

# NAVIGATING THE PARADOX OF PROMISE THROUGH THE CONSTRUCTION OF MEANINGFUL CAREER NARRATIVES

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Working with a prominent mentor can offer many benefits to one's career: mentors provide skills, resources, and values that leave a lasting imprint. Yet, these promising starting points also present a puzzle as people make sense of their careers further on: they must acknowledge their association with their prominent mentor, without being overshadowed by them. We refer to this tension as the *paradox of promise*. Through a qualitative study of former employees at the Eames Office, we examine how individuals navigate the paradox of promise as they construct retrospective career narratives. We find that individuals narrate their formative experience as imprints, but with two distinct emphases—*values-dominant imprints* versus *skills-dominant imprints*. Individuals then narrate their later career experiences by *reprinting*, reinforcing the existing meaning or finding new meaning in relation to their imprint; we induced three reprinting practices: (a) embracing values, (b) contrasting values, and (c) supplanting values. Using imprints and reprinting, former Eames employees crafted overarching sources of career meaningfulness: *belongingness narratives*, emphasizing collaboration and contribution with others; *self-expression narratives*, emphasizing authenticity and freedom; and *achievement narratives*, emphasizing expertise and accomplishment. Our study contributes to interpretive perspectives of career success and mentor relationships, and how meaningfulness is constructed over the career.

I reminded myself that a beginning and an ending are two different places, and, in real life, you might be able to make your own ending, whatever had gone before.

—Loveday Cardew in *Lost for Words*  
(Butland, 2018: 141)

Starting points are critical to the unfolding of an individual's career narrative, the "personal 'moving perspective' on who we are and what we are able to

do" (Arthur, Inkson, & Pringle, 1999: 42; see also Bujold, 2004; Maitlis, 2022). Starting points provide beginnings that the subsequent narrative must render plausible, justifications for why "things turned out the way they did," and groundwork for plot twists or turning points (Leander, 2008; McAdams, 2006b; Zheng, Meister, & Caza, 2021). Starting points also reflect formative career chapters whose effect can endure (Higgins, 2005). Such chapters are particularly

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We are grateful to our associate editor, Andrew Nelson, and the three anonymous reviewers for their incisive and developmental feedback. We owe a special thanks to Ben Innis for assistance with data collection and analysis. We are grateful to Rob Litchfield, Kevin Rockmann, Lydia Hagtvedt, Gabriel Sala, and Mike Pratt for their extensive feedback on earlier drafts of the paper, as well as thoughtful comments and advice from the Work, Identity, and

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Meaning (WIM) group at Boston College, the Creativity Collaboratorium, members of BOSCon, and seminar participants at UT Austin, the University of Oregon, and INSEAD. Greg would like to especially thank his wife and daughters for sacrificing time during revisions of this manuscript, and their uplifting support. Finally, we are grateful to our informants for sharing their stories with us—without them, this work would not have been possible.

salient when they occur with a *prominent mentor*—someone who has achieved field-level recognition based on “salient personal characteristics and accomplishments, demonstrated behavior, and intended images presented over a period of time” (Ferris, Blass, Douglas, Kolodinsky, & Treadway, 2003: 215), and someone who provides developmental career benefits (Chandler, Kram, & Yip, 2011).

Beginning one’s career with a prominent mentor offers many opportunities going forward (Ma, Mukherjee, & Uzzi, 2020; Zuckerman, 1967)—yet, it can also present challenges. On the one hand, individuals develop career-relevant skills, build their professional networks, and gain a sense of identity and meaning from their relationships with mentors (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Jones, 2010). The greater the status of the mentor, the greater the likelihood that individuals can “bask in reflected glory” (Cialdini, Borden, Thorne, Walker, Freeman, & Sloan, 1976) and thus craft affirming, legitimate career narratives (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). On the other hand, individuals seek personal agency in authoring their career narratives (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; McAdams, 1993) and may feel constrained by their association with a prominent mentor, both because of how others view them and because it hampers their ability to craft a unique career narrative (LaPointe, 2010). Individuals risk being overshadowed by their prominent mentor (Slavich & Castellucci, 2016)—the brighter the reflected the glory, the larger the potential shadows cast by it. Put differently, there is a risk of their career story becoming monopolized by their mentor. We refer to these tensions as the *paradox of promise*: individual’s starting points can provide key resources, such as reputation, skills, and values, but these resources can also serve as constraints. Individuals must work with and around these starting points to craft an agentic career story in relation to their mentor. Indeed, recent work suggests that, at least in scientific careers, “protégé success requires intellectual independence. The greatest returns to mentorship are likeliest when mentees break away ... and chart their own course” (Ma et al., 2020: 14081). The paradox of promise is, therefore, fundamentally about association with and differentiation from a prominent mentor.

However, despite existing research on how individuals achieve objective success in the wake of working with a prominent mentor (Ma et al., 2020; Slavich & Castellucci, 2016), we know little about how individuals themselves make sense of the paradox of promise, particularly when reflecting on their

career after a formative experience. Put differently, a starting point provides the resources, opportunity, and promise of success, but individuals make meaning retrospectively and subjectively from these experiences as they construct a career narrative (Maclean, Harvey, & Chia, 2012; Weick, 1995). It is important to understand how individuals derive meaning (or not) from these formative experiences as it is critical to how individuals interpret their career as a whole and make decisions moving forward (Carlsen & Pitsis, 2020; Modestino, Sugiyama, & Ladge, 2019). Little is known about the interpretive work that individuals do as they navigate the paradox of promise, the tricky task of acknowledging the influence of a prominent mentor while still authoring a narrative that feels agentic and personally meaningful. This also speaks to the larger question of how individuals may reconcile the diverse episodes of a career, a fundamental concern of career theory (Arthur, Khapova, & Wilderom, 2005; Barley, 1989).

We became sensitized to these issues through a qualitative study of former employees of the Eames Office. Eames was a design firm active in the latter half of the 20th century named for its two founders, the husband and wife team of Charles and Ray Eames. Eames developed a reputation for being at the vanguard of design, described as “probably the most exciting design practice in the United States” (Kirkham, 1998b). Our broad research goal at the start of the study was to examine the late-career narratives of people who began working at a famously creative organization. In examining our informants’ narratives, however, we became attuned to the tension between associating oneself with a prominent mentor while seeking one’s own distinct creative career—that is, differentiation. To help explain this phenomenon, an imprinting lens (Bourmault & Anteby, 2020; Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013) provided a useful theoretical vocabulary for understanding the paradox of promise: imprints are interpretations of formative experiences (e.g., starting points) that have an enduring impact on attitudes and behavior (Higgins, 2005; Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013). Our findings highlight how people use *imprints*, interpretations of a formative experience, and *reprinting*, a set of narrative strategies for interpreting subsequent career experiences by implicitly or explicitly evoking the imprint, in their career narratives to derive *meaningfulness*, the sense that one’s work is purposeful or significant (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003). Through our analysis, we develop a theory of imprints and reprinting in which individuals narrate their careers to construct a sense of meaningfulness

in relation to a formative experience with a prominent mentor. Notably, even for people with a shared starting point, these interpretations vary in emphasis. Individuals reinterpret their starting points in different ways to craft narratives that offer distinct forms of career meaningfulness.

Our study thus makes three theoretical contributions. First, we emphasize that promising starting points also create tensions: the potential for feeling overshadowed by a prominent mentor alongside the potential for basking in the spotlight. Extant literature suggests individuals manage this tension by structuring projects and career decisions to create optimal separation (Ma et al., 2020; Slavich & Castellucci, 2016), but this obscures the psychological experiences that make careers meaningful to the individuals themselves. We introduce a unique theoretical perspective, highlighting the intrapersonal narrative work individuals perform to craft association and differentiation, themes that endure across their career narratives. Indeed, we show equifinality in crafting these narratives, inducing three possible composite narratives individuals create to navigate the paradox of promise. Second, we bring a novel, interpretive perspective to imprinting. Existing research views imprints as relatively stable social facts that are externally assessed, such as by measuring environmental characteristics (Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013); our theory complements this perspective by showing that imprints can be narrative accomplishments that individuals (re)interpret at later points in their careers. Importantly, our perspective aligns with current research by showing the long impact of imprints but also diverges by demonstrating that individual's interpretations of the same formative experience (i.e., working under the same prominent mentor) can have different emphases. Finally, we build on theories of meaningful work by showing how episodes of work meaningfulness are aggregated to consider the overall meaningfulness of one's career. Our study contributes to temporal perspectives on meaningfulness (Bailey & Madden, 2017) by showing how the small moments in individuals' narratives add up to something significant: how people make sense of the totality of their careers. To contextualize our findings, we review research on careers, narratives, and individual-level imprinting, concepts that emerged as relevant through our inductive analysis.

### CAREER NARRATIVES AND STARTING POINTS

A *career* is generally defined as the sequence of work experiences and activities over a person's

lifespan (Hall, 2002; Wang & Wanberg, 2017). Individuals make sense of their careers through "narrative," the internalized and evolving story individuals tell about themselves that gives meaning to their experience of temporality and personal actions (Bujold, 2004; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; McAdams, 2008b). In reflecting on one's career, an individual must look back to make sense of the various chapters—jobs, organizations, projects, transitions, successes, and failures. People strive to craft a story in which the pieces fit together, while emphasizing their role as a character capable of taking deliberate action toward meaningful ends (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016; Canary & Canary, 2007; McAdams, 1993). It is important to note that this narrative interpretation is necessarily retrospective, even as individuals live looking forward (Carlsen & Pitsis, 2008, 2020). Individuals might tell partial narratives at any time in their career looking back, or might offer a fuller narrative at the end of their career that encompasses the entire sweep of their experience by selectively choosing and weaving together key episodes. As Weick (1995: 128) noted, "typically, [people] have access to some felt outcome that can guide them retrospectively as they search for an efficient causal chain capable of producing that feeling... stories posit a history for an outcome" (see also McAdams & McLean, 2013).

The goal of narration is *meaning*: answering the question of "what has gone on" (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010; Weick, 1988) to create an account of meaningfulness—what, if anything, makes something significant, purposeful, or worthwhile (Lepisto & Pratt, 2017).<sup>1</sup> As Cohen and Mallon (2001: 61) emphasized, this process "cannot be seen as a neutral or objective activity. Rather, it involves the continuous sifting and sorting of events and memories, and the establishment of cause and motive, in light of ensuing circumstances and current contexts." As individuals retrospectively make sense of their careers, "events are 'infused' with meaning and meaning is 'discovered' in the facts" (Gabriel, 2000: 35), giving purpose and coherence to "the vicissitudes of human intention" (McAdams, 2001: 103).

<sup>1</sup> We follow the existing literature (Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Rosso, Dekas, & Wrzesniewski, 2010) in using "meaning" to refer to the outcome of sensemaking, which may be positive, negative, or ambivalent in valence, and "meaningfulness" to refer to positively valenced meaning, emphasizing significance or purposefulness.

### The Paradox of Promise: Association and Differentiation

Narratives require a starting point (Leander, 2008) and career narratives often include formative experiences with prominent mentors at the story's beginning (Cotton, Shen, & Livne-Tarandach, 2011; Dunn, 2019; Zheng et al., 2021). Frequently, in these episodes, individuals receive a variety of resources (e.g., skills, mindsets, values, connections) that launch their careers on a particularly trajectory. Over time, individuals may find that their careers, identities, and reputations become connected with their prominent mentor, as Mannucci (2021: 260) noted: "Careers do not happen in a vacuum but are entangled in an interconnected web of careers ... the creative trajectory of a creator is likely to be influenced by others' career trajectories." Such "entanglements" with prominent mentors can provide benefits as well as challenges—the paradox of promise, introduced above.

On the positive side, relationships and connections with prominent mentors can improve individuals' creative opportunities and output over time (Allison, Long, & Krauze, 1982; Piazza, Phillips, & Castellucci, 2020; Simonton, 1984). For example, scientists who apprentice with Nobel Prize winners are much more likely to win Nobel Prizes themselves (Zuckerman, 1967, 1977). This occurs, in part, because a prominent mentor can provide access to the skills that serve as building blocks for a protégé's own success (Ma et al., 2020; Zuckerman, 1967, 1977). Moreover, association with a prominent mentor signals that one is competent and legitimate, opening up additional opportunities (Jones, 2002). Beyond these more externally focused indicators of success, mentors can also shape individual's identities and provide guidance, inspiration, and meaning for their careers (Ashforth, Harrison, & Sluss, 2018; Humbert & Rouse, 2016; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007).

On the negative side, the entanglement of an individual's career with a prominent mentor can also lead to being and feeling overshadowed. Returning to the example of Nobel Prize-winning scientists, Zuckerman (1967, 1977) found that, when Nobel laureates published with coauthors, the ideas were primarily attributed to the laureate: "[The person] who's the best known gets more credit, an inordinate amount of credit" (Zuckerman, 1977: 140). Research among chefs likewise suggests that "high-status masters continue to receive disproportionate merit for any apprentice's accomplishments" (Slavich & Castellucci, 2016: 840). Career success often requires

establishing an independent career (Arthur et al., 2005; Hall, Yip, & Doiron, 2018); individuals can thus prevent this overshadowing to some extent by pursuing some degree of optimal distinctiveness from their mentors. Chefs can offer similar dishes to their mentor but with a degree of novelty, and scientists can study different topics than their mentor and coauthor with them infrequently (Ma et al., 2020; Slavich & Castellucci, 2016). These strategies, however, are aimed at objective career success, external indicators of career advancement such as promotions, awards, salary and bonuses, etc. (Feldman & Ng, 2007), which are often assessed by others.

In addition to objective success, however, individuals seek subjective career success; positive "perceptual evaluations of, and affective reactions to, their careers" (Ng & Feldman, 2014: 170). Dobrow and Tosti-Kharas (2011: 1004) referred to "meaningful work" as "the highest level of subjective career success"; people aspire "to express themselves and their values in their lives and work" (Hall et al., 2018: 131; see De Vos, Van der Heijden, & Akkermans, 2020). Constructing a self-directed career narrative, in which one is the protagonist, is critical to this subjective success and meaningfulness (Dries, Pepermans, & Carlier, 2008). In constructing a unique career narrative, however, individuals must grapple with the influence of their prominent mentor within their career story. When others attribute a protégé's efforts to their mentor, the protégé's agency over their own career narrative can be undermined—they can feel that their career story is centered on their mentor, with little that differentiates them as unique (Kasof, 1995). The paradox of promise thus comes into clearest focus when we consider the subjective perspective of individuals themselves—not only how they achieve objective success in the face of these tensions, but how they think and feel about their work in relation to their prominent mentor.

It is important to note that, although these double-edged mentor relationships have often been conceived of as dyadic, such career development can also be embedded within collectives, as was the case in our context. Working at a prominent design studio, consulting firm, or other company provides many of the same benefits that traditional apprenticeships provided in the past (DeFillippi & Arthur, 1994; Jones & DeFillippi, 1996). For example, many young professionals join high-status firms to develop leadership and other skills from an established company before leaving to forge their own careers. Moreover, in today's workplaces, it might be difficult to clearly delineate where the mentor ends and the

collective begins, especially when that mentor is prominent. For example, Apple employees working under Jony Ive, a world-renowned designer, might learn core design principles shaped by Ive and view him as an important influence, but their formative experience occurs in working as part of Ive's design team (Sullivan, 2016). Whether one on one or embedded within collectives, these experiences often leave lasting imprints (Higgins, 2005).

As our review reveals, extant literature focuses on tactics individuals might use to navigate objective success (e.g., "Do not publish with your advisor"), but we have little theory to address how individuals make subjective meaning of these connections in relation to their larger career narratives. In order to understand how people make sense of their formative experience, we need to understand the role that these formative experiences play in a career narrative and why; an imprinting lens provides resources to that end.

### An Imprinting Lens

*Imprinting* is a broad theoretical perspective emphasizing the influence of the external environment (e.g., organizational conditions, relationships with others) during a sensitive period and the ways this influence persists over time (Azoulay, Liu, & Stuart, 2017; Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013; Simsek, Fox, & Heavey, 2015; Tilcsik, 2014). While studies of individual-level imprinting are relatively sparse, extant work has shown that individuals can be imprinted by organizational cultures (Higgins, 2005) or by other individuals (Azoulay et al., 2017) and that imprints shape how people respond to later environments (Higgins, 2005; Tilcsik, 2014). Imprinting often has a particular impact on employee's ways of thinking, including attitudes, ideology, and values (Higgins, 2005; Marquis & Qiao, 2020).

An imprinting lens thus provides a valuable perspective in studying the paradox of promise; starting one's career with a prominent mentor seems especially likely to leave an imprint (Azoulay et al., 2017; Ma et al., 2020; Zuckerman, 1967), as individuals are likely to be more open to influence when their values and habits are still forming (Hall, 1987). And, as noted above, prominent mentors are likely to have an outsized influence on the development of skills and work-related attitudes (Cotton et al., 2011; Ma et al., 2020; Zuckerman, 1977). As famed scientist Hans Krebs noted: "Scientists are not so much born as made by those who teach them ... I owe this good fortune [winning the Nobel Prize] to ... an

outstanding teacher at the critical stage in my scientific career" (Krebs, 1967: 1442). Imprints can serve as key orienting points that individuals use in narratively "reconstru[ing] their past and future in order to come to terms with their present" (Barley, 1989: 49). Importantly, for our study, imprinting research highlights that the skills and values that people internalize might not fit with later environments (Tilcsik, 2014). Consequently, the paradox of promise should be more acute in later career experiences (i.e., after separation from a prominent mentor; Kram, 1983), as individuals explore and engage with new contexts and audiences, assessing (mis)fit with their imprint.

Taken together, this review highlights the tensions that arise from working with a prominent mentor: the paradox of promise. Although existing research has described strategies for objective success in the face of these tensions, such as establishing "intellectual independence" (Ma et al., 2020: 14081), our contention is that research does not adequately address how individuals themselves can construct subjective success, especially meaningfulness, in the face of the paradox of promise. An imprinting lens provides a promising jumping-off point, yet we still know little about how individuals interpret formative experiences in retrospect, and how these interpretations shape the meaningfulness derived from their careers. To that end, we explore the following research question: *How do individuals who experience the paradox of promise construct a meaningful career narrative?*

## METHODS

### Research Context

The Eames Office<sup>2</sup> was founded by the husband and wife team of Charles and Ray Eames and operated between 1943 and 1978. While furniture, such as the now-ubiquitous Eames lounge chair, was their most well-known and lucrative product, the Office also produced acclaimed short films, like *Powers of Ten*; museum exhibitions, such as *Mathematica* and *The World of Franklin & Jefferson*; and product and toy design (Ince & Johnson, 2016). In total, the Office completed "a bewildering succession [of] toys, films, scientific researches, lecture tours, special exhibits" along with "a great number of awards and citations" (Koenig, 2015: 7). Projects were carried out by a

<sup>2</sup> We use the office's real name, since it is now defunct, but the names of all informants are pseudonyms.

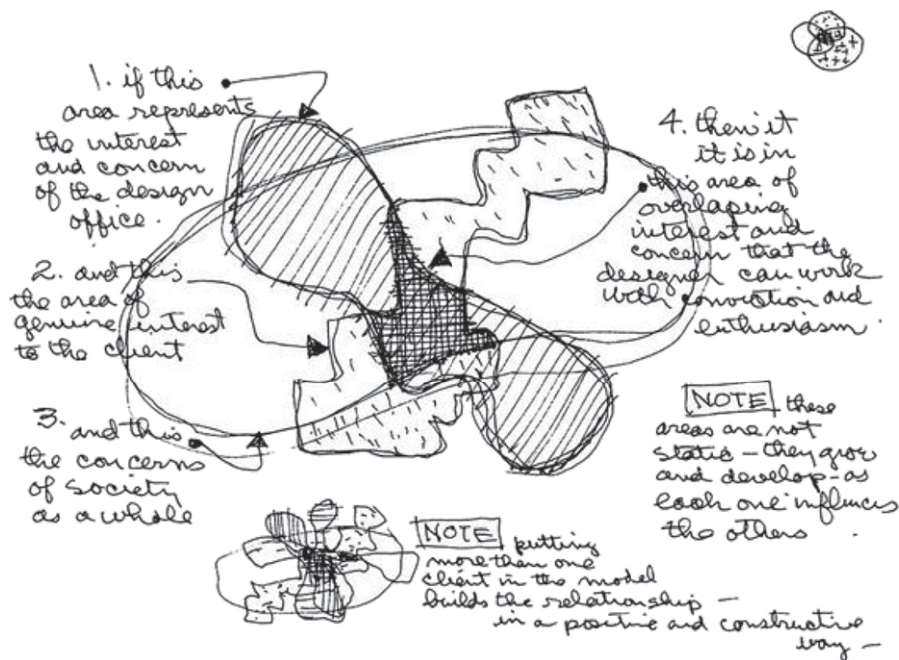
shifting group of employees, from 10 to 40 people at any one time, who were exposed to various creative domains: “The projects were absorbing and challenging ... you were always expected to give more than you thought you had. You were often asked to perform some task outside the realm of the expertise for which you were hired” (Neuhart, Neuhart, & Eames, 1989: 9). Eames’s workforce was purposefully eclectic, selected from a variety of fields, including design, architecture, biology, philosophy, fine art, and mathematics, among others.

Eames’s unique design ethos was embodied in Charles and Ray’s values. They often emphasized the importance of collaboration and making connections: “Eventually everything connects—people, ideas, objects. The quality of the connections is the key to quality per se” (Eames Foundation, 2013). Curiosity and learning were central to how they approached their projects and trained their employees: “Most people aren’t trained to want to face the process of re-understanding a subject they already know. One must obtain not just literacy, but deep involvement and re-understanding” (Eames, 2007: 53). Another

central value of the Eames Office was an emphasis on design as problem solving; as Charles put it in one interview, “We don’t do ‘art’—we solve problems” (Cook, 2017). This ethos was encapsulated in a sketch, attributed to Charles, created for a 1969 Louvre exhibition (see Figure 1), which emphasized the need to find the intersection between different stakeholders to effectively serve all of them.

Matching the definition of *prominence* outlined above, which includes “field-level recognition” and acknowledgment of key “accomplishments,” major retrospective exhibits on the work of the Office have been featured in more than 39 different museums, including the Smithsonian and the British Museum, among others (Eames Foundation, n.d.). In addition, Charles and Ray have been called some of “the most important figures in the history of American design” and some “of the most influential figures in 20th-century design full stop” (McGuirk, 2010). While Eames’s work was accomplished collectively, the Office’s creative achievements have historically been attributed to Charles (Schrader, 1970; Schuessler, 2020); as one retrospective puts it, “Charles was

**FIGURE 1**  
**The Eames Design Diagram**



Reprinted from Eames and Eames (2015: 282).

Text reads: “1. if this area represents the interest and concern of the design office”; “2. and this the area of genuine interest to the client”; “3. and this the concerns of society as a whole”; “4. then it is in this area of overlapping interest and concern that the designer can work with conviction and enthusiasm.” “Note: these areas are not static—they grow and develop as each one influences the others.” “Note: putting more than one client in the model builds the relationship in a positive and constructive way.”

the Office" (Neuhart et al., 1989: 8). Even so, we recognize that Ray contributed significantly to the Office's work and we were, therefore, open to informants' connections to Ray as well as the firm collectively.<sup>3</sup> Working at the Office seemed to have a lasting impact: "Those who stayed remember their years in the Eames Office as turning points in their lives" (Neuhart et al., 1989: 9). This, combined with the age of former employees at the time of our interviews (i.e., late career/early retirement), means Eames employees offer a particularly illuminating sample (Eisenhardt, 1989) for exploring how individuals craft a meaningful narrative in relation to the paradox of promise.

### Sampling and Data Collection

Using Eames timesheets archived at the Library of Congress, research assistants identified all 188 people who worked at Eames during its operation. We made our best efforts to contact all living Eames employees, leading to a total of 33 interviews (see Online Appendix A in Additional Materials online for a breakdown of our informants and their career narratives). We supplemented these data with seven interviews given to us by filmmakers for an Eames documentary, *The Architect and the Painter* (Cohn & Jersey, 2011); these interviews were with Eames employees we were unable to reach, some of whom had passed away before our data collection. Informants in our sample worked at Eames between 1957 and 1978 and spent between six months and 17 years at Eames (average tenure = 3.33 years); this is not significantly different than the tenure of an average Eames employee, 2.61 years ( $t = -1.15$ , n.s.), as calculated from the archived timesheets.

We conducted semi-structured interviews to elicit informants' career narratives, with the goal of understanding how they made sense of their careers following their Eames experience. Interviews were conducted over the phone or Skype, recorded, and transcribed verbatim. Interviews lasted an average of 75 minutes. To elicit the narratives, we adapted McAdams's "life story interview" (McAdams, 1988, 2008a), focusing on informants' careers (rather than lives) and using a semi-structured approach,

allowing us flexibility to hone in on theoretically important concepts as they emerged during the interviews (see Online Appendix B in Additional Materials online for a copy of our interview protocol). Our questions prompted general career narratives, with a particular focus on the role that Eames played in informants' careers (Atkinson, 1998). Thus, our data represent elicited narratives focused on careers and the influence Eames had on them (Dailey & Browning, 2014) and offer a retrospective account, "the clearest sense of the person's subjective understanding of his or her lived experience" (Atkinson, 2007: 223). Consistent with inductive methods, we iterated between data collection and data analysis (Charmaz, 2006) and altered our interview protocol as themes emerged from earlier interviews that refined our focus. For example, we found that informants had different perspectives about credit for their work at Eames. We thus asked questions directly focusing on their feelings about their Eames projects, and how, if at all, these related to the rest of their career.

We supplemented our interviews with additional data. We asked informants to provide their CVs or résumés prior to the interview, so that we could see their work activities over time. We also encouraged participants to draw a "career map," asking that they graph their own self-assessed creativity over the career (see Online Appendix C in Additional Materials online for sample career maps). Incorporating drawings into the interviews provided "a basis for further... communication between researcher and participants" (Bagnoli, 2009: 548), allowing informants a way to illustrate their careers. Informants' maps provided another perspective on our data, improving data triangulation (Creswell, 2012). We also gathered archival data from books, magazines, and documentaries about Eames (Cohn & Jersey, 2011; Eames & Eames, 2015; Eames Foundation, 2013; Kirkham, 1998a; Koenig, 2015; McAleer, Follette, Madison, McCarthy, & Vietrogoski, 1995; Neuhart et al., 1989; Pavlus, 2011). These sources were valuable to learn more about the philosophy, practices, and culture of the Office.

### Analytic Process

Our analysis focused first and foremost on understanding how our informants made sense of their careers retrospectively: "we [were] seeking *the teller's story*" (Atkinson, 1998: 75, emphasis added). Narrative data are rich and "contain multitudes" (Adler, Lodi-Smith, Philippe, & Houle, 2016: 147) and are thus amenable to a variety of analyses

<sup>3</sup> Ray Eames was a significant creative force at the office (Kirkham, 1998a), though gender roles of the day clearly limited the credit she received (Cohn & Jersey, 2011; Schuessler, 2020). While not the focus of our paper, an exploration of these issues at Eames is found in Cohn and Jersey (2011) and Schuessler (2020).

(Vaara, Sonenshein, & Boje, 2016). We opted for a methodological bricolage approach (Pratt, Sonenshein, & Feldman, 2022), rather than strictly following a single qualitative methods template. We drew analytic moves from grounded theory—specifically, iterative coding (Charmaz, 2006; Miles & Huberman, 1994) and constant comparison (Strauss & Corbin, 1990)—as well as moves from narrative analysis, which emphasizes sequence and narrative causality (Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 1993). This combination has been used in prior work (Ferraro, 2021; Schabram & Maitlis, 2017; Wolf, 2019). Below, we describe the major phases of our analysis.

**Open coding to discern themes.** To analyze the rich, diverse narratives we elicited, we began open coding the interview transcripts (Charmaz, 2006; Locke, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1990), describing initial concepts and themes in the data, and grouping them into categories. As often as possible, these open codes were *in vivo* codes, reflecting the language of our informants. For example, “working outside your comfort zone,” “learning to see,” and “applying the Eames mindset” were early *in vivo* codes related to what individuals gained from their Eames experience. In general, coding helped us identify the interpretive themes in our data (Locke, 2001). We relied on constant comparison (Charmaz, 2006) as we progressed through analysis, compared codes, and discussed emerging themes in the data. The first author was primarily involved in data analysis; the other two authors served as “devil’s advocates” to challenge the emerging insights and theoretical implications (Sutton & Callahan, 1987). During data collection, the first two authors met weekly to review contact summary sheets (Miles & Huberman, 1994), discuss emergent themes, and adjust the interview protocol as data collection continued. We wrote theoretical memos after each meeting, providing a set of “breadcrumbs” for us to recognize how our theorizing evolved. For example, one breadcrumb that we came back to was the notion of who received credit for projects at Eames; as the research progressed, we realized that these issues were wrapped up in the complexities of association with prominence. We also presented preliminary sketches of the emerging theory to colleagues for feedback (Corley & Gioia, 2004).

**Axial coding to dimensionalize categories.** We then created axial codes, comparing the emergent open codes and integrating them into higher-order categories (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). For example, while we observed that our informants had quite different interpretations of their Eames experiences, we

noted that these experiences “hung together” in two primary groupings. Some embraced the skills and the values gained at Eames, using them as guides for their careers. Others used Eames more strategically in their narrative, while emphasizing their own personal values as career guides. To elaborate our theory, we began engaging with the extant literature on starting points and formative experiences in careers to find a conceptual vocabulary for our data. After multiple iterations, we selected an imprinting lens (Bourmault & Anteby, 2020; Higgins, 2005; Simsek et al., 2015), leading us to conceptualize these different interpretations of the Eames experience as imprints with distinct emphases, which we labeled *values-dominant imprints* and *skills-dominant imprints*.

At this stage, we also became sensitized to the importance of meaningfulness as a theme in our informants’ narratives. In integrating open codes related to high points and low points, we began to distinguish different patterns in what informants described as most meaningful. For example, some informants described their career maps as going “up and down like a bouncing ball” (Ronald) while another related, “It’s only gone up to the upper-right corner since my 20s and 30s” (Ellen). In analyzing these experiences, we noted patterns around both the high points individuals related and the overall significance they described in reflecting on their career. In iterating with theories of meaningful work, we came to see these as distinct sources of meaningfulness, which we labeled *belongingness*, *achievement*, and *self-expression*, inspired by Rosso, Dekas, and Wrzesniewski’s (2010) framework.

**Narrative analysis to establish a theoretical model.** Once we had a clearer sense of the most salient categories in our data, we leveraged narrative analysis (Boje, 2001; Feldman, Sköldbberg, Brown, & Horner, 2004; Mishler, 1995) to discern temporal patterns and the ordering of codes within informants’ accounts. That is, narrative analysis allowed us to understand the concepts we induced holistically, in the context of an entire narrative. We did this by ordering key moments and examining how these pieces fit within the larger whole (Langley, 1999). Specifically, we created summaries of each informant’s narrative in a large spreadsheet, divided into the different episodes they described (similar summaries are found in the Online Appendix A in Additional Materials online). Analyzing the structure of informants’ narratives sensitized us to the importance of key post-Eames career episodes—high points, low points, and turning points—in shaping how informants constructed their narrative



and their connection to Eames. In examining how individuals narrated these experiences, we came to see that they used these experiences to deepen, change, or downplay their imprint. We thus selected the term “reprinting” to indicate that this process involved using later experiences to implicitly or explicitly re-examine one’s imprint. Furthermore, we noted that reprinting took three forms, which we labeled “reprinting practices,” based on how individuals used the Eames values in their narrative: (a) embracing values, (b) contrasting values, and (c) supplanting values. We came to understand the imprints and reprinting practices as the key narrative structures that individuals used to associate themselves with and differentiate themselves from Eames.

We continued to integrate existing theory to help us make sense of the emerging patterns. We began fully integrating theories of imprinting (Higgins, 2005; Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013; Simsek et al., 2015) and careers (Arthur et al., 1999; Barley, 1989; Hall, Feldman, & Kim, 2013; Hall et al., 2018). Building from the imprint–reprinting structure we identified, we induced the three sources of career meaningfulness described above. We thus identified composite narratives (Sonenshein, 2010), “typical patterns or dynamics found across multiple observations” (Jarzabkowski, Bednarek, & Lê, 2014: 281), centered on imprints, reprinting practices, and career meaningfulness. For clarity, we refer to these as *belongingness*, *self-expression*, and *achievement* narratives. Our “recursive, process-oriented analytic procedure” (Locke, 1996: 241) allowed us to integrate our analytic moves to develop a theory that provides analytic generalizability—that is, our theory can be applied to other contexts (Yin, 1994).

## FINDINGS

Eames employees<sup>4</sup> told career narratives that revealed different approaches to navigating the paradox of promise. All informants described being exposed to the strong culture and values of the Eames Office that left a significant imprint on them. We noted differences, however, in the ways individuals interpreted the meaning of the Eames experience within their narratives. All employees recognized that they learned a set of values and skills, but they

emphasized them in different ways in their narratives. One group of employees emphasized the Eames experience as providing values, which became anchoring beliefs for their career, providing a “know-why.” We refer to this as a *values-dominant imprint*. Another group of informants emphasized the Eames experience as providing skills, such as creativity techniques and collaboration skills. We refer to this as a *skills-dominant imprint*; these employees’ narratives emphasized the “know-how.” From these differences in narrating their imprints, we found that employees engaged in *reprinting*—narrative strategies in which individuals embraced, contrasted, or supplanted their Eames imprint, and thereby derived additional meaning from their career beyond the resources acquired at Eames. Reprinting thus helped individuals create narrative consistency by connecting where they had been (Eames) to where they were going. By connecting their imprints and their later experiences via reprinting practices, Eames employees structured narratives that provided career meaningfulness. Figure 2 depicts differences in the narrative structures that emerged using the classic three-part narrative structure in which stories have a beginning, middle, and end (Aristotle, c.335 BCE/2006; Freytag, 1894). We stylized these visuals as puzzle pieces to emphasize, first, with the vertical connections, how focusing on a set of skills invites a set of values and vice versa, and to highlight, second, with the horizontal connections, how imprints and reprinting fit together to create consistency in a narrative. Finally, the outcome is not only the narrative itself but also the career meaningfulness individuals evoked from their narrative—hence the outcome box features the narrative structure in miniature, as that acts as the text from which meaningfulness is derived. Additional data can be found in Table 1.

### Narrating the Eames Experience: Values-Dominant and Skills-Dominant Imprints

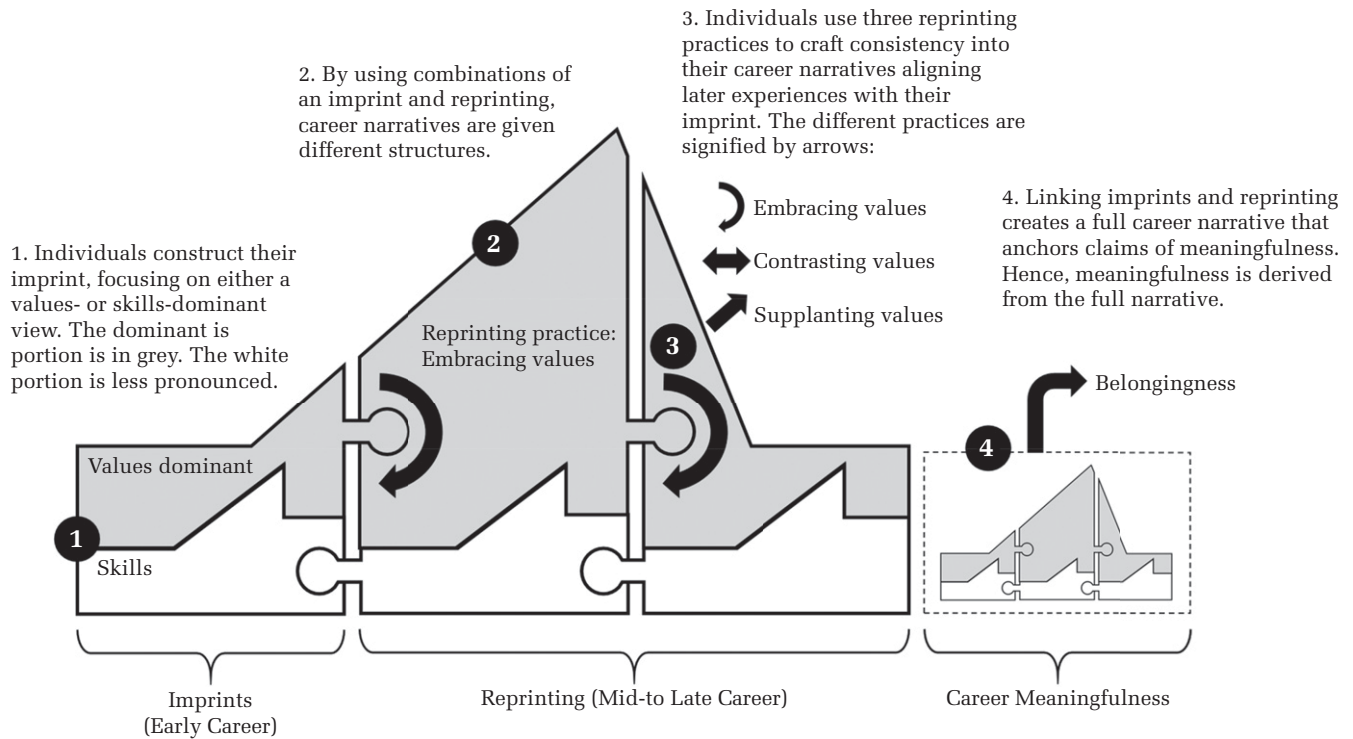
All informants described how the Eames Office left a lasting impression on them; for example:

It was like walking into a magic kingdom... It was just wonderful... There were artifacts and art objects and things they had been using or were working on, up around paintings on the wall... I was struck by the beauty and the intensity of things. (Rod)

Beyond being memorable, our informants described their Eames experiences as formative, providing attitudes, skills, meanings, and values that informants could use in their careers. While all

<sup>4</sup> All informants are “former Eames employees,” but, for brevity, we shorten this to “Eames employees” or “employees.” All italicized emphases in informants’ quotes are our own.

**FIGURE 2**  
**The Structure of Imprints and Reprinting Practices**



individuals' narratives hinted at both values and skills, they tended to emphasize them in different ways; hence, we describe them as two separate imprints. Nevertheless, because values often support behaviors and behaviors point to values in a reinforcing way (Schein, 1990), it is useful to think of them as coupled, with potential for uncoupling as individuals use them in narratives (Weick, 1995). Put differently, individuals had a similar formative experience at Eames, but their interpretations differed in whether skills or values were dominant. It is important to note that, as we describe these imprints, career narratives are not veridical accounts per se but interpretive accomplishments (Bujold, 2004). In describing a significant career moment, individuals are shaping that moment in a particular way such that they not only derive meaning from it but also have that moment fit within the broader narrative structure they are retrospectively crafting; aggregated moments fit together to add up to a larger sense of meaningfulness (see Weick, 1995: 111).

**Values-dominant imprints.** Some informants interpreted their experience at Eames as providing not just career resources and skills but also values that anchored beliefs that guided their career

decisions—the “know-why.” Informants often narrated this as a lasting impression that carried forward throughout their careers. Values-dominant imprints revealed *why* individuals engaged in creative work by echoing principles espoused by Charles and Ray, such as the mantra of “everything connects” or the importance of curiosity. Some in this group described Eames as an important growth experience: “I was a child until I arrived at the Eames Office, where I became an adult” (Noelle). The Eames experience gave them a feeling of rootedness, shaping how they saw their career and the work they aspired to do: “My reaction to everything, I think, is flavored by that experience [at Eames]. I think, for me, it was life defining” (Wade). Individuals relating a values-dominant imprint often described Eames in this way; “There are people like [me] who came almost as raw material and so being there is life-changing” (Esther).

**Skills-dominant imprints.** In contrast, some informants narrated the Eames experience as providing career resources (e.g., techniques for developing ideas, how to interact with clients, a prestigious name on one's CV)—the “know-how” for their careers, while the “know-why” was more muted. We refer to this starting point as a *skills-dominant imprint*. In

TABLE 1  
Illustrative Data

| Imprint                        | Belongingness (Values-Dominant Imprint—embracing Values)   | Self-expression (Skills-Dominant Imprint—contrasting Values)  | Achievement (Skills-Dominant Imprint—supplanting Values)   |
|--------------------------------|--|---|--|
| <b>Values-dominant imprint</b> | <p>"I mean, to this day, people talk about the fact that, working under Eames, whatever they did, working under Eames was like a spiritual journey because everybody knew and understood that you were doing something that was magical." (Derek)</p>  | <p><b>Skills-dominant imprint</b><br/>           "[Eames] really was an incredible entree into the world of art and design in that it was the top of the field. They had the wherewithal to do whatever they wanted; they were very playful and energetic; they just set me off on a great path. Because I thought, for whatever reason, that I could do anything I wanted to; if they can do it, I can do it." (Fred)</p>                                | <p><b>Skills-dominant imprint</b><br/>           "He [Charles] made everyone think a little bit differently because you were out of your comfort zone and you were forced to look at things differently. Probably, it really did produce a lot of creativity because people were not always in their comfort zone." (Ronald)</p> |
|                                | <p>"After working at the Eames Office, I didn't find the work very exciting, but the money was good. And, about that time, I became very dissatisfied with my life in general, thinking maybe I should have stayed at the Eames Office." (Evan)</p>  | <p>"[Charles] just had a way of seeing the world, which I could use as a model for how to approach projects and think about them ... He was a perfectionist and things were never good enough. So you incorporated his sense of perfectionism and the sense that you were always sort of failing ... Even though you were very proud of how good it was, part of the esprit de corps was saying, 'This is good, but couldn't it be better?'" (Dustin)</p> | <p>"I think the most impactful thing is just the whole environment that he had set up there and how it was run. He had a lot of—he had certain things; like, he was very—detail was a very, very important thing there. Dedication was an important thing there." (Frank)</p>  |
| <b>Reprinting practices</b>    | <p><b>Embracing values</b><br/>           "When I got [back] into the field of architecture, I loved the field, but I looked at it through the Eames prism and the people in the field ... were egomaniacs ... It lacked the depth that I had seen in the Eames Office and it thoroughly disillusioned me with architecture, and that's why I left the field." (Ellen)</p> | <p><b>Contrasting values</b><br/>           "I wasn't going to stay a designer, so my career departed so radically that it wasn't like I was competing with him. I wasn't worried that my designs weren't up to the Eames standard or anything because that wasn't my side of the street ... His movies were a wonderful inspiration for me, but I wasn't making his kind of movies." (Dustin)</p>  | <p><b>Supplanting values</b><br/>           "I mean it's [Eames] an important period, but it's a formative period ... Life after Eames did go on ... And there are [other] projects. And we can call them ours." (Esther)</p>  |
|                                | <p>"I don't think that a creative career only consists of what you produce ... I think there is an abundance of creativeness in a lot of things that aren't something you can hang on the wall ... and I do think that Eames Office experience, even though the Eames Office was a place that</p>  | <p>"I think the times have caught up with me. One thing I've learned: if you're going to be a pioneer, you'd better have patience and persistence. Because it's very frustrating knowing that you've got something that really works and people aren't ready for it ... I was trained by innovators.</p>  | <p>"The thing that I noticed [at Eames] is that I would do a couple of sketches ... Charles would come over and look at them and he would say, 'Okay, I want you to do ... four different variations on either side of this concept you've come up with' ... when he came over to look at</p>                                    |

**TABLE 1**  
**(Continued)**

| Belongingness (Values-Dominant Imprint—embracing Values)  | Self-expression (Skills-Dominant Imprint—contrasting Values)  | Achievement (Skills-Dominant Imprint—supplanting Values)  |
|---|---|---|
| <p>produced a lot of respected traditions toward film, furniture, so many things. Nonetheless, I think the real lesson for me was that so very much of what one does can be the thing that's creative. That's just a matter of mindset I guess." (Wade)</p>   | <p>Charles was way ahead of his time ... So I understood, from hearing their stories, you'd better be prepared for some disappointments because they're not going to always understand what the hell you're doing. And you've got to believe in yourself and keep doing it. So I did." (Carla)</p>  | <p>them, he would choose the one that I did either first or second. So I thought this was a bunch of bull crap ... I learned that he could afford to have designers sitting there doing variations on a theme ... And I came to the realization, when I started my own shop, that I couldn't afford to do that. I had to take ownership of maybe the first or second ... concept I came up with." (Robert)</p> <p>"I went to graduate school ... and took the social policy track rather than the design track. So I didn't think of myself as someone who was in the design field. I really was going in a different direction." (Anne)</p>  |
| <p>"Charles was never about ego, expressing himself. He always had some problem to solve in the work that he did. It was never about 'me, Charles Eames, expressing myself' ... I really appreciated [that] when I was working there; it was good to see someone who was real creative not talk about his work or not get carried away with his Art with a capital A. So I had attitude." (Evan)</p>  | <p>"I decided not to go on with movies. I decided I was not interested in movies. I also decided I was not deeply interested in furniture design. I learned a lot of things I didn't want to do at the Eames Office. But that's not to say I didn't learn a lot of things I did want to do, but they were just more abstract things." (Melvin)</p>  | <p><b>Achievement</b><br/>"Making a living off of it [the design firm I founded] and moving forward, that's probably, I think, parallel to that exposure that I had at the Eames Office. So I think that's a kind of a reward, it keeps you on your toes and it's that resilient factor that I think keeps us having fun ... keeping 10 to 15 employees, you have a certain amount of responsibility that goes along with being creative and things like that." (Ronald)</p> <p>"In my case, what I'm able to do now is take everything I've learned over 50 or 60 years of trying to be a rational designer and consolidating and synthesizing that into some kind of result. So, there's no doubt that my best work, my most original and</p> |
| <p><b>Belongingness</b><br/>"([When I left Eames], he [Charles] looked at me and he said, 'Okay. Don't let the standards down.' And I will hear it. I can hear his voice echoing in my head, and every time I encounter a mean-spirited, penurious producer howling at me about how they don't have enough money so I'm supposed to do crappy work, Charles's voice overrides it every time. There's nothing you can do about that. It was like, I'm not going to let Charles down." (Noelle)</p> | <p><b>Self-expression</b><br/>"Not many people have written movies, TV shows, IMAX films, made documentaries, novels, nonfiction books, and articles in newspapers and stuff. Not many people do all those different things. People tend to pick one thing they're good at and try to hone in on it. But, I don't know. My experience has been the opposite of that. Once I feel I'm good at it, I want to go and try something else." (Dustin)</p> | <p>"The negative things in my life are business related ... There are always moments of glory and we were happy with the work that we did. But it was a constant struggle." (Tyler)</p>   |
| <p>"When you set up a miniature ... and you shoot it ... and your heart leaps because it's maybe even better than you thought it was ... That is the thing—that is creativity. And everybody in the room says 'Yeah.' The guy who dusted the sand out of</p>  |   |   |
| <p><b>Career meaningfulness</b></p>   |   |   |

TABLE 1  
(Continued)

| Belongingness (Values-Dominant Imprint—embracing Values)   | Self-expression (Skills-Dominant Imprint—contrasting Values) | Achievement (Skills-Dominant Imprint—supplanting Values)                             |
|--|--|--|
| <p>the foreground to generate the texture says, 'Yeah, that worked great.' And somebody else said, 'Yeah, look at the way those trees are moving.' ... And everybody responds that way ... we have done something that has never happened before. We've created something out of nothing and everybody understands it. It doesn't always happen, of course ... But, when that happens, that is tremendously emotionally satisfying." (Derek)</p> |  | <p>creative work, has been in the last decade. And it's still going on." (Tyler)</p> |

contrast to the values-dominant imprint, which emphasized the guiding values Eames provided for their career, informants who related a skills-dominant imprint mainly focused on the concrete know-how, often related to particular disciplines or practices, they developed at Eames. Zach, for example, who had a long career in photography, described how Eames provided an important foundation:

[Before Eames] I had a camera, I knew how to develop film ... But I really didn't know much of anything about photography ... I took pictures and developed and printed them for Charles ... he'd look at the print ... and he'd say "a little light." I'd run back into the darkroom and make five more prints that were darker ... *So the long and short of it is that I learned photography under Eames in a large sense.* (Zach)

Like other informants, Eames was narrated as a formative career experience, yet, with skills-dominant imprints, informants did not describe themselves internalizing the Eames values as a guide that anchored their career narratives. Instead, not narrating these values seemed to serve two narrative purposes. First, it gave these individuals narrative space that they could fill at later points of their career narrative with meanings extracted from new experiences. Second, it left the "mold" of Eames's values in the same way a handprint can be left in drying cement: the hand is no longer there, but its shape is still remembered; the skills-dominant imprints allowed Eames employees to use the values as a reference against which to compare new experiences and extract additional meaning.

Notably, Eames employees seemed to realize these different imprints existed, reflecting that individuals internalized the Eames experience differently:

At this point [two years at Eames], I'm realizing that there really were two kinds of people at the Eames Office ... There was this larger cadre of about 10 or 15 people who had been there anywhere from four years to 10 years, and they were the people who actually got stuff done. And then there were another 15 or 20 people, like me, who were there from anywhere from three months to three years ... *you sort of looked at the way the place ran and you went, "Okay, am I one of those people? Or am I one of those people? Or am I some other kind of person?"* (Luke)

Regardless of the flavor of the imprint, however, all informants eventually left Eames.<sup>5</sup> Leaving meant

<sup>5</sup> No employees we are aware of spent their entire career at Eames: archived timesheets showed the two longest-tenured employees spending 17 years at the office.

informants had to make sense of their connection to Eames and what it meant to their overall narrative, particularly because of Eames's eminence in the design field. As a result, Eames became a starting motif in the opening part of their career narratives that was revisited and dramatically shaped their career narratives. Evan referenced this:

I owe a lot to that [my experience at Eames]. I'm sure a lot of people say this; it was a life-changing experience, totally ... As I grew older and as my career developed, I know I began to appreciate more and more that experience.

As we show below, values-dominant imprints fit with narratives that emphasized internalizing the Eames values and then revisiting them as a guide for constructing meaningfulness throughout a career. In contrast, skills-dominant imprints emphasized early skill acquisition, yet, later in the narrative, the hollowed-out spaces where the Eames values seemed missing were used as a storytelling device that enabled new meanings to be collected and incorporated from subsequent career experiences. Consequently, skills-dominant imprints provided a more open starting point—that is, there was more than one way to incorporate later experiences in relation to their imprint.

### Reprinting Practices and Narratives of Career Meaningfulness

Eames employees' interpretations emphasizing values or skills served as the beginning of their career narratives. To create consistent narratives, they used *reprinting* to narrate what they did with those imprints in their post-Eames career narrative. That is, imprinting was evident as informants narrated the Eames experience, while reprinting occurred as they narrated later career experiences. In common language, "to 'reprint' (Oxford University Press, n.d.) means both to print again or in a different form." We lean into this double meaning—reprinting allows individuals the option to either reinforce existing meaning or to find new meaning in relation to their imprint. These types of reprinting were evident as Eames employees narrated high points, low points, and career transitions. During these moments, the shadow of Eames was present throughout informants' narratives, both as text (explicit mentions) and subtext (implicit comparisons). Reprinting practices thus became narrative strategies that allowed individuals to connect where they had been (Eames) to where they were going, and construct a consistent and meaningful career

narrative. Analyzing our informants' narrative yielded three different ways of reprinting, or reprinting practices: *embracing values*, *contrasting values*, and *supplanting values*.

Just as imprints contain both values and skills, as individuals build out their narratives from these starting points, reprinting practices allow them to emphasize a feature that becomes thematic or repeated during their narrative. As they focus on one feature, though, it creates space to build the other. Individuals who embrace values also see themselves as embracing Eames's skills but in the service of these values. "Embracing values" thus involved individuals interpreting subsequent career experiences in line with the beliefs derived from Eames values. In contrast, individuals who embrace skills (i.e., skills-dominant imprint) see themselves doing it in service of finding new values that contrast with the Eames values. "Contrasting values" thus involved individuals embracing skills in service of distancing themselves from the Eames values as a way to emphasize a later career experience as more significant. Finally, others emphasize skills but are also highlighting the values, to show how their ability to embrace the skills has allowed them to supplant the values. "Supplanting values" thus involved strategically embracing skills while highlighting Eames values as a comparison with values derived from later experiences; often, the goal was to portray the new values as superior to the prior Eames values. For simplicity of labeling—and because the key distinctions in these patterns seem to hinge on values—we label these three patterns as *embracing values*, *contrasting values*, and *supplanting values*. However, each label implies a dual action between how individuals think of the values and the skills.

The way individuals narrated the Eames experience (emphasizing either values or skills) shaped the possible options for how they could relate this chapter to the rest of their story through reprinting. For example, narrating a values-dominant imprint ("Eames was life defining") made it harder to emphasize later experiences as new guiding values in a narrative, unless people connected those subsequent values to Eames. Thus, we saw that values-dominant imprints were related to the reprinting practice of embracing values, and this combination enabled a composite *belongingness narrative*, which centered collaboration and contribution with others. In contrast, narrating a skills-dominant imprint ("I learned photography under Eames") left empty space for a "know-why," the guiding values in one's story. This openness provided more flexibility, and,

as such, we observed two corresponding reprinting practices that fit with this imprint—contrasting and supplanting values. Skills-dominant imprints in combination with contrasting values formed a composite *self-expression narrative*, emphasizing authenticity and freedom, whereas skills-dominant imprints in combination with supplanting values formed a composite *achievement narrative*, emphasizing expertise and accomplishment. Contrasting and supplanting are both built from experiences that bring new meanings in from outside influences, such as new environments, new projects, new colleagues, and thus allow for the narrating of two different possible forms of career meaningfulness. These practices differ, however, in the form in which they incorporate post-Eames experiences, as we discuss more below.

These composite narratives were constructed based on the dominant patterns we observed in each narrative; that is, individuals could use multiple reprinting practices in their narrative, as they related different career experiences, but the dominant patterns held because they seemed to provide the most plausible way to construct a coherent narrative. Echoing similar work on life narratives, we saw that individuals seek narrative coherence in crafting a meaningful story that connects their beginning with their end (McAdams, 2006a). The composite narratives we observed—the combination of imprint, reprinting practice, and source of meaningfulness—appeared to provide the strongest narrative coherence. For example, a values-dominant imprint fit well with the reprinting practice of embracing because it allowed individuals to continually associate with Eames; it would have been less coherent to narrate Eames as a source of guiding values but then discount those values in recounting the rest of one's career. All three reprinting practices allowed Eames employees to author a story that portrayed them as an agentic protagonist while acknowledging callbacks to formative Eames experiences and creating a sense of consistency in their stories, but they do this by achieving a fit between the different aspects of their narrative's structure. In the sections that follow, we introduce the three composite narratives and structures (imprint, reprinting practice, source of meaningfulness) that defined them.

**Belongingness: Embracing values.** Embracing involved incorporating the Eames values as the lens through which later career experiences were interpreted; this was the primary pattern among individuals relating a values-dominant imprint. Eames employees who narrated this imprint crafted a plot that allowed them to write themselves into a larger Eames story: internalizing Eames meanings to carry

on the legacy of the organization while also adding their own contribution to that legacy. This plot structure allowed these narratives to prioritize association with Eames throughout the career; as a result, the dominant source of career meaningfulness was belongingness, centered on connection and collaboration with others, both Eames and subsequent colleagues.

Informants adopting this pattern narrated their later career experiences as infused with the values and meanings derived from Eames. For example, Ellen described how she used the meanings instilled at Eames in other choices and key moments in her career:

*[Eames] will be always be a very strong influence in terms of who I am and how I see the world and that sense of curiosity, and that to me is what underlies creativity ... If you look at my path, it's been very much influenced by both that sense of curiosity in a lot of different subject areas and the need to pool them together to solve problems ... for example, during my MBA, I realized that one of the areas that was near and dear to me, environmental issues, were not being taught in business school and so I went to the [dean] and said, "I would like to apply my business education to the new area of environmental development technology but I learned nothing about this in business school" ... And they said, "Why don't you do a feasibility study for us?," which I did.*

Ellen's example reveals how she narrates the Eames value of curiosity as a source of guidance in key moments in her career. As a result, even though she was pursuing fields outside the interests of the Eames Office (business and environmental studies), she still relied on the Eames values to determine how to approach these situations. Hence, the meaning from the imprint cascaded forward and colored later career experiences. As another example, Wade noted in his narrative how his Eames experience continued to carry into later experiences in his career almost daily:

*I don't think there's a day that I don't have experiences or think things or have an opinion about something that isn't influenced by the time spent at the Eames Office. I think it's so interwoven, I think, into the way I approach things and who I am that I think it's sort of inescapable.*

For Wade, bringing forward the Eames ethos into current projects or career choices, rather than collecting new meanings, felt "inescapable." Wade's choice of the word "inescapable" hints at what we saw across the data: a close coupling between specific imprints and reprinting practices, as noted above.

These Eames employees acknowledged how their work departed from Eames while still emphasizing

the Eames values as a primary frame for interpreting their later career experiences. In this way, meaning from the imprint was held and brought into each of their other creative projects and subsequent career turning points. Derek, for example, worked on a variety of different film projects, building on his film-making experience at Eames. When narrating his later successful projects, Derek emphasized his own learning:

I would say that I was learning [at Eames] and I'm still learning ... *you're laying in a store of knowledge that you know you'll be able to use again and again and again* ... I felt that, every time I've done a project, I've learned something ... So, it's a growth. That's why I drew the line [career map] as a gradually increasing line ... I've spent 48 years getting to the day when I step on this stage to do this thing that I haven't done before. And that's very important to me.

Derek emphasized his own "growth," but it built from the meaning attached to learning he had developed at Eames. As a result, his later experiences were narrated as embracing the Eames values, allowing him to draw associations with Eames:

*The management style that Charles used, which was to lead by example, but also to never tell a person too much, that was exactly the style that I was using with these folks [on that film] ... [Charles] basically trusted the people working for him to come up with good ideas ... You've placed in them the fact that ... "I trust you to think about this. I'm not going to tell you how to do it" ... And that was how we ran the unit [I was in charge of] for all those years ... And I would just sort of cycle from one [stage] to the next and encouraging, praising, suggesting, exactly like what Charles did.*

In narrating this experience, a film project he called the "spiritual highlight" of his career, Derek associated himself with Charles. He emphasized the trust he had in his teammates, a value he took from Eames, where he felt Charles trusted his employees. Derek thus interwove his personal story with the larger Eames story ("I learned this from Charles Eames") as well as embracing the Eames values and skills (using "the management style" he recalled Charles using). This story is also notable because Derek was working with an award-winning director whom he rarely mentions, while choosing to mention Charles frequently.

For these informants, the Eames values-dominant in their imprints were the narrative motif that they wove into their later career experiences. This shaped how informants derived meaningfulness from their career: they emphasized a sense of belonging as they carried on the Eames legacy, but also a sense of

belonging with their later collaborators. When put together, values-dominant imprints and the reprinting practice of embracing values allowed employees to connect their career to the larger Eames legacy, providing belongingness:

I went to graduate school at Harvard, but *the Eames Office was my real, genuine, true graduate school* ... that's where I learned things that I ended up teaching ... Charles felt that, whether you're preparing a lecture or an exhibition or making a film ... even after, theoretically, you've got it right, you never stop working on it ... That was just Charles all the time ... I think that approach where everything that you do is part of your creative effort ... that work could be like play, but it was play that was serious. That, if you did that, that would be the most fulfilling way to live your life ... I always felt ... *the things that I felt that I really had to give to students were things that had come to me from the Eames Office.* (Wade)

Here, at the conclusion of his career narrative, Wade explicitly compares the imprint he used from Eames versus one he could have used from Harvard. Wade highlights this values-dominant imprint by emphasizing that he gained meaning not only from the "approach" he learned at Eames, but also from understanding the Eames values as "the most fulfilling way to live your life." He derived meaningfulness from belonging not just with Eames but also connecting his students and the Eames legacy.

Embracing the Eames values could be challenging, however, when subsequent experiences did not seem to live up to the higher aspirations, such as creating an Eames-like organization, which emerged from adopting the Eames values as a guide. This could potentially lead to great disappointment if informants felt unsuccessful in living up to these aspirations. While this pattern was rare in our data, we did have one prominent example. Alastair joined Eames after beginning his design career in Europe; he narrated a strong values-dominant imprint, expressing a deep identification with Eames: "I'd never been so happy in my life ... They gave real attention to what they did, what we did ... I loved it there." He eventually decided to return to Europe and interpreted this experience with links to the Eames experience: "I returned transformed and fizzing from my experience in the Office." Despite this excitement, however, he met with moments of disappointment:

*It's not been easy. I'd had these years in this perfect design-making environment and I suppose I'd hoped naively to make a clone of the Eames Office in Europe, but it was very hard.* Economically, it's very



hard. I did a range of chairs, but they never went anywhere. I'm a very bad businessman. I'm very good at designing things and making things, but I'm actually a shitty businessman.

He described these as the low points in his career: "The low point... was the gradual realization that my dearest fantasies would not bear fruit, and my dear fantasies were [not] to be involved again in [an] organization like the Eames Office." He described his creativity "tailing off" after being "bruised too many times professionally." Nevertheless, such disappointments provided opportunities to bring the Eames values forward: he continued to call Eames "one of the highlights of my career," wishing "I could show them what I've been doing [lately]."

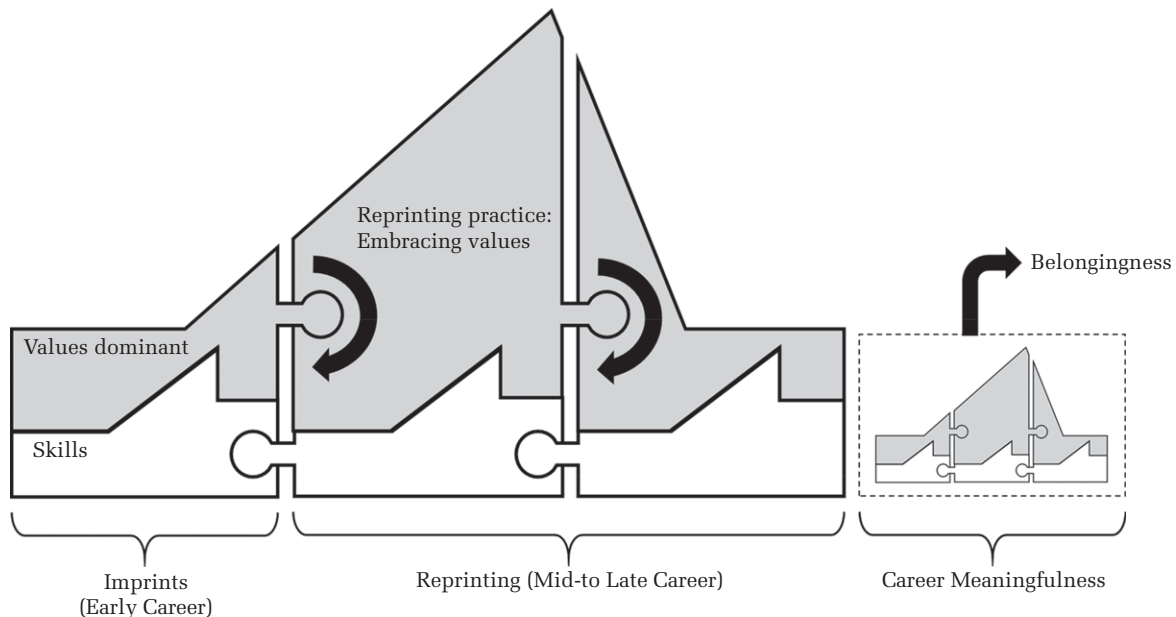
In sum, the belongingness narrative is a narrative of association: the Eames values cascade into later experiences, coloring them to reflect what was learned earlier (see Figure 3). It is worth highlighting that informants did feel a trade-off between belonging and individuality—a circumscribed sense of meaningfulness. As Derek put it, "You're a member of the [Eames] family. It means that you are theirs, body and soul." As a result, belongingness served as the central source of meaningfulness for these career narratives, but Eames employees expressed some regret about the cost of belongingness. Notably, this narrative was more straightforward compared to

those centering self-expression and achievement, which we describe next.

**Self-expression: Contrasting values.** Rather than embracing the Eames values, employees could also use them to contrast with later experiences, providing a way for individuals to differentiate themselves from Eames; this generally occurred among individuals with skills-dominant imprints. In these narratives, the Eames experience provided useful ways of doing things (e.g., skills and techniques), but lacked meaningful values ("know-why") that could guide their careers. In Zach's narrative, for example, creative work at Eames was overly "specified," leaving him to have to collect his own sense of "creative work" later—"fine art" contrasted with Eames's "commercial art":

...the Eames Office specifies it [creativity] too much... industrial design, it's commercial art. You are generally working for someone else... I was working for Eames. But, of course, Eames is working for IBM... *the further you go down the rungs, the more you're doing creative work, but it's not necessarily your creative work*... [after I attended that photography workshop], I suddenly realized there is this thing called "fine art"... That, by golly, I could go out and I could photograph anything I damn well pleased and I could make that photograph say what I want it to... it was a great boost too, in terms of a sense that *I could do something meaningful all by myself*.

FIGURE 3  
Belongingness Narrative



Not relying on values from Eames meant collecting one's own values, which often involved exploration of various roles and domains. Sometimes, these informants would work for a period of time in a job before realizing that they were not fulfilled creatively by the work: "Not everything was really exciting ... It's just intense ... But I wouldn't call it particularly creative. The end result was creative I guess, but the process of doing some of the things was really slogging the battle" (Clark). As a result, they often narrated major career experiences with a sense of frustration both with their experience post-Eames and with a mismatch between the Eames values and what they found fulfilling.

By contrasting values, informants interpreted the meaning of the Eames experience through later experiences that were perceived as more representative of their individual values. This often required explicitly rejecting or creating a contrast with Eames:

I would call Eames "formative." I don't have a product like Aluminum Group that is standing the test of time or Airport Seating [two iconic Eames products] ... *But I think some of our exhibits are much more important, you know, for me.* (Esther)

As another example, Dustin noted that Eames provided him status to get jobs ("a good name to have on your list") and skills for filmmaking ("the process of decision-making"):

It [the Eames experience] never did anything but help me because I wasn't competing with him [Charles] ... his work, his movies were a wonderful inspiration for me but I wasn't making his kind of movies ... *He had nothing—he was just a good name to have in your list ... He just had a way of seeing the world that made me—I could use this as a model for how to approach projects and think about them.* When he designed a chair, he built it and then they would leave it around and people would sit in it for a month. And then he thinks about it some more. And I realized that the process of decision-making isn't something you just jump into.

But, when describing how he managed later successes and challenges in his career, he did not refer back to the Eames values, instead emphasizing values from his later experiences:

The battle is to just keep doing things that give you creative satisfaction. And what gives you creative satisfaction changes over time as your values and your interests change ... my career departed so radically [from Eames] ... because that [design] wasn't my side of the street.

When contrasting was the dominant reprinting practice, employees emphasized values of autonomy, authenticity, and self-knowledge as informants charted a career path that was uniquely theirs: "Learning how to make *your own work* as opposed to simply learning how to make work ... that's the lifetime job ... you have to be sure enough of what you're doing to *take your own path*" (Zach). To achieve this, they separated their personal story from the Eames story. Clark related:

When I left [Eames], I was doing my photography, and I was really aware of the fact that *I had, by osmosis, absorbed his style. I was shooting as though I was a Little Charles ... I did go through a period of time really struggling against that*, because I would naturally migrate to using those tools ... and the way of looking at things.

Clark resisted being associated with Eames, not wanting to be "a Little Charles"; he did, however, want to use the "tools" he had learned to develop his own personal career.

Crafting their narrative around their search for their own values enabled the experience of meaningfulness from self-expression, but these narratives also captured a profound struggle to achieve external recognition. Meaningfulness was circumscribed by the difficulties in finding external success. This is due in part to the open-ended nature of contrasting values that required narrators to bring in details from their post-Eames experience as guiding values; by contrasting strongly with Eames, these informants had less foundation in their prior experiences. Consequently, self-expression narratives were circumscribed by struggles for economic viability seen as a trade-off for self-expression:

I went from a life where it was a wonderful environment to be in [Eames], and I had a steady paycheck, *but the price you pay had something to do vaguely with your freedom to really be going exactly the direction you want to with your own life ...* So, when you step off that boat, yeah, the world is yours—and the problem is that nobody's paying you to be there, and so, for decades ... my life has been one of, I guess you'd say, economic levitation. (Zach)

Even so, these employees described the journey to find personally fulfilling work that resonated with their values as worthwhile even as they sometimes acknowledged the lack of a "market" for their work:

I guess there's some creative aspect to [my design work at Eames], but I wouldn't call that "creative" in

the sense that I would call my painting creative ... *It's not self-generated. It's not—it's outside yourself... I don't paint for the market... I would call that [my painting] creative because it is self-generated and it has a purpose that I feel like is much more noble and life sustaining.* (Wayne)

In sum, the self-expression narrative was one of differentiation: by interpreting the Eames experience as focused on skills, an individual's overarching values ("know-why") were left for these individuals to collect for themselves from subsequent career episodes, with little reference to Eames. Eames functioned primarily as a background contrast to provide color and texture to the later, more significant career experiences. The primary source of career meaningfulness here was self-expression; without the Eames values as anchor, individuals sought their "self-generated" creativity, extracted from later experiences. The skills-dominant imprint from Eames provided a narrative structure to support this exploration—a foil against which they could contrast their collected values. At the same time, this meant that these individual's narratives had to reconcile a variety of experiences and meanings to make sense of their careers while still finding meaningfulness ("the world is yours [but] nobody's paying you to be there"; Zach). Figure 4 depicts this narrative.

**Achievement: Supplanting values.** In addition to embracing and contrasting values, we found that informants could seek to supplant the Eames values in their narratives as they both associated and differentiated within their narratives in strategic ways; this

was the second composite narrative built from a skills-dominant imprint. Supplanting values revealed how Eames employees embraced the skills they learned at Eames while also contrasting the extracted meaning from later projects to fill in the narrative spaces left from the skills-dominant imprint. This allowed these employees to claim their own achievements; building on Eames, but also supplanting the Eames values with those from their later career successes. Put another way, their imprint provided a form (e.g., skills and opportunities), while their subsequent experiences filled in the meanings that made their career narrative meaningful; in this way, they narrated Eames as a stepping-stone to their own success.

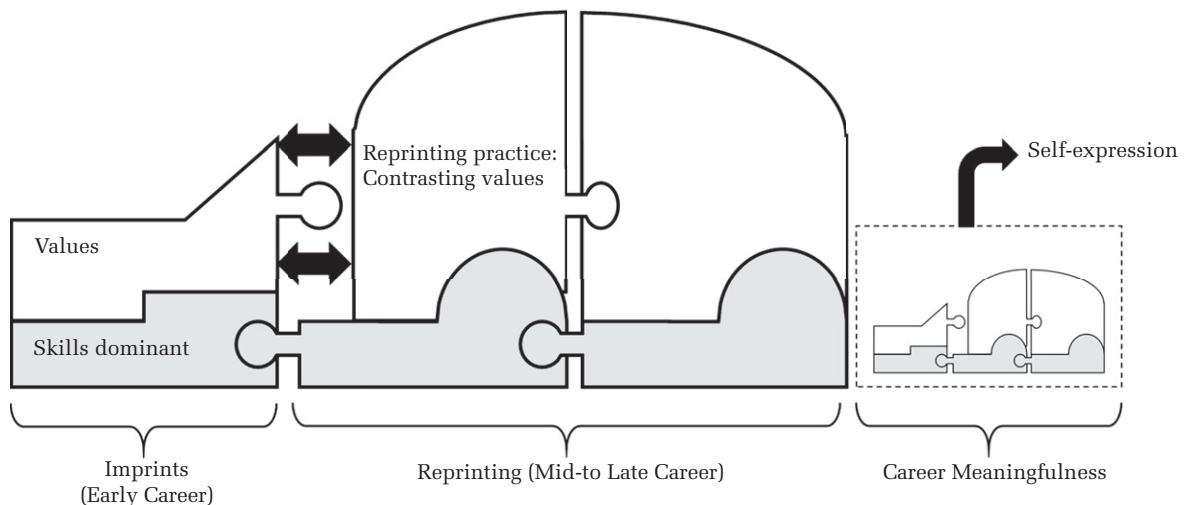
Luke's narrative provided a clear illustration of supplanting values. He began by depicting his starting point (skills-dominant imprint) and how he "learned to learn" at Eames:

When I arrived at the Eames Office, I was somebody who knew almost everything about almost nothing... I realized I am possibly the most ignorant person on the face of the earth, and, at that moment, I became a life-long autodidact... I have never stopped.

In time, he left Eames to work for another design firm, where he reveals the tell-tale mark of a skills-dominant imprint: emphasizing "know-how" ("what I could do") over "know-why":

... all of a sudden, I was a special person because I had come from the Eames Office. So, all of a sudden, my "status" quote unquote—and I hate to use the

**FIGURE 4**  
**Self-Expression Narrative**



word “status” because it really wasn’t about that. *It was really just about finally being in a situation where I was accepted for what I could do.*

By not claiming the Eames values, Luke’s narrative provides empty spaces for different guiding principles. The first hints of differentiation appear here; Luke chafes at his success being attributed to “status” from Eames, reiterating that it was more about “being accepted for what I could do.” Luke resists the possibility that Eames could dominate his story.

Later, Luke was invited by an Eames colleague, William, another informant, to start their own design firm. Their first project was the successful downtown rejuvenation of a major city. As William described: “We were launched... people from all over the country started coming to look at what we had done, and soon ... we started getting big clients.” In reflecting on these successes, Luke again takes the opportunity to distance himself from Charles and Ray by collecting new meanings from his successes:

The high point ... was that *we were able to build an enduring practice* that resonated both with the markets, it resonated with the culture and it resonated with the people ... And so, the single greatest of point of pride—and *I do wanna reflect on the Eames Office. I made the point very clearly that that was not a business. It was an atelier; it was an indulgence.* It was an all-consuming passion and hobby of Charles and Ray. There was never anything that resembled what a conventional professional design practice has to do to survive ... We [my partner and I] had a pretty successful practice, financially and professionally ... We were committed to providing a great career ... not just for ourselves ... *and so we had to be adults about that.*

Note the role of the work context (i.e., a professional design practice) in how Luke narrates this episode: his work had to resonate both “financially and professionally,” not just with himself but also with others. In addition, the newly collected meaning is framed in contrast to the Eames approach (as Luke saw it), where work was a “hobby” or “an indulgence,” based around the assessments of Charles and Ray alone. Supplanting values allowed Eames employees to construct narratives that highlighted the know-how developed at Eames but left hollowed-out spaces that could later be filled in with values they collected through their successes—values that were often in explicit contrast with the Eames values (“an indulgence” vs. “an enduring practice”). This structure enabled Eames employees to differentiate themselves (“we had to be adults about [the business]”) by

finding their own meanings (“we had a pretty successful practice ... financially and professionally”).

At the same time, these narratives also allowed individuals to associate themselves with Eames by attributing some of their success to the skills developed at Eames:

*I learned how to work in a creative environment, which, now I’m a production designer ... We’re basically involved with all the creative aspects of the film ... which is, in a way, the same as they were doing at the Eames Office, just in a different format ... It [Eames] was about how to put all the creative people together and how to put them to work ... So I think *I learned a lot; not technical things but just more cerebral things about how to work with people and how to be in a creative environment,* and all the personalities and stuff. It’s basically the same in film and television. (Frank)*

Note how Frank continues to emphasize skills developed at Eames (“how to work in a creative environment”) while also relating this to his later success in Hollywood. Returning to Luke and William’s narratives from above, Luke noted, “When William and I started our practice ... everything we did followed those tenets [of Eames]”; William elaborated:

*It [Eames] reinforced the path I was on.* It really gave it credibility that someone that failed to be an architect [Charles], and a painter [Ray] ... that wind up together and start an office and be successful and create furniture that the world had never seen and discuss ideas that no one had ever thought of ... *We were all on the same trajectory of creating ...* The Eames Office was jumping from one trampoline onto another.

In each of these examples, employees associated themselves with Eames, strategically embracing the Eames values as a stepping-stone to their later success. This is a key difference between self-expression narratives and achievement narratives; in the former, Eames is an early experience that is backgrounded, unless it can make comparisons more vivid. In the latter, Eames is something to be superseded by their own accomplishments, both a predecessor and a foil.

By both acknowledging the skills they gained at Eames and differentiating themselves in later experiences, these individuals could claim their own achievements and experience, and thus derive a sense of meaningfulness:

I think I’m just as creative now as I was when I was in my early to mid-thirties ... There was this mantra during the ‘60s that “don’t trust anybody over 30,”

because it's like you're a fossil. *I always thought, when I heard that, "No, it's based on experience."* (Robert)

I have more tools at my disposal and I don't stress myself out about it the same way as I would have when I was 30. (INTERVIEWER: *What would you say is the cause of that change?*) Experience. *My bag of tricks is much, much bigger, so not everything I do has to come from some nebulous, smoky, creative space.* I can more narrowly define what I need to be creative about to write some music because I have so many more tools now than I used to. (Thomas)

Supplanting the Eames values through both association and differentiation was used to narrate careers as an upward trajectory: "My trajectory has never slowed down... So, my trajectory is Eames Office, the bar graph goes up, up, up, up, up until the day you die" (William). In focusing on achievement, these narratives often emphasized objective success:

You can just look at a list of my films and you can create the curve [career map] from that. Where it went, which ones you remember and heard about, and the ones you didn't have an idea what they were. (Frank)

Neither fully embracing the Eames values nor fully differentiating from them allowed these individuals to emphasize their own achievements and accomplishments, while still standing on the metaphorical shoulders of giants. As with the other composite narratives, however, meaningfulness was somewhat circumscribed: although they portrayed

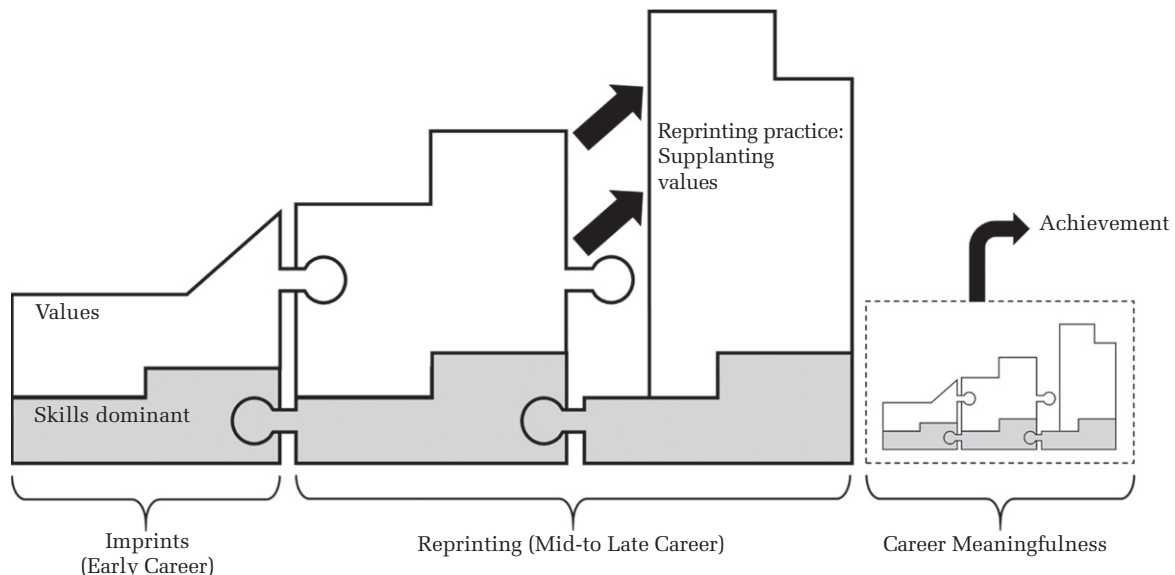
an upward trajectory of success, these employees acknowledged that they were constrained somewhat by external factors in the market:

If you go through a history of work, *different things are presented to you, considering we're dealing with an economy that goes up and down... this is the opportunity of being able to work on projects ... Good design is easy but making it profitable and meeting the market is another thing.* And so we really try and balance that. (Ronald)

In sum, the achievement narrative was one of both association and differentiation (see Figure 5). These informants created narratives centered on achievement as a source of career meaningfulness by interpreting the Eames experience as centered on skills, yet still leveraging these values to emphasize their external success. Even in summarizing his narrative, Luke implied this structure, highlighting the hollow spaces ("[what] I didn't know"), the collecting to fill these spaces ("everything that I have learned"), and the eventual claim of achievement ("billions... in revenue"):

I've learned over the course of my career the critical importance... to be able to return to a beginner's mind... I didn't know that when I was young... I am more creative now... simply because of everything that I have learned and experienced... Thirty-nine years later, the firm we began in 1973 has endured and prospered... *These projects and places we have helped create touch millions of people daily and produce what must now amount to billions of dollars in revenue.*

**FIGURE 5**  
Achievement Narrative



## DISCUSSION

Through a qualitative study of former Eames Office employees, we theorize how individuals navigate the *paradox of promise*, the tension between association and differentiation in relation to a prominent mentor, in their career narratives. In crafting their narratives, Eames employees drew upon *imprints* (values-dominant vs. skills-dominant), interpretations of their formative experience at Eames, and *reprinting practices* (embracing, contrasting, supplanting), narrative strategies for interpreting subsequent career experiences in light of their imprint. We observed that the dominant themes in individual's imprints implied certain reprinting practices; this fit was critical in constructing a coherent narrative and allowing individuals to construct an overarching source of career meaningfulness—belongingness, self-expression, or achievement. In developing a theory of imprints and reprinting (see Figure 2), we build and extend theory on careers, imprinting, and meaningful work, which we discuss next.

### Navigating the Paradox of Promise

In bringing together theories of careers, imprints, and mentoring, we offer novel insights about how people make sense of working with prominent mentors—the paradox of promise. Existing research explains how mentors provide key career resources, generally emphasizing benefits: “mentors help protégés become socialized ... provide instrumental and emotional support ... and share knowledge and resources to help protégés” (Sullivan & Al Ariss, 2021: 7). Narrowing in on *prominent* mentors challenges this more positive view by highlighting the potential drawbacks that occur when individuals begin to see their career as entwined with a prominent other. After, and even perhaps during, the formative experience, people begin to feel innately, or permanently, compared to their mentors—regardless of the relationship's quality (Ragins & Verbos, 2017). The theory we induced in this study suggests that individuals interpret these resources as enduring imprints that emphasize either values or skills and are woven into later experiences via reprinting practices. To establish their own careers as meaningful in their own right, people need to figure out how to take advantage of these connections. Our theory provides three patterns for how individuals accomplish this via narrative, emphasizing association (belongingness), differentiation (self-expression), or both (achievement).

Existing research generally focuses on how to manage these tensions through the production of particular types of work (i.e., optimally distinct products; Slavich & Castellucci, 2016), often seeking objective career success (e.g., publications; Ma et al., 2020). Although this may seem a straightforward solution, it belies the internal psychological work required to see oneself as capable of standing on one's own to produce differentiated work, while feeling indebted or connected to a prominent mentor. Mentoring research suggests that separation (i.e., when the mentoring relationship changes to accommodate psychological and/or structural changes) and redefinition (i.e., when a peer-based relationship replaces the more hierarchical one) are key phases in the mentoring process, yet are understudied in comparison to earlier phases of initiation and cultivation (Humberd & Rouse, 2016; Kram, 1983). Our study concentrates on the complications of separation. Building on the recognition that “career success is ... a social construction rather than an objective reality” (Dries et al., 2008: 255), our data show that people can author career narratives in a way that weaves in differentiation and association as enduring motifs throughout their careers. The paradox of promise thus becomes a recurring theme that, while perhaps never fully resolved, nonetheless serves as a central drama of individuals' working lives (Carlsen, 2008). What's more, our data show that, while prior literature emphasizes optimal distinctiveness from one's mentor (Castellucci & Slavich, 2020; Ma et al., 2020; Slavich & Castellucci, 2016), we show that people can find meaningfulness both in being very closely aligned with their mentor (belongingness narratives) or by differentiating significantly from them (self-expression narratives), in addition to a more optimally distinct approach (achievement narratives).

Our emergent theory of imprints and reprinting, drawing on retrospective narratives, also responds to calls for a more interpretive approach to careers:

Retrospective designs ... can provide further insight into the long-term processes of how (non-)sustainable careers have developed over time, the factors that affected these, as well as their inter-relatedness. The advantage of such an approach is the relative ease of obtaining a long-term perspective. (De Vos et al., 2020: 11)

In taking this approach, we reveal that, even though individuals seemingly have a limited set of narrative structures (imprints and reprinting practices, which have to be coherently linked), they are

still able to construct meaningfulness in different ways. Individuals author their careers with a combination of constraint and flexibility. This is perhaps similar to a mystery writer working with typical hallmarks of the genre—red herrings, foreshadowing, clues, etc. These hallmarks constrain the story the author can tell, and yet they can use these hallmarks in slightly different ways to construct different stories. Similarly, narrating the paradox of promise does not offer individuals infinite flexibility, as some features are fixed—namely, their prominent mentor, their objective successes and failures, and the products they created. We discovered that these features provide the content for reprinting that individuals combine with imprints to create their narratives. Hence, even though each career narrative is unique in its details, the overall responses to the paradox of promise (i.e., the three composite narratives) seem remarkably similar.

Although our study has focused on mentors whose prominence is positive, based on success and achievements, it is also possible that a mentor's prominence could come from infamy rather than fame. Individual's association with fallen mentors, such as film industry employees who worked with Harvey Weinstein (Tovar, 2018), or disgraced organizations, such as Arthur Andersen or Enron ("10 Years Later," 2011; Gendron & Spira, 2010; Zaslou, 2004), could create similar tensions but in reverse. We can speculate from our study that, in these cases, individuals seem likely to strongly differentiate themselves from their infamous mentor, though potentially seeking to leverage the expertise or other skills they did obtain from the mentor. Future research is needed to understand these topics, perhaps drawing upon organizational research on stigma (Paetzold, Dipboye, & Elsbach, 2008) to explore, for example, how individuals navigate imprints that have been "tainted."

### An Interpretive Perspective on Imprints

Following on our first contribution, our second contribution involves bringing an interpretive perspective to imprints, expanding future possibilities for using the concept.

Most research has emphasized imprints as tangible elements that individuals carry forward, such as skills, knowledge, and social capital (Higgins, 2005; Marquis & Tilcsik, 2013; Tilcsik, 2014). These studies generally treat imprints as relatively static social facts that can be inferred from contextual factors. To illustrate, in two representative studies of individual-level imprinting, imprints are inferred

based on environmental conditions (Marquis & Qiao, 2020; Tilcsik, 2014). Marquis and Qiao (2020: 808) measured a communist ideological imprint based on whether individuals were Chinese Communist Party members before founding their ventures. Similarly, Tilcsik (2014) used first-year resource abundance to assess an imprint of environmental munificence on individuals. This approach assumes that "experiences during these [imprinting] periods shape interpretation of what constitutes appropriate behaviors and rules of action later in life" (Marquis & Qiao, 2020: 797).

Building on existing work (Bianchi, 2013; Bourmault & Anteby, 2020; Dokko, Wilk, & Rothbard, 2009), our study complements this dominant view by fleshing out an interpretive perspective. Our research shows that imprints can also be intrapersonal, interpretive accomplishments that not only shape, but also can be shaped, to extract meaning beyond the resources individuals felt they were endowed with. The concept of *reprinting* that we induce from our data complements existing imprinting research: whereas imprinting emphasizes the influence of the environment on individuals, reprinting emphasizes what individuals do with this enduring influence. In this sense, our contribution parallels work by Sonenshein and colleagues, who brought an interpretive perspective to employee growth, a topic typically treated as "a developmental experience...marked by gaining knowledge and skills" (Sonenshein, Dutton, Grant, Spreitzer, & Sutcliffe, 2013: 552). In a similar vein, our findings are important not because they offer veridical accounts of reality per se, but also because they unveil how individuals work to align earlier experiences—imprints—with understanding from the full sweep of their careers to create meaning. Hence, our theorizing changes imprints from metaphorically impressed on and absorbed by individuals into interpretations they can author, edit, and express.

Adding an interpretive perspective to imprinting complements and contributes to the conventional approach by providing at least two novel insights. First, our data show that individuals who experience similar objective starting points (i.e., working under the same prominent mentors in a similar time period) interpreted their formative experience in two distinct ways (dominated by values vs. skills). The importance of values has been noted in other research on imprinting (Marquis & Qiao, 2020; Wang, Du, & Marquis, 2019), yet our findings show that individuals can take away more complex combinations of skills and values, which they may



emphasize to varying degrees. This is noteworthy since our participants worked at an organization with a strong culture and publicly renowned mentors in Charles and Ray Eames. Even so, when retrospectively crafting their career narratives, individuals extracted different meanings from this experience, which had implications for how they made sense of their overall career. Future research should examine how and when individuals internalize different aspects of their environment(s) during a formative period.

Second, the concept of reprinting illustrates not only that imprints can vary from the same experience, but also that imprints become narrative fodder for continued reinterpretation throughout a career narrative. This complements the existing arguments that imprints have long-lasting impacts; classically, the impact comes from the unconscious psychological framing internalized by individuals (Johnson, 2007; Marquis & Qiao, 2020). In contrast, our findings highlight the flexibility individuals have in (re)writing their imprints, exposing or imposing meanings throughout their narratives. Importantly, conventional imprinting research has begun to acknowledge the potential for “imprint decay” (Marquis & Qiao, 2020; Terbeck, Rieger, Van Quaquebeke, & Engelen, 2022). Allowing for the role of individual interpretation in the persistence, amplification, decay, or transformation of imprints (Simsek et al., 2015) opens new avenues for research. For example, because some imprints are experienced collectively, future research might examine how cohorts collectively author narratives of their experience at an organization at a given moment in time. These collective narratives may evolve: a high-status company might be brought low by scandal, changing the framing of a socialization experience (Bishop, Treviño, Gioia, & Kreiner, 2020), or a crisis might be reframed as an opportunity for resilience (Kahn, Barton, Fisher, Heaphy, Reid, & Rouse, 2018). Such changes in the collective narrative might authorize individuals to reinterpret their imprint, emphasizing unique experiences that give them license for differentiation from the collective narrative.

Similarly, future research could build a typology of the types of experiences that offer opportunities for reprinting. A potential starting point would be to integrate research on emotions into the practices induced in this paper. For example, research on the “bad is stronger than good” hypothesis (Baumeister, Bratslavsky, Finkenauer, & Vohs, 2001) would suggest that moments of failure might evoke more detailed cognitive processing, perhaps enabling

individuals to dissect and reconstruct their experience (De Dreu, Baas, & Nijstad, 2008). In contrast, recent work on narratives of awe suggests that positive, expanding experiences allow people to bring new meanings into their work (Sheprow & Harrison, 2022). Finally, it would be valuable to examine how individuals’ interpretations of their formative experience change over time (i.e., longitudinally). Research on narratives shows that life stories change as individuals develop (McAdams & Olson, 2010)—how would an individual’s career narrative change at five years, 20 years, and 40 years post-imprinting?

### Careers and Meaningful Work

Finally, our findings build new theory around meaningful work over the career. We significantly extend this literature in three ways. First, we provide a theory of how individuals weave career episodes together to craft a larger sense of meaningfulness over the entire sweep of a career. Existing literature has emphasized that meaningfulness manifests in “transcendent moments in time rather than as a sustained state of being” (Bailey & Madden, 2017: 15). Our findings reinforce this, showing how narrative peaks and turning points can be highly meaningful; as Scheibe (1986: 136) put it, “One tells stories about these events, ‘dines out on them,’ elaborates and embroiders on successive retellings. In this fashion, the life story ... is enriched.” At the same, our findings go beyond only describing moments to demonstrate how they are woven into larger wholes—career narratives—illuminating the narrative work used to create plotlines linking past and present. For example, informants with a skills-dominant imprint appeared to leave a hollow where the Eames values would have been, allowing for greater significance in post-Eames chapters that provided these values. This is possible as individuals retrospectively bridge their career’s past and present with a hoped-for future. While extant research has demonstrated how individuals derive meaningfulness over smaller increments of time (Allan, 2017; Vogel, Rodell, & Sabey, 2020), without theory about how these smaller moments accumulate into a larger whole (or why they might be meaningfully deleted), it is less clear why the smaller moments matter. Our retrospective, narrative approach thus answers calls to build theory on the temporality of meaningfulness (Bailey & Madden, 2017; Fetzer & Pratt, 2020; Tommasi, Ceschi, & Sartori, 2020), revealing how successes and failures are woven together around imprints and reprinting. Future research should explore further



how meaningful experiences may aggregate (or not) over a career.

Second, we theorize how individuals construct meaningfulness using narrative capital (Carlsen, 2008; Carlsen & Pitsis, 2008, 2009) from an organization with a strong legacy. Our study shows that formative experiences with a prominent mentor can provide these “storied units of meaning” (Carlsen & Pitsis, 2020: 358), both retrospectively as well as when individuals orient themselves into the future. Informants could embrace the Eames legacy, allowing it to cascade forward in their careers but they could likewise use it as a foil, allowing them to construct a narrative of progression, change, and differentiation. Past successes thus become “seedlings for the new” (Carlsen & Pitsis, 2020: 359) as individuals engage in reprinting, building upon, or contrasting their formative experience with what they did next. Our work thus points to the importance of considering the role of legacies in relation to meaningful work—this could include connections to the past, such as past organizations (Crosina & Pratt, 2019), as well as the future, considering what individuals hope to leave behind (Bednar, 2013; Bednar & Brown, 2023; Fox, Tost, & Wade-Benzoni, 2010). Future work should explore these dynamics in regard to meaningful work, as legacies preserved and legacies discarded or reimaged.

Regardless of how legacy was narrated, however, gaining authorship of that legacy in relation to one’s own story was critical (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; McAdams, 2001), suggesting that broader potential sources of meaningfulness (e.g., narrative templates; Polkinghorne, 1988; cultural accounts of work; Boova, Pratt, & Lepisto, 2019) have to be internalized as part of one’s self-narrative to provide significance and purpose. Our work points to the meaning individuals derive from their successes as an important input into their career narratives rather than the success itself, absent the meaning. For example, research on creative careers broadly, and creativity specifically, often focuses on how others—judges of awards (Harrison, Askin, & Hagtvedt, 2023), feedback providers (Harrison & Rouse, 2015), and potential consumers (Harrison & Dossinger, 2017)—evaluate a creative success. But the *meaning* that the individuals derive from their successes seems more likely to stick with them over their careers. Hence, the meaning individuals carry from their efforts and what they do with that meaning in the future merits increased attention.

Finally, we show that the ultimate meaningfulness that individuals extract through their narratives is

circumscribed—people acknowledge trade-offs and regrets while also seeing the sweep of their career as personally significant. The richness of a narrative approach likely foregrounds these trade-offs as meaningfulness is embedded in plotlines and highly contextualized (Bloom, Colbert, & Nielsen, 2021). In constructing the overall purpose of one’s career (achievement, self-expression, belongingness), individuals must prioritize some efforts over others. Sacrifice is not a new topic in meaningful work, with extant research highlighting sacrifices of time, money, physical and mental well-being, and close relationships to pursue meaningfulness (Bunderson & Thompson, 2009; Jiang & Wrzesniewski, 2021; Oelberger, 2019; Schabram & Maitlis, 2017), but our study shifts the emphasis by highlighting sacrifices people make in terms of the source of meaningfulness itself. To illustrate, Rosso and colleague’s (2010: 114) review highlighted that “perceptions of the meaningfulness of work can fundamentally vary based on whether action is directed toward the self or toward others.” We reveal that not only are the sources of meaningfulness distinct, but they may be (to some extent) mutually exclusive. That is, when individuals orient their work efforts toward the self—for example, focusing to develop their own unique creative style—they may have less effort to direct toward others, such as connecting with teammates, and vice versa. Future research should explore meaningfulness as circumscribed, explicitly addressing trade-offs as well as potential synergies between different drivers and sources of work meaningfulness.

### Limitations and Future Directions

We see the interpretivist stance of our study as a feature and a strength, but are not blind to its limitations. First, as we described, our method was deliberately subjective: “the significance of narrative data lies not just in their richness... but in the fact that they are the same kind of data that organizational members use to plan, enact, interpret, and evaluate their own actions and those of others” (Pentland, 1999: 717). Although our informants relied on “narrative causality” (McAdams, 2001) in relating their careers and how they were received by others, we cannot draw conclusions about the objective facets of informants’ careers. Our findings highlight that individuals’ careers are webs of intersections (Mannucci, 2021); we focused on how individuals interpreted one specific intersection with a prominent mentor at a particular organization that

occurred early in the career. We also acknowledge that our data are elicited narratives; we focused in particular on the role that Eames played, and informants may have emphasized Eames-related episodes as a result. There are likely numerous relationships and connections that are influential for individual's careers (Dobrow, Chandler, Murphy, & Kram, 2012); future research, perhaps using network analysis, should examine these broader webs, possibly comparing prominent mentors with other connections.

Second, there are limitations to the generalizability of our findings. Inductive research naturally limits classic notions of generalizability but highlights the potential for transferability (Pratt & Bonaccio, 2016). Our findings should generalize most clearly to creative careers, or any work where people are rewarded for generating, elaborating, or implementing ideas (Florida, 2002; Rouse & Harrison, 2022). Nevertheless, our informants described having to navigate the tensions of working with a prominent mentor, which is common across a variety of fields, creative or otherwise. Thus, while our informants' experiences are unique, they represent a phenomenon common to employees across a variety of occupations. Future work should examine how individuals navigate the paradox of promise in other organizations and occupations. A particularly intriguing corollary is how associations with prominence may differ when there is no clear focal actor in the collective—is association with prominence still a double-edged sword? For example, many individuals begin their careers at high-status consulting firms before moving to management roles elsewhere. What lingering effects, if any, do these experiences have and how do individuals interpret them?

Finally, storytelling is inherently retrospective and personal storytelling necessitates attention to a host of self-enhancing motivations (McAdams, 2006b). We cannot rule out such motivations, although our informants appeared quite self-aware regarding the external evaluation of their work, especially in relation to Eames. Future research, drawing on themes in narrative identity work (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; LaPointe, 2010; McAdams, 2011), could more deeply explore the motives for constructing narratives in the moment—both backward-looking motives around legitimacy and coherence, and forward-looking motives like living with openness and a sense of purpose (Carlsen, 2008; Carlsen & Pitsis, 2020)—and how these motives shift over time (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010). Future research following cohorts over a longer period of time, either

with interviews, diaries, or surveys (preferably a combination), might capture how individuals wrestle with association and differentiation across different stages of the career.

### Practical Implications

Our work provides suggestions for individuals who find themselves navigating the paradox of promise. We highlight that there is equifinality in managing these tensions—there are multiple strategies for constructing a meaningful career in relation to a prominent mentor. Our research suggests that there are also critical trade-offs to be considered—since we cannot “have it all,” individuals should reflect on their experiences and consider what they truly value and what they would be willing to give up. In addition, thinking of one's career as a story, with protagonists, antagonists, tensions, plot twists, beginnings, and endings, can be a powerful tool. For individuals who are more advanced in their career, our findings highlight the degree of flexibility in developing one's personal story; lows can turn to highs and the past can be fitted to the present, allowing for “a celebration of mystery, surprise, and creativity” (Ezzy, 2000: 605; see also Lawrence & Maitlis, 2012) in the future. For individuals early in their career, we believe our findings can also provide reflection. Considering the future story one would seek for one's career can be powerful for elaborating possible selves (Ibarra, 1999; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Obodaru, 2012), enriching one's creativity and sense of possibility. For organizations and leaders, it is important to consider the different imprints that individuals bring to their work and how these may shape their interpretations; providing collective narrative resources, such as relating how prior experience is valuable to the organization (see Cable, Gino, & Staats, 2013), as part of the socialization process could help individual's reprinting in their new organization.

### CONCLUSION

The average adult spends most of their waking life at work (Dutton et al., 2010). As a result, careers and the creative twists that characterize them provide some of the most meaningful stories we can tell about our lives. By shining a light on the paradox of promise, we have highlighted a set of stories that individuals who work with prominent mentors must create to craft meaning from their careers. Together, our findings show that individuals cannot

simply solve thorny issues of meaningfulness that emerge from their work and work relationships; instead, they often narrate them, reinterpreting them in retrospect. In doing so, these tensions become the dramatic arcs, the imprints and reprinting, that individuals use to give their career a personalized sense of purpose and worth—a gift that no career success or failure can ever bestow upon them without storytelling.

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