

# Organizations as Social Actors: The Trickster

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## Abstract

After conducting initial fieldwork in three cultural organizations, I developed the view that organizations are social actors with unique organizational identities. The literature suggests that organizational identities are constructed through interorganizational interactions (e.g., Albert & Whetten, 1985), and that social action and identity are linked. In order to act, an entity must understand what it is. The methodological literature suggests that narrative inquiry provides an approach for understanding the process through which employees construct the organization's identity, as they reflect on interorganizational interactions. Thus, I present my interpretation of interview narratives about Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump's (HSIBJ's) interorganizational interactions, to illustrate my belief that organizations are social actors with unique identities. My interpretation supported my view that HSIBJ had a distinct, ambiguous identity that I could represent with the name 'The Trickster'. That is, the site was constructed as a culture hero for the Blackfoot people, but at the same time also constructed as an actor that was selling that culture. This interpretive approach to understanding organizational identity is unique in the literature on interorganizational relations.

## Introduction

During my doctoral studies, I spent one summer conducting initial field research in three Southern Alberta cultural organizations. Each of these facilities was a provincial Historic Site associated with Alberta Community Development. They were close together geographically, and shared the same mission of preservation and presentation of Alberta's cultural heritage. However, the sites displayed different types of collections, portrayed representations of different ethnic cultures, and interacted with different sets of important community stakeholders. During that field research, I accompanied visitor tours of the centres, initiated conversations and informal interviews with employees, attended Board meetings and other official functions, and acted as a volunteer at special events. Upon completion of my fieldwork, I began to explore my field notes, and developed the belief that the three historic sites were collective social actors with unique organizational identities. It appeared that each site was also oriented toward the behaviour of other actors in their external environments, such as community stakeholders.

Organizational identity is typically defined as what its members believe is central or fundamental, distinctive and enduring about the organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985). The organization defines what is distinctive about it, as it compares itself to other organizations or actors along self-selected characteristics. Drawing on Mead (1962/1934), Albert and Whetten suggested that organizational identity is constructed and re-constructed over time, as the

organization self-reflects on its ongoing interorganizational (IO) interactions. Other authors have also proposed that organizational identity is constructed and understood in relation or comparison to other organizations (e.g., Gioia, 1998). If we think about the ‘identity of’ the organization as a whole, it opens the way for conceptualizing organizations as social actors (Whetten & Mackey, 2002). From this view, organizations interact with other entities as collective social actors, as though they were individuals (e.g., Czarniawska, 1997; Meyer, Boli, & Thomas, 1987).

An exploration of the literature reveals two key links between social action and organizational identity. First, social action presupposes the existence of a unique, identifiable identity, at both the individual and organizational level. As Anne Huff suggested, “In order to exist, you have to act, and to act, you have to have some sense of who you are and some sense of what you are trying to do.” (In Barney et al., 1998, p. 111). Thus, Huff is suggesting that action and identity are interdependent. An actor cannot choose what to do, until it knows who it is. Second, the literature also suggests that identity may be the best predictor of the action that a social actor will take. As Albert (1998) wrote, “How one acts may depend more on who one is, who others think one is, and who one aspires to be than on any objective assessment of the opportunities and costs associated with a given direction.” (p. 10).

In this paper, I use an interpretive approach to illustrate the argument that organizations are collective social actors with unique identities that are constructed as organizational members reflect on IO interactions. Specifically, I present my interpretation of interview narratives at Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump (HSIBJ), one of my three field research sites. This interpretation suggested that managers (and occasionally other employees) used narratives to construct the organization’s identity, as they reflected on the organization’s IO interactions. The paper elaborates on the relationship between narrative analysis and identity construction, outlines the methodology used to analyze the interview narratives, presents key themes identified in the interview narratives and concludes with a discussion. However, I begin with descriptive detail about HSIBJ and my fieldwork at that site.

### **Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump**

HSIBJ is located 18 kilometres northwest of the Town of Fort Macleod, in the Porcupine Hills of southwestern Alberta (Brink, 1995; “Chronicling,” 1990). The 11-metre high buffalo jump was used by Plains First Nations peoples to kill large numbers of buffalo, beginning about 6000 years ago and ending perhaps as recently as 150 years ago. The buffalo jump is one of the oldest and best preserved in North America. The site was identified as an important archaeological area in the 1930s, and became a National Historic Site in 1968 (“Chronicling”, 1990). In 1981, UNESCO designated the buffalo jump as a World Heritage site.

In the mid-1970s, the department of Alberta Culture approached the Piikani Nation with the idea that they should collaborate to preserve and interpret the artifacts at HSIBJ (Brink, 1995). The facility was built into the hill next to the buffalo jump, to avoid disturbing the natural surroundings of the buffalo jump (“Chronicling,” 1990). The site had three purposes: to represent the Plains First Nations culture, to describe the traditional use of the buffalo jump, and to display an example of archaeological science (Brink, 1995).

Local First Nations peoples have had significant participation in the planning and ongoing operations of the facility. For example, the provincial government wanted to include “more than just a textbook view of the story of the buffalo jump” (Brink, 1995, p. 3). Thus, the provincial government consulted the Elders during the planning stages, as they decided on the interpretive centre’s key themes (“Chronicling,” 1990). Later, they also consulted Elders about the content of exhibits and their accompanying texts. At an early stage, planners also decided to incorporate myths about Napi, the Blackfoot trickster figure, into the text at the site. These Napi stories provided an alternative, non-Western interpretation of Blackfoot history and the artifacts at the site. Significantly, HSIBJ also employed a cross-cultural mix of staff. During the summer, when the facility is fully staffed, approximately half the employees are First Nations.

### **HSIBJ as ‘The Trickster’ in Initial Field Material**

I believed the name ‘The Trickster’ aptly encapsulated my interpretation of the identity of HSIBJ. The trickster is one of the most common characters in mythology and culture around the world (Christen, 1998). The trickster character is sometimes human, but more typically it is an anthropomorphized animal, such as a coyote, raven or hare (Minderhout, 1995; Thompson, 1966). Tricksters are distinguished by their ambiguous dual nature (Minderhout, 1995). As Kuiper (1995) argued, the trickster-hero “may be regarded as both creator god and innocent fool, evil destroyer and childlike prankster” (p. 1130). Thus, the trickster is known for his cunning ability to deceive others to attain his own goals (Ruoff, 1990; Sullivan, 1986). However, tricksters often get into trouble as their schemes backfire. Indeed, in some trickster stories, the people benefit from the trickster’s deceitfulness or theft (Herskovits et al., 1972). On the other hand, the capricious trickster also may act as a ‘culture hero’, a figure that represents “the ideal of a people” (Kuiper, 1995, p. 1130). In this role, the trickster’s purpose is to provide guidance to the people (Bonnefoy, 1991). Thus, the culture hero provides the “benefits of civilization,” including fire, water, plants, animals, and language (p. 1153). In addition, the culture hero provides rituals and other cultural characteristics. “As such, [the trickster] plays the part of another mythic archetype, the transformer, or culture hero, who in a mythic age at the beginning of the world helps shape human culture into its familiar form” (Sullivan, 1986, p. 45). In North American First Nations’ societies, the trickster figure is usually also the ‘culture-hero-transformer’ figure (Herskovits et al., 1972). Napi, or Old Man, is the creator-god of the traditional Blackfoot culture and is also their trickster figure (Peat, 1996; Ruoff, 1990).

In my view, the name ‘The Trickster’ reflected the ambiguous identity and actions of Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump. HSIBJ was clearly a culture hero for the Blackfoot people. For example, the site provided employment for several members of the nearby Piikani (Peigan) Nation. All interpretive officers had to be members of the Blackfoot Confederacy, so that they were knowledgeable about the Blackfoot culture. HSIBJ also sponsored an annual powwow that attracted about 8,500 visitors, including several bus tours. According to a Piikani employee, HSIBJ’s powwow was more traditional than many others, such as that held on the Blood reserve. However, as an ambiguous social actor that I called The Trickster, HSIBJ showed some characteristics that were antithetical to those of a culture-hero. For example, my field notes included some evidence that not all Blackfoot accepted the site as a culture-hero. Indeed, the Piikani Nation believed that the buffalo jump and the surrounding area still belonged to them, although it was outside the reserve’s current boundaries. As a result, members of the Piikani Nation often resented the site’s economic success.

## Narratives and Identity Construction

Narrative inquiry is an inherently interdisciplinary approach, which builds on the recent interpretive turn in the social sciences (Riessman, 1993). By the early 1990s, several leading scholars had embraced narrative as the key organizing principle for conceptualizing human or social action. For example, Czarniawska (1999) wrote that “the narrative mode of knowing consists in organizing one’s experience around the intentionality of human action” (p. 14). That is, the scheme used to order experiences into a narrative or story assumes that human action is intentional (Czarniawska, 2004). The link between social action and narrative is important, because it suggests that social actors use narrative discourse to organize action and events into meaningful accounts. Thus, I could expect HSIBJ’s facility manager to construct narratives around IO interactions, to create an understanding of the site in relation to other actors.

The story is the main object of study in narrative analysis (Riessman, 1993; 2002). Most narrative researchers define the story as a specific type of narrative, which orders events into a sequential, cohesive experience (Polkinghorne, 1995; Riessman, 2002). Indeed, Bruner (1990) argued that narrative is distinguished from other texts by its sequential nature. Each narrative includes “a unique sequence of events, mental states, happenings involving human beings as characters or actors” (Bruner, 1990, p. 43). Within each story, plots organize experiences into a meaningful whole (Czarniawska, 1999; Polkinghorne, 1988, 1995). That is, the plot arranges action and events into a story by signifying the start and end of the story (“temporal range”), delimiting the relevant events, sequencing those events, and explaining their meaning (Polkinghorne, 1995). Thus, narrative meaning or understanding occurs when we configure events into an explanatory plot (Czarniawska, 2004; Polkinghorne, 1995). This emplotment occurs as we note relationships among our perceptions of events and actions (Polkinghorne, 1988). We develop understanding or meaning through an iterative process, as we seek to develop a plot that will explain connections among the events and their apparent significance.

As an interpretive perspective, narrative inquiry privileges human action (Riessman, 1993). Thus, it is appropriate for research on *identity*, or the understanding of self. Indeed, Polkinghorne (1988) argued that individuals *construct* their identity through development of a narrative that allows them to understand their life as a single, continuous story. Research suggests that collective identity may also develop through storytelling. For example, Cain (1991) studied how members of Alcoholics Anonymous took on the collective identity of non-drinking alcoholics. During meetings, as they told stories about their addiction, they gradually transformed their individual identities as drinking non-alcoholics. During this process, they adapted their personal stories to closely resemble the typical AA story (e.g., heavier drinking, denying a problem, hitting the bottom, admitting inability to stop drinking, joining AA). Cain argued that the collective AA story, and the identity that it constructed for its members as non-drinking alcoholics, helped them develop a new understanding of their own identity and past experiences, as part of a collective identity. This study is important, because it suggests that individuals will adopt an organizational identity that is constructed and reflected through narrative. That is, we can understand the organization as part of an unfolding story about events and actions experienced by its constituent members.

Interviews provide the most common source of stories in narrative research, since people will often respond to questions with a story, as they make sense of their experiences. Interviewees will choose to narrate certain experiences, often because they have felt some dissonance around those experiences (Riessman, 1993). Unlike other types of qualitative analysis, the narrative approach does not include any standard set of techniques for understanding how the storyteller has made sense of their experiences (Mishler, 1995; Riessman, 1993). However, Riessman (1993) argued that narrative research must include the following steps: identifying narrative segments, as opposed to simple descriptions; reducing stories to their core narrative; examining the structure and the selection of specific words; and studying how each story is related to previous ones. All talk (or interview text) is not narrative (Riessman, 2002). Thus, the analyst must decide where a narrative segment begins and ends. Labov's (e.g., Labov & Waletzky, 1967) structural framework is useful in identifying narrative segments, and extracting the core narrative from extraneous material. Labov argued that complete or 'fully formed' narratives have six key parts: *abstract* (summary of the narrative), *orientation* (description of the situation and relevant actors), *complicating action* (the sequenced events), *evaluation* (meaning of the action), *resolution* (outcome of the event or action), and *coda* (transition away from narrative, back to current activities).

### Narrative Analysis of Interviews at HSIBJ

To illustrate my argument that HSIBJ was a social actor with a unique identity that I called 'The Trickster', I analyzed the narratives in six employee interviews, four of those with the facility manager. Members of the larger research team did these interviews over a six year time period. All interviews were between one and two hours in length. The interviewers used open-ended questions in a conversational style (e.g., Patton, 1990). Occasionally, the researchers intervened with follow-up questions, to clarify points or explore an important event or issue.

In early interviews with the facility managers, the open-ended questions focused primarily on business planning and performance measures at the site. In later interviews, questions focused on changes at the site since the last visit, such as new revenue-generating programs or altered IO partnerships. In interviews with the other government employees, questions focused on both their responsibilities (e.g., planning special events) and recent activities at the site (e.g., adjusting to a new relationship with the Friends Society). Throughout the interviews, the researchers encouraged all participants to speak about related ideas and examples. Thus, all the interview transcripts, but especially those for the facility managers, provided rich narrative data for my analysis. All interviews were taped during the previous studies noted earlier, and were transcribed verbatim.

### Data Analysis

I was most interested in the plot or content of the narratives about IO interactions, and the interpretations provided by the narrators. I also chose to focus primarily on the facility managers' interviews, as those interviews included richer detail and interpretations about the site and its IO relationships. I believed this was appropriate because the organizational identity literature suggested that the vision and values of managers directly influenced the development of organizational identity, particularly in bureaucratic organizations such as government (e.g., Bouchikhi, et al., 1998; Scott & Lane, 2000). Nevertheless, I did include narratives from

interviews with other government workers whenever possible, to enrich my understanding of the site's unique identity.

First, I reviewed each transcript, to refamiliarize myself with the content of each interview. Following Riessman's (1993) advice, I used Labov's structural framework for narrative as the foundation for beginning my analysis. That is, using Labov's framework, I identified the core narratives in each interview, and identified extraneous material. Full narratives had each of the parts outlined by Labov (e.g., abstract, complicating action). In contrast, narrative fragments or partial narratives included valuable narrative detail, including the narrator's explanation or interpretation of the site's identity. However they did not include other parts of the narrative, such as the story's abstract. Typically, these full or partial narratives described one or more events involving other actors in the site's external environment. The stories ranged in length from a dozen lines to two or three pages of text.

Second, I read through each narrative or narrative fragment and identified the narrative that illustrated the site's identity as a social actor that I called 'The Trickster'. Third, I analyzed the content of each narrative, paying particular attention to the narrator's interpretation of the site's identity. Fourth, based on this analysis, I developed a deeper interpretation of the stories told by the interviewees. That is, I developed my own narrative about how the storytellers constructed meaning about the site. My narrative described how the stories about IO interactions illustrated narrative construction of organizational identity. Fifth, I looked for any patterns among my deeper interpretations. Based on those patterns, I was able to develop two themes about HSIBJ's organizational identity, which I present in the following section.

### **Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump as The Trickster**

In this section, I summarize my interpretation of the manager's narrative construction of the site's organizational identity as The Trickster. The section is organized around two main topics: culture hero for the Blackfoot Nation, and ambiguity about commercialization of the site's cultural role. Both these topics support my perspective on the site's unique identity.

#### **Culture Hero for the Blackfoot People**

The interpretive centre at Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump was built in 1987, to preserve and interpret the traditional culture of Southern Alberta's Blackfoot peoples. Therefore, it was not surprising to find clear references to the site's role as a champion of the Blackfoot culture in the early interviews at HSIBJ. Here, I provide my analysis of two narratives that illustrate my interpretation of how the site constructed its identity as the preserver of traditional Blackfoot practices, values and beliefs.

First, in the initial interview with the facility manager, a narrative included three references to the site's mission or role in preserving the Blackfoot culture. The context was a discussion of the manager's recent business planning activities. As part of those activities, employees were expected to develop the first formal mission statement for the site. However, the manager argued that the site's mission was already clear to everyone in the division and the surrounding communities. "I think everyone knows what [the site's mission] is. Basically, it is to preserve the site, which is a [UNESCO] World Heritage Site, as well as, uh, interpret that site . . .

.” (First Interview with Manager, Lines 345 to 349). The world-renowned centre had received the UNESCO designation, to signify its role in preserving and interpreting the cultural heritage of the Blackfoot people.

The manager went on to claim that HSIBJ was unique within the provincial system of cultural sites. “You see, this is a Native site too. And they claim moral ownership over it. And that has to be respected. Legal ownership is the government’s, but moral ownership is definitely Blackfoot.” (First Interview with Manager, Lines 384 to 386). As a result of this unique partnership with the site’s moral co-owners, the manager argued that it was particularly important that the centre’s programs and exhibits reflected the Blackfoot’s traditional values and attitudes.

“As long as you are respectful to the mandates of the facility, that you’re not pandering. That you’re not, you know, selling religious ceremonies or something to all the wannabe non-Natives in the world. As long as you don’t do those crass things, which is in the business plan, too: How to represent the site.” (Lines 445 to 449).

In this narrative, it is my interpretation that the manager constructed HSIBJ as The Trickster. That is, he constructed the site as a collective social actor that worked to preserve the ideals of the Blackfoot culture. The manager acknowledged that the government shared ownership of the site with the Blackfoot. Although the government legally owned the site, the manager recognized that they were obligated to include the Blackfoot as another type of ‘owner’. The site existed to preserve and interpret not only the physical artifacts, but also the accompanying traditional values of the culture. Therefore, he argued that HSIBJ did not develop any programs that would desecrate the spiritual side of the site, nor specific Blackfoot rituals.

Second, in an interview two years later, a First Nations employee described her views on the site’s importance in preserving and interpreting First Nations culture. The employee began this narrative by describing her initial dislike of the centre. “To tell you the truth . . . when I [first] came up here I didn’t like this place . . . Because it destroys the um, the sacredness of the whole, I guess.” (Interview with Education Officer, Lines 741 to 755). A small hill adjacent to the buffalo jump was a sacred place where the Blackfoot held Vision Quests. These were religious experiences, typically undertaken by young Blackfoot men. These individuals fasted and then retreated alone to the hill for several days, until they experienced a vision that would provide them with spiritual guidance. Given the centre’s proximity to this Vision Quest site, as well as to an old burial ground, this First Nations employee had initial misgivings about not only the site’s location, but also its existence. However, she eventually accepted a position at HSIBJ. It was located close to her home on the Piikani (Peigan) reserve and allowed her to use her educational qualifications.

As time passed, she became convinced that the site actually served an important purpose, helping all First Nations peoples to develop pride in their cultural heritage. She told about a First Nations visitor from Manitoba who had told her he originally “didn’t want to go to another one of those damned Indian places!” (Interview with Education Officer, Lines 816 to 817). However, after visiting the site, he was impressed by its authentic portrayal of a traditional First Nations lifestyle. “I’d say this [the centre] is really good because it’s – it teaches Native people [who visit the site] a pride that they can identify as a people . . .” (Lines 776 to 777). Incidentally, she also believed the site was important for non-Natives, with its authentic representation of First Nations

culture. “. . . [T]hat’s what they [non-Natives] like about this place, is that it doesn’t have stereotypes.” (Lines 788 to 789].

In this narrative, it is my view that the First Nations employee constructed HSIBJ as a culture hero for the Blackfoot people, as well as other First Nations peoples. That is, she constructed the site as a collective actor that presented the Blackfoot culture authentically, avoiding stereotypes of First Nations traditions and beliefs. She also constructed the site as an actor that helped Blackfoot and other First Nations peoples to develop pride in their traditional culture.

### **Commercialization of the Blackfoot Culture**

My interpretation of several narratives suggests that HSIBJ’s manager, and perhaps other employees, were eager to generate additional revenues at the site. The site’s operational budget had significantly declined in recent years. At the same time, the site wanted to build a recapitalization fund for replacement of its aging exhibits. However, these narratives also highlighted some concerns about whether new programs or policies would damage the site’s cultural integrity. In this section, I discuss two narratives to illustrate my interpretation.

In the first narrative, the manager discussed his plan to generate more revenues at the site, through seasonally adjusted admission fees. The manager believed that summer visitors would show little price sensitivity, and would pay higher admission fees. At the same time, he wanted to lower fees in the off-season, when visitation rates dropped significantly. In the manager’s view, lower admission fees outside the peak summer season would encourage local people to visit the site more often, boosting its overall revenues. The manager justified this proposal with arguments based on supply and demand and competitive dynamics. Specifically, the manager argued that the site needed to compete with other organizations, primarily in the private sector, which were also trying to attract tourism dollars.

We're part of the tourism industry. Our visitation graph -- I'll show you `cause I recently -  
- Our visitation graph is clearly, uh, clearly seasonal. And that being the case, the admissions policy should reflect that. It should reflect it because pricing should be a function of demand, which our competitors are doing. (First Interview with Manager, Lines 80 to 84).

However, the division had not approved his proposal. Managers at the division-level argued that the site’s main purpose was to preserve and interpret the Blackfoot culture, not to engage in competitive dynamics with private-sector organizations in the tourism industry. They believed that admission fees should remain high throughout the year, to reflect the site’s high-quality facility and exhibits. Although the manager agreed that HSIBJ had a unique cultural mandate, he argued that they still needed to view their programs and exhibits as a “product”.

. . . [Quality] does not reflect necessarily the demand for our quote unquote product. So people don't . . . want to look at . . . what we do here as product. They consider that a diminishment to what we do. . . . I agree with them upstairs, that's not all that we do. We have to balance that perspective with a preservation and education mandate. But we are also living in a real world and money is very important to the government these days. And our budgets are being radically cut and so this [proposal] was a very common sense way to make more money. (First Interview with Manager, Lines 170 to 182).

In this narrative, I am suggesting that the manager constructed the site as The Trickster, as a collective actor that played an ambiguous role with respect to culture. The manager recognized the importance of the site's mandate to preserve and interpret the Blackfoot culture. However, the manager also constructed the site as a social actor that wished to exploit that culture for financial gain. The manager believed that the site could compete against private-sector organizations by adjusting admission fees during the year. Therefore, my interpretation suggests that the manager constructed the site as an actor that was motivated by financial gain, as well as cultural ideals.

My interpretation of a second narrative also illustrates the site's ambiguous role in relation to the Blackfoot culture. In this first interview, the facility manager spoke about another plan to generate higher revenues at the site. In partnership with the Piikani Nation, he hoped to open a teepee campground on the prairie directly below the building. Visitors would have the opportunity to camp overnight in an authentic teepee, which the Piikani Nation would provide in exchange for half the revenues. The site would supply the other camping necessities, such as firewood. The manager was hopeful that the teepee campground would become a significant "revenue producing" program at HSIBJ.

Three years later, the teepee campground had achieved an occupancy rate of 40 per cent. The facility manager hoped to boost the campground's occupancy and therefore revenues, by advertising the program to potential European visitors.

Our major market for the teepee packages are Europeans. . . . The two international tour companies that we've got, one is out of Holland and one is out of the UK. And they are the ones wanting this [campground] package. The people want to play cowboys, and the Germans are pretty nuts about cowboys and Indians. So that would be a good market for us [too]. (Third Interview with Manager, Lines 134 to 145).

My interpretation suggests that the manager wanted to exploit a stereotypical view of the Blackfoot culture that was held by a segment of international visitors. He was motivated by the significant profit potential of the campground program.

[T]he profit centre for us is when we sell [the teepee camping experience] as part of a package. We stand to make a lot of money on that. . . . [If] we can sell these more and more, we can make a good buck on them. (Third Interview with Manager, Lines 68 to 76).

In this narrative, it is my view that the manager constructed the site as The Trickster, an ambiguous social actor. As The Trickster, the site wanted to provide an 'authentic' Blackfoot camping experience, selling visitors the opportunity to camp in a Piikani teepee. In that sense, the site stood for the cultural ideals of the Blackfoot people. However, to achieve greater revenue, the manager was willing to appeal to the stereotypical views held by some international visitors about the Blackfoot culture. That is, as The Trickster, the site was willing to exploit the Blackfoot culture, to boost its overall revenues.

It is important to note that not all employees at the site agreed with the manager's focus on revenue-generation. Indeed, my interpretation suggests at least some of the Blackfoot employees were uncomfortable with the site's increasing focus on profit, arguing that it damaged the site's integrity. For example, one employee was concerned about the "cowboys and Indians" mentality behind the site's teepee campground. The same employee also commented on the

increasing commercialization of the site's activities. She spoke about how she had finally suggested, during a business-planning session, "Well, why don't you just have a big herd of neon buffaloes going right over the cliff!" (Interview with Education Officer, Lines 642 to 643).

## Discussion

This study suggested that Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump had a unique organizational identity, or characteristics that were fundamental and distinctive about it, according to their members (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Thus, based on my interpretation of the interview narratives, I argue that HSIBJ was a collective social actor with an ambiguous organizational identity. I have suggested here that the name 'The Trickster' represented its capricious nature as the culture hero for the Blackfoot people. The site sought to preserve and accurately represent the traditional culture of the Blackfoot people. At the same time, HSIBJ sought to gain financially through its commercialization of that culture. Further, the illustrative interpretation presented in this research suggested that an organization constructs an understanding of its identity in relation to other organizations (e.g., Gioia, 1998). This is consistent with Albert and Whetten (1985), who theorized that an organization constructs its identity as it reflects on interactions with one or more external actors. Thus, for Head-Smashed-In Buffalo Jump, I presented an overall narrative, based on my interpretation of the managers' story line about the site (Mishler, 1995), to suggest that the site constructed its identity through reflections on interactions with external actors, including the division and visitors to the site.

The study makes a key contribution to the methodological literature on organizational identity, by using an interpretive approach to illustrate how organizational identity is constructed. Several authors have analyzed organizational narratives from a discursive approach (e.g., Hardy & Phillips, 1998). However, previous research has not used narrative inquiry to understand identity construction through IO interactions. This is important, because this interpretive approach allowed me to explain the *process* through which organizational identity was enacted as managers and other employees developed an understanding of the organization. Thus, my interpretation of the narratives suggested that the organization constructed a unique organizational identity through interactions with key IO entities.

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