

## **Can Pronouns Predict Work Intentions? An Empirical Assessment of The Reich Test**

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*In a 1993 op-ed piece in the Washington Post, then-Secretary of Labor Robert Reich proposed that employees reveal their job attitudes through the pronouns they use to describe their organization, specifically suggesting that employees who describe their organization using the pronoun “we” are more engaged and committed, whereas the opposite is true for those who use the pronoun “they.” This study empirically tested Reich’s assumption by studying the relationship between employees’ pronoun use in describing their work experiences and their work intentions. The study finds qualified evidence of a relationship between pronoun use and work intentions, under specific conditions.*

In 1993 during the Clinton Administration, then-Secretary of Labor Robert Reich wrote an op-ed piece in the *Washington Post* in which he described a highly effective informal test that he used when visiting workplaces across the United States (Reich, 1993). Reich asked front-line employees to talk about their work and then listened for specific *personal* pronouns used to describe their company. He suggested that he could tell whether an organization facilitates employee commitment and engagement based simply on whether its employees referred to their company using the pronoun “we” or “us” (high commitment, high engagement) or “they” or “them” (low commitment, low engagement). In his explanation of this, Reich (1993) alluded to personal pronouns being tied to several different research constructs such as organizational climate, high performance work teams, employee engagement, and work intentions. More recently, the “pronoun test” has been described in the popular press as a simple, low-cost indicator of employees’ commitment to their organizations (Pink, 2011).

In the academic tradition, such claims should arouse our suspicions and curiosities. Although we aim to complete research that will impact the workplace, practitioners may be more susceptible to management myths, clichés, and adages than those in the academic ranks who are accustomed to information based on empirical “proof”. For the management practitioner, specifically, the Reich (1993) test has intuitive appeal as an efficient, low-cost means of assessing employees’ beliefs and intentions. On the other hand, the Reich (1993) test has not received systematic research attention, and there may be a risk for practitioners to oversimplify the complex nature of pronouns in an attempt to predict engagement, organizational health, and work intentions. In this study, we empirically explore whether or not there is a relationship between the personal pronouns employees use in describing their work experiences and their work intentions.

## FRAMEWORK AND LITERATURE REVIEW FOR STUDY CONCEPTS

Job attitudes and their effects on employee outcomes have received renewed attention in recent years (e.g., Freaney & Tiernan, 2009; Van Rooy, Whitman, Hart & Caleo, 2011). In particular, researchers have focused on attitudes (e.g., Bakker, Albrecht, & Leiter, 2011), motives (e.g., Grant, 2008), and work intentions (e.g., Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006). This study rests upon the attitude-intention-behavior chain research established by researchers such as Azjen and Fishbein (1980), and Eagly and Chaiken (1993). This study sets out to examine important attitude and intentional aspects of work behavior based upon appraisal theory's strong theoretical and empirical scholarship that has demonstrated the connections between attitude, intention, and behavior (e.g., Webb & Sheeran, 2006).

### Appraisal Theory

A short explanation of appraisal theory is presented to help the reader frame the study's two main variables, namely pronouns and work intentions. Appraisal theory holds that individuals are constantly making evaluations (appraisals) of their life and job experiences. All individuals use latent appraisal processing in order to understand the meaning of their (work) experience and possibly shape the future of their actions (Lazarus, 1991). The appraisal process centers on two questions: "How does the situation affect me personally?" and "What, if anything, can be done to change or enhance my sense of well-being?" (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). In the first step, individuals develop a logical and emotional sense of well-being (or a lack of well-being) from their immediate experience. In the second step, individuals seek to develop appropriate coping strategies (intentions), based on their sense of well-being or lack thereof (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984).

When processing work experiences, individuals begin by forming descriptive mental pictures, or schemas, of "what is" and then reaching logical (e.g., rational) conclusions and affective (e.g., emotional) inferences about the meaning of the experience (Parkinson, 1997, 2007). Cognitive and affective evaluative schema (i.e., mental descriptions and judgments) occur simultaneously, in a reciprocal relationship (Fugate, Harrison, & Kinicki, 2011). In other words, individuals reach rational conclusions and decisions concerning the meaning of their work experience and how they feel about the experience (Zigarmi, Nimon, Houson, Witt, & Diehl, 2009, 2011).

By drawing on the appraisal theory we aim to integrate a theoretical framework for the two variables measured in this study. Personal pronouns, which may be singular i.e., "I," "me," or plural "us" and "they," are manifestations of the unconscious and evaluative cognitions employees may have reached, and the expressed work intentions may be the result of those cognitions.

### Appraisal Cognitions and Pronouns

Reich's (1993) suggestion that the personal pronouns used to describe a company may reveal the degree of employee work engagement and organizational commitment is consistent with research on the psychology of function words in natural language (Pennebaker, Mehl, & Niederhoffer, 2003). Pronouns, which include not only personal pronouns but several other categorical pronouns such as demonstrative, possessive, and reflexive, are examples of function words i.e. "junk words" that individuals use, largely unconsciously, to connect content words in speech and writing (Ireland, Slatcher, Eastwick, Scissors, Finkel, & Pennebaker, 2011). Because they are used so frequently, function words can reveal important information about individuals' underlying cognitions and attitudes in relation to their social environment (Chung & Pennebaker, 2007). Pronouns, in particular, are useful indicators of perceived psychological distance between individuals and other people, entities, events, or actions (Pennebaker, 2011). For instance, individuals who are lying subtly distance themselves from their stories by using the pronoun "I" less frequently than individuals who are telling the truth (Newman, Groom, Handelman, & Pennebaker, 2003). Similarly, the use of first-person pronouns on Internet blogs dropped significantly in the first 24 hours following the September 11, 2001 attacks as individuals emotionally distanced themselves from the traumatic event (Cohen, Mehl, Pennebaker, 2004). It is possible, then, that employees' pronoun use may convey the psychological distance they perceive between themselves and their employer.

A growing body of research supports the role of systematic analysis of specific words and word categories (i.e., linguistic cues), through the use of text analysis software (e.g., Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC), Scientific Content Analysis (SCAN), in predicting individuals' cognitions and relations with, or, toward others (Olekalns, Brett, & Donohue, 2010). For instance, linguistic cues have been used to detect deception in computer-mediated communication (Fuller, Biros, & Wilson, 2009), including online dating profiles (Toma & Hancock, 2012). Researchers have also found evidence of linguistic markers of deceptive behavior in ultimatum games, which they label the "Pinocchio effect" (Van Swol et al., 2012). The linguistic cues used by participants have also been used to predict outcomes in negotiations (Taylor and Thomas, 2008), settlements in divorce mediations (Olekalns et al., 2010), and online disputes (Brett et al., 2007).

One category of linguistic cues in natural language that has received a great deal of attention is pronouns (Pennebaker, 2011). Pronouns are useful because they convey information, often beyond conscious awareness, about individual cognitions, both toward oneself and in relation to others. For instance, individuals high in the Big Five personality trait Neuroticism will use first-person pronouns heavily, reflecting a high degree of self-involvement (Pennebaker et al., 2003). Individuals who are depressed or contemplating suicide have been found to use a higher proportion of first-person *singular* pronouns (I, me, mine, my, etc.), but not more words associated with death or morbidity (Stirman & Pennebaker, 2001). Pronoun use is also a robust predictor of the relative status of participants in a conversation, as lower-status participants tend to use first-person pronouns more frequently (Pennebaker, 2011). Patterns of pronoun use have been researched in health care settings in order to study team affiliation with the purpose of providing better team-based health services. Kvarnstrom and Cedersund (2006) found the pronoun "we" to be consistently used in a variety of ways in the health care environment. Most notably, it was used to demonstrate affiliation with the profession as well as the work team. Among sports fans, Cialdini *et al.*, (1976) found that fans more frequently used the pronoun "we" in times of victory than defeat. In both studies, the researchers found pronouns to function as "powerful markers of affiliation" (Chung & Pennebaker, 2007).

### **Attitudes, Cognitions, and Work Intentions**

According to Eagly and Chaiken, an attitude is a result of an individual's favorable or unfavorable evaluation of something (1993), resulting in a judgmental state that intervenes between certain perceptions of experience and various responses that are possible. This judgment, or valuation, is a critical aspect of the appraisal process, and by impugning some degree of goodness or badness to a particular entity or experience, attitudes shape/influence intentions.

Work intentions flow from the second question of the appraisal process "What, if anything, can be done to change or enhance my sense of well-being?" The second step results in the individual choosing among alternative outcomes and courses of action that will eventually shape their future (Lazarus, 1991). Work intentions are formed to solve realized problems or attain derived needs and wants stemming from a positive or negative sense of well-being (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Work intentions are mental pictures of the behavior an employee plans to manifest (Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980).

In keeping with the appraisal literature and demonstrated in the following pages, we have put our study emphasis on the relationship between a semantic analysis of an employee's behavioral use of pronouns and the resultant intentions. Because the relationship between intentions and actual behaviors has been firmly demonstrated in several meta-analyses (e.g., Webb and Sheeran, 2006), we have chosen to examine the relationship between pronouns and intentions. Over several decades, research demonstrates that intentions are reliable predictors of behavior (e.g., Ajzen & Fishbein, 1980). These findings are widespread in both the social and health psychology literature (e.g., Webb & Sheeran, 2006).

Five work intentions (intent to endorse, remain, perform, be an organizational citizen, and use discretionary effort) have frequently been used in the psychology and organizational literature. These five intentions have been found to correlate with various dependent variables such as attrition (e.g., Tett & Meyer, 1993), organizational citizenship behaviors (e.g., Organ & Ryan, 1995), performance intentions

(e.g., Gollwitzer & Sheeran, 2006), discretionary effort and work/life balance (e.g., Dubinsky & Skinner, 2002), and endorsing one's organization and loyal boosterism (e.g., Andersson & Bateman, 1997).

In an attempt to examine the relationship between pronoun use and its effect on work intentions, we believe that a psychological appraisal model provides a strong theoretical framework in which to study the relationship between pronoun use and work intentions. Along with other researchers (Tett & Meyer, 1993), we consider work intentions to be better indicators of the likelihood of behavior and performance than other popular outcomes such as job satisfaction, job involvement measures, and organizational commitment.

HYPOTHESIS 1: There will be a significant positive relationship between the use of the pronoun "we" and work intention scores.

### **Pronouns and Context**

Reich (1993) provides a simple, yet limited, explanation of the role the pronoun actually plays in his assessment formula. He does, however, clearly delineate between "we" and "they" as even a "they" statement that is seemingly pro-organization ("they aim for high quality" still "suggests a workplace that hasn't yet made the leap into true high performance" (¶2). We question this either-or pronoun perspective, and propose that the greater context of the sentence the pronoun exists within, among other things like age (Pennebaker & Stone, 2003), gender (Pennebaker, 2011), emotional health (Pennebaker & Lay, 2002), may be of equal or potentially more importance than the pronoun itself.

Reich (1993) implied that all "we" statements are superior to contextually positive "they" statements. However, not all "we" statements appear to be created equal as words can reflect thoughts and feelings in unpredictable ways (Chung & Pennebaker, 2007). For example, we would argue that "we are trusted and empowered here" is different in context (more positive in nature) and meaning than "we do not feel valued, we feel expendable," and "my director doesn't care; we are just support for the real money makers" (the latter two quotes are verbatim examples of participant responses in this study).

Context, as a construct, varies slightly between disciplines. In organizational research, Johns (2006) advocates the importance of exploring and understanding context as part of better understanding organizational and work behavior phenomena. Whereas, in terms of discourse processes and analysis, context refers to the "underlying meaning of words" (Newman et al., 2008). Despite the differences in disciplines, the concept of context appears to be central in attempting to accurately evaluate or understand the nature of the relationships among several factors. With respect to the Reich (1993) test, it seems reasonable to consider the greater sentence's context if we are going to attempt to associate a linguistic cue with a work attitude or behavior.

Although there is support for the idea that pronouns may provide a window into the beliefs and intentions of individuals in the workplace, it is important to recognize the complexity of speech and word use as we consider the utility and fit of Reich's (1993) pronoun test. Drawing on work in sociolinguistics (e.g., Gumperz, 1982), speech style is subject to numerous factors. Speakers are "creative" in their how they use language as they are "active agents" as opposed to "passive rule followers" (Erickson, 2011). This reinforces the belief that statements may be loaded with contextual information, which may lead to gaps in the communication exchange process. Therefore, if we are going to attempt to interpret and generalize words and reduce them to linguistic cues to predict a person's level of engagement, or in this case a reflection of one's work intentions, then we need to consider not only the word's conventional meaning, but also the various *other*, less conventional, meanings (Ariel, 2004).

HYPOTHESIS 2: Employees who use the contextually positive pronoun "we+" will demonstrate significantly higher work intention scores than those who use contextually negative pronoun "we-"

HYPOTHESIS 3: Employees who use the contextually positive pronoun “we+” will demonstrate significantly higher work intention scores than those who use contextually positive pronoun “they+.”

HYPOTHESIS 4: Employees who use the contextually negative pronoun “we-” will demonstrate significantly higher work intention scores than those who use contextually negative pronoun “they+.”

Despite the growing body of research linking pronoun use in natural language to individuals’ cognitions, researchers have not explored Reich’s (1993) prediction that the pronouns employees use in describing their organizations can reveal their job attitudes or work behaviors.

## METHOD

### Participants

A listserv was used to invite business professionals to participate in the study via a Web-based link. 555 respondents completed the entire survey while meeting the criteria of using pronouns (independent variable) in the qualitative question section; 69% of respondents were female, 64% had supervisory responsibilities, 74% conducted business within the United States, and over 41% had been with their current company 8 or more years.

The responses were prepared for analysis utilizing the Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count (LIWC) software (see Pennebaker *et al.*, 2007 for all development and psychometric properties). Because we were examining the pronouns participants used in response to the open ended question *What has the organization done well to make the work experience good or what could the organization do differently to make the work experience better?*, we utilized the LIWC due to its successful and frequent use in studying the emotional and cognitive aspects of verbal and written speech (Pennebaker *et al.*, 2007). The software operates off of a built in dictionary which captures and organizes words according to overarching concepts and categories. For our specific study, we were most concerned with its personal pronoun dictionary, specifically the first person plural and third person plural groups (see Figure 1).

**FIGURE 1**  
**LIWC2007 OUTPUT VARIABLE INFORMATION**

Category	Abbrev	Examples	Words in category	Validity (judges)	Alpha: Binary/raw
<b>Linguistic Processes</b>					
Word count	<u>we</u>				
Words/sentence	<u>wps</u>				
Dictionary words	<u>dic</u>				
Words>6 letters	<u>sixltr</u>				
Total function words	<u>funct</u>		464		.97/.40
Total pronouns	<u>pronoun</u>	I, them, itself	116		.91/.38
Personal pronouns	<u>ppron</u>	I, them, her	70		.88/.20
1st pers singular	<u>i</u>	I, me, mine	12	.52	.62/.44
1st pers plural	<u>we</u>	We, us, our	12		.66/.47
2nd person	<u>you</u>	You, your, thou	20		.73/.34
3rd pers singular	<u>shehe</u>	She, her, him	17		.75/.52
3rd pers plural	<u>they</u>	They, their, they’d	10		.50/.36
Impersonal pronouns	<u>ipron</u>	It, it’s, those	46		.78/.46

Excerpt from LIWC2007 Output Variable Information Table 1 (Pennebaker et al., 2007, p. 5).  
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The LIWC provided us with two groups for analysis moving forward.

### **Group 1 – A Selection of Personal Pronouns**

Because the Reich test (1993) was specifically concerned with the words “we,” which is a first person plural pronoun, and “they,” which is a third person plural pronoun, we used the LIWC to identify all instances of the first person plural pronouns (lets, let’s, our, ours, ourselves, us, we, we’d, we’ll, we’re, weve, and we’ve) and third person plural pronouns (their, them, themselves, they, theyd, they’d, theyll, they’ll, theyve, and they’ve). This resulted in reducing our initial 555 responses to 267 responses. However, due to the fact that many of the variations of first and third person plural pronouns are outside the scope of Reich’s (1993) argument, we then refined the groups further (Group 2) for additional analysis.

### **Group 2 – “We” and “They” Pronouns**

To more closely test Reich’s assumptions, we manually isolated all instances of “we” and “they” from the group of 267 responses. This resulted in 119 responses. Of the 119, eight were removed from the data set analysis because they used both pronouns “we” and “they” within the same statement, which Reich (1993) didn’t address. This resulted in the Group 2 sample being made up of 53 “we” responses and 58 “they” responses. Our pronoun sample for Group 2 was 111 respondents, 64% female, 61% in supervisory positions, 74% conducted business within the United States, and over 50% had been with their current company 8 or more years.

#### *Contextualizing the Group 2 Pronouns for Data Analysis*

Once the “we” responses were isolated, we manually reviewed the “we” responses for their greater sentence context (positive or negative) and ascribed a valence (+ or -). All interpretations and coding of the pronouns were reviewed by two separate parties. When the valence was in question, the response was removed from the data set. Of the 53 “we” responses, we retained 48 “we” responses with 31 being contextually positive (“we+”) and 17 contextually negative (“we-”).

The “they” responses were scrutinized in the same manner. After removing questionable “they” responses, we arrived at 55 “they”, 29 “they+”, and 26 “they-” responses. In all instances of “we” and “they,” gender, supervisory role, years in position, years with company, location of the company, and age were examined for confounding effects.

### **Procedure**

The participants responded to the 15 item Work Intention Inventory (WII-SF) scale, followed by being prompted to answer the open-ended question concerning their work experience. The open-ended question was field tested in a lab environment against several different scales to determine reliability, prior to the selection of the WII-SF. The other scales considered included the Utrecht Work Engagement Scale (UWES-9 Schaufeli, Bakker, & Salanova, 2006) and Becker’s affective commitment scale (1992). The open ended question was crafted in a way to elicit a response from the participants that was specific to the organization in a manner that we felt would mirror Reich’s questioning strategy. This resulted in a written body of text unique to each participant. We chose this approach as written text analysis has been a popular research methodology among researchers (e.g., Cohen et al., 2004; Olekalns et al., 2010; Toma & Hancock, 2012).

Immediately following the responses to the scales and the opened-ended question, the participants completed a demographics section.

## Work Intention Measures

Work intentions were measured by a shortened form of the Work Intention Inventory, WII-SF (Nimon & Zigarmi, 2015). Zigarmi and Nimon (2011) presented the rationale for the importance and conceptual basis for the five work intentions: *intent to remain*, *intent to be an organizational citizen*, *intent to perform*, *intent to use discretionary effort*, and *intent to endorse*. Using two studies, Zigarmi *et al.*, (2012) established the construct validity for their five scales, which assess various forms of employee work intentions. The five scales (three items per scale) were reported to have consistently displayed adequate factorial structure and internal consistency (Zigarmi *et al.*, 2012). Each subscale in the short form (Nimon & Zigarmi, 2015) featured three items per subscale and a 6-point Likert-type response scale, ranging from 1 (*no extent*) to 6 (*to the fullest extent*).

The five subscales of the short form have been found to have acceptable coefficient alphas: intent to stay (e.g., “I intend to continue to work here because I believe it is the best decision for me”), with a coefficient alpha of .91; intent to use organizational citizenship behaviors (e.g., “I intend to respect this organization’s assets”), with a coefficient alpha of .94; intent to perform (e.g., “I intend to exert the energy it takes to do my job well”), with a coefficient alpha of .90; intent to use discretionary effort (e.g., “I intend to spend my discretionary time finding information that will help this company”), with a coefficient alpha of .82; and intent to endorse (e.g., “I intend to speak out to protect the reputation of this organization”), with a coefficient alpha of .93 (Nimon & Zigarmi, 2015).

## RESULTS

The hypotheses have been organized to follow a deductive logic path in ultimately examining the appropriateness of using the pronoun test in the workplace. Despite the writings on pronoun tests as an either-or phenomenon, as reflected in Hypothesis 1, the complexity surrounding intentions and context suggests that while a strict “we” versus “they” analysis is possible, there appears to be more to the pronoun-context-work intention relationship.

The two groups (Group 1 – first and third person plural pronouns; Group 2 – contextual variations of the “we” and “they” pronouns) were subjected to the same analysis techniques (Oneway ANOVAs, Pearson’s Correlations, and Linear Regressions). Only the most germane results are presented. What the study reveals is that there is some concordance among pronoun use and work intentions for both groups, but the following demonstrates that the overly simplistic proposal made by Reich (1993) and Pink (2011) needs some further consideration. Table 1 contains the means and standard deviations for all pronouns studied.

**TABLE 1**  
**MEANS AND STANDARD DEVIATIONS FOR WORK INTENTION INVENTORY**

	Group 1				Group 2											
	1 <sup>st</sup> Person Plural <sup>1</sup> (n=130)		3 <sup>rd</sup> Person Plural <sup>2</sup> (n=137)		We (n=48)		We+ (n=31)		We- (n=17)		They (n=55)		They+ (n=29)		They- (n=26)	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
WII																
DE	12.49	3.64	11.70	3.49	13.54	3.10	13.90	2.90	12.88	3.42	11.51	3.86	12.21	3.28	10.73	4.36
IP	16.01	2.26	15.17	2.96	16.69	1.82	17.23	1.31	15.71	2.22	15.31	2.46	15.10	2.30	15.54	2.64
IE	14.57	3.92	13.57	4.18	15.77	3.24	16.81	1.92	13.88	4.24	13.29	4.37	14.14	4.23	12.35	4.41
IR	12.02	4.88	10.85	4.66	13.27	4.25	14.10	3.70	11.76	4.86	10.78	4.53	12.62	3.80	8.73	4.46
OCB	16.45	2.08	15.77	2.55	16.94	1.77	17.35	1.33	16.18	2.22	15.36	2.73	15.69	2.53	15.00	2.94

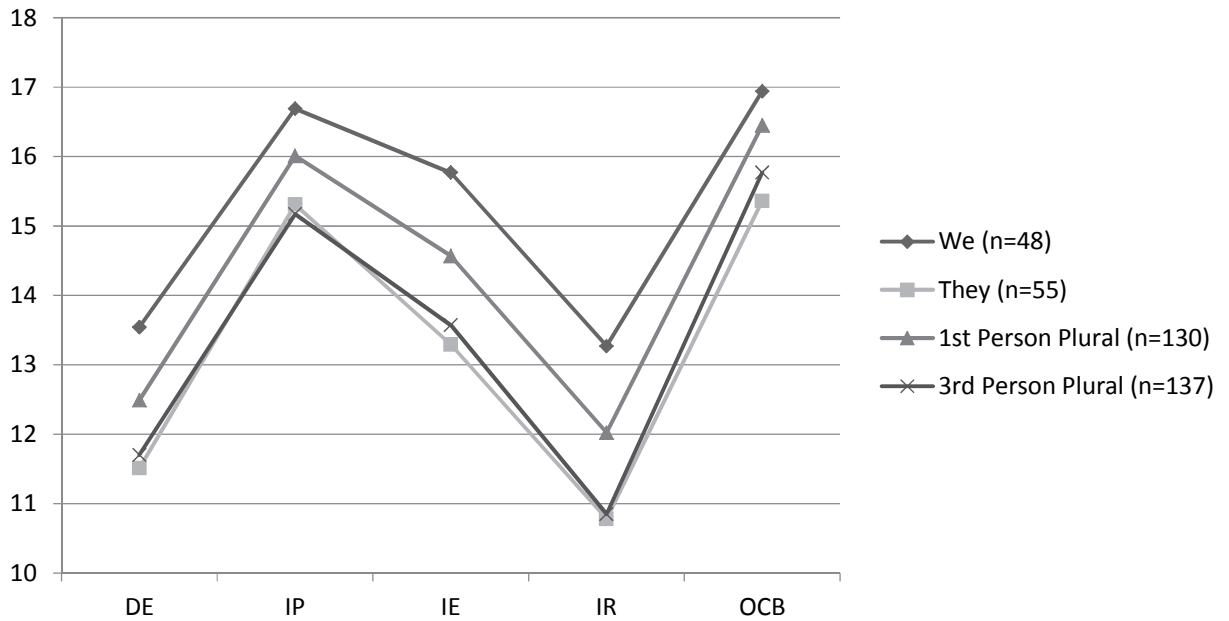
<sup>1</sup> – 12 dictionary items (lets, let’s, our, ours, ourselves, us, we, we’d, we’ll, we’re, weve, we’ve)

<sup>2</sup> – 10 dictionary items (their, them, themselves, they, theyd, they’d, they’ll, they’ll, they’ve, they’ve)

The results presented in Table 1 and Figure 2 reflects that something is in fact happening with respect to the relationship between pronoun use and work intentions. Within both groups, in every instance, there is a significant difference between the first person and third person pronouns (n=267). However, moving

forward the results will focus strictly on the Group 2 (n=111) pronouns as a) they are more consistent with Reich's (1993) proposition, and b) there is greater magnitude between the "we" "they" responses, as opposed to what we observed with the first person and third person plural pronouns

**FIGURE 2**  
**COMPARISON OF MEANS FOR THE WORK INTENTION INVENTORY SUBSCALES**



**Hypothesis 1—"We" versus "They"**

When completing a comparison of means with the strict "we" versus "they" analysis, we observed high p values and F statistics in all five WII scales. Table 2 contains correlations and given the moderate effect sizes, a linear regression was completed. A significant regression equation was found ( $R^2 = .14$ ,  $F(1, 101) = 15.86$ ,  $P < .000$ ), thus supporting Hypothesis 1, despite being relatively weak as a predictor. However, before making any conclusions regarding the fit, appropriateness, and reliability of the pronoun test, we feel that it is important and helpful to review the use of pronouns in their conversational context—specifically, whether the pronouns are used in connection with positive, negative, or neutral descriptions.

**TABLE 2**  
**PEARSON CORRELATIONS**

WII	Pronoun (n=555)	1 <sup>st</sup> Person			3 <sup>rd</sup> Person			They+ (n=29)	They- (n=26)
		Plural (n=130)	We (n=48)	We+ (n=31)	We- (n=17)	Plural (n=137)	They (n=55)		
DE	.08	.17**	.28**	.26**	.05	-.02	-.28**	-.04	-.28**
IP	.04	.14**	.30**	.37**	-.05	-.05	-.30**	-.23*	-.11
IE	.10*	.15**	.31**	.38**	-.06	-.04	-.31**	-.05	-.30**
IR	.10*	.14*	.27**	.31**	-.02	-.04	-.27**	.09	-.41**
OCB	-.05	.09*	.32**	.34**	.01	-.09*	-.32**	-.11	-.26**

Note. Two-tailed tests.

\* p < 0.05 \*\* p < 0.005 \*\*\* p < 0.001



### Hypothesis 2—“We+” versus “We-”

Hypothesis 2 is the first attempt at examining the contextualized pronouns to determine if there are any differences between them. In “contextualizing” the pronoun, we categorize the pronoun according to the sentiment or theme of the sentence/phrase in which it exists. An example of a contextually positive “we” pronoun (we+) is “We feel that our input is welcome and valued,” whereas an example of a contextually negative “we” pronoun (we-) is “We are overly micro-managed,” or “We get screwed out of our time off.” Despite the latter statement as being somewhat crass, this language and sentiment, is not atypical in the work environment. It also challenges the notion that “we” is a reliable indicator of positive work intentions, not to mention a positive work environment.

The results from Hypothesis 2, as well as the following hypothesis, should be considered when determining the accuracy and success of the pronoun test, especially from the practitioner’s point of view—will this or will this not be effective? By specifically examining the difference, if any, between a contextually positive “we+” and a contextually negative “we-,” we attempt to strengthen our understanding of how these particular words may or may not help us better understand the relationship between pronoun use and work intentions.

This data begins to challenge the notion that a strict “we” versus “they” assessment is sufficient. When preparing the data for analysis, we observed considerable difference in attitude toward the organization when coding the responses. We completed a one-way ANOVA and Table 3 reflects the different means, F statistics, and P values.

**TABLE 3**  
**COMPARISON OF MEANS AND LEVELS OF SIGNIFICANCE “WE+” AND “WE-”**

	We+ (n=31)	We- (n=17)	F
Discretionary Effort (DE)	13.90	12.88	3.994
Intent to Perform (IP)*	17.23	15.71	5.571
Intent to Endorse (IE)*	16.81	13.88	7.037
Intent to Remain (IR)	14.10	11.76	8.319
Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (OCB)	17.35	16.18	5.331

\*  $p < 0.05$

Table 3 demonstrates that there are significant differences between the “we+” and “we-” responses in two of the five WII scales (Intent to Perform and Intent to Endorse), therefore rejecting the null hypothesis of Hypothesis 2. This analysis alone does not lead us to any further conclusions on the accuracy of the “we” versus “they” responses other than that there may be more to this strict “we” versus “they” approach than we have been led to believe; context may matter. We think it is important to continue to review the results of each of our remaining hypotheses and then consider our findings in aggregate.

### Hypothesis 3—“We+” versus “They+”

With Hypothesis 2 we attempted to determine whether or not there is any difference within the “we” category once we examine the various contexts of the “we” statements used. In Hypothesis 3 we looked at the two contextually positive pronouns “we+” and “they+” to determine whether there might be a difference in work intention scores between each group. Table 4 compares the contextually positive “we+” statements, such as “I feel we have a ‘family-based’ culture and we strive to do what is right for our business and our customers” with the contextually positive “they+” statements, such as “They have empowered me to make necessary decisions to make this division run more smoothly.” We believe that these two statements reflect the dilemma surrounding the “we” is good, “they” is not argument.

**TABLE 4**  
**COMPARISON OF MEANS AND LEVELS OF SIGNIFICANCE “WE+” AND “THEY+”**

	We+ (n=31)	They+ (n=29)	F
Discretionary Effort (DE)	13.90	12.21	3.994
Intent to Perform (IP)*	17.23	15.10	5.571
Intent to Endorse (IE)*	16.81	14.14	7.037
Intent to Remain (IR)	14.10	12.62	8.319
Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (OCB)	17.35	15.69	5.331

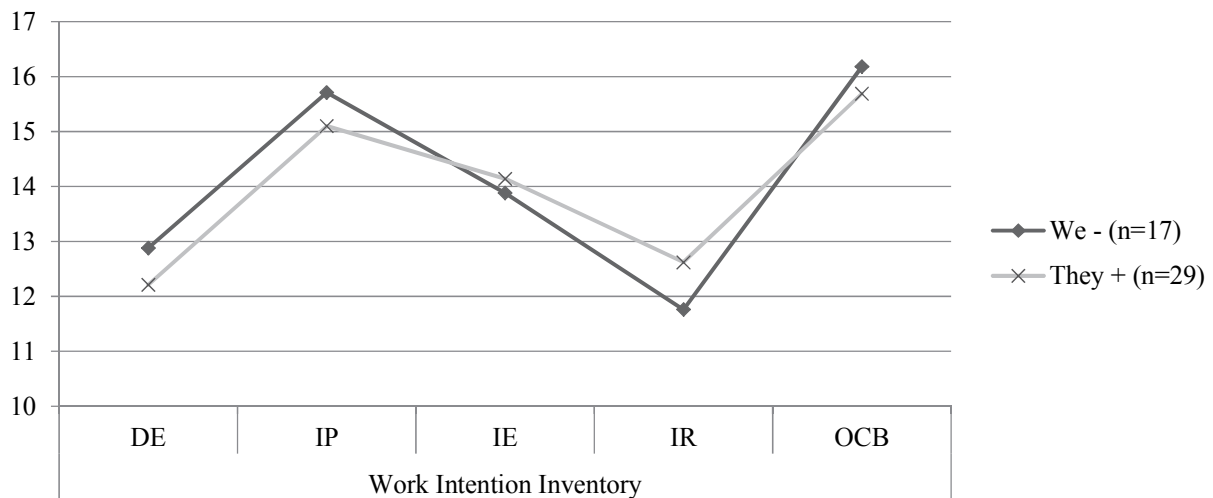
\* p < 0.05 \*\* p < 0.005 \*\*\* p < 0.001

When we analyzed “we+” against “they+” we observed significant differences in Intent to Perform, Intent to Endorse, and Organizational Citizenship Behaviors, resulting in rejection of the null hypothesis for Hypothesis 3.

**Hypothesis 4—“We-” versus “They+”**

The final hypothesis ultimately challenges the notion that the use of the pronoun “we” is aligned with desirable work intentions, whereas the employees using “they” possess or demonstrate less favorable intentions. By examining the contextually negative “we-” statements, we attempt to determine whether context matters. The final hypothesis continues to examine the relationship between context and pronoun use. Figure 3 demonstrates how the “they+” and “we-” responses differ. In not one instance are their means significantly different. We believe these results strongly challenge the findings in Hypothesis 1 and the practical application of the Reich (1993) test, as referred to by both Reich (1993) and Pink (2011). If there is not a significant difference between the “we-” and “they+” groups, does this not violate the assumption of “we” is good and “they” is not? We, therefore, accept our null hypothesis.

**FIGURE 3**  
**COMPARISON OF MEANS FOR THE WORK INTENTION INVENTORY SUBSCALES BETWEEN “THEY+” AND “WE-”**



*Note.* No significant difference in mean values.

Table 5 demonstrates that the greatest difference in work intentions occurs between the contextual pronoun extremes “we+” and “they-.” As we consider the ability of pronouns to serve as a tool to determine work intentions, after reviewing the contextualized and non-contextualized responses, Table 5 suggests stronger support for an augmented pronoun test.

**TABLE 5**  
**p VALUES FOR “THEY-” AND “WE+”, “WE-” & “THEY+”**

			We (n=48)	We+ (n=31)	We- (n=17)	They+ (n=29)
WII	Discretionary Effort (DE)	They-	0.000	0.001	0.052	0.122
	Intent to Perform (IP)	They-	0.036	0.004	0.803	0.454
	Intent to Endorse (IE)	They-	0.000	0.000	0.191	0.079
	Intent to Remain (IR)	They-	0.000	0.000	0.021	0.001
	Organizational Citizenship Behaviors (OCB)	They-	0.001	0.000	0.106	0.271

*Note.* Two-tailed tests.

Given the moderate effect sizes presented in the Pearson Correlation table (Table 2), we concluded our contextual analysis with a comparison of linear regressions between the contextualized pronoun group ( $R^2 = .20$ ,  $F(1, 101) = 26.81$ ,  $P < .000$ ) and the “we” “they” group ( $R^2 = .14$ ,  $F(1, 101) = 15.86$ ,  $P < .000$ ). The slightly greater strength of the contextualized pronoun group regression supports the position that context of the statement will bring greater clarity than solely relying on pronoun type alone.

## DISCUSSION

This study set out to examine the relationship between pronoun use and work intentions. The findings challenge the notion of Reich’s (1993) pronoun test being an accurate or reliable workplace assessment. Our findings are contradictory to Reich (1993) and Pink’s (2011) statements that “we” is good, and “they” isn’t.

One of the challenging concepts of the practice of counting and analyzing pronouns is that, if context matters (Johns, 2006), we can only assume that there is much more occurring within individuals on cognitive and emotional levels that contributes to the construction of their reality, relative to the environment they are working within and among colleagues who are simultaneously constructing their own realities. A potential risk or limitation of this study is that we did not explore the impact of psychosocial variables and other constructs, such as culture, on pronoun use. For example, how do we account for pronoun use from respondents who either live in or have familial roots in collectivist societies versus individualist societies? The extent to which a society is individualistic or collectivistic has implications on people’s behavior (Newman, 1993). Would this have made a difference in our findings? Would Reich (1993) have given any consideration to such factors?

### Implications for Practice

As we consider the results from this study, a few noteworthy implications for practice emerge. Although the significance of this study lies in the promise of a valid, low-cost workplace assessment, the potential worth of this practice is overshadowed by the risks associated with its use. We consider that the implications for practice are better understood in terms of risks and the mitigation of such risk, as opposed to the espoused benefit of using the pronoun test.

We cannot deny that our findings yield a possible, workable modified version of Reich’s (1993) pronoun test in terms of the contextualized extremes of the positive “we” against the negative “they” responses. This practice, however, is based upon the assumption that the manager can monitor the communication process in a way to accurately collect and inventory the pronouns used in the exchange.

As with most things, user operator training is important if the manager is to effectively employ a modified pronoun test. However, as we know, many supervisors, managers, and leaders are underprepared, under-tooled, and under-resourced, and the perpetuation of incomplete or inaccurate information surrounding practice can lead to further exacerbated practice and mismanagement. The risks increase when practitioners (i.e., new managers) believe that they merely need to collect or count pronouns to make an assessment of organizational health or employee engagement, instead of listening to what employees are actually saying.

Another implication for practice involves the risk associated with in-house assessment and analysis. As many organizations are drawn to the burgeoning body of research and popular press attention on work engagement as a way to address organizational performance, they are developing in-house, non-validated assessment tools based on readily available sources (e.g., blogs, Web pages, trade journals, popular press, etc.). An assessment like the Reich (1993) test used in an under prepared manner could inadvertently create potentially larger organizational issues. An example of such a situation might be an in-house employee engagement survey that, among many things, counts pronoun occurrence in the open-ended response section in an attempt to explain organizational issues. We have observed practices such as this in many organizations. Such a practice is risky because it can cause much greater damage than good.

On a day-to-day level, the misuse of the pronoun test risks de-humanizing the worker and not seeing them for who they are. Instead of working to support and position subordinates for success by creating an environment for them to be successful, the supervisor risks failing to hear and understand his or her reports, reducing them to little more than expendable sound bites.

## **LIMITATION AND FURTHER RESEARCH**

### **Limitations**

Due to the nature of this study, we acknowledge several limitations. The first limitation relates to the discrepancy in practice between how Reich (1993) suggested administering the pronoun test (i.e., in a face-to-face conversation) and our reliance on self-disclosure through a Web-based survey. While we do not know if he believes that employees at all levels (front line, middle managers, etc.) are subject to the same or similar pronoun use practices, we do know that his proposal was based upon a face-to-face dialogue with workers. In the example he used in his *Washington Post* article, Reich (1993) spoke of questioning front-line workers to identify pronoun use, while drawing conclusions about their work and the environment.

A second limitation is based on attempting to study a phenomenon solely described in a 1,000 word newspaper article. Reich's (1993) brief manuscript provides limited explanation of his justification behind his opinion, as well as his methodology at arriving at his conclusions. He does not account for how he analyzes statements containing instances of both "we" and "they". Although we employed a test to examine employee's work intentions as it relates to the pronouns "we" and "they," it is important to recognize that Reich's (1993) article explains this phenomenon through the use of several different research constructs such as organizational climate, high performance work teams, employee engagement, and work intentions.

### **Further Research**

Our review of the literature for this study led us to believe that pronouns could possibly serve as linguistic cues and be of value in the workplace. After reviewing the data and the hypotheses, it is clear that there is potential value in further studying the relationship between pronoun selection and the overall psychological appraisal process. If the assumption is that pronouns provide linguistic cues to intentions and/or attitudes, what informs the selection of such pronouns? It is probable that some aspect of the appraisal process may be influencing or solidifying the selection of the pronouns. As was documented in the literature review section, under the heading Pronouns and Work Intentions, the appraisal process has both an affective and cognitive dimension. Both cognitive conclusions and affective inferences are reached, which influences the sense of an individual's well-being (or lack thereof). Further research could

include a measure of affect using a semantic differential such as the PANAS (Watson *et al.*, 1988). This would allow researchers to better understand the respondent's emotional state or the context in which a given pronoun was used.

Another area of research may be in the area that precedes the appraisal process. Is there something relating to the organizational characteristics and/or job characteristics that helps clarify the pronoun generation process? The employee work passion appraisal model by Zigarmi *et al.* (2009, 2011) included the consideration of antecedents, both personal and work related, which the respondent takes into consideration when making an appraisal. Personal antecedents such as work cynicism, locus of control, and basic psychological needs have been shown to shape work intentions (Roberts & Zigarmi, 2014). Personal antecedents such as these and others might also influence pronoun selection. Work environment antecedents such as job factors, organizational factors, and relationship factors could also be studied in conjunction with the use of various pronouns.

## CONCLUSION

Whether we like it, or not, management myths, clichés, adages, and organizational folklore bear significant influence over how people work within organizations. Even though we desire highly translational and original research for the workplace, we must be mindful that we have plenty of competition with gut feelings, rose colored glasses, and foggy recollections.

In 1993, then-Secretary of Labor Robert Reich, proposed a simple, low cost assessment based solely around the expression of two personal pronouns “we” and “they”. There is no doubt that the Reich (1993) test has intuitive appeal. After all, at some level, don't we want it to be just that easy? Even though our findings suggest that a modified pronoun test approach may be possible for the practitioner, we feel that the risks of misuse could be significant. The belief that any person can administer such a simple assessment may be comforting; however, such an unsophisticated assessment should encourage us to dig deeper into, not just the pronouns and words used, but the person and the work environment. After all, we all have bad work days and a one-time assessment based on a particular pronoun uttered may merely capture our attitude at that one point in time and, possibly, misrepresent our true feelings or intentions with respect to our job.

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