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It’s the cheese:
Collective memory of hard times during deindustrialization

Kristen Lucas and Patrice M. Buzzanell

Unquestionably, food and the way we communicate about it are important markers of identity. Like other chapters in this volume that illuminate connections to cultural, social, and gendered identities, food also is inherently linked to social class. Dougherty, Dixon, and Chou (2009) explain that people from different social classes have distinct relationships with food. From the security and taken-for-grantedness of food in middle and upper classes to the insecurity of food in lower socioeconomic classes, people’s relationships to food structure everyday practices and discourses. Particularly for working class people (because “food on the table” is not always a taken-for-granted assumption), food is a highly salient issue that affects a number of behaviors, including not only how they talk about food but also how they prepare meals (Calnan, 1990) and make risk-benefit assessments in occupational settings (Lucas, 2007). In this chapter, we focus our attention on a context in which temporary economic upheaval highlights the importance of food in understanding the material complexities of social class and financial insecurity.

In the current global recession, researchers and popular media have traced economic indicators such as unemployment figures and consumer indices. They have also followed how people have been dealing with massive and long-term job loss, stretched social services, uncertainties about fulfillment of basic needs, and the potential collapse of major industries. For many people reading today’s headlines, this is not a new story. In the early 1980s, the United States’ “Rust Belt”—the manufacturing region that spans from the Northeast to the Upper Midwest—and other industrial centers throughout the world suffered massive
economic downturn and the failure of core industries (Bluestone & Harrison, 1982; Bradley, 2008; Newman, 1999; Wilson, 2004; Worley, 2007). During that period, the United States “deindustrialized,” as the core of its economy shifted from heavy industry (e.g., steel, auto making) to more knowledge and service-based work (e.g., financial investment, real estate; see Bluestone & Harrison, 1982). Although many economic shifts have occurred throughout U.S. history (Cowie, 1999; Hareven & Langenbach, 1978), deindustrialization reached epidemic proportions in the late 1970s and ran rampant throughout the 1980s.

In the wake of deindustrialization, individuals, families, and communities struggled to get by. Layoffs were mounting, blue-collar jobs were being eliminated permanently, homes were being foreclosed, businesses were locking their doors, factories were shutting down their assembly lines, and small towns were all but disappearing as residents left in droves due to lack of gainful employment opportunities. By the early 1980s, Bluestone and Harrison (1982) calculated that between 32 and 38 million people lost jobs as a direct result of deindustrialization. The financial devastation and hard times faced by people living in that period cannot be overstated. Many breadwinners from middle-class working families—especially those who worked in heavy industry—experienced extended periods of unemployment that led to missed mortgage payments, depleted saving accounts, and the need to accept government assistance.

In this study, we take a retrospective observer-participant stance to gain insight into accounts of hard times by individuals who were coming of age during the early 1980s recession. Our communicative lens focuses attention on the content and processes whereby people construct messages, tell stories, rework identities, and talk into being those revised realities that incorporate the consequences of negative life events (Buzzanell, in press; Buzzanell, Shenoy, Remke, & Lucas, 2009; Marin, Bohanek, & Fivush, 2008; Shellenbarger, 2009). While the individuals’ parents recalled particular strategies enabling resilience, such as talk and material practices associated with “tightening one’s belt,” preparing for anticipated hard times by saving money and stocking up, and seeking alternative sources of income (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2010), individuals who were children or adolescents during the 1980s commented on a different event—government giveaways of surplus cheese—and its significance for them. Nearly 30 years later, these kids, who are now mid-life adults, spontaneously and consistently brought up “the cheese” during interviews about life during the 1980 recession. Our research project examines why “the cheese” is so important to them and how it played a central role in this cohort’s collective
memory of hard times in “Irontown,” a small mining community in the Rust Belt.

To begin this chapter, we provide the historical context for this study by describing Irontown and how it was affected by the 1980s recession. Next, we describe the authors’ positionality in this study. From there, we bring in the newspaper accounts of a community-wide cheese distribution and personal accounts of individuals who grew up in Irontown during the 1980s and whose parents were employed or, more often, laid-off by Irontown Mining Inc. (IMI) during that recession. Finally, we explain how their story of the cheese serves as the centerpiece for their collective memory and why collective memory offers a different, but significant, theoretical lens for organizational communication scholars interested in human resilience during detrimental organizing and economic processes (Lutgen-Sandvik & Sypher, 2009).

Hard Times in Irontown

Irontown is a small, remote town (pop. 12,000) located in the upper Midwestern United States. Its heritage and identity are steeped in the iron ore mining industry. Its streets, businesses, community organizations, and physical environment bear outward signs of this heritage. Cars and pickup trucks drive daily along streets named after ores, mines, and prospectors. The businesses, schools, and community organizations along those streets carry similar names. The most prominent and recognizable images along the horizon are numerous mining shaft houses, tall housing structures that sit above old mine shafts. Almost all past and present residents of the community have had a parent and/or grandparents who have been employed by IMI.

The mid- to late-1970s was a major boom period for the mines in Irontown. Employment figures steadily rose from 2,400 hourly employees in 1972 to 3,600 in 1978. IMI even had a trailer set up in its main office parking lot to handle the surge of applicants. In addition, more than 1,800 construction workers, many of them from out of the area, found work at two major expansion projects at mines (“IMI operations undergo,” 1979). However, this boom period, typical of the “resource roller coaster” experience of mining towns (Wilson, 2004), did not last. The once vibrant mining industry faced waves of severe and progressive deindustrialization, not the least of which was the 1980s recession.

By May 1980, the top headline of the local daily newspaper read what people had known and lived for more than a year: “Recession here, U.S. admits” (1980). In addition to consumer woes (e.g., steep inflation, skyrocketing
interest rates), heavy industry took heavy hits. With the surge in gas prices, U.S.-
manufactured gas-guzzling vehicles sat in sales lots while smaller, more fuel-
efficient Japanese imports sold. The downturn in the auto making industry was
felt by the steel industry, whose outdated equipment could no longer keep up
with foreign competitors. This downturn eventually reached the mining
industry, whose product was no longer needed to fill the orders for steel mills.
Within a month of the official announcement of the recession, it became clear
how hard the United States iron ore industry would be hit. Of the 13,900
people who were employed by this industry in manual labor positions in 1977,
only 7,000 remained by 1982 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1979; 1985). The number of
operating companies and mine properties also decreased by more than one-
third.

When demand for iron ore came to a near halt because of mounting
troubles in the partner industries of auto making and steel, Irontown’s mining
properties were idled. Some properties were put on partial production
schedules, while other mines closed permanently. IMI’s number of hourly
workers dropped to 2,600 in 1980 and 1,600 in 1981. The overall employment
figures hid the day-to-day struggles faced by miners and their families, including
temporary layoffs for seasoned employees. By mid-1982, nearly one-third of the
reduced workforce was laid off. The jobless rate in the county ranged from a
low of 14.3%, to a high of 29.7% for the year (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2006;
Lucas, 2006). These shutdowns and slowdowns resulted in dramatic financial
hardship in the local community. Thousands of idled miners in the community
bided their time while nervously waiting to be called back to work. They stood
in line at makeshift unemployment offices that were established to meet the
overwhelming demand for social services. They filled out eligibility cards for
government food stamps and union-distributed relief boxes.

The costs of these economic downturns were more than monetary. In its
1981 annual report, the state’s Public Health Department linked several health
problems to economic hardship (“Economy implicated,” 1982). First, an
unknown number of families lost medical coverage due to layoffs, which
resulted in many people postponing (or not seeking) needed medical care.
Second, suicide became the tenth leading cause of death in the state by 1980.
Third, drug and alcohol abuse increased. Admissions to drug and alcohol abuse
programs increased by 12% during the 1979–1980 fiscal year and more than
half of these patients were unemployed.

While the above account of the deindustrialization era of 30 years ago may
appear to be simply an historical overview, we note that the characteristics of
the economic downturn in the 1980s closely mirror the current global recession: widespread unemployment, plant closings, industries teetering on the brink of bankruptcy, entire families without income except for unemployment funds or payment for pick-up jobs, housing industry slumps and foreclosures. As such, this chapter is more than just a history lesson. The insights gained about how people have retrospectively found meaning in similar set of circumstances may be able to shed light on how families and communities can best make sense of the current recession.

By examining the discourse of a generation growing up in Irontown during the 1980s recession, we delve into the collective memory construction—not of a particular commemorative monument or site, as often is examined in collective memory studies (e.g., Ehrenhaus, 2009; Zelizer, 1985)—but of an event etched into and evocative of generational identities, thinking, feelings, and understandings about hard times. As Zelizer (1985) notes, it is through collective memory that people connect the past with the present, their inner thoughts with the external environment, and their individual selves with a particular collective. The group shapes and is shaped by memory; the group reconstructs the past to say something that resonates with the present. The significance of the memory is in its connections of material and symbolic, its impact on how people value certain events, and its place in “stake[ing] out a claim on how we should (or should not) stand in relationship to that past” (Ehrenhaus, 2009, p. 234).

**Author Positionality**

I (Kristen) was born and raised in Irontown. My grandfathers made life-long careers of mining. My older grandfather was retired by the time of my earliest memories. However, my younger grandfather worked swing shift in the mines until I was 20 years old. It was he who was my window to that occupation. Strangely, what I remember most about my grandfather being a miner is tied up in memories of my grandmother. It seemed that every time I visited (which was usually a few times a week), she was packing his lunch pail. Sometimes it was in the morning, but more often than not it was in the afternoon or late evening for his shifts that rotated between 8 a.m., 4 p.m., and midnight starts. I can still hear the clacking sound of his metal lunch bucket and picture its typical contents: three sandwiches, a piece of fruit, a plastic-wrapped Hostess™ cupcake of some sort, and a full thermos of coffee sweetened with cream and sugar. During the times when he was out of work and there was no lunch pail to pack, he brought home relief boxes filled with nonperishable food items. I can still see, from my
vantage spot perched on the counter in their tiny kitchen, my grandmother quickly unpacking and putting away the food in the cupboards. Logically I know that there were a variety of items, but somehow the only thing I can remember with any clarity is the cheese.

Maybe it is because the bright yellow-orange color stood in such sharp contrast to the plain box. Maybe it is because it was the only item that went into the refrigerator instead of the cupboard. Maybe it was because the cheese was a much bigger conversation starter than the other items. Several of the adults condemned it, groaning “Oh no, not government cheese.” Another, who regularly received cheese through state welfare rolls, defended it, saying “Hey, that’s good stuff!” My own memory of one particular day is that my grandparents—who were empty nesters by this point—made grilled cheese sandwiches for the large group of extended family and friends who regularly gathered around their kitchen table on weekends to drink coffee, smoke cigarettes, and converse for hours on end about everything and nothing at all.

I grew up in Irontown, had family who worked in the mines, and ate the cheese. Experiences such as these make me an insider. But for other reasons, I am more of an outsider. Although both of my grandfathers had life-long careers in the mines, my father never worked in one. Instead, he had had steady employment in the maximum security prison about 20 miles down the road. His career provided a modest and, most importantly, stable lifestyle. My family was never subjected to the financial volatility brought on by the layoffs, strikes, and seasonal slowdowns that plagued mining families in Irontown. When my peers’ parents were collecting unemployment checks, leaving town to seek temporary hold-over money-making opportunities, and worrying about making their next mortgage payment, my life went along relatively uninterrupted. I knew even as a preteen that my experiences during the recession were markedly different from most of my classmates’ experiences. Therefore, because of my positionality as outsider-insider, I take a stance of observer-participant, one who observes more than she participates, one who is more familiar than fully knowing, and one who listens more than she speaks in the telling of this story.

I (Patrice) didn’t grow up with government cheese. But I had family members who did. My dad had working class roots, having worked as a steelworker before pursuing an executive career in the federal government. His father was a railroad engineer. Many of my cousins, aunts, and uncles remain connected to the steel industry, unions, and blue-collar work. Although I never experienced deindustrialization in the same way as the kids who grew up in Irontown, I did gain understanding of the hardship associated with
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deindustrialization through my own vantage point. I was aware of economic and lifestyle differences between my immediate and extended family. I recognized the gratitude my father had in his ability to help his parents and his many siblings and their families during hard times. I was cognizant that we were fortunate to have economic stability whereas others did not. Because I was never a recipient of government cheese, nor do I have any personal ties to Irontown, I am largely an outsider. However, my extended family ties, which allowed me a glimpse into the need for government cheese and other assistance during hard times, make me empathetic to the situation. Therefore, my positionality is that of an empathetic outsider: one who stands back and provides a perspective that is not swayed by personal recollections, yet one who remains committed to the story of the cheese and sensitive to the lived experiences of the people who tell it.

The Story of the Cheese

In the summer of 1982, the United States government opened its storehouse of food surpluses to distribute blocks of yellow cheese to millions of citizens hard hit by deindustrialization. The cheese giveaway government program was signed into effect by President Ronald Reagan to the tune of 30 million pounds because, as Reagan noted, “At a time when American families are under increasing financial pressure, their Government cannot sit by and watch millions of pounds of food turn to waste” (“A mess however,” 1982, para. 1).

The five-pound blocks of “American cheese,” a processed cheese with a texture and flavor that lay between cheddar and Velveeta™, had been stored for upwards of 18 months in government warehouses and had “USDA” (United States Department of Agriculture) stamped on the outside of its plain cardboard box. The surplus cheese was acquired as a result of government purchases to subsidize American dairy farmers and maintain productivity and prices. Cheese and other food items regularly were given to families on welfare through charitable organizations. Reagan’s move lifted the restriction that limited cheese distribution to permanently displaced workers and families below the poverty line. The cheese’s association with socioeconomic status provoked mixed recollections during fairly recent blogs and chatroom postings (Democratic Underground, 2005; Roadfood.com, 2004). While some comments in online forums indicate that young recipients whose families were enrolled in welfare programs for long periods of time expressed gratitude and fondness for the cheese, others resented the receipt of old cheese and its part in signaling their families’ poverty to others.
Irontown and surrounding communities received surplus cheese as part of a federal relief program for blue-collar workers and their families who were displaced due to the recession. The first cheese distributions were in California, Nevada, and Texas. Irontown miners and their families received their cheese in August 1982. During the peak of IMI layoffs in August 1982, the local newspaper ran a front-page story that announced that a joint effort of the mine union and the county would make 30,000 pounds of cheese available for distribution to temporarily laid-off iron ore workers (“Surplus cheese giveaway,” 1982). The assistant director of the county office said, “We feel that with the economy the way it is now and with so many people unemployed in our area that the cheese will be greatly appreciated by those eligible to receive it” (“Surplus cheese giveaway,” 1982, p. 1A).

Indeed, the cheese was big news in the region. One week after the announcement, the local union ran a large advertisement and a full distribution schedule. It boldly announced, “STEELWORKERS! SURPLUS CHEESE AVAILABLE” (United Steelworkers, 1982). Droves of unemployed miners lined up at the Union Hall and other distribution points throughout the county to pick up blocks of cheese encased in plain brown cardboard boxes (“Cheese giveaway,” 1982). As inconspicuous as its wrapper was, the cheese left a lasting and vivid impression on the children and adolescents who ate it on their grilled cheese sandwiches and in macaroni and cheese casseroles.

**Collective Memories of the Cheese**

This chapter emerged from a larger study about family-based socialization messages in working class families. A total of 62 interviews were conducted with families from a blue-collar mining town: a cohort of 23 men and women who were between 8 and 17 years old during the 1980s recession, 20 fathers (who worked in the mines), and 16 mothers. The interview protocol included two questions that specifically queried people’s recollections of the economic downturn in the 1980s. The first asked what they remembered about that period and the second asked if and/or how they talked about it with their family. However, talk about this period surfaced throughout the entirety of the interviews and was not limited to responses to these two questions. The interviews resulted in more than 60 hours of talk and 1,000 pages of single-spaced transcriptions. These data were supplemented by analyses of community and company documents available from the local labor archives, the *Irontown Daily News* (a pseudonym), a local mining museum, and IMI’s administrative office.
For the cohort of “kids,” who were in their 30s and early 40s at the time of the interviews, the food was a central element of their discourse. They brought up the work in which their parents and extended family members engaged to put “food on the table,” shared memories of purchasing groceries with food stamps, and described changes to family meals during layoffs. Approximately half spoke specifically and at length about government cheese. Because no specific questions about food or government cheese were part of the interview protocol, their spontaneous talk indicates the relevance of food for participants in making sense of hard times.

Their recollections of the cheese are deemed collective memories because of the consistency of the memory structures, the focus on a particular contested site (i.e., the cheese itself and its meaning), and the ways in which recall of cheese—whether factual or not—arose unannounced in interviews. The recollections sealed one’s identity as an insider in a community bounded not by geographic location but by working class values and promise (Lucas, 2009). Through a thematic approach (see Owen, 1984) oriented toward a particular entity (cheese) and grounded within and across entire interviews and archival documents, two primary interpretations of the cheese as collective memory emerged: (a) cheese as symbol of daily struggle; and (b) cheese as symbol of camaraderie.

Cheese as Symbol of Daily Struggle

More than a third of the younger cohort of participants explicitly talked about the cheese when recalling what it meant for them to have their fathers work at the mines or live through the layoffs of the 1980s. It was a shorthand marker that indicated the daily struggle associated with making ends meet during hard times. For example, within the first few minutes of her interview, Tracy (all names are pseudonyms) alluded several times to the depressed economic conditions of Irontown. For her, her father’s job and her childhood were characterized by the volatility of the mines. When asked what she remembered about the layoffs of the 1980s, she said:

I lived it. I was there. I was aware. I think a part of it is too that I am the oldest of five. I mean, I was only 9 years old in 1981. But I mean, it’s government cheese, you know? And then when the government cheese was gone, my brothers would use the boxes for their baseball cards. So just, I remember the food of that type and, you know, my Mom or Dad going to pick it up. And my Dad being gone for a certain amount of time and not seeing him when he was at other places. And just, you know, I guess maybe the uncertainties and the worries.
Lisa used the cheese as a comparison point between the good times and bad times of her father's career. She remarked:

Well, it was kind of funny because it was either feast or famine, you know. When I was growing up in the '70s and '80s, my dad was laid off a lot. So when the times were good, they were really good. But when they were bad, we were eating government cheese.

Kim also noted the connection between the cheese and financial hardship.

I remember my friends having to move away because of the layoffs. And I remember getting the free cheese. [laugh] That was good cheese. We talked about that the other day. But I do remember lots of people having to leave. And you're wondering if they're ever going to come back. But yeah, I remember it was very. . . . Lots of people not knowing where they were going to be. Or lots of people having to leave.

Other individuals talked about the cheese in less direct ways. Several people discussed the need relief packages or food stamps along with the way that meals changed at home. When talking about tough financial times, Frank said,

Macaroni and cheese was used a lot more. [laugh] and the funny thing when you say that, believe it or not, you can tell our economy based on the sale of macaroni and cheese. But just hard times, guys looking for jobs, sweating it out.

Matthew echoed some of Frank's sentiment that the quality of meals declined:

Oh yeah, IMI, yeah. There was layoffs, strikes, all that stuff. Yeah, the beef roast went to half size, the pot of potatoes went to twice the size, and there was lots of gravy. Yeah, when things were tight, it was tight.

For these individuals, the government cheese was embedded within webs of stories marking changes in their lives: their fathers going out of town to find work and returning home only on weekends or for a few days once a month, standing in line at unemployment offices, the worry associated with overhearing their parents talking of financial matters, friends and family members moving away permanently, and, especially for the older members of the cohort, concern about their own future career prospects.

Through their memories of uncertainties and changes in family rhythms, the cheese offered a site for emotional reconstruction and a point of departure.
For the children of deindustrialization, it is the cheese that captures collective memory: a symbol of an era and a people.

**Cheese as a Symbol of Camaraderie**

Although the cheese distribution occurred precisely because of financial hardship, a situation that certainly was not pleasant, participants became very animated when they talked about it. Many of them laughed about how much they enjoyed eating the cheese and said that they still reminisce about it with friends. Their seemingly counterintuitive positive response raises the question as to why they recollect this event so fondly. The answer is in that the cheese was not solely a marker of hard times. It also was a stability point for communal identity and camaraderie among family, friends, and neighbors who were in the same precarious position.

Eric discussed the fact that “everyone was getting Reagan cheese” and was receiving other forms of assistance. For Eric, then, there was no shame because, in his world, everyone was in the same situation. He accepted the cheese in the same way he accepted blue lunch tickets:

> Yeah. I remember like, well, everyone was getting Reagan cheese. And we all had the blue-colored lunch tickets. Those were like the people who didn’t have a lot of money. But it really didn’t faze me too much back then because, like I said, all your friends’ dad worked at the mine, you know, 90 percent of them, so it’s not like you were some... If, like calling yourself a destitute, we all were. Because none of our parents were working at the time, you know.

Interviewer: So you weren’t the only kid with a blue lunch ticket?

Far from it. I mean we were all, everyone knew everybody else was broke, basically. The group I hung around with, it wasn’t that big of a deal.

For Eric, the cheese and lunch tickets signaled membership in a community for which government assistance and free lunch were pragmatic options. Similarly, David stated that “everyone” received surplus cheese. David remembered the distribution of surplus cheese as happening more than once and as being the impetus for people getting together at the Union Hall:

> They used to go on strike every three or four years. And we had to get, you know, the government cheese and the government peanut butter. So we’d be living on food stamps and stuff for two, three months, waiting for them to settle the contract.
Interviewer: Did you and your parents ever talk about layoffs and strikes when they were going on?

No, not really. You know, we just knew they were on strike because we had to go. It was like a fact of life, you know. Every few years, you had to go down to the Union Hall and pick up your basket of government cheese and food stamps and all that fun stuff. So you knew there was a strike. But I mean, it wasn’t like it was just one family. You knew it because like everyone in the whole area, of course, was employed that way. So it was pretty common.

Interviewer: The Union Hall was probably the most happening place in town.

Oh, it sure was. You’d see everybody. [laugh]

The conversation surrounding the distribution of food boxes was not limited only to the Union Hall. It also was a topic of conversation within the schools. For Rachel, getting government cheese and free boxes of groceries was a sign of fitting in:

I can remember, I was a senior in high school, and my dad was on strike. And I think it was once a week or twice a week, or every other week, we got a box of food from the Union. And that was the big conversation in our classes. “What did you get in your begging box?” Well we got this, this, and this. And then you got some classmates whose parents didn’t work at the mine were saying how they wished their parents did so they could be involved in these conversations. But it was just a way of life for everybody, for most everybody up here. It was just, I don’t know, normal.

Rachel’s mother (in a separate interview) also recalled school-based talk about food boxes:

I didn’t realize until years later, like when you were on strike and you’d get those food boxes that the kids in school would go to school and compare. And they called them begging boxes. And you know, because sometimes there’d be Girl Scout cookies in them or sometimes there’d be different kinds of cereal. And after the begging boxes came, the kids would go to school, “What did you get in your box?” I mean, it was a thing for these kids. They made it kind of funny. Yeah, it’s cool.

The camaraderie that Eric, David, and Rachel recall is imbued with emotion, friendliness, and commonalities in life experience fine-tuned by in-group solidarity. Further, these memories also are whitewashed of the ugliness, fear, and raw emotion found in job loss literature by individuals who lose their jobs and by their family members (Buzzanell & Turner, 2003; Gunn, 2008). In
blue-collar industries, job loss is often faced by entire communities, and does not have the selective nature or isolation of grey- and white-collar sector job loss (Ehrenreich, 2005; Newman, 1999). Knowing that there are other people in the same dire straits can be a source of comfort while locating and transitioning to new employment and new residences.

**Collective Memory and Symbolic Value of Food**

In explaining the importance of "the cheese," we draw upon two bodies of literature: the linkage of memorable moments with collective memories, and the symbolic value of food. Memorable message or moments focus on individual recollections about past events that carry import and may even mark turning points for work and/or family relationships and career development. While they often occur in the context of organizational (Bullis & Bach, 1989; Dallimore, 2003; Lucas, in press) or family socialization (Marin et al., 2008; Medved, Brogan, McClanahan, Morris, & Shepherd, 2006), memorable moments also can occur as a result of critical media accounts of specific events (Greenberg, 1988).

Although originally considered to consist of direct socialization prescriptions, the concept of memorable messages has been enlarged to consider ambient (implicit and indirect) socialization that might result from observing others or through personal experiences (Dallimore, 2003; Lucas, in press). Memorable messages are remembered for a long period of time, are perceived as influential in the message recipients’ lives, and often occur early in people’s lives or work experiences. These messages may be single but life-altering statements or may be oft-repeated family sayings, stories, or mantras. The influences of memorable messages and, by extension, collective memory both assist in sensemaking and in socializing individuals about important life realms or processes (Knapp, Stohl & Reardon, 1981; Stohl, 1986).

In this study, the cheese was recalled spontaneously and easily amidst layers of hardships and personal recollections of that time, marking its vivid memorability for this cohort. Archival research sheds some light as to possible reasons why. The original cheese distribution schedule was published in the *Irontown Daily News* on August 25, 1982 (United Steelworkers). The very next day, IMI announced that workers would be recalled to work over the next few months (Owens, 1982). It is possible that some of the warm affect that people conjure up when talking about the cheese is that by the time the first slices were cut from the block and grilled between pieces of Bunny™ bread, their families’ spirits had been boosted with the good news that they would soon be returning.
to work. So the cheese is tied to a low point, but also to a turning point when things became markedly better. It symbolized good after a long stretch of hardship.

Surprisingly, archival research also revealed that the cheese distribution to families was a one-time occurrence during the 1980s IMI layoffs. Granted, some families in the community who were on welfare rolls received surplus cheese regularly. Additionally, union-provided food boxes were a mainstay during strikes and layoffs. However, there was only one box that included “government cheese.” Yet, in the case of the cheese, the memories of cheese distribution were so common and vivid among participants that their discourses made it seem as though the cheese distribution happened frequently.

Characteristics of memorable messages on an individual level are consistent with those of collective memory. In both, the memories need not be factual, but may be absorbed into individual or collective consciousness through repeated tellings and importance of the “memory” to the individual, family, or community (Neath & Surprenant, 2003; Zelizer, 1985). Therefore, what is important about the collective memory of the cheese is not its verifiable truth, but instead “why one construction has more staying power than its rivals” (Zelizer, 1985, p. 217).

Although we noted that it might be the co-occurrence of cheese distribution with uncertainty (negative economic times) and hope (call for return to work the next day), we also believe that the collective memory of cheese distribution as mostly positive suggests ideological work. Parents attempted to shield their children. They did this through focusing on family talk that foregrounded a realistic, but confident, financial outlook and deemphasized the emotionality of job loss (Lucas & Buzzanell, 2010). For example, one mother prepared her children by telling them, “We’ll cut back on many things. There won’t be as much luxury. There won’t be as much ice cream and pop and that kind of stuff. We’ll have mainly meals. But there won’t be any luxuries.”

This kind of talk, combined with financial stretching, stocking up, and location of other income and resources enabled working class families to engage in ideological control that focused on providing for and protecting their individual families without overtly resisting and embracing departures from class values. The lifelong lessons that one can “make do,” figure out strategies to stretch food budgets and earn money, anticipate the end of strikes, layoffs, and changes in the economy are strategies of resilience that enabled families to bounce back and reintegrate into new realities (Buzzanell, in press; Lucas & Buzzanell, 2010).
With regard to families, communication about the talk during prior economic hard times and strategies used by family members can build self-confidence and hope for getting by, and even ahead, during current difficulties. Much like the research on family stories cited earlier, everyday talk about past family events, values, and traditions can prepare children for the increasing volatility of today’s labor market and recession. Therefore, we do not believe that the mostly positive collective recollections of cheese are accidental.

Moreover, we do not believe that sons’ and daughters’ recall of food—for sustenance, comfort, and warmth in casseroles, soups, or grilled cheese sandwiches—is accidental either. Food has long served to bind communities together in religious or neighborhood celebrations and tragedies and to pass along family, community, and national or ethnic values (e.g., Beoku-Betts, 1995; DeVault, 1995; Meyers, 2001). For instance, DeVault’s (1995) work with dietary food and nutrition practitioners dealt, in part, with how female African American nutritionists were sensitive to different groups’ dietary preferences and vocabulary. Sensitivity to ethnicity (e.g., the inadequacy of grouping Caribbean, Puerto Rican, Cuban, Mexican American, clients’ foods together) enabled these minority women to see how attitudes and beliefs toward food and eating were linked with ethnic backgrounds. The food preserved core parts of themselves and their social identity group. Similarly, Beoku-Betts (1995) described the Gullah community, direct descendants of slaves from West African rice communities, who maintained their African heritage while living on the Sea Islands and on the coastal regions of Georgia and South Carolina in the United States. They preserved their links with their past and with each other through elaborate rice preparation for their main meal, storytelling about traditional ceremonies, making unique handicrafts, and attending religious services. The Gullah organizational system centered around harmony and social exchange influenced by African spiritual beliefs. These beliefs prioritized the whole community by weaving together individual existence and relationships among God, ancestors, other humans (including the unborn), extended family members, and living/nonliving beings. Residents were able to bounce back from hard times and retain community values through their food, its preparation, its consumption, and its accompanying talk of the past and future.

In Irontown, the cheese—ordinary, low cost, yellow American cheese—seems to have symbolized and renewed working class values of community, endurance, plain and wholesome food, ethics of providing and protecting, efforts to “make do” or handle life crises as they occur, and the inventiveness required to survive and even thrive during hard times. As such, the cheese is a
collective memory about the individuals' identification with their community of origin's values, lifestyles, and time-honored traditions. The cheese represents a time of hope and resilience, even as America's Rust Belt has continued to decline and today faces yet another economic crisis (Bradley, 2008).

Conclusion

The cheese is a simple image that encapsulates and represents a variety of complex issues that children of the 1980s deindustrialization were negotiating at the time and are still of concern. First, it symbolizes that parents were out of work and unable to provide for the same lifestyle as they had in the past. The children used the cheese as a type of shorthand to identify that there were significant financial struggles at home without having to describe them in-depth. Second, and perhaps more importantly, it normalized the experience of family job loss for the kids. Rather than feeling like a stigmatized "Other," they felt normal because they were not alone. Moreover, the cheese gained salience as a collective memory because of its original distribution during a turning point between rough financial times and the hopefulness engendered by industry callbacks to work. The cheese also gained prominence because of the fact that it is a food that comforts, gives sustenance, and was part of parents' attempts to shield their children from full recognition of economic hardship. As a result, the cheese serves as the centerpiece for these individuals' collective memory of family and community resilience. They may have moved away from Irontown and out of the working class but they retain a sense of community and an appreciation for working class values. As the cheese became a collective memory for the children of the 1980s deindustrialization, we ask, what will be the collective memory of today's recession for our children?
References


