Identity, Interpretation and Influence:  
Positive Community through Language among San Pedro Longshoremen

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In a qualitative study of San Pedro’s longshoremen, I find that positive outcomes accruing to members of the community—identity, interpretation and influence—are maintained through the evolution of shared languages of safety, participation and economics. As these languages are spoken and printed in the hiring halls, on the docks, and during casual social interactions, work takes on a meaning beyond the task. The languages support the longshoremen’s identity—masculine, cohesive, well-paid socialists—and provide an interpretive guide for how to react to disruptive events in the world.

The life of a longshoreman in San Pedro, California is both a throwback to the days of the industrial society and a glimpse into the future of work. Reminiscent of the prototypical blue collar workers of the 20th century, longshoremen, often children of the same, hold one job throughout their lives, belong to a union—the Industrial Longshoremen and Warehouse Union (ILWU), and are paid by the hour for their labor. Reflecting newly forming images of work in the 21st century, longshoremen choose their own working hours and days, are independent of any one employer, work with an array of different people across jobs, and are constantly adjusting to the ways in which new digital technologies isolate them from coworkers. As the work becomes more asocial, requiring more interaction with machines and less coordination and communication with other workers, the highly valued relational aspects of longshoring work are dwindling. This unusual amalgamation of old and new rests on the quirks of history that shaped the maritime industry on the West Coast of the United States—government intervention, competition across maritime employers, new technologies for transporting and tracking goods, and the globalization of trade—all combined with the fundamental immobility of deep water ports. The unusual and fluctuating work conditions create the need across longshoremen for a
consistent identity, a way of interpreting changing relationships with work and employers, and a source of influence into the conditions of and payoffs from employment. The strong, positive community among the longshoremen in San Pedro provides this critical identity, interpretation and influence in the face of the simultaneous constancy and change in longshore work.

This study adds to our knowledge of occupational communities (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984) by bringing attention to how language evolves around and shapes shared understandings of changes in a community’s environment. My objective in observing the members of the San Pedro community was to study their interaction to gain insight into how the longshoremen related to one another and to the larger community. In this sense, this paper is less about the community as a social world or an occupational community, and more about the community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). As I sought to understand the evolution of meaning within the community as the world around it changed, I came to appreciate the role played by the languages spoken among the longshoremen. This included the explicit languages used in oral and written interactions as well as the implicit understandings, cues, and sensitivities (Wenger, 1998) revealed in their shared world views.

As a community faces challenges to its identity and its very existence, its members face the task of incorporating these new factors into their repertoire of practices (Wenger, 1998; Swidler, 1986). This paper shows how languages shared by community members work both to hold the community together, keeping the members’ identities and interpretations intact, and to aid in the evolution of the community, gradually changing the members’ representations of themselves and their place in the world. In the community among longshoremen in San Pedro, the languages of safety and solidarity have survived for over a century, and have been adequate to explain and maintain the community’s role in their lives and in the larger economic and
political arena. As technology, international trade and government involvement increasingly shaped the environment around the community, a new language of economics evolved among the longshoremen. This new language reflected and created new features of identity, interpretation and influence.

Longshoremen in San Pedro

San Pedro, a sunny peninsula 22 miles south of downtown Los Angeles, California, is home to the most militant locals in one of the reputedly most independent, democratic and socially conscious unions in the United States. As the town’s website conveys, the legal standing of the town as incorporated within Los Angeles belies the fierce independence of its citizens: “San Pedro, CA is a community that is part of the city of Los Angeles, but don’t tell that to the people who live here!” (SanPedro.com) The town, which maintains its own city hall and its own courthouse has a notably high level of civic and political involvement, countering the laid-back laissez-faire image of southern Californians. The town’s ethnic mix reflects its location—56 percent of the residents are Hispanic, 27 percent white, 11 percent African American and five percent Asian. The economy rests on the jobs available in the nearby Ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles. The two ports make up the busiest port system in the country, handling 40 percent of all cargo shipped into the U.S., and 80 percent of all imports from Asia. Long Beach is the only port in the United States that can dock the massive freighters now being used by many of the international shipping lines. San Pedro is home to the majority of the West Coast’s longshoremen.

Longshoring on the west coast of the United States began in the early 1800s, when men would line up along shore to wait for ships. The work of loading and unloading break-bulk
cargo, carried out by “gangs” hired daily from “shape-ups” on the docks, was physical and
dangerous and paid poorly. Experienced teams were in high demand, creating segregation across
workers. In 1934, Harry Bridges, who would go on to serve as president of the ILWU for over 40
years, led the dockworkers in a bloody two-month strike, finally winning a coastwise contract.
The hard-won contract guaranteed shorter working days, decent wages, grievance and arbitration
machinery for the settlement of disputes, and the right to distribute longshoreman jobs at a
union-run hiring hall. In 1938, the National Labor Relations Board affirmed the legal basis for
the coastwise contract, which remains intact in the new millennium. The NLRB also mandated
that all employers of dockworkers on the West Coast bargain as a single unit, leading to the
creation of the Pacific Maritime Association (PMA). The PMA, by 2002 an association of over
70 employers, serves as the collective bargaining unit in negotiations with the ILWU. Three
types of employers are members of the PMA: ship owners or shipping companies (e.g., Maersk
Sealand); terminal operators, usually affiliated with shipping companies (e.g., APM is the
terminal operator affiliated with Maersk Sealand); and stevedores, independent companies
running terminal operations at a port (e.g., Stevedoring Systems of America (SSA)). Terminal
operators and stevedore companies rent the piers from the regional Port Authority, a public
agency.

Work on the ports changed drastically in the 1960s with the introduction of
containerization. Prior to this time, cargo was shipped in crates or loose (“break-bulk cargo”),
and gangs working “in the hatch” loaded the cargo into “bras” which were slung by cranes up
out of the hold of the ship onto the pier. The work was slow, backbreaking, and extremely
hazardous. With containerization, cargo is shipped in standardized containers weighing up to 40
tons each. By the 1970s, container ships capable of carrying hundreds of uniformly shaped cargo
containers accounted for the vast majority of ocean shipping. The gains in efficiency were staggering: a gang on a conventional ship could unload 15 tons of cargo per hour, while a gang could move 300 tons per hour out of a single hatch on a container ship. Only a few types of cargo, such as fresh produce and steel products, are shipped break-bulk today, but experienced gangs are still highly respected by others in the community and valued by employers. Watching a skilled gang effortlessly coordinate the motions of five men in frontloaders and mobile cranes as they moved crates of fresh fruit up and out of a deep hold with near mechanical precision and then moving to the next hatch and witnessing the chaotic danger of an inexperienced group attempting the same feat brought home to me the reality of how much containerization has changed the lives of longshoremen. Changes have come not only in the quality of the work, but in the quantity—employment has fallen steadily over time. Registered West Coast longshoremen numbered approximately 100,000 in the 1950s, fell to about 10,500 by 2002, and rose again to over 11,500 by the end of 2004.¹

There are three distinct groups of dock workers—longshoremen, clerks, and foremen—and each group maintains its own hiring hall in San Pedro. Longshoremen perform the tasks of physically loading and unloading ships. The most highly trained—and best-paid—longshoremen are the crane operators, who perform the repetitive but critical task of manipulating fixed cranes from small boxed-in seats atop cranes standing 60 feet above the docks. Up to six crane operators per ship latch their machinery onto the containers, carrying 200 to 300 containers on or off a ship per hour. “Lashers” walk along the towering stacks of containers to secure the containers to the ship’s deck. This is the most physical of the longshoreman jobs on a container ship, requiring the lashers to lift up to 100 pounds overhead. The cranes carry containers, or “cans” off of ships onto waiting trucks or vise versa. Drivers operate the trucks (UTRs), the

¹ This includes all longshoremen, clerks and foremen registered in the Longshoreman Division of the ILWU.
transtrainers, and the tophandlers that move the cans around the ship and the yard, and off of or onto the waiting semi-trailers or trains. This can be treacherous work; if a truck is not positioned perfectly underneath the crane, both truck and driver may be crushed or lifted off the ground, and the trucks weave through rows of stacked containers with almost no visibility around the stacks. As one longshoreman put it, “it’s like working on the freeway.” To help avoid such accidents, “signalmen” are positioned on the ground to be the crane operator’s eyes and ears. “Floor runners” drive around the yard locating needed or missing cans, and relieve drivers and signalmen on their breaks. “Swingmen” are available throughout a shift to perform a wide variety of tasks on the dock.

Clerks, traveling in small trucks around the pier, sitting in towers and offices on the pier, or monitoring the entrances and exits of the pier, track the movement of cargo in and out of ships and piers. Between 2000 and 2004, these tasks increasingly relied on Optical Character Recognition (OCR) and Global Positioning System (GPS) technology. The “Supercargo” clerk runs the logistics, organizing the process of loading or unloading the ship and assigning jobs throughout the time that the ship is in the port. Clerks nearly always come out of the longshoremen ranks, often after working for twenty or more years as a registered longshoreman. Because the work is less demanding physically and better paying, when clerk jobs are in abundance, longshoremen try to pick up extra clerk work at the clerks’ hiring hall, often after working a full shift in one of the longshoreman jobs.

Foremen oversee the loading and unloading of ships, acting as the liaison between the longshoremen and management of the terminal. Prior to 2002, the operation of each crane was supervised by a foreman. As part of the implementation of the 2002 contract, the ratio was changed from 1/1 to one foreman per every two cranes. As with clerks, most foremen started
their careers on the docks as longshoremen. Their liaison role often makes members of this group perceive themselves as outside the longshoreman community, though some are able to retain full membership in spite of the identity conflict, and many more maintain close social and kin ties with full members of the community.

As containerization changed the work done by longshoremen, it also affected how that work was distributed. The majority of dock jobs are handed out in the three (longshoreman, clerk and foreman) hiring halls each shift, as they were over 80 years ago. In essence, longshoreman work is distributed like casual labor. The employer sends a list of open jobs for the shift to the hiring hall. All longshoremen ready and willing to work that shift report to the hiring hall to pick up a job assignment. The rules of the hall are uniquely designed to equalize the distribution of work: workers with the fewest hours worked in the month have the first choice of jobs for the shift. Some jobs last two to five days, while others are a single shift. But one of the concessions made in contract bargaining in the wake of containerization, the infamous Mechanization and Modernization Agreement (M&M) of 1961, allowed employers to hire “steadies” on a long-term basis for certain positions, including most foreman jobs and many clerk jobs. “Steadies,” rather than picking up jobs at the hiring hall, report directly to the employer’s terminal each working day. Steadies are guaranteed five days of paid work each week. If there is no work on a given day, a steady can earn double pay by reporting into the hiring hall and taking on other available work. Thus, steadies stay connected to the longshoreman community in spite of close ties with their employers.

Throughout the second half of the 20th century, highly competitive shipping lines with tight shipping schedules driven by just-in-time manufacturing methods gave longshoremen leverage over employers and kept employment relations stable and basically quiet. Coastwise
contracts were written and signed with little internal strife or public attention, keeping both the longshoremen and the employers busy and well-remunerated. Lucrative contracts allowed San Pedro longshoremen to keep up with the ever increasing standards of living in Southern California. 2001 wages, including average overtime, averaged $83,000 for longshoremen, $118,000 for clerks, and $158,000 for foremen. Problems were solved “in-house” with little ado by a longstanding coast arbitrator, and San Pedro remained isolated geographically and socially.

But by 2002, the technological, economic and political forces surrounding Pacific shipping coalesced to confront the longshoremen with a new reality. First, information technology was changing clerks’ jobs. With bar coding technology, a strategically placed scanner monitored by an employee miles away or even in a different country could track containers on and off ships and docks. Companies shipping goods across the ocean wanted continuous monitoring of their containers, rather than the discontinuous and often unwieldy processes in place at the ports. Simultaneously, the sheer mass of goods being transported in and out of the West Coast, the majority of it going through the Ports of Long Beach and Los Angeles, brought the attention of national and international corporations to the hitherto esoteric business of longshoring. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers (2003) estimates that the volume of maritime cargo going through U. S. ports has roughly doubled in the past twenty years, and the ports of southern California have disproportionately borne that increase. Eighty percent of the shippers (companies whose cargo is being transported) transporting their goods through the LA and Long Beach ports are owned outside the U. S. Finally, the U. S. government under George W. Bush, registering pressure from big box retailers and the ongoing “war on terrorism” brought new, and unwanted from the longshoremen’s point of view, political and media attention to the workings of the west coast ports.
The result of this conflation of factors was a work slowdown, a lockout by management, the first-ever invocation of the Taft-Hartley Act during a lockout, and a contentious and mediated bargaining period throughout much of 2002. These led to a new relationship between the longshoremen and their employers. In the end, the longshoremen of San Pedro believe they “won the day” but this translation of the transition from pre to post 2002 required an evolution of their shared languages. To their longstanding languages of safety and solidarity, they added a new language—a language of economics.

San Pedro’s longshoremen and their families match Strauss’ (1993) definition of a social world: a group with shared commitments to certain activities, shared resources, common goals, and shared ideologies. The “average” San Pedro longshoreman\(^2\) is male,\(^3\) 50 years old, married for the second time, with children. Structural and behavioral features of the longshoreman families living in San Pedro underlie their densely tied and committed community\(^4\) (McGinn, forthcoming). Structurally, the longshoremen share a position within society that forms a foundation of mutual understanding. Each longshoreman shares with every other longshoreman a common relationship with employers, the ILWU, state and federal government, the public, and work itself. The ongoing discord between the ILWU and the PMA reflects and colors all of these relationships. Behaviorally, the longshoremen build community as they interact with one another (Vaughan, 2002). But this interaction cannot occur on the job as it does for most employees because the longshoremen work with different people at different locations each day. The social world of San Pedro rests on an occupational community: the longshoremen and their families

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\(^2\) I use the term “longshoremen” when referring to any ILWU member in San Pedro, CA, regardless of gender, or whether their membership is in the longshoremen, clerk or foreman local union.

\(^3\) Though the number of female longshoremen doubled over the prior 15 years, in 2002 only 14% of registered Longshore Division members were women.

\(^4\) When I refer to the “San Pedro longshoreman community” I am including others in addition to the longshoremen, such as family and friends, who do not work on the docks but identify themselves as part of that community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).
“share bonds of solidarity or mutual regard and partake of a communal way of life that contrasts in idyllic ways with the competition, individualism, and rational calculation of self-interest associated with persons organized on utilitarian principles” (Van Maanen & Barley, 1984: 292).

San Pedro’s longshoremen gather in the hiring halls each working day to pick up assignments to particular ships. It is in the hiring hall, rather than at work, that their languages are spoken and shaped. Here they share information about specific employers, exchange social, emotional and work-based support, and catch up on the local gossip. The community among the longshoremen is also tangible on the streets of the small peninsula on which they have lived for generations. In coffee shops, restaurants, pubs and stores, their similarities and mutually held world views are reiterated and reinforced as they interact with one another. These languages are reified in print, through community emails, on billboards, in local union newsletters, and in the press.

The identity of a San Pedro longshoreman is shaped through participation in the community (Wenger, 1998). His interpretation of local, national and international events is colored by his membership and interaction in the community. Members of the San Pedro community are encouraged to be socially active, to run for office, to support longshoreman unions in other countries, and to come to the aid of embattled unions within the U. S. Involvement in and reflection on this community enhances shared identity, supporting longshoremen’s views of themselves as involved in an important collective enterprise. Through interaction daily and over many years, the community is defined and redefined, providing an interpretive lens for viewing economic and political action. In addition to providing a source of identity and interpretation, the San Pedro community serves as the basis for collective action. The community allows each longshoreman to have influence that would otherwise be unlikely—
through the collective, voice in the workplace, the industry and the larger economy is solidified and given weight.

**Methods**

The community of longshoremen in San Pedro in 2002-2004 was a revealing site for a case study of the role of language in communities for two reasons. First, the nature of work on the docks is a complex blend of traditional blue collar jobs and new economy employment based on transient labor (Barley & Kunda, 2001), and thus findings may be applicable to both segments. Second, the community was facing challenges from the external environment, and these challenges were placing new demands on the languages of its members. Inconsistencies between internal conditions and external context have been shown to drive action within organizations (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Hannan & Freeman, 1984; Zucker, 1988). The same is likely to hold within communities. The adaptation of the community to changes in external stimuli required an evolution of long-shared languages and the development of a new language, for the existing languages proved insufficient to create an acceptable shared understanding of those stimuli.

I studied the members of the San Pedro community through interviews, observation, and archival research. The interviews spanned from 2002 through 2004. The first round of informal, investigative interviews with longshoremen took place on the ports during the lockout. The next round involved two to three hour open discussions with individuals and groups involved in the 2002 contract negotiations, including longshoremen, employers, union officials, employer association officials, and federal mediators involved in contract negotiations. These interviews, which took place in Washington D.C., San Francisco, CA and Boston, MA began with
background questions, history, overview of the industry, and specifics about the 2002 port
dispute from the interviewee’s perspective. I then asked for descriptions of others in or involved
with the community and details of ongoing work practices. After getting details of historical and
current practices, I probed how longshoreman work and the community is changing, how they’re
staying the same, and their expectations for the future. The interviews were supplemented by
reading several historical accounts of longshoreman work on the West Coast (Finlay, 1988;
Wellman, 1995), newspaper and Internet articles detailing the 2002 contract negotiations, and the

The archival data and the data from these interviews were used to formulate questions to
investigate further through another round of interviews and ethnographic observation. The final
set of interviews, with longshoremen, union representatives, PMA representatives, and
management of PMA affiliated companies, took place on docks, in offices, and in social settings
in San Pedro and Long Beach, CA. The formal interviews occurred during two weeks of
observation on the Long Beach docks, in the hiring halls, and in restaurants and bars in the San
Pedro community in January 2004. During the observations, my research associate and I visited
the piers and hiring halls with union representatives, with company representatives, and alone. In
total, we interviewed 26 individuals formally and I talked informally to dozens of other
community members while I watched them work and interact. Finally, after I had begun to
analyze the data and develop the theory, I spent two days with a small group of longshoremen in
Boston in the spring of 2004, discussing their perspectives and my evolving understanding of
their community, and one week in November 2004 talking informally with San Pedro
longshoremen at an ILWU leadership conference in Palm Springs, CA.
Data Analysis

I began my analysis of the data by writing down the story of the longshoremen in three historical periods (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991): prior to the mediation of the 2002 dispute, during and immediately after the mediation of the 2002 contract negotiations (ending December, 2002), and after the new contract was signed through 2004. I then read the transcripts and notes from each period, searching for unique or unifying themes. As themes began to emerge in the data, I iterated through existing theory on communities (VanMaanen and Barley, 1984; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Wenger, 1998) and identity processes (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Scott & Lane, 2000; Pratt & Rafaeli, 2001; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001; Bechky, 2003) and back through the data to come to a grounded understanding of how the identity of the community and its members was evolving over time (Strauss and Corbin, 1990; Miles and Huberman, 1984).

In this iterative process, the application of different languages (Eliasoph & Lichterman, 2003) became a central focus. I had not initially considered languages as a lens. But the ubiquity of references to safety and solidarity as ways to understand events throughout the transcripts and the archival data was not, in retrospect, surprising—these are traditional languages in unions (Freeman & Medoff, 1984; Hammer and Hartley, 1997). Translating through these languages proved useful for understanding the members’ perspectives on the community. In organizing the data prior to and during the mediation of the 2002 dispute, these languages appeared largely sufficient. But they were insufficient to capture the sentiments being expressed from 2003 onward. Rather than discarding them as not useful, I began to trace an evolution in their meaning, while pulling aside those passages and issues that did not fit even an expanded understanding of safety and solidarity. The language of solidarity seemed to be at the root of a new language of participation and equality, which explained many of the longshoremen’s
interpretations of events in 2003 and 2004. But this still left a significant portion of the data from the final period unexplained. As I searched for a common theme in the remaining passages, a language of economics emerged.

As a test of the theoretical lens I eventually came to put on the data, I checked with two different sets of longshoremen after I had identified all three languages. Their recognition and discussion of these languages was helpful in solidifying my analysis. I then returned to the existing theory on communities and identity to sharpen the focus on the process of change within positive communities.

Findings

The positive outcomes accruing to members of the San Pedro community—identity, interpretation and influence—are maintained through shared languages. As these languages are spoken in the hiring halls and on the docks, as well as during casual social interactions, work takes on a meaning beyond the task. For years, the community had been stable. In spite of the transient nature of the work, there was widespread use of and agreement on languages of safety and solidarity. These languages reflected not only the identification with the union, but the realities of a shared history of work on the docks. But when the community faced increasing threat from technical, economic and political changes in the external environment, the languages evolved to protect the identity of the community and to ensure its influence in the larger environment. The evolved languages of safety, participation and economics support the longshoremen’s identity—masculine, cohesive, well-paid members of the working class—and provide an interpretive guide for how to react to events in the world. Influence into these events accumulates to the collectivity, while benefiting the individuals within it.
Language of Safety

Longshoremen pride themselves on masculinity and teamwork, but most of their jobs no longer involve strenuous physical labor or close coordination with other people. The introduction of new technologies has fundamentally changed the work of loading and unloading ships, threatening the longshoreman’s identity and his influence on day to day work. In contrast to yesterday’s dangerous and back-breaking work carried out by tightly-knit, experienced “gangs,” today’s longshoremen are involved in dangerous and tedious work carried out by individuals manipulating machines. Machismo remains core to the longshoreman’s identity, though it is no longer core to the work. This identity of masculinity and physicality is maintained through a constant discussion of safety and an ongoing litany of the dangers of work on the docks. The number of recent deaths and the details of injuries are recounted in hiring-hall conversations and around San Pedro. Grievances often cite safety infractions on the part of the employer, though longshoremen don their hardhats only under direct orders to do so. Reputations as skilled and careful or sloppy and dangerous determine whether one is a desirable or despised coworker (“If he’s drunk again, just refuse to work with him”). The language of safety and the swagger of the blue collar male simultaneously define the individual and the community, and set the terms and the tone of the contract negotiations that regulate work practices.

**Table 1: Language of Safety**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prior to 2002 dispute</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• “In the late 1970s, we were seeing new gate and delivery functions and new types of equipment, like hammerhead cranes. We needed training to hone our skills to drive this equipment. We never fought that stuff.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “Health and safety issues are justification for immediate work stoppages on the docks.” One longshoreman told the story of the beginning of his days as a ILWU Business Agent—he was told to stop all work on a dock because of a safety infraction. “Now you have their respect.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>During the 2002 dispute</td>
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McGinn, Identity through language
A union spokesperson during the lockout could easily spout safety figures such as “The job injury rate for industries in the water transportation sector was 42% higher than the national average in 2000.”

[re multiple deaths in 2001] “… they were all independent accidents where each one of them was killed or injured, plus injuries, the number of injuries went up dramatically as well. So, we looked at that. We said to them, it’s ridiculous. This is absolutely ridiculous. You have to do something about it. How can you ask people to increase productivity if it cost them their lives literally? You have to build in health and safety.”

“… we were moving volumes, and safety had kind of gone out the window. We were breaking records, the longshoreman, marine clerks and foremen were working together to make those stats.”

After the 2002 dispute

“There’s no way to verify if empties are actually empty. Because of the volume increases, they are no longer inspected.”

Leadership conference began with officer from Long Beach asking all to stand for a moment of silence in respect to the two longshoremen who had been killed in the previous two weeks. One had been crushed by a container and the other had been killed when a cat walk collapsed.

Table 1 provides examples of the language of safety across the three periods studied. This language remained constant and universally used throughout the period of study. Though grounded in the historical realities of longshoreman work, it matched the needs created by current challenges to the community.

Language of Participation, Evolving from Language of Solidarity

Surrounded by the individualist mentality of southern California, San Pedro longshoremen stand out in their acceptance of solidarity as an ultimate value. Whether waiting in the hiring hall for work (the best jobs each day go to the longshoremen who have worked the fewest hours that month), discussing employer treatment (favoritism is strongly frowned on), or making contributions to other unions (longshoreman families “adopt” and support families in other, striking unions), the mantra of “One for all and all for one” holds. Identity and status are more consistent with European-type socialism than U. S. capitalism: people are viewed as independent and self-reliant, but not unique (Hammer & Hartley, 1997). The traditional language
of solidarity reflects longstanding union practices—for example, any registered ILWU longshoreman can attain work at any dispatch hall on the west coast.

Social standing in San Pedro is based not on broader societal standards emphasizing upward career patterns, mobility, positions and titles (VanMaanen & Barley, 1984), but on an individual’s relationship with others in the community. Longshoremen typically don’t value or seek promotion into management positions with stevedore companies or terminal operators. Instead, over a period of up to twenty years, they work and wait for opportunities to move from casual to Class B and finally Class A, opportunities arising from the retirements of the previous generation of longshoremen, rather than due to any individual action or skill.

Many longshoremen have college and post-graduate education, travel extensively, and read esoteric literature, and these experiences are valued for what they say about the balance a longshoreman has achieved and the contribution he can make to his family and the community. Even union leadership positions (strict term limits with return to hiring halls at the end of terms) and hard fought contract language (spreading wage increases across job classifications rather than allowing large increases to higher job classifications only) restrict positional status. The language of solidarity pervading formal and informal communications across the community solidifies the cohesive identity of the longshoremen, provides a world view discordant with those outside the community, and justifies a non-negotiable stopping point when bargaining with employers.

**Table 2: Language of Participation, Evolving from Language of Solidarity**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prior to the 2002 dispute</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• “We are just working class stiffs.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• “The principle of family goes beyond personal feelings, to unity, excitement, longevity, perseverance.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• “He may be a son of a gun, but he’s our son of a gun and we’re here to help him. If you holler, we’ll come.”</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>“… biggest fear is that we will lose the right to collective bargaining and be regulated in the same way as railroad workers.”</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>“The union eliminated corruption and favoritism with the establishment of the union hiring hall. Management favors putting daily job assignments onto a computerized system and taking it away from the union hall completely.”</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>“Longshoremen are the only ones in ILWU that have a coastwise contract.”</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Referring to the threat to the community of having “steadies”: “Right now, probably 50% go through the hall and 50% are steady. That allows employers some expertise and comfort. The dispatch hall makes the difference. It brings us together. Dispatch puts together different groups of people. This is your union.”</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>“During the 1998 Australian Port Dispute, Japan and US dockworkers’ unions were in solidarity with Australia, refusing to unload non-union loaded cargo. Both Australia and Japan promised US workers the same in return.”</strong></td>
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**During the 2002 dispute**

| **“... we also agreed to do this, even during the lockout, [we] agreed to load and unload any cargo necessary for national security or for any of the war efforts, no charge.”** |
| **“We’re like a social conscience. We’re the real working class, but we’re political, we’re social. It’s a lifestyle, it’s a commitment.”** |
| **“They [management] brought in the outside world, they brought in a whole other way of thinking --the PMA who elected to go outside-- so we had to form committees to reach out to the outside world.”** |
| **“Rank and file are the 1st to come up with a proposal and have the last say in accepting a contract.”** |
| **“We had bloody battles over every frickin word, not to mention concepts.”** |
| **Referring to a San Pedro longshoreman, active in Int’l, “[He] was allowed to assist with PR and community support, so he influenced a lot. He’s a conceptual thinker, a class warrior and community activist, just a lightning rod of ideas.”** |
| **“The future of this bargaining unit is not for sale. There’s no amount of money you can put on the table. We want to work with [management] moving ahead.”** |

**After the 2002 dispute**

| **“Both parties are working through this. There’s a lot of tedium—both sides are feeling their way.”** |
| **Referring to implementation of the new 11-step process for new technology: “... involves a lot more meetings. It’s a struggle to identify what constitutes a new technology.”** |
| **One terminal operator manager talked about negotiating directly with the union, without PMA involvement, to implement new technology. “We try to live the philosophy of ‘bring us along.’”** |
| **(Manager at a Terminal Operation) “We’re definitely more open. Whenever a new technology is being introduced, local reps and reps from other companies are invited to see the dock where it’s being introduced to see how the implementation will work.”** |
| **At the ILWU Leadership conference, during discussion of outsourcing and job losses: “Speak your minds on issues [such as globalization]. Show our democratic unity ... Instead of closing ranks and worrying only about protecting our jobs ... [we] have to put up a political fight, an economic fight, work against monopolies.”** |
| **Longshoreman referring to being under the media microscope: “... requires more contact, more opportunities for informal exchange. We’re moving outside traditional practices, away from the...”** |
Table 2 provides examples of the language of solidarity prior to the 2002 dispute, and the
changes in the language as the dispute continued and was finally settled. Throughout the periods
studied, this language rested on the shared commitment to solidarity as good for the whole, as a
way of “being family.” When talking about how the issues came forward in the 2002 dispute,
how the negotiation was carried out, and a year later about how the changes in technology were
being implemented, community members talked about traditional principles of standing together
and working for the preservation of jobs for everyone. But the language of solidarity as
historically spoken was insufficient to maintain the community identity and enhance
interpretation of the world around them in the whirlwind of events that precipitated and followed
the dispute. As changes took hold, the language of solidarity expanded. The language came to
entail not just “an injury to one is an injury to all” but also ‘we all have a responsibility to
participate in our community, to help one another and others like us, and to take on a voice the in
larger world.’ Thus, the language of solidarity evolved into a language of participation.

The language of participation gradually provided new interpretations for issues that had
previously been discussed in the language of safety. “Work to rule” is the term used in unions
when workers follow the precise letter of the contract, effectively slowing down operations.
When longshoremen worked to rule in 1999 and early 2002, it was explained as necessary
because of safety considerations. Longshoremen in Long Beach and Los Angeles were “working
to rule” because, they reasoned, an increase in accidents in the previous year had culminated in
six deaths. These accidents were conveyed as management’s responsibility, because of
inadequate training and short crews. Subsequent to the changes in the environment, in the
contract and in the language to accommodate these, the longshoremen moved away from using
safety as a reason to work to the letter of the contract and moved toward working out the kinks with management. In the language of participation, the emerging view was articulated as “Bring us along, so that we can learn together how this new technology is going to work.”

Language of Economics

Prior to 2002, discussions of money or wages were couched in the languages of safety or solidarity. Wages were well publicized and discussed frequently and openly. High wages were deserved because of the danger inherent in dock work; high pensions were necessary because today’s longshoremen respected all that the longshoremen before them had done for them. Because of the potential for overtime work, working multiple shifts a day, longshoremen can earn multiples of the average annual salary, making the allure of more money “like a cocaine carrot.” Such behavior in the extreme was frowned upon, for it created inequalities across the members of the community and spoke of a value on money alone that the community did not condone.

The ports dispute brought unwelcome public attention to the high wages of the longshoremen: “Among workers who work with their hands in America, there is probably nobody paid better than the longshoremen. In terms of economic muscle, it may be the strongest union in the country” (Kimeldorf, 2002). It became difficult to explain the increasingly large difference between longshoreman wages and those earned by other blue collar workers, even those in very dangerous jobs. The languages of safety and solidarity were inadequate to maintain the longshoremen’s identity as “just working class stiffs.” By 2003, a new language emerged during discussions of wages, and this language expanded to take on broader economic issues.
Table 3 presents illustrative quotes and notes from the three periods, as the language of economics came into use in the community.

**Table 3: Evolution of the Language of Economics**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Prior to and during 2002 dispute</th>
<th>After the 2002 dispute</th>
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<tr>
<td>• When talking about wages, language of solidarity, e.g., using the base rate when discussing pay. This hides the wide differences in pay across tiers (A, B, &amp; casual) and number of hours worked.</td>
<td>• “Workers are free agents—they will go to the highest bidders.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Re how they reasoned why they should continue to have fully paid medical benefits in spite of most other unions giving this away years ago: unreasonableness of management “asking for givebacks in medical benefits in this high hazard industry.”</td>
<td>• Longshoreman explaining the reason why the 2002 contract negotiation became a dispute, rather than the rollover it had been for 35 years: “The ship costs are coming down because the ships are bigger and can handle more cargo, and the terminal operations are taking a bigger percentage of total costs.”</td>
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<tr>
<td>• “Not a buyout” repeatedly mentioned when talking about accepting new technology in the same contract that saw significant increases in wages and pensions. i.e., they didn’t sell out their solidarity for money for just part of the group.</td>
<td>• “The problem with the market is not the market itself, but who controls the terms under which markets operate. We don’t have a regulation-free market—just [a market] biased toward big business with lobbyists.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Re view of selves as contingent work force and the transient nature of employment: “This is the #1 issue challenging labor law and organized labor. UAW said it wanted to represent temps @ GM, but NLRB said both GM and Manpower (temp agency) had to consent to the representation. We see our model as a possibility with contingent workers in other industries.”</td>
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It was not just high wages and benefits that precipitated the new language of economics. In the languages of safety and solidarity, there was little to members of the San Pedro community interpret how technology fit into their community identity. Members’ understanding of the new technology that was affecting their lives and how they should interpret the changes they were encountering were solidified through the language of economics.

The new language reflected a growing understanding of their role in the economy, not just at work but in their role as a community. In the language of economics, the majority of American imports and exports from and to Asia, South America and Africa ship out of the Ports.
of Long Beach and Los Angeles. And the workers who make this commerce possible are rightfully well remunerated for their critical role in maritime trade. The underlying theme in this language is that the world of capitalism creates the basis for cooperation and competition, for the role of the longshoreman. The high wages of the longshoremen separate them from other blue collar workers and serve as evidence of their unique role in the international economy. Note how the final quote in Table 3 above, regarding contingent work, is in contrast to the way this issue would be discussed in the traditional language of solidarity—‘we are the working class’.

San Pedro’s longshoremen view themselves as critical to national and international business. But still, the economic place they hold is a collective place. Any one longshoreman’s identity comes from being part of the whole—each person is absolutely replaceable, but as a group the longshoremen are a vital component in the world’s economy. The language of economics, and of their place within the larger economy, is understood by all San Pedro longshoremen and under girds their individual and collective esteem and helps holds them together as a community.

Discussion

The transient nature of the work carried out by San Pedro longshoremen could challenge the ability of the community to adapt to environmental jolts. But the positive nature of the community led to, and no doubt derived in part from, ongoing communication across multiple media throughout the community. Through shared languages used in person at the hiring hall, online in community emails, in print in local newsletters, and in press on billboards and in the public media, the community evolved to meet the changes surrounding it. In spite of lack of continuity at the workplace—perhaps even because they knew they could not rely on repeated
interactions with the same people to shore up their identity—a shared language facilitated the process through which the identity, interpretations and influence of the community incorporated the technical, economic and political turbulence around it. Transient work embedded within a positive community may assist the evolution of the community’s languages. Different people interacting with one another at different workplaces every day may hasten the evolution of language to meet changes in the external environment.

Recent work on identity within organizations presents a dynamic process of identity transformation (Asforth, 1998; Albert, Ashforth & Dutton, 2000) involving both the organizational context and the actors within that context (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Pratt, 2000; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). Pratt & Rafaeli (2001) offer physical symbols as a flexible medium through which identity changes can be communicated: “The accessibility and flexibility of a physical symbol language offers individuals and organizations a powerful medium with which to represent and negotiate new and complex identity and status relationships.” Similarly, spoken and written languages have the necessary ‘accessibility and flexibility’ to play a critical role in the transformation of identity within a community.

Identity is the lens through which one makes sense of the world (Weick, 1995; Ashforth and Mael, 1996). Identity change within a community may be a product of an evolution in the way of interpreting the external world. Past research has shown how identity change has cognitive components (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001), emotional components (Pratt, 2000), and practice components (Wenger, 1998; Van Maanen, 1998). In the community in San Pedro, I have found that identity change also involves spoken components, a set of languages for speaking in and to the world. An evolution in identity and interpretation requires adaptations in languages for sharing this new way of making sense of events and issues.
In the community in San Pedro, interpretation and identity were created simultaneously and worked to reinforce one another, through an evolving set of shared languages. The specific antecedents and consequences of the positive community in San Pedro may be particular to the setting. But the insights into how language evolves and influences identity, interpretation and influence may provide a valuable lens into building positive communities in the new organizations of contingent and transient workers the 21st century.
References


Kimeldorf. 2002.


