sites ( $n = 64$ ) to serve as the pure control group. The remaining two sites ( $n = 50$ ) served as a nonequivalent control group. All three conditions involved family practices that featured similar jobs and offered a wide range of services to comparable patient groups, including urgent and acute care, primary care, infant, pediatric and geriatric care, chronic disease management, gynecological care, sports medicine, and minor surgery.

In the experimental group, two members of the research team gave a 10-minute presentation about the use of self-reflective job titles at the Make-A-Wish Foundation and other organizations, and then invited employees to begin brainstorming about possibilities for their own titles. Some representative examples included: germ slayer (physician who deals with infectious diseases), quick shot (nurse who gives allergy shots to children), bone seeker (x-ray technician), physical fitter (scheduling assistant), and connector (patient services representative). We then facilitated a discussion about when and how it might be appropriate to use the titles in interactions with coworkers and patients. The new self-reflective titles would be used as employees felt was appropriate, in addition to keeping their existing titles—which they also could use as they deemed appropriate.

We included a nonequivalent control group to strengthen our design by ruling out a key rival explanation for effects that might be observed within the self-reflective titles group. Specifically, the internal validity of quasi-experimental designs is often threatened by the fact that treatment and pure control groups differ not only in terms of the content of the intervention, but also the process of carrying out the intervention, which makes it difficult to identify the causal ingredients responsible for observed effects (Cook & Campbell, 1979; Grant & Wall, 2009). As implied by early research on the Hawthorne effect (Roethlisberger & Dickson, 1939), it is possible that attention from managers and researchers, not the titles themselves, would affect employees' experiences. To address this threat to internal validity, we designed an alternative intervention in which employees received equivalent

amounts of time and attention from managers and researchers, but did not create self-reflective titles. Thus, in both treatment groups, two senior managers invited employees from participating sites to a conference room over a meal, where the researchers conducted an hour-long session. The interventions occurred on the same day, and participants in each group did not know about the design or the other intervention.

In the nonequivalent control group, the same two members of the research team invited employees to conduct a role-play exercise that mirrored three key features of the titles workshop: relevance to a health care setting, an engaging, entertaining atmosphere, and actionable ideas to take back to work. Participants divided into pairs and conducted the “Carolina Blue Tree” negotiation developed by Robert Adler (2007). Both participants need chemicals from a rare tree to save children’s lives, and most pairs agreed to split the trees so that each participant could save half of their children. Only a few pairs arrived at the solution: one needs chemicals that are found in the roots of the trees, whereas the other needs chemicals from the leaves, so they can save everyone.

We discussed why people often fail to express which part of the tree they need and fail to ask what their counterparts need: they assume that their counterparts have the exact same interests as their own. Then, we facilitated an interactive dialogue about steps that participants could take to facilitate the discovery of hidden and shared interests at the hospital. Among the ideas generated were encouraging people to introduce themselves by describing an interesting personal detail or hobby, holding more icebreaker events at team-building sessions, and using the tree exercise itself at these sessions. Afterward, several employees inquired about running this exercise in their own departments, and we made it available to all attendees. The atmosphere was sufficiently entertaining that our key liaison at the hospital, who attended the titles workshop earlier in the day, remarked that this group appeared more interested in the session and might benefit more than the titles group. In summary, this workshop created a fair comparison (Cooper & Richardson, 1986) by providing equal contact with managers and researchers, an entertaining experience, and concrete steps to take upon returning to work, but no opportunity to create self-reflective titles. In the pure control group, employees were not contacted for a workshop.

Five weeks after the interventions, we sent another online survey to all 169 employees who participated in the first survey. We selected this time interval of five weeks for two reasons. First, it was a sufficiently long period of time to rule out the fadeout effects of 1–3 weeks that are common in quasi-experiments on reducing emotional exhaustion (e.g., Westman & Eden, 1997). Second, it was a sufficiently short period of time to prevent a large number of history threats—alternative interventions or events occurring in one group but not another—from limiting the internal validity of our design (Cook & Campbell, 1979).

We received Time 2 survey responses from 121 participants. However, 37 surveys were incomplete—participants did not provide identification codes or respond to our key variables—and we were unable to match the self-generated identification codes of 8 participants across the two points in time. This resulted in a final sample of 76 participants (45% response rate), which comprised 31 employees in the job titles group, 18 in the pure control group, and 27 in the nonequivalent control group. Eighty-nine percent of participants were female, with a median age range of 35–39, an average tenure in the organization of 5.10 years ( $SD = 3.58$ ) and in their current jobs of 3.43 years ( $SD = 3.15$ ), with an average workweek of 42 hours ( $SD = 4.78$ ). They worked as patient services representatives (37%), medical technicians and assistants (21%), account supervisors and administrative support employees (16%), nurses (11%), physicians (10%), and managers (4%).

**Measures.** We assessed all of our variables in both the pretest and posttest surveys. We measured emotional exhaustion with the Maslach Burnout Inventory (Maslach & Jackson, 1981), which included items such as “I feel burned out from my work” and “I feel emotionally drained from my work” ( $T1 \alpha = .90$ ,  $T2 \alpha = .94$ ). We measured self-verification with the scale developed by Wiessenfeld, Swann, Brockner, and Bartel (2007), including items such as “I feel that people at work understand who I am” and “In this organization, other people see me as I see myself” ( $T1 \alpha = .81$ ,  $T2 \alpha = .81$ ). We measured psychological safety with Edmondson’s (1999) scale, including items such as “People in this organization sometimes reject me for being different” (reverse-coded) and “In working with other people in this organization, my unique skills and talents are valued and utilized” ( $T1 \alpha = .79$ ,  $T2 \alpha = .83$ ). We measured external rapport with items adapted from Bernieri et al.

(1996), including “I have excellent rapport with patients” and “I make a great first impression on patients” ( $T1 \alpha = .91$ ,  $T2 \alpha = .90$ ).

At the end of the posttest survey, we presented open-ended questions to employees in the self-reflective titles group, asking if they use their titles, how they feel about them, and how others react. In total, 61% of these employees described specific ways in which they used their titles, indicating that the titles training lasted at least six weeks after employees generated their titles. Employees reported using their titles in three types of situations: introducing themselves to patients, bonding with coworkers, and defusing stressful situations—such as when a doctor is late, a patient is angry, or a child is nervous about a painful procedure. Representative quotes about title use appear in Figure 2, along with responses that illustrate our mediating mechanisms.

## Results

**Nonresponse bias.** To assess the impact of nonresponse bias, we followed steps recommended by Rogelberg and Stanton (2007). We first conducted an archival analysis by comparing participants who responded only to the first survey with participants who responded to both surveys on our measured

variables. Independent-samples *t*-tests showed that respondents and nonrespondents to the second survey did not differ significantly at pretest in emotional exhaustion ( $t = .20$ , *n.s.*), self-verification ( $t = -.35$ , *n.s.*), psychological safety ( $t = .35$ , *n.s.*), or external rapport ( $t = -1.43$ , *n.s.*). Furthermore, respondents and nonrespondents did not differ significantly in age ( $t = .86$ , *n.s.*), hours worked per week ( $t = -.58$ , *n.s.*), organizational tenure ( $t = 1.26$ , *n.s.*), job tenure ( $t = 1.24$ , *n.s.*), or gender ( $\chi^2 = 2.04$ , *n.s.*). These results cast doubt on the possibility that substantive variables and demographic factors affected response rates.

We then conducted a wave analysis to examine whether participants who responded earlier versus later to the posttest survey differed on any of our substantive variables. This allowed us to assess, for example, whether more emotionally exhausted participants responded more slowly and thus could be predicted to be less likely to respond at all. Our findings showed that time of completion of the posttest survey was not significantly correlated with emotional exhaustion ( $r = .05$ , *n.s.*), self-verification ( $r = .07$ , *n.s.*), psychological safety ( $r = .03$ , *n.s.*), or external rapport ( $r = -.01$ , *n.s.*). Taken together, these results suggest that our substantive variables were unlikely to bias response rates (Rogelberg & Stanton, 2007).

**FIGURE 2**  
Illustrations of Title Use and Mechanisms from Study 2 Qualitative Data

Illustrations of Title Use and Mechanisms from Study 2 Qualitative Data

Title Use	Self-Verification	Psychological Safety	External Rapport
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “In email my signature has my new title. I also talk about it with my patients and peers.”</li> <li>• “I bring it up when I introduce myself to new patients. Occasionally I mention it to the patients I have known for a long time.”</li> <li>• “I use my title when I am actually doing something specifically referring to it.”</li> <li>• “I use my title when I bring the patients back.”</li> <li>• “Most of the time, when the nurses bring the patients down to the waiting room for me they say, [title] will be right with you.’ If not, when they come in I introduce myself and throw it in there.”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “I feel it is true to myself.”</li> <li>• “I love my new title...I think it accurately portrays what I try to do for each patient and at the same time it's quirky like me! Now if only I could get it put on my business cards!”</li> <li>• “It tells people what is important to me outside of the work environment.”</li> <li>• “It relates to my work-life as well as my personal life.”</li> <li>• “Coworkers agree that it suits me very well to what I do and what I am about.”</li> <li>• “It fits my personality and what I do very well.”</li> <li>• “My coworkers can understand why I am so outgoing and always on the run.”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “The patient seems to come back to me with a feeling of confidence that I have some experience and can really help them with whatever their issue may be.”</li> <li>• “This way, everyone is equal.”</li> <li>• “Coworkers respond back to me with a confidence in my ability. They go from thinking I am the new guy with little knowledge and/or ability to help them (because they don't see me as often as the regular staff members) to having a confidence in my ability and knowing that I have the knowledge and am very capable of helping them with anything they need... I have a feeling of confidence when I use it because I do have a unique opportunity in my position... the title I created really encompasses everything about my job and what I can do for our patients in that role.”</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• “When a patient is angry, I use my title to defuse the situation... It makes a good conversation and good rapport.”</li> <li>• “When interacting with patients and coworkers, it helps when the MD is running behind and the patients are upset. The patients will often laugh.”</li> <li>• “I would smile and say, ‘I am the [title]. I have gotten some chuckles and smiles.”</li> </ul>

**Factor structure.** We conducted confirmatory factor analyses of the Time 1 items using EQS Software 6.1 (Bentler, 1995) with maximum likelihood procedures. In light of the small sample size, we used parceling techniques (Bandalos, 2002) for the scales exceeding five items. The four-factor solution achieved good fit with the data,  $\chi^2(48) = 71.10$ , CFI = .95, SRMR = .08, and this four-factor solution was superior to all alternative nested models. All factor loadings were statistically significant, ranging from .79 to .96 for emotional exhaustion, .63 to .79 for self-verification, .69 to .88 for psychological safety, and .75 to .93 for external rapport.

**Main effects.** Means and standard deviations by condition are displayed in Table 2, and correlations across conditions appear in Table 3. Comparing the titles group to the two control groups, a repeated-measures analysis of variance showed significant time  $\times$  condition interactions in predicting emotional exhaustion,  $F(1, 73) = 6.49$ ,  $p < .01$ ; self-verification,  $F(1, 73) = 9.02$ ,  $p < .01$ ; and psychological safety,  $F(1, 73) = 3.84$ ,  $p < .05$ ; but not external rapport,  $F(1, 73) = .26$ , *n.s.* We interpreted the significant interactions by conducting paired-samples *t*-tests within each condition over time. In support of Proposition 1, these analyses showed that employees in the self-reflective titles group decreased significantly in emotional exhaustion,  $t(30) = 2.14$ ,  $p < .05$ , whereas employees in the other two conditions did not show statistically significant changes.

Employees in the self-reflective titles group increased significantly in self-verification,  $t(30) = 2.50$ ,  $p < .05$ , while employees in the other two conditions did not. Similarly, employees in the self-reflective titles group increased significantly in psychological safety,  $t(30) = 2.04$ ,  $p < .05$ , whereas

employees in the other two conditions did not. However, there were no statistically significant changes in external rapport in any of the three conditions. Further, a regression analysis showed that changes in external rapport were not significantly related to changes in emotional exhaustion ( $\beta = -.14$ ). These findings effectively falsify Proposition 2c, since the conditions for mediation hold that the independent variable influences the mediator, which, in turn, is related to the dependent variable.

**Mediation analyses.** We next tested whether the increases in self-verification and psychological safety mediated the decreases in emotional exhaustion in the self-reflective titles condition. We used procedures for testing mediation in longitudinal within-subject designs (Judd, Kenny, & McClelland, 2001). Our previous analyses demonstrated that the independent variable (titles) produced change in the dependent variable (emotional exhaustion) and two of the mediators (self-verification and psychological safety). To complete the test of mediation, it was necessary to meet two additional conditions: changes in the mediators predict changes in the dependent variable while controlling for the independent variable, and, after entering changes in the mediators, the independent variable decreases in significance.

The results of a hierarchical regression analysis appear at the top of Table 4. Increases in both self-verification and psychological safety significantly predicted decreases in emotional exhaustion, and the effect of the titles condition was reduced to non-significance. To confirm that this decrease was statistically significant, we conducted a bootstrap analysis. We constructed bias-corrected confidence intervals by drawing 1,000 random samples with replacement from the full sample.

TABLE 2  
Study 2: Means and Standard Deviations by Condition

Condition	Emotional exhaustion		Self-verification		Psychological safety		External rapport	
	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest	Pretest	Posttest
Self-reflective job titles ( <i>n</i> = 31)	3.02 (1.25)	2.70 (1.43)	5.38 (1.17)	5.69 (1.04)	4.71 (1.32)	4.97 (1.15)	6.40 (.72)	6.26 (.80)
Pure control ( <i>n</i> = 18)	2.80 (1.22)	3.08 (1.19)	5.18 (.92)	4.91 (1.42)	4.88 (.78)	4.70 (1.15)	5.90 (.86)	5.69 (1.03)
Nonequivalent control ( <i>n</i> = 27)	2.94 (1.25)	3.11 (1.29)	5.30 (1.24)	5.08 (1.28)	5.13 (1.11)	5.10 (1.12)	6.16 (.69)	5.97 (.88)

Note. Standard deviations are in parentheses.

**TABLE 3**  
**Study 2: Correlations across Conditions**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
1. Emotional exhaustion, Time 1	(.90)							
2. Self-verification, Time 1	-.52	(.81)						
3. Psychological safety, Time 1	-.67	.62	(.79)					
4. External rapport, Time 1	-.10	.31	.07	(.91)				
5. Emotional exhaustion, Time 2	.76	-.59	-.54	-.13	(.94)			
6. Self-verification, Time 2	-.24	.70	.40	.32	-.51	(.81)		
7. Psychological safety, Time 2	-.57	.72	.77	.17	-.68	.59	(.83)	
8. External rapport, Time 2	.01	.24	.05	.80	-.13	.33	.13	(.90)

Notes.  $r > |.23|$ ,  $p < .05$ ,  $r > |.29|$ ,  $p < .01$ ,  $r > |.39|$ ,  $p < .001$ .

Mediation occurs when an indirect effect differs significantly from zero (Shrout & Bolger, 2002), which was the case for both self-verification (95% CI [-.01, -.16]) and psychological safety (95% CI [-.01, -.20]). These results support Propositions 2a and 2b: self-verification and psychological safety each partially mediated the effects of self-reflective job titles on emotional exhaustion.

One limitation of the Judd et al. (2001) approach is that it relies on difference scores, which suffer from statistical flaws (Edwards, 1995). To assess the robustness of our mediation results, we conducted additional analyses as a robustness check. Instead of using changes in each variable, we entered posttest emotional exhaustion as the dependent variable, controlled for pretest emotional exhaustion, and then examined whether posttest self-verification and psychological safety mediated the effects. The results of this analysis appear at the bottom of Table 4. Mirroring the results

from the previous analyses, posttest self-verification and psychological safety were significant predictors of posttest emotional exhaustion (even after controlling for pretest emotional exhaustion), and controlling for the mediators reduced the effect of the self-reflective titles condition to non-significance. A bootstrap analysis showed that the bias-corrected 95% confidence intervals excluded zero for both self-verification [-.01, -.17] and psychological safety [-.01, -.14]. These results corroborate self-verification and psychological safety as mediators of the effects of self-reflective job titles on emotional exhaustion.

## Discussion

The results from this quasi-experiment provide initial support for the majority of our propositions, and suggest that the linkage between self-reflective titles and emotional exhaustion generalizes beyond

**TABLE 4**  
**Study 2: Hierarchical Regression Analyses**

	Step 1				Step 2			
	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>
<b>DV: Change in emotional exhaustion</b>								
Self-reflective titles condition (1 = yes, 0 = no)	-.26	.10	-.30	-2.55*	-.13	.13	-.14	.97
Changes in self-verification					-.21	.10	-.22	-1.99*
Change in psychological safety					-.46	.12	-.41	-3.81***
<b>DV: Posttest emotional exhaustion</b>								
Pretest emotional exhaustion	.84	.08	.77	10.11***	.65	.09	.60	7.34***
Self-reflective titles condition (1 = yes, 0 = no)	-.25	.10	-.19	-2.49*	-.17	.09	-.13	-1.84
Posttest self-verification					-.19	.10	-.18	-1.99*
Posttest psychological safety					-.28	.12	-.24	-2.38*

Notes. In the first model predicting change scores, the addition of the two mediators in Step 2 increased variance explained by 23% from  $R^2 = .09$  to  $R^2 = .32$ ,  $F(2, 64) = 10.96$ ,  $p < .001$ . In the second model predicting posttest emotional exhaustion, the addition of the two mediators in Step 2 increased variance explained by 10% from  $R^2 = .62$  to  $R^2 = .72$ ,  $F(2, 63) = 11.74$ ,  $p < .001$ .

\*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

our qualitative results in a new, less extreme context. Health care employees who created self-reflective job titles felt less emotionally exhausted five weeks later, while employees in a pure control group and those who participated in an alternative exercise did not. The decreases in emotional exhaustion were mediated by increases in employees' perceptions of self-verification and psychological safety.

In contrast, self-reflective titles did not influence employees' perceptions of external rapport. It is possible that self-reflective titles increase rapport in initial interactions, but that the overall effects on rapport are canceled out by more extended interactions. Alternatively, since the qualitative comments suggested that some employees experienced the titles as building rapport, the null effects may be an artifact of the higher starting level of rapport among employees in the self-reflective titles group (see Table 2), which might have resulted in ceiling effects that left little room for improvement. It is also plausible that employees did not use their titles frequently enough with external stakeholders to build rapport, or that five weeks was not enough time to develop sufficient comfort with using their titles to reap the potential rapport benefits. Further, since it is possible that patients would have been more aware of (or more likely to report) the rapport created by the titles than employees themselves, future research should triangulate self-reports with patient ratings. Researchers may even code rapport based on videotaping employees sharing their self-reflective titles in some interactions but not others.

## GENERAL DISCUSSION

Observing and investigating one service organization's unexpected use of job titles as a vehicle for self-expression opened our eyes to a new way of seeing job titles and illuminated why self-reflective titles might reduce emotional exhaustion. Transferring these insights to a different organization, our quasi-experiment demonstrated that self-reflective titles can reduce emotional exhaustion by fostering perceptions of self-verification and psychological safety. These findings have implications for theory and research on job titles, identity, and emotional exhaustion.

### Theoretical Implications

Rather than viewing titles solely as sources and reflections of formality and rigidity (Baron &

Bielby, 1986) or mechanisms of bureaucratic control (Dreyfuss, 1968; Strang & Baron, 1990), our research suggests that titles can be vehicles for agency, creativity, and coping. Although organizational scholars have recognized the presence of idiosyncratic jobs (Miner, 1987) and idiosyncratic employment relationships (Rousseau et al., 2006), they have sparsely considered the possibility that one's job title can be personalized in ways that are psychologically beneficial. Interestingly, these effects can be created while leaving the existing job title structure intact, thereby preserving the strategic benefits of job titles in hiring and compensation.

As organizations seek to create consistency between employees, employees are at risk of losing the "me" within the "we" (Kreiner et al., 2006; Pratt, 2000). To preserve their identities, employees often seek a sense of optimal distinctiveness, striving to find a balance between fitting in and standing out by expressing unique features of their self-concepts (Brewer, 2009; Kreiner et al., 2006). Past research on how employees achieve optimal distinctiveness has focused primarily on how affiliating with distinctive groups allows employees to feel integrated within the group and differentiated from other groups (Brewer, 2009; Hornsey & Jetten, 2004)—but these studies have overlooked steps that employees can take to achieve optimal distinctiveness when their group memberships are relatively fixed. Our research suggests that self-reflective job titles may be an alternative pathway to optimal distinctiveness. In terms of differentiation, a self-reflective title allows employees to stand out and be verified by others as distinctive around self-identities that they personally value. In terms of integration, by increasing employees' feelings of self-verification and psychological safety, a self-reflective title may foster a sense of group acceptance, build rapport, and strengthen bonds. Our research thereby identifies a novel perspective on how employees can navigate optimal distinctiveness.

In doing so, our research provides new insights into how organizations can creatively manage the tension between their objectives of social control and employees' desires for self-expression. Previous work has largely focused on documenting the ways in which organizations constrain self-expression by creating identity threats, deficits, and violations (Pratt, 2000; Pratt et al., 2006) that can lead to employee rebellion (Elsbach, 2003). While documenting the "dark side" of the identity tug of war clearly is useful, it is both theoretically and practically important to understand how organizations

can work with employees to facilitate identity expression, and, thus, reduce emotional exhaustion. We suggest that self-reflective job titles may be an important form of co-construction that exists at the intersection of top-down organizational control of employees' identities and bottom-up self-expression by employees.

Whereas researchers have traditionally focused on reducing emotional exhaustion by changing the organizational context or changing the individual (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004; Maslach et al., 2001), a co-construction approach starts from the premise that organizations and employees can jointly create toolkits for identity expression. Self-reflective job titles may serve as one of these toolkits. In our research, the role of the organization was to create and legitimize personalized job titles from the top down, and the role of employees was to customize more self-expressive job titles from the bottom up. Put differently, job titles can serve as a type of menu from which employees can select and combine options to construct and express their identities (Pratt et al., 2006; Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003).

As such, our research shows how employees' identity expression can be a joint function of the organization providing a useful vehicle and employees utilizing this vehicle in ways that engage personally meaningful parts of their self-concepts within the standards of their social environment. In contrast to the dominant emphasis on how organizations create strong cultures, norms, and rules that suppress, threaten, and transform employees' identities (e.g., Elsbach, 2003; Kahn, 1990; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1996; Pratt, 2000; Pratt et al., 2006), our research advances toward an understanding of how organizations and employees can jointly participate in identity work—the process of actively constructing and maintaining a positive identity (e.g., Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010).

### Limitations and Future Directions

Our research is subject to several limitations that suggest opportunities for future inquiry.

**Outcomes and generalizability.** In both studies, since we relied heavily on self-report data, it remains to be seen whether self-reflective titles have meaningful effects on titleholders' behaviors, as well as the reactions of customers, patients, and other service recipients (see Elsbach, 2004). We studied human service organizations because emo-

tional exhaustion is common therein, but this focus raises questions about the generalizability of our findings to other settings (e.g., manufacturing and knowledge work). It is interesting that, in fact, many of our respondents were not customer-facing, even though they were in service organizations (e.g., accountants, lawyers, human resource managers, etc.). It also is interesting that the conceptual mechanism that represents external service work (building rapport) was not a significant mediator of emotional exhaustion. This null result suggests that the value of self-reflective titles transcends customer-facing work and service roles, since the effects appear to emanate from inside employees and internal relationships. In general, future research is needed to examine the extent to which employees in other industries benefit from self-reflective titles.

The generalizability of the results can also be questioned because the majority of the participants in both studies were female, although anecdotally it is worth noting that the male Midwest CFO and several male physicians and patient services representatives reported that their titles improved their working conditions. Still, in light of evidence that men tend to be more status conscious (Buss, 1995; Eagly & Wood, 1999), as well as less comfortable expressing emotions in the workplace (Martin, Knopoff, & Beckman, 1998), future research may reveal that gender moderates the effects of self-reflective titles. Furthermore, research may show that dimensions of national culture, such as power distance or collectivism, moderates the positive effects of self-reflective title initiatives. Specifically, some cultures may make internal and external customers less receptive to self-reflective titles, or may make job incumbents less likely to use or even develop self-reflective titles in the first place.

**Mechanisms.** Unmeasured variables might help explain the effects that emerged. For example, the titles intervention may have increased employees' positive emotions or perceptions of autonomy. Indeed, it is plausible that any initiative that increases positive affect throughout the organization would decrease emotional exhaustion. Although many employees created self-reflective titles that were not especially joyous or humorous (especially in Study 2), in both settings, there were employees who described the titles initiative as being fun and creating humor. Thus, we cannot rule out the possibility that increased positive affect may be necessary for employees to pursue self-verification and feel more psychologically safe—or that similar ini-

tatives that increase fun in one's daily work would have produced this same result.

Toward this end, future studies should examine the active ingredients in more detail by comparing serious and playful self-reflective titles, and by examining whether similar effects emerge for other self-expressive artifacts, such as personalized office décor (Elsbach, 2003). Indeed, although self-reflective job titles represent one co-construction vehicle for organizations and employees to jointly mold and create toolkits for identity expression, other vehicles may accomplish this goal. For example, Zappos.com explicitly encourages call center employees to customize their workspaces, be themselves, have fun at work, and use their best judgment when serving customers, instead of following scripts (Hsieh, 2010). The goal was to transform the typically stressful, high-turnover call center environment into a motivating, fun workplace full of self-expression and top-notch customer service. Future research may reveal other co-construction toolkits that firms use to encourage employees to personalize and express their identities, while solving organizational problems (Swidler, 1986: 273).

**Causality.** While our experimental design permits inferences about causality, it should be noted that individual participants were not randomly assigned to conditions in our experiment. Although the sites were arbitrarily assigned to conditions, it is possible that these sites possessed other characteristics that might lead to different results in other settings. Further, because our design was single-blind rather than double-blind, we cannot rule out experimental arrangements threats to external validity (Cook & Campbell, 1979). To assess whether researcher biases and enthusiasm affected buy-in or commitment to the titles, or improved psychological reactions to the titles, we recommend that future studies use double-blind designs in which workshop coordinators are not aware of the propositions. In addition, the response rate to the posttest survey was noticeably lower in the pure control group than the two treatment groups. One explanation is that the pure control group was the only condition in which employees received no direct benefits from participating after the survey: they did not attend a workshop, have a free meal, interact with the researchers, or have dialogue with their colleagues on work time. Future research should include more incentives for responding and compare the effects of self-reflective titles with other structured, practical interventions.

**Leader support.** In both studies, leaders encouraged the use of self-reflective titles, raising unanswered questions about whether the effects would change in the absence of top-down support. Although, of course, all interventions are influenced by manager support (Eden, 2003), and although managerial support was not enough to reduce emotional exhaustion in our nonequivalent control group, it nevertheless will be critical for future research to explore how employees experience self-reflective titles when they are not encouraged by leaders who create their own titles. The openness of organizational cultures and the norms in different industries also may place boundaries on the observed effects. Furthermore, because employees in both of our studies interacted with colleagues who were also generating self-reflective titles, we are not able to address whether the effects hinge on developing contagious emotions (Barsade, 2002) and energy around the titles. A supportive climate may be necessary for the titles to serve self-verifying functions and increase perceptions of psychological safety, and the titles may then contribute to further strengthening the climate.

**Identity.** Across our two studies, there was a noticeable difference in the identity level at which employees located their titles. At MAW, since the titles initiative was introduced by the CEO and embraced across the chapter, employees viewed it as creating a distinctive signal about the organization's collective identity. A wish coordinator exclaimed, "Gosh, I can't think of any other foundation that has something like this," and a development manager told us that the primary purpose of the titles lies in "showing that what we do is enjoyable, that we take pride in working for a pediatric charity. It's something that sets us aside. I remember telling my friends about it." In contrast, at the hospital, not all sites were involved, there was less support from senior leaders, and employees had more discretion about whether or not to create and use their titles. As a result, hospital employees appeared to connect their titles to individual values without viewing the organization's identity differently, and so future research should examine the effects of individual versus collective adoption of personalized titles.

**The dark sides of self-reflective titles.** There may be negative aspects of self-reflective titles that were not captured by our research. For example, creating unprofessional titles, or using them in tense situations or with unreceptive audiences, runs the risk of threatening both employees' images

and the employer's brand. Similarly, using self-aggrandizing titles, such as when Steve Jobs introduced himself as the "chief know-it-all" at Apple, has the potential to harm reputations and relationships—especially if the responsibilities implied by the titles exceed the actual roles and capabilities of the individuals using them. Self-reflective titles may also elicit negative reactions when they fail to match others' views and expectations of the job. Given the importance of job titles for creating teams that must develop trust very quickly to react in stressful situations (e.g., Klein et al., 2006), self-reflective titles could be damaging within the context of action teams.

Most disconcertingly, from a critical theory perspective, managers may use self-reflective titles as devices to manipulate employees into thinking more positively about unjust, unsafe, or otherwise adverse job conditions (Fineman, 2006). Our personal interpretation is that the organizations we investigated offered a voluntary opportunity to revise their titles because they wanted to help employees express their personal identities. However, it is possible that organizational leaders could tempt employees with the opportunity to personalize their title and their role as a way to trick them into bringing more of their personal energy and identity into the workplace (Fineman, 2006). It is also possible that some leaders invite creativity, then reject employees' ideas and manipulate them into accepting titles that only benefit the organization. If employees are initially cynical, they may rebel by generating titles that display negative job attitudes or reflect poorly on the organization. If employees are required to change these titles, a vicious cycle of increasing cynicism and emotional exhaustion may ensue. We encourage researchers to study these sharper edges of self-reflective titles.

To gain insight into these issues and their implications for future research, we examined the qualitative comments from the hospital employees who created self-reflective job titles in Study 2. Although the majority of employees in this study (61%) reported using their self-reflective job titles, a substantial minority (39%) did not. One employee wrote, "I don't use my nickname, I prefer to have patients address me by my real name." Another expressed ambivalence, indicating that, after six weeks, "I am still trying to decide for sure what it will be and if I am interested in doing this." Others stated that, "I do not think everyone is on board with this program, so I kind of feel silly," and "Truthfully, I have rarely used it."

Even those who reported using their titles chose particular times and places to present them. In the hospital, employees developed heuristics about appropriate situations, roles, and contexts in which to disclose versus withhold their titles. For example, one participant wrote, "As a physician and a female, I feel less inclined to have another title other than MD/doctor. I personally have been told that I look young (even though I am in my forties). I think this is not such a great idea for me to have a different title other than doctor with patients." These comments echoed some of those we heard in our original study at MAW. For example, a volunteer services manager explained that the titles can "make us look less than professional, when viewed from the outside. People can be taken aback by the ways we operate versus the way a [typical] organization works." A regional director mentioned "a donor who didn't really get it: 'I don't know that you guys should be doing that.'" Another was "working with the national office in conjunction with an attorney, who said, 'Before I forward your document on, I'm going to take out your fun title.' There are people you meet who want to be all about business."

MAW employees also suggested that self-reflective titles might be more appropriate in some organizations than in others. They recommended self-reflective titles in two types of settings: youth-driven organizations, especially in public-facing roles, and emotionally challenging contexts in which icebreakers are needed. Employees consistently questioned how titles would play out in highly professionalized industries and organizations, such as banks or law and accounting firms. We also observed this distinction when we compared the titles created at MAW and the hospital that we studied. In congruence with the MAW mission of bringing hope, strength, and joy to children, MAW employees intentionally created titles that were playful, such as "king of cashola" and the "royal ambassador of really cool kids." At the hospital, where employees placed greater emphasis on seriousness and interacted with more stakeholders who did not expect fun, employees were more likely to create self-reflective titles that expressed core values without as much humor, such as "germ slayer" and "quick shot."

**Sustainability.** It is interesting to consider how long the effects of self-reflective titles might last. Introducing oneself with a new title may wear off after a few months—particularly with internal customers who have become accustomed to the self-

reflective title. On the other hand, it is important to note that self-reflective titles do not need to be “surprising” or “humorous” in order for them to add substantial value as a vehicle for self-expression and creating greater psychological safety. Moreover, to the extent that an employee’s self-expressive title wears thin or begins to lose its beneficial effects after some months or years, it may be possible to change it, as the backbone of the formal titles and job structure still exists. In this sense, a self-reflective title is a temporary, self-constructed badge that allows employees to consider and then highlight the unique value they believe they add to the organization, which can be flexible and need not hinge on novelty or humor.

To explore the issue of sustainability, we conducted new interviews with four different MAW employees six years after our original MAW study. The timing was opportune, as the original CEO who introduced and championed the titles had left two and a half years earlier, and a new CEO and COO had taken over since then. The new leader chose to continue the initiative, but placed less emphasis on all employees creating their own titles. To explore how reactions to the titles changed over time, we selected two employees who had been at MAW since the titles were originally introduced. We asked these employees to comment on how the use and experience of titles changed after the original CEO’s departure. Then, we interviewed two newer employees to explore whether reactions to the titles were different among employees who did not learn about them from a transformational leader.

A fundraiser (whom we interviewed six years earlier) felt that the CEO’s departure did not have a discernible impact on titles:

They’re still very much part of everybody’s signature lines and business cards . . . It serves as a great icebreaker. A lot of times, we’ll be in a business meeting, talking about ways they can engage their employees, sponsor an event, and we’ll hand out business cards. Suddenly, the tone of the meeting completely changes.

When we asked her whether the titles initiative would have launched as effectively with a different CEO at the helm, she said: “It doesn’t take a charismatic leader to come up with something like this. It’s a very simple idea, and, once it’s introduced, it takes on a life of its own.” A wish coordinator conveyed a similar message:

After [the CEO] left, I don’t think anybody ever thought about not having a fun title. I don’t think that crossed anybody’s mind at all. Everybody was in the same boat that I am: it’s always been taken in by others very well, and we’ve gotten a good response to our titles.

A development manager who arrived after the original CEO left highlighted the same benefits that we observed in our original study, pointing to the reduction of stress, a chance to self-verify, and the creation of psychological safety and external rapport:

It’s helpful to break the ice. It takes a little bit of the pressure off of you if you’re looking for a way to open up a conversation, especially in a public speaking setting. It breaks down these barriers and gives you something to talk about. I bring it up if I feel like I’m having trouble expressing what we do, and what it is to work here. I also took it as an opportunity to talk to my new coworkers.

While the benefits of self-reflective titles appeared to last at MAW—including for some time after the charismatic champion left the organization—future research in other contexts is needed to more fully understand the temporal dynamics and boundary conditions of self-reflective titles. If the psychological effects of self-reflective titles do fade over time, it would be intriguing to explore whether generating a new title can sustain the benefits, or whether the novelty of creating and using the title itself—rather than the content—wears off.

## Practical Implications and Conclusion

Our findings highlight a novel, practical process that enables employees to play an active role in reducing their own emotional exhaustion. Whereas existing burnout interventions have tended to focus on expensive top-down changes (Halbesleben & Buckley, 2004; Le Blanc et al., 2007), our research suggests that, when leaders encourage employees to reflect on—and then reflect out—their unique value through personalized titles, employees are able to express their identities in ways that contribute to a sense of affirmation and psychological safety, reducing emotional exhaustion. Since past research suggests that reducing emotional exhaustion is associated with fewer illnesses, lower intent to quit, and improved role performance (e.g., Cropanzano, Rupp, & Byrne, 2003; Maslach et al., 2001; Melamed, Shirom, Toker, Berliner, & Shapira, 2006; Taris, 2006), self-reflective titles can offer important benefits for organizations. They

may be especially useful in jobs where effective performance demands rapid relationship-building. In service encounters, when employees have only moments to form first impressions, self-reflective titles may assist employees in differentiating themselves—and their organizations' services—by making a memorable and authentic first impression. As Nurse "Quick Shot" explained, "It is great when a patient will ask for me by using my new title. When I am going to give vaccines to children, they remember my new name and use it when they return to the office."

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