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Problematized Providing and Protecting: The Occupational Narrative of the Working Class

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In the summer of 2001, the House of Representatives held a special hearing to confront the problems associated with “making ends meet.” Speakers at the hearing addressed some of the most pressing issues, including health care, children living in poverty, and the long-term consequences of substandard income. They voiced concern regarding the difficulties faced by many Americans as they struggle to provide a living for themselves and their families. The hearing was not a discussion of welfare and unemployment, however. The citizens for whom the speakers expressed concern were employed members of the working class.

The daunting challenges of making ends meet can have serious implications for members of the working class, particularly in terms of dignity. The ability to provide is tied inextricably to personal dignity; threats to the ability to make ends meet are threats to dignity. For example, Riggs explains that, by and large, society imposes a mandate upon men that they fulfill the role of “breadwinner” by providing for their families financially (567). Due to societal pressures, the inability to fulfill breadwinner duties can have serious impacts on masculine identity for men (Buzzanell and Turner). Ongoing threats can damage self-esteem. In an examination of what constitutes a living wage, Glickman quotes a McDonald’s worker who wanted a raise in the federal minimum wage to ten dollars per hour. He explained, “A man can’t have any self-respect for less than that” (xii). It is important to note that men are not alone. Women, too, take the role of providing...
seriously, particularly when they have sole responsibility for those duties. In the United States, 12.9 million households are run by single mothers (Simmons and O’Neill 2). Within African American communities, women often assume a central role of providing and protecting. Fine and Wies explain that a “roof over our heads and food in our stomachs” (162) is frequently a mantra of African American women, regardless of their marital status.

The material conditions of the working class that lead to difficulty in making ends meet (low wages, limited benefits, job instability) certainly are cause for concern. However, disregarding, discounting, or denying the struggle itself—whether in scholarship, policy debates, or daily discourse—is just as damaging. Zweig explains: “When society fails to acknowledge the existence and experience of working people it robs them of an articulate sense of themselves and their place in society. We know from the vibrancy of other identity movements that to silence and leave nameless a central aspect of a person’s identity is to strip them of a measure of power over their lives. A full, realistic self-identity is a basic requirement for human dignity” (61).

In this chapter, I give voice to and name a central aspect of membership in the working class in an effort to bolster a sense of dignity among its members. I argue that providing and protecting, particularly problematized providing and protecting, is a fundamental principle of working-class identity and organizing. As such, it surfaces in everyday rhetoric.

*Problematized Providing and Protecting*

The combined ideals of providing and protecting have a long history in the United States. During the colonial period, society held men responsible for protecting their families from physical danger. Later, following the Industrial Revolution, providing financial resources became paramount (Pleck and Pleck 35–39). In contemporary times, Townsend explains that men consider providing to be their most important role as fathers (53). Protecting children from physical and moral dangers is also important. Some means of protection include moving to “good” neighborhoods and sending children to “good” schools, which require financial investment. The fact that the protecting role often is fulfilled through providing demonstrates that the two are intertwined. Although the dual-ideal may be widely accepted—and imposed upon both men and women—Townsend contends that the ability to provide and protect differs between people according to social position (50).
Despite the "taboo" nature of social class analysis in public discourse (Perrucci and Wysong 44) and the dearth of attention paid to issues of materiality and class in rhetorical scholarship (Cloud 271), class remains a significant social marker that has associated with it distinct material conditions, namely, challenges to members' ability to provide and protect. However, class-based struggles associated with providing and protecting seem to have become exclusively associated with and relegated to historical accounts of immigrant labor. Simply put, providing and protecting is something that is largely unacknowledged in contemporary times; struggles to provide and protect are considered to be exceptions rather than the rules. Furthermore, general improvement in standards of living combined with widespread belief in a "classless society" have reinforced the ideology of meritocracy. Meritocracy is marked by a belief that success is due exclusively to hard work. Consequently, anyone who is unsuccessful is believed to have failed due to his or her lack of hard work. The thought that an individual is unable or struggling to provide and protect has become something of a private shame and personal deficiency that must be borne in silence instead of a material condition shared by an entire class.

Within the middle class, providing and protecting is largely backgrounded in collective consciousness. That is, many Americans have become so assured in the adequacy and stability of their financial means that providing and protecting is no longer the sole—or even a mindful—concern. The assumption of providing and protecting has enabled many employees to focus on fulfillment, intellectual stimulation, challenge, variety, social status, and accumulation of enough material wealth to provide luxuries beyond the bare necessities. Yet the luxury of assumed providing and protecting is not available to everyone, especially the working class. Working-class employees earn substantially less income and are less likely to receive employer-provided benefits like medical insurance or sick pay than their middle- and upper-class counterparts (Labor Force; Mishel, Bernstein, and Schmitt 280–81). Furthermore, the working class is more prone to job outplacement due to mechanization, whether that is assembly-line robotics or bookkeeping computer software; more at risk for industry instability or elimination as a result of foreign competition; more vulnerable to strikes and layoffs; and more likely to live paycheck-to-paycheck, carrying a heavy debt burden (Perrucci and Wysong 27).

Although not explicitly identified as such, the problems associated with providing and protecting have undergirded recent scholarship on the working class. For example, Ehrenreich reported her experiences of taking a series of low-wage...
jobs: waitress, nursing home dietary aide, hotel maid, house cleaner, and retail clerk. Her goal was to investigate if it was possible to "get by" in a low-wage job. After three earnest but failed attempts, Ehrenreich concluded that she simply could not get by, even though she typically worked more than one job and had to provide only for herself. Similarly, Newman conducted a two-year ethnography of three hundred people who either worked in a Harlem fast-food restaurant or unsuccessfully sought work at the restaurant. Contrary to the popular stereotypes of "welfare queens" and "drug kings," most of the poor in Harlem wanted to work. However, in doing so, they exchanged one insufficient means of providing (i.e., welfare) for another (i.e., low-wage work). Even when workers pooled their earnings with resources from other members of the household, providing for the bare essentials remained a significant challenge. Moreover, low wages, combined with the high rents of New York City, forced workers to live in unsafe neighborhoods and increased the risks associated with everyday life (e.g., drugs, gangs, theft).

In contrast to studying the working poor, Lamont examined blue-collar workers' discourses regarding the meaning of their work. She claimed that white and black men create ethics around which they construct their identities in such a way as to find dignity in their lives. Although there are some differences between white and black men, common among them is a dedication to "providing for and protecting the family." Unlike their middle- and upper-class white-collar counterparts, whose family priorities are building college education funds and ensuring that their children became self-actualized adults, working-class men's conception of providing is one of "being able to keep necessity at bay, put food on the table, and maintain 'a roof over [our] heads'" (30). Identifying the challenges of providing and protecting faced by the working class is in no way meant to diminish or disparage their abilities. On the contrary, many working-class people provide and protect quite well. Countless working-class families lead lives that are materially indistinguishable from middle-class families: they live in nice homes in decent neighborhoods, drive newer vehicles, go on family vacations, and send their sons and daughters to college. However, what makes them different from their middle-class counterparts is that they cannot—or in some cases do not—assume the ability to sustain this lifestyle to be stable. Regardless of their current financial means, for the working class, providing and protecting is never far from consciousness. Instead, they experience problematized providing and protecting.

Problematized providing and protecting is a material reality characterized
by the difficulties faced in having insufficient or unstable means for providing for and protecting one's self and family. The sources of problematized providing and protecting come from insufficient wages or lack of benefits, the instability of employment in the industry or of the industry itself; or from the perception of insufficient wages or unstable employment. Challenges to providing and protecting are ubiquitous in the lives of the working class and, consequently, are at the core of their daily discourses and occupational narratives.

Miners' Occupational Narratives as Everyday Rhetoric

Richardson maintains that people make sense of their lives through narrative and, as such, narrative is the best way to understand human experience (133). Particularly among the working class, narrative is an important source of everyday rhetoric. Whereas members of the working class have access to other outlets—books, journals, corporate communications, radio, and television stations—their access is as consumers, not producers, of the content. In contrast, they are the creators and broadcasters of their own narratives, regardless of how limited their audiences may be. Therefore, rather than turning to (mis)representations of the working class in others' rhetoric, if we are to gain a rich, accurate understanding of the lived experiences and worldview of the working class, it is necessary to listen to workers' own voices and understand their accounts from their perspectives.

I conducted a series of interviews in the spring of 2002 with retired underground iron ore miners from Michigan’s upper peninsula. The thirteen participants ranged in age from forty-seven to eighty-six and their collective mining career spanned from 1938 until 2002. In total, I listened to and recorded more than seventeen hours of stories told by these miners. I isolated and transcribed discrete stories guided by Brown’s criteria: sense of temporality, story grammar, relevance for membership, and ring of truth (165). I then performed an inductive thematic analysis to identify the primary themes in the miners’ stories. Themes had to exhibit: recurrence, “same thread of meaning, even though different wording indicated such a meaning”; repetition, “repetition of key words, phrases, or sentences”; and forcefulness, “vocal inflection, volume, or dramatic pauses which serve to stress and subordinate some utterances” (Owen 275). I contextualized the miners' stories with archival research, not to refute the truth of the men’s stories, but instead to provide more detail regarding the material conditions in which their narrativized accounts were embedded.
On the surface, the dramatic stories that follow paint vivid pictures of strong work ethics, deplorable working conditions, bloody accidents, and embittered labor struggles. The details of the stories raise important issues pertaining to organizational injustice and working-class meanings of work. Upon closer examination, these stories are all variations of the same tale, one of problematized providing and protecting. The narratives, which are different in their details, function in important ways. On a microlevel, problematized providing and protecting is the central issue around which individuals form their identities and make individual decisions. On a macrolevel, it explains organizing patterns and collective decisions. The miners’ stories and their functions are detailed below.

*I’m Just Trying to Feed My Family*

Ernie R. is a retired labor leader who was instrumental in the efforts that were eventually successful in unionizing the mines. The local union hall now bears his name. However, before he was drawn into a career with the United Steelworkers, he followed in the footsteps of his father and grandfather by working as an underground contract miner. Looking back on the years he spent working underground, Ernie R. told the following story about two coworkers whose determination and never-give-up attitude made them heroes in his eyes:

I can tell you another story about two Italians: John and Angelo. They worked next to us and they had hit a real hard seam of iron ore, called blue steel. It was blue and hard. And they were adjoining contract and we used to eat in the traveling road in between. So my dad and I—it was about 11, 11:30—so we were going to go over there. And they were drilling. So we were going to tell them to come and eat. And they were drilling and you could tell from the sound of the machine that they were in some hard ground. And it looked like a fog coming out of that machine. That mist. That oily. And their headlamp was just bouncing like a laser. You could tell they were vibrating. And we went there. And John, John was about six-foot-two, six-three and he had muscles that he even didn’t know he had. And Angelo was shorter, but he was just as firm and chunky. And John put that machine off and threw his hat on the ground. “Dio Cane!” [Italian for “God is a dog.”] . . . He looked up like that [glaring up at the ceiling and shaking his fist], he said, “Why you make this goddamned ground so hard?” he said. “I’m just trying to feed my family!” Angelo just shook his head. So we went to eat. And they were wringing wet. Pushing like that. Well, took ten, fifteen minutes to eat and we went back and you could hear them go drilling again. Then about 3:30 when we start going down the ladders to go down, you know, the holes were, you know, being detonated. And you always counted the holes. If you had twenty-six, twenty-eight holes, you tried to count to twenty-eight so you could tell the oncoming shift that they all went. That there are no missing. And John was counting. “One, two, three—.”
The miners' job was to extract ore from the ground by advancing "drifts," horizontal passages dug off of the main tunnel. Their task was achieved by completing "rounds," a drilling-blasting-digging-setting routine. Each round required a pair of miners to drill twenty-one to twenty-eight 4 1/2-foot deep holes into the breast of the ore body and fill each hole with six to eight sticks of dynamite. The miners would then wire the dynamite, place blasting caps on each hole, and hook the explosives to a primer wire. When the preparation was complete, the miners would evacuate the immediate area to seek shelter from the blast twenty to thirty yards away and detonate the area. After the explosion, they would shovel the ore into mine cars and put up a timber or steel "set." A set consisted of two nine-foot legs placed on the sides of the blast opening to hold back the crumbling walls and a six-foot long cap that was placed on top of the legs to support the weight of the ceiling.

In exchange for their labor, miners were paid an hourly base rate, called "company count." However, in order "to make money" beyond their humble base rate, miners had to exceed that quota of one round per eight-hour shift. Completing one round (or more) per day was a challenge in and of itself, but when miners hit "blue steel," as did John and Angelo, it was even more daunting. Described as "diamond hard" and "hard, featureless, foreboding" (Etelamaki 41), blue steel was the term used by miners to refer to a mass of iron ore that had no seams or layers. Without the "cracks" found in other ores, it was difficult, if not impossible, to start drilling. Their jackhammer-like drills bounced across the smooth surface instead of drilling into the ore body. To further complicate the process, driving a drift required miners to drill forward (i.e., into a "wall") not down (i.e., into the "floor"). Not only were miners unable to use their body weight and force of gravity to assist them, they also had to support the weight of the seventy-pound machine, often drilling at levels above their shoulders, as the vibration of the drills caused muscles to fatigue quickly and arms to go numb.

The vivid details that Ernie R. relays make plain the strong work ethic held by John and Angelo. His story also speaks to a reverence for toughness and beating the odds. By the end of their shift, John and Angelo had persevered against the blue steel and had drilled and blasted all twenty-some holes, as evidenced by their counting of each successive detonation: "one, two, three—." However, what makes this a story of problematized providing and protecting is the motivation behind their actions. John and Angelo were not trying to prove they were better miners than other men, nor were they trying to impress a boss; rather, they were motivated by their need to provide for their families. Although his comment is
buried in the unfolding action, John shouts in exasperation, "I'm just trying to feed my family!" John and Angelo knew that if they were not able to finish the round they not only would be unable to work ahead, they would be unable to meet their quota. By the end of the pay period, they needed to complete more than the minimum number of rounds in order to earn enough money to provide for their families. Their base pay simply was not enough to make ends meet.

In a similar context, Burawoy conducted an ethnography of a manufacturing organization in which he asked "why do workers work as hard as they do?" He discovered that the workers turned work into a game they called "making out." The goal of their game was to maximize incentive pay by exceeding quotas, while at the same time keeping production low enough that they would not hit a point of diminishing returns or risk having the quota adjusted to a higher level. From a Marxist perspective, making out directly contributed to the obscuring and securing of surplus value for the owners by transforming extra work into a form of play. Although John and Angelo did not attach a game moniker to their work, they, too, were making out. In order to earn their base pay, all they had to do was complete an average of one round per shift. Yet, they would not settle for a one-round average. Unquestionably, John and Angelo were operating in the best interests of the mine owners. Their additional labor reaped the company far more financial remuneration than they claimed for their own. Certainly, it can be claimed that John and Angelo, as well as all the other miners who strived to complete extra rounds, were falling prey to the hegemonic control of the company.

However, in his analysis, Burawoy backgrounds workers' material reality beyond the shop floor. He focuses on the surplus value generated for the company, but ignores the financial obligations of the workers. Admittedly, making out can be problematic if quotas are set at unrealistic levels such that the workers are not compensated fairly or workers are placed in harm's way to meet their quotas. However, when embedded within the socioeconomic context of the workers' lives outside of the jobsite, making out, working harder than others, or skipping lunch breaks simply may be necessary. Therefore, it is necessary to consider employees' full decision-making context before evaluating the quality of their decisions.

_I Don't Have a Dime in My Pocket_

Whereas problematized providing and protecting dictated how John and Angelo responded in their day-to-day duties, it also guided decision making in more pivotal work choices. In an unrecorded interview, Jim, a seventy-one-year-old re-
tiree, who as a young teenager lied about his age so that he could start working in the mines, told the story of how he responded to a major layoff he experienced as a relatively young man. In the late 1950s, miners across the region were out of work and hungry. Men with as many as seventeen years of seniority were losing their jobs in a layoff that lasted several years. As did many of his peers, Jim left his wife and child at home and headed west to find work. These journeys had brought miners to the copper mines of the Western Upper Peninsula of Michigan, the molybdenum mines of Colorado, the gold mines of California, and, last on everyone's list, the uranium mines of New Mexico. Uranium mines were notorious for hazardous working conditions, particularly the health risks associated with working in cramped, unventilated, radioactive underground mines. These mines proved so difficult to staff that an unprecedented incentive was offered—a lengthy paid vacation—after completing six months of work. The vacation served as a recruiting tool and gave the workers time to cleanse their bodies and ready themselves for another stint.

Jim recalled in vivid detail the day he arrived in New Mexico. After standing in line at the office, he and twelve other men were met by one of the bosses who gave them a glimpse into what work in the uranium mine would be like: "One of three things is going to happen to you," the boss explained. These things, which the boss presented with blunt pessimism, included diarrhea, permanent sterility, and cancer. Yet Jim continued through the employment process filling out paperwork and passing the company physical. By that afternoon, only Jim and one other man boarded the elevator that lowered them into the wet, radioactive bowels of the mine. When he stepped off the elevator, the boss turned around to see the other man still standing on the elevator shaking his head, refusing to get off. "What about you?" the boss asked Jim. Jim stared him in the eye and with steely resolve replied, "I gotta stay. I don't have a dime in my pocket. Show me where to go."

Like John and Angelo, whose wages were insufficient to fulfill their need to provide and protect, Jim was experiencing the effects of an even wider-scale insufficiency. Industry-wide slowdowns were eliminating hundreds of jobs and there was simply not enough work available in the local community to absorb the losses and sustain unemployed workers. As such, with far fewer options available—in the local community and across the country as unemployed miners hungrily filled vacancies—miners became more willing to place themselves at risk for the few jobs that remained. Thomas contends that blue-collar careers differ from white-collar careers in that they are characterized by constrained choice.
Constrained choice materializes itself in fewer advancement opportunities, less freedom to choose how to enact work, and—especially salient during periods of mass layoff—fewer employment options. However, constrained choice does not mean no choice, nor does it mean passivity. Clearly, Jim had several opportunities to turn around and walk away from the uranium mine. He made the long journey to the mine during which he could have turned around at any time (and during which he presumably passed other places of potential employment), listened to and remembered in detail the boss’s warnings about the health risks, and was asked again at the job site if he wanted to leave. Although he was given chances to go, he chose to stay. Jim held an instrumental attitude toward work, which Thomas claims is a common way that workers make sense of their lack of choice (369). For Jim, work was a means of providing for and protecting his family, a responsibility that was undoubtedly threatened as evidenced by his comment, “I don’t have a dime in my pocket.”

When providing and protecting can be taken for granted, workers can value other ideals such as fulfillment, enjoyable work responsibilities, and advancement opportunities. In comparison, however, in a situation of problematized providing and protecting, working to earn an adequate income is paramount. Therefore, even basics such as personal safety and comfort are relegated to positions of secondary importance. It is not that Jim wanted to work in the uranium mine or that he did not understand the risks portrayed by the boss. Rather, it was that he needed to work and the uranium mine provided a viable option—perhaps the only viable option at the time for an unemployed miner. Fortunately, by the time Jim finished his first stint, his wife had called to let him know that his hometown iron ore mines were hiring again. Jim used his paid vacation from the uranium company to finance his 1,800-mile trip back to his family.

Although not as dramatic as Jim’s story, working-class people in contemporary times are Shouldering serious occupational hazards on the job. Zoller’s research in an automotive manufacturing organization revealed that employees communicatively constructed norms and identities that socialized workers who had been injured on the job to let their injuries go unreported. A culture of blaming victims, combined with workers’ desire not to be labeled as a whiner or a bad worker, created a culture that perpetuated health and safety risks, rather than one that pressed for workplace improvements. Like other literature on working-class organizations, Zoller largely dismisses conditions of workers’ material reality. One employee explained, "but then I’m thinking I’m getting paid twice as much as at my other job . . . there’s nowhere else you’re going to find that kind of
money in this town, so I guess I accept that." Instead of positioning the worker's comment as evidence of a local economy characterized by problematized providing and protecting, Zoller explains the remark as being representative of the employees' need to differentiate themselves from low-wage fast-food workers in town. She says, "employees were expected to trade their bodies for high pay and good benefits" and, when placing the comment in a politicized context, claims, "the bargain of physical health for money can be criticized for failing to contest the notion that a choice between the two must be made at all" (131). Regrettably, if the automotive plant truly is workers' only option for stable work, and therefore their sole means for providing and protecting (a fast-food job would not raise a family above the poverty line), then, for some, a choice needs to be made. Trading long-term health risks for the relief of immediate threats to the ability to provide and protect frequently is the alternative chosen by the working class.

It's Just a Way of Life

Not only do miners face health risks, they also risk serious injury. Debilitating and fatal accidents are commonplace. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (Industry at a Glance), miners experience twenty-four thousand work-related non-fatal injuries and illnesses each year (four per one hundred miners). Additionally, workers in the mining industry experience the highest rate of death in any occupation. In 1999, twenty-three of every one hundred thousand miners were killed on the job (Labor Force 46). As shocking as these statistics are, they pale in comparison to the risks associated with mining even a generation ago. Miners have long understood that "you can always mine safer, but you can never mine safely." William, a seventy-nine-year-old retiree who became a miner when he replaced the man on whose legs he placed tourniquets following an on-the-job accident, recounted the following story about another gruesome accident which he helped to clean up:

Well, me and my partner [were] mining in one drift and this other crew were in here and they were charging up. And, uh, I don't know what happened, but anyway there was a heck of an explosion. They had about two boxes of powder by their feet, anyway. And, uh, there was two drifts. They were twenty-five, thirty feet apart. And, uh, this one they had already mined. They had drilled all the holes. And they had a scraperman in there. That's all he'd done, just scrape that dirt. So he was here and [they] were here mining and they were charging these long holes. And whatever happened, I don't know, but what I think it was was the scraperman here had to blast. And, uh, he went and told these guys. They said, "go ahead, it won't bother us." And he set off his charge and it set off all these holes.
So me and my partner went in there after that. And all we did was pick up pieces of them guys. Yeah, we were afternoon shift that day. We were the first ones in there. When we started to walk in there, there was pieces of their belt and there was a pair of glasses. So we got in there and all there was was a pile of dirt. We had to stay overtime then and find the pieces. We didn't find much. Backbone against one set. And then, uh, a hand up on a set. That's about the worst, I guess. [long pause] Interesting.

[Interviewer: Interesting? It sounds kind of dangerous, too.]

Oh yeah, I suppose. It's just a way of life, that's all.

The way of life to which William referred was one frequently marred by tragedy. Although accidents were common, it still did not make them easy; it only conditioned the miners to realize that accidents were endurable. Ernie B., a fifty-seven-year-old retired miner, vocal union supporter, and survivor of a near-fatal mining accident himself, assisted with the cleanup of the same incident:

And the guys underground that got blasted, they were, uh, um, they were like Jell-O. And you couldn't see 'em. You put your hand down there and you go through parts of their body with your hand, digging for 'em.

[Interviewer: How did people respond after someone was killed?]

The mining company themselves used to launch investigations into why it happened, how it happened, and what they could do to prevent it in the future. But um, as far as the men, [they] went on. You just went on with your daily work because the work had to get done.

William's and Ernie B.'s responses were markedly similar, despite the fact that at the time of the accident, William was an "old-timer" with only a couple of years to go before retirement, while Ernie B. was the new kid on the block with only a few years on the job. Yet both of them accepted the fatal accident as a way of life and naturalized the danger associated with working in the mines. Whereas Ernie R.'s and Jim's stories were explicit regarding insufficient wages and the instability of employment and of the mining industry itself, William's and Ernie B.'s stories are much more implicit in their treatment of problematized providing and protecting. Outsiders may be overwhelmed by the gory details of their stories and the matter-of-fact way they present them. Some may question their rationales for staying in the mines. However, the material conditions that surrounded the community were marked by limited employment options. Both men felt compelled to stay at the mines in order to provide for their families. What resulted was the development of incredible resilience.

Resilience has received recent attention in organizational literature. For example, Coutu writes about people who are able to snap back when confronted
with life's hardships. Truly resilient people, she argues, possess three unique qualities that allow them to survive when others cannot: they have a staunch acceptance of reality, the ability to improvise under pressure, and a deeply held belief that life is meaningful. Coutu's three characteristics of resilience are evident in the miners' stories and work histories. First, they face the reality of their dangerous worksite on a daily basis. By the time most miners retire, they are witness to someone—whether a partner, friend, or relative—being seriously injured or killed on the job. An acceptance of this grisly reality keeps them alert, and their mindful focus on their work prevents many potential accidents. Second, the miners are in a state of constant preparation for surviving if disaster should strike. This preparation allows them to exercise "ritualized ingenuity" when the situation calls for action, whether that is preventing or enduring tragic accidents. Third, and most important in regard to providing and protecting, they find meaning in life beyond the drifts of the mine. For many of the miners, this meaning comes from their roles outside of work as spouses, parents, and friends. When tragedy strikes, they can pull themselves up by their bootstraps and focus their attention on the instrumental value of their work, for example, providing food, clothes, and decent homes for their families.

Following the 2002 Somerset, Pennsylvania, incident in which nine coal miners were trapped in a flooded underground mine for seventy-seven hours, Lubrano interviewed workers from another mine regarding their responses and their reasons for mining. He attests to their resilience and their desire to provide and protect when he says, "miners think of the mortgage and their children's education, the hook on their belts the numbered metal badge that will identify their bodies should disaster strike." One of the miners interviewed was even more explicit. In response to an accident in which the roof of the coal mine collapsed on him, he shares: "I vowed I'd never go back down. But I couldn't find anything else, and I had to. It's that payday... But I guarantee you my 9-year-old son will never come down here" (16A).

**And We'll Both Starve Together**

On an individual level, problematized providing and protecting functions as an underlying decision premise; the facts and values that enter into the decision-making process (Simon 23–24). The decisions made by the miners—how hard to work, how many health risks to expose themselves to, and how to respond after a crisis—might, on the surface or from another class ethic, make little or no sense.
That is, from an outsider’s perspective that takes for granted the ability to provide and protect, the choices of John, Angelo, Jim, William, and Ernie B. seem almost incomprehensible. Unquestionably, they placed themselves in danger on a daily basis. However, evaluating those decisions within a context that fully acknowledges their material reality reframes their decisions as logical and appropriate.

Their stories collectively explain microlevel functions of occupational narratives in terms of working-class identity and individual behavior. Moreover, occupational narratives can serve macrolevel functions of working-class organizing. Ernie R. told a story of a local business owner who supported the miners during the 104-day strike for union representation in 1946:

Frank had a little grocery store. And in ’46, there, Jack Stone, the superintendent, the general superintendent and manager, he called a meeting of the [local] business professional people. And the strike had been going on for [a long time]. He told them, he said, “the strike will end tomorrow. [pause—then whispering] If you guys just cut out the credit. Don’t, don’t give them no credit.” For clothes, or for, you know for food, eh. In other words, freeze them back to work.

And they said that Frank got up. And Frank got perfect broken English. And he got up and he called him Mr. Stocky [mocking Jack Stone’s name]. He said, “Mr. Stocky, how, how often you big shots come in my store?” Stone couldn’t answer that, ’cause everybody knew he never came in there. And Frank said, “I’ll tell you one thing, Stocky, if Frank got one loaf of bread on the shelf, Frank and his family is gonna eat half of it. The other half is going to go to the miners on credit and we’ll both starve together.”

In 1946, at the time of Frank’s encounter, industries across the United States were adjusting production levels for a civilian economy, resulting in shutdowns, reduced working hours, and loss of take-home pay for workers (Paquette 1). As a result, a wave of strikes erupted across the country. From meat packing to mining, textiles, and assembly lines, more than 1.7 million blue-collar workers went on strike for better working conditions and compensation. The demand among the miners was an 18 1/2-cent per hour raise and recognition of the United Steel Workers as their collective bargaining unit. The requests and, more importantly, the strike itself were contested by the mining company and affiliated steel organizations. Company officials who were fighting adamantly against unionization had resorted to asking merchants to “freeze out” the miners. By not allowing miners to purchase on credit such necessities as food and clothes, they were hoping that the miners’ resolve would break and they would go back to work without their demands being met by the company. When a company representative made this malicious request at a meeting of town merchants, Frank dramatically rejected their proposal.
Although Frank is neither a miner nor a member of the working class, it is clear that this is a narrative about the challenges faced by miners in providing and protecting. Not only did Frank refuse to acquiesce to the company's demand, he demonstrated his willingness to endure hardship alongside the miners. Particularly salient is Frank's statement, "and we'll both starve together." Frank acknowledged and accepted as his own the risks faced by the miners: hunger and blackballing. He protected the unionization movement by endangering his own ability to provide for his family by not yielding to the company's order.

Providing and protecting is a principal source of motivation for labor movements in general and union organizing in particular. Historically, almost all union demands are for further reassurances for providing and protecting. Health and safety improvements help to prevent injuries and illnesses that would leave people unable to work; collective bargaining power and formal grievance procedures prevent people from being arbitrarily terminated or disciplined; increased wages allow workers to earn a living wage or more; health insurance provides some protection from skyrocketing healthcare costs; death and disability insurance covers workers' ability to provide and protect should they become unable to work again. However, providing and protecting is also a significant tension among organizational members during labor movements. Unions work toward long-term guarantees that can create an employment environment and compensation package that will allow members to be more confident in their ability to provide and protect. Yet, pursuit of long-term guarantees often competes with short-term abilities. For example, in the mining community that was the focus of this study, it took a 104-day strike and more than three months without a paycheck to get the United Steelworkers Union and its local bargaining units officially recognized by the mining company in 1946 (Paquette 1). Since that time, the miners have staged more than a dozen strikes, totaling more than four hundred strike days. Yet for every benefit that is gained from the strike, the striking workers rarely, if ever, recuperate their individual losses. One miner said of his lost wages, "You never made that back." As such, when short-term needs vie against long-term benefits—especially when workers believe that the wages are "good enough"—internal struggles can be very heated and threaten to divide the union and its members. However, the sacrifices that individuals make in hopes of getting long-term assurances, assurances from which they may never directly benefit, speak to the importance of problematized providing and protecting.
Moving from Cultural to Collective Narrative

As Cloud attests, much research in rhetoric assumes a classless society and ignores the material reality of class inequality (271). Existing scholarship has tended to background or render invisible the material problems faced in providing and protecting in the working-class world. The literature that does address working-class issues largely focuses on perpetuation of class distinctions and impermeability of class boundaries (see, e.g., Willis). Perrucci and Wysong argue that members of the upper class (among whom they distinguish between the “super class” and “credentialed class”) use their power and resources to preserve the economic, political, and cultural status quo (47). That is, through the upper class’s control of the media and of political and public discourse, class analysis is marginalized, silenced, and sometimes distorted in order for those in power to maintain their position of privilege. Although Perrucci and Wysong affirm that common class interests “have the potential to unite all members of the new working class in effort to promote changes that would reduce [inequality]” (33), they offer little hope and even fewer concrete suggestions as to how this can be accomplished.

The material realities and everyday rhetorics experienced and expressed by a small group of working-class men serve to address some of the apparent gaps in the literature. Furthermore, through occupational narratives, working-class men and women can take action in the pursuit of greater class equality and improvements in the conditions of their material realities. Richardson contends that narrative is sociologically significant in that it has the power to both reflect and transform the social order. Specifically, she identifies two types of narratives that have particular salience for groups of people: cultural narratives are stories that are shared within a culture that serve to support the social world and maintain the status quo (128) and collective narratives are stories that challenge the status quo by recasting the accounts of those who are marginalized or disenfranchised by the cultural story (129). Occupational narratives, such as the ones shared by the miners, can operate as both cultural and collective narratives.

Occupational narratives can serve as cultural narratives by providing an opportunity for all members of a group to gain a general understanding of shared meanings and their relationship with each other and the world. This can occur in a number of ways, including crossing generational boundaries and socializing organizational newcomers. For example, parents and grandparents tell stories to younger generations even before children are old enough to enter the workforce, thereby preconditioning them in terms of life and work expectations. In this re-
spect, occupational narratives are an instrument of organizational osmosis—the “seemingly effortless adoption of the ideas, values, and culture of an organization on the basis of preexisting socialization experiences” (Gibson and Papa 79). Additionally, as people join specific organizational cultures or workgroups, occupational narratives told by “old-timers” can be used as a way to manage meaning, frame organizational activities in terms of organizational values, and bond members together by presenting points of shared identity (Brown 163). Richardson explains the significance of cultural narratives: “Stories of one’s ‘people’—as chosen or enslaved, conquerors or victims—as well as stories about one’s nation, social class, gender, race, or occupation affect morale, aspirations, and personal life chances. They are not ‘simply’ stories, but are narratives which have real consequences for the fates of individuals, communities, and nations” (127–28).

Occupational narratives also can be harnessed as collective narratives in order to effect positive change for the working class as a whole. Whereas cultural narratives support the status quo, collective narratives challenge it by recasting the stories of those who are marginalized or disenfranchised. Richardson explains that even though collective narratives are told about a category of people, individuals respond to them by thinking, “That is my story. I am not alone” (129, emphasis in original). As such, collective stories serve to overcome isolation and alienation of individuals in contemporary life, galvanize members, create a collective consciousness (even among people who are not organized), and provide for the possibility for social action on behalf of the collective. Victims can be reframed as survivors, and individual shortcomings in a system of meritocracy can be reframed as systemic power imbalances.

A working-class story (e.g., John and Angelo’s “blue steel” story) may focus on the sacrifices made to provide and protect and thus turn protagonists into cultural heroes for assuming those risks. In contrast, that same narrative reframed as a collective story could be an admonition of a company-imposed pay system that privileges production over safety and jeopardizes the physical well-being of its employees. Viewed in this way, the narrative serves to lift the stigma and shame attached to the struggle to make ends meet, and those who identify with the story can find a dignified space for collective action. Likewise, Jim’s story of accepting occupational hazards can bring necessary attention to health and safety concerns as well as encourage economic development initiatives in communities heavily hit by industry instability. William and Ernie B.’s story of cleaning up after a mining explosion can address the organizational injustices and dangers endured by working-class people. The story of Frank’s com-
mitment to the strike efforts emphasizes the hope and possibility of middle- and upper-class allies assisting with the fight to improve the material conditions of the working class, whether that be through developing local programs or lobbying for federal policies.

On a microlevel, problematized providing and protecting is a guiding principle around which individuals form their identities and make individual decisions, such as working harder than they may need to, exposing themselves to health risks, and enduring hardships and injustices. On a macrolevel, it explains the demands for which organizers push and the debates that divide workers. Identification of problematized providing and protecting makes explicit an important underlying process that is essential for understanding and critiquing the contemporary workplace. Naming the tension enables otherwise hidden working-class experiences to be foregrounded in future research and sheds new light on extant scholarship and theory. As Cloud explains, "the concepts of materiality and class are still crucial for our critical, theoretical, and activist work" (274).

Most importantly, this analysis points to the potential for narratives of problematized providing and protecting to be used for collective action that can make significant, material changes on behalf of the working class. The congressional hearing held in 2001 was a start in placing problems of providing and protecting on the national agenda. However, a single day of members of the privileged class discussing concerns of the working class is not enough. Government representatives' political speeches must be bolstered by everyday collective narratives shared by working-class people who understand firsthand the day-to-day struggles of making ends meet. Even though membership in the working class is characterized by a lack of economic, political, and cultural power (Zweig), there undeniably is power in numbers. When the working class is able to listen to a well-told collective story of problematized providing and protecting and say "that is my story, I am not alone," once silenced masses may finally be able to join voices in a concerted call for action. In collective narrative lies the power to change material reality.

NOTES

1. My archival research included microfilm archives of the local newspaper dating back to the early 1900s, vertical files on union movements and mining disasters, special collections published by the local newspaper, historical books, mining company publications, a published miner's autobiography (Ronn), photographs, and video documentaries. I also conducted a two-hour interview with a local mining historian who detailed the evolution of mining and safety in the region.
2. For additional treatments of these miners' narratives, see Lucas (organizational justice) and Lucas and Buzzanell (blue-collar meanings of work).

3. Jack Stone is a pseudonym to protect the identity of the superintendent. All other names are real and used with the miners' written permission. Furthermore, eleven of the thirteen participants permitted donation of their interview tapes and transcripts to the Central Upper Peninsula and Northern Michigan University Archives for preservation.

4. In June 1895, 1,300 miners from the Marquette Range went on strike for improved safety conditions, better wages, and union recognition (LaFond). By September, as winter was drawing near, the company needed the miners back to work. If the ore did not get shipped before the close of the shipping season, the company would not be able to generate any revenue until the following spring. In desperation, the company resorted to "freezing out" the miners. Company representatives demanded that local merchants stop issuing credit to miners and took horses to company houses to stomp out gardens miners had planted to help feed their families through the strike period. These tactics left miners without the ability to provide for the most basic needs of themselves and their families. Immediately following the destruction, miners voted to return to work without a union. The term "freeze them back to work" stuck.

WORKS CITED


