CHAPTER 28

Communicating Identity and Identification In and Around Organizations

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Introduction: The Interwoven Histories of Organizational Identity and Identification

Any reasonably comprehensive discussion of identity, identification, and organizational communication must consider at once (1) the grounds for and resources of identity construction and transformation in contemporary global society; (2) the articulation and promotion of corporate identities by institutions and organizations of all sorts; and (3) the individual linkages to and bonds with organizations, industries, professions, brands, and other features.

Theoretically, as well as practically, identity is a given for units from biological cells to international systems, and its establishment and maintenance involves a variety of forms and levels of communication. There is, in other words, a certain universal dimension to identity in the sense that it is a drive that characterizes all living systems (Morin, 1986; see also Luhmann, 1990). Yet it is impossible to appreciate contemporary manifestations of organizational identity and identification without an understanding of their historical and cultural contexts.

The explicit focus on identity, which is one of the defining preoccupations of the contemporary industrialized world, is a fairly recent phenomenon. For tribal or “traditional” societies, individual identity was not subject to constant repetition, performance, and negotiation (see Durkheim, 1933). Rather it was relatively fixed, ascribed by traditions and practices largely beyond the influence of the individual person. The rise of modernity, however, questioned such traditional practices and authorities and gradually eroded the institutions through which people had previously defined their roles and positions in society (Mongin, 1982; Nisbet, 1970). Consequently, identity emerged as a salient issue, pursued and contested at many different levels. For most large organizations today, identity is not only a key point of reference but also a practical building block for other objectives and projects; that is, organizations use their established identity
programs and identity messages within networks of activities and projects, including mission statements, articulations of values and ethics, and marketing materials. Most organizational activities, in other words, are pervaded by identity concerns (Haslam, Postmes, & Ellemers, 2003).

Considering identity as a defining issue of the modern world, we can look to its changing treatments in key discourses. With its *uniqueness* emphasis (“I am myself distinct from you”) in contrast to a stress on *sameness* (“I share identity with you”), the issue of identity emerged in the European Renaissance and then attained full expression in Enlightenment discourses and beyond (compare Foucault, 1984; Mackenzie, 1978). By the early 1800s, identity-as-possession-of-a-unique-self had made its way audibly into political debates in Britain and the United States. In his travels around the United States in the 1830s and 1840s, de Toqueville (1847) observed a stress on individuality and at the same time the formation of a distinctive national identity. A century later, Lasswell (1935) keenly observed parallels and linkages between national and cultural expressions and individual needs and desires for self-definition and security (cf. Tracy & Trethewey, 2005). Lasswell’s analysis laid the foundation for a more communication-centered treatment of identity for organizations and institutions, especially in terms of how organizations answer questions about why they do things, albeit in often circular ways: “This action is right because of who we are [fill in the characteristics and values].”

Organizational identity formations and, ultimately, obsessions with identity grew up together in modern industrialized societies (Foucault, 1984). During the last 150 years especially, identity has become a focused and professionalized enterprise, adopted by organizations in all sectors through the successive development of advertising, public relations, and marketing. And, with applications from personal branding to international social movement identification, these disciplines have exerted a growing influence on individual identities and self-perceptions. Although the field of organizational communication has been rather slow in acknowledging the role external communication practices might play in shaping the identification of individuals with organizations (Cheney, 1983; Cheney & Christensen, 2001), the questions of organizational identity and membership identification have, in practice, been treated as one issue. As documented by Marchand (1998), many public relations campaigns from the early 20th century—often designed to improve public sentiments toward capitalist enterprises—were directed not only to external audiences but also to the corporations themselves and their members. By the 1940s, organizations often combined internal and external communication concerns in attempts to build public respectability while demonstrating what Marchand (1998, p. 15) calls a “compassionate concern” for their employees.

Despite persistent and increasingly professionalized attempts to invest individuals in various organizational resources of identity (compare Kuhn & McPartland, 1954; Whyte, 1956), this contextual backdrop has been disregarded in a number of ways since the mid-1980s due to the predominantly social-psychological treatments of individual identity and organizational identification. We argue that identity and identification cannot be divorced from historical and cultural contexts, including such macro trends as the saturation of the communication universe with itself (e.g., Baudrillard, 1988), the rupture in the social contract between many organizations and their members, and the global economic crisis. Although in-depth commentary on such trends is beyond the scope of this essay, we emphasize the necessary interplay between operationalizations of individual identifications with organizations, organizational formulations of identity, and the larger social landscape for identity formulation in the contemporary world.

Notably, one of the great advances in identity-related research in recent years has been the coalescence of disciplines around key questions, such as comparative cross-cultural assessments.
of identity (e.g., Allen, 2011; Hofstede, 1980; Munshi, 2006), along with the treatment of identity at multiple levels of society (e.g., Silva & Sias, 2010), including national, ethnic, linguistic, professional, organizational, and group levels (see Ashcraft, 2007). Organizational identity and identification as foci of studies in organizational communication and allied areas can now benefit from this theoretical richness, bringing together the studies of culture and identity in important ways (Kenny, Whittle, & Willmott, 2011).

In the remainder of this essay, we pursue three goals: (1) to revisit the ontology and epistemology of organizational identity and identification, (2) to organize recent research in the area according to key theoretical-practical themes, and (3) to suggest some future avenues of investigation.

The Ontology and Epistemology of Organizational Identity and Identification

In spite of decades of research—and although identity and identification play a central role in the modern experience—both terms are fraught with ambiguity (e.g., Kenny et al., 2011). The notion of identification, for example, assumes the existence of a more or less stable and discernible entity or identity. Since such existence is precarious and open to multiple interpretations, the ontological grounds for identification are uncertain and fragile. This section develops the definitional complexities of identity at the aggregate organizational level, followed by an account of research on individual-organizational bonds and the ways they shape identification and professional identities.

The Nature of Organizational Identity

A recurrent question in the literature on organizational identity centers on ontological status: that is, what is the reality or nature of an organization’s identity, presuming an organization has one or ought to have one? Most answers to this question tend toward seeing organizational identity as either an essential or inherent property of an organization or seeing it as a social construction. Much talk about organizational identity, however, draws on both perspectives. This is clearly the case in managerially oriented writings where descriptions of organizational identity as essence and continuity often coexist with discussions of identity as managerial projects of communication (e.g., Kunde, 2000; Olins, 1989).

A similar ambiguity, however, is found in the scholarly literature that frequently talks about organizational identity as something intrinsic, solid, and reliable that sets it apart from its surroundings while at the same time assuming that identities can be planned, shaped, and manufactured (e.g., van Riel & Balmer, 1997).

With their now-classical understanding of organizational identity as the central, distinct, and enduring dimensions of an organization, Albert and Whetten (1985) provide a theoretical backup to the largely essentialist perspective on organizational identity. They refer to identity as the inviolable core of an organization that shapes its choices and defines its integrity. This identity becomes a focal point in the organization’s official communications, just as it is a key referent for individual members and other stakeholders (e.g., Balmer, 1995).

By contrast, Ashforth and Mael regard organizational identity as changeable. In line with the work of Nietzsche (1954), who conceived of identities as ongoing stories, Ashforth and Mael (1996) define organizational identity as “unfolding and stylized narratives about the ‘soul’ or essence of the organization” (p. 21). From this perspective, organizations enact their identities through the stories they tell, directly or indirectly, about themselves, their past, their ambitions, and their perceptions of the environment.

Scholars of communication as well as organizational studies are gradually assuming a more complex understanding of identity, which sees both qualified objectivity and intersubjectivity as
playing important roles in the epistemology of individual-organizational relationships. Further, these relationships are seen in explicitly processual terms through the application of narrativity, where organizational identities are seen as volatile social constructions based in large part on the interpretive capabilities and preferences of their audiences (Christensen & Askegaard, 2001).

On the one hand, identity is permeated by otherness as well as shaped by narratives and interactions. According to Dunne (1996) and Rasmussen (1996), identity is a storied self, a self that unfolds in the stories that we tell ourselves and in the accounts we provide to others about our past and present behavior. Narrativity, in other words, is essential in the development and maintenance of identity. Narratives link the past with the future and provide a sense of continuity to our self-identity (see also, Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Browning & Morris, 2012). Important as the narrative-identity linkage is to understanding the deeply processual nature of identity formation and change, there has been relatively little longitudinal research on how stories told by individual members, leaders, and corporate voices are part and parcel of identity development in an organization (Grant, 2004). However, a recent ethnographic study shows how narratives from three interwoven levels (societal, organizational/family, and individual) come together to shape both individual and organizational identities (Watson & Watson, 2012).

On the other hand, organizational identities are often related to as immutable facts of life. In this sense, identity is usually counterposed to image, with the latter seen as a less stable or reliable projection but one that is nevertheless very important in public settings (e.g., Alvesson, 1990). This dialectical relationship is fortified in everyday as well as professional discourses, for example, about the need for organizations to come forth and express their true selves. The everyday focus on real identity reflects the experience of organizational audiences that organizations have identities with real effects and significance. As the neo-Weberian (Weber, 1978) position makes clear, organizational identities are real to the extent that people extend such cherished concepts to organizations; thus organizational identities become objects of study just as they are points of reference in everyday life. This is different, however, from asserting that we can discover the true identity of an organization. Facing identity as a relatively stable reference point in a constantly unfolding communication process inevitably reveals both the fluidity and solidity that preoccupies individuals and organizations (Cheney & Christensen, 2001; Chreim, 2005), fueling consultants’ and others’ efforts to name, grasp, and hold on to the organization’s identity.

Often, when people talk about an organization’s identity, they do not relate it to the organization as a whole but refer to specific organizational attributes that stand for the organization in question. In practice, an organization’s identity corresponds to what is commonly used to represent the organization (Christensen & Askegaard, 2001). From a social psychological perspective, Haslam et al. (2003) refer to such representations as “stereotypic attributes . . . conferred upon [the organization] by those for whom the organization is relevant and meaningful” (p. 360). Such stereotypic attributes, although context dependent and thus potentially fluid, are widely shared and provide a basis for coordinated action, including organizational identification. The stereotypic attributes inform behavior and define individuals as members or nonmembers of a particular group or organization. Such complex understanding of organizational identity has only recently made its way into more processual notions of organizational identification.

The Individual-Organizational Bond

To date, research on organizational identification has been more influenced by psychological and motivation-centered perspectives than by any other tradition of research. This pattern makes sense from the focus on certain human needs and resources for identity as well as targets
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of attachment. Advancing what has become known as the belongingness hypothesis, Baumeister and Leary (1995) present a wide range of evidence to support the notion that “human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships” (p. 497). The authors, however, are not as concerned with explaining how individuals create and maintain such bonds; rather, they argue that the need to belong is a fundamental human motivation. While Baumeister and Leary discuss this psychological need in terms of interpersonal relationships, scholars—mainly those in organization studies and organizational psychology—have begun to apply this psychological perspective to the organizational context and to consider what it means for communication processes in organizations. In the context of this discussion, the stress on belonging highlights the membership or solidarity component of Patchen’s (1970) formulation of identification, which considers belongingness to be a key underlying feature of organizational identification.

Other similar psychological characterizations of organizational identification (and relatedly, commitment) include the work of Mael and Ashforth (1992), who define organizational identification as the “perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization” (p. 104, emphasis added). Likewise, Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail (1994) describe identification as a “cognitive connection” (p. 239) between an individual and his or her organization. The concept of disidentification or not identifying with an organization is also considered a “cognitive separation between one’s identity and the organization’s identity” (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001, p. 393).

Since the early 20th century, theorists in psychology, sociology, political science, anthropology, and economics have approached identification as an attachment with an organization, exhibited through attitudinal or behavioral components. Freud’s (1992) accounts of attachments at work are framed chiefly in terms of identification as a defense mechanism; thus, one might find transference of a role vis-à-vis a father figure to a “boss” in the workplace. Psychoanalysis placed a strong emphasis on the emotional side of identity formation and from a very different theoretical standpoint, as did the pragmatic psychology of James (1950). Inspired by Burke (1969) and Mead (1934), Goffman (1959) placed a strong emphasis on roles and role-related identifications, for example, with respect to front-stage and backstage performances. Similarly, Simon (1976) suggested that “a person identifies himself [or herself] with a group when, in making a decision, he [or she] evaluates the several alternatives of choice in terms of the consequences for the specified group” (p. 205, emphasis removed). In this formulation, the notion of role is operationalized in terms of specific contexts of and perceived parameters for decisions.

Scholars who take a more communicative approach to identification highlight how an individual’s identity arises from and is shaped by interaction with an interest or reference group (or even an object). As Foote (1951) notes, “One has no identity apart from society; one has no individuality apart from identity” (p. 51; cf. Mills, 1940). Collectively, these works set the stage for language-centered investigations of identity, especially in the form of expressed accounts for one’s connections, decisions, and behaviors (Chaput, Brummans, & Cooren, 2011; Harré & Secord, 1972; Tompkins & Cheney, 1983); the fluidity of identity formation; and the interplay of individuality and sociality.

Moreover, scholars of organizational communication and management have been influenced by social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Scott, 2007; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), a perspective that treats individuals as classifying themselves into social categories that define that individual. Because organizational membership can serve as a social identity, organizational identification is considered a specific form of social identification (Haslam et al., 2003). According to social identity theory, identification implies that the individual perceives him- or herself as psychologically entangled with the fate of the group (Ashforth
& Mael, 1989). In its extreme form, “identification does not require actual affiliation or a desire for future affiliation, nor admiration for or even knowledge of specific group members” (Mael & Ashforth, 1995, p. 313, emphasis in original). For instance, the minimal group effect shows that individuals implicitly favor and identify with a group, even if their categorization to that group is ad hoc and trivial (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This finding suggests a different angle on partial inclusion in terms of the type and intensity of an attachment and how it is conveyed or expressed (Weick, 1979).

In spite of its heritage, much of the early work in organizational identification was limited, because it conceptualized and measured identification at a specific point in time (Cheney, 1983). While a growing number of studies have begun to examine identification as both a product and process (e.g., Kuhn & Nelson, 2002), research has traditionally “focused more on a static sense of being identified rather than becoming identified” (Glynn, 1998, p. 238, emphasis in original), thus reproducing the notion of organizational identity as an immutable dimension of organizational life. This static approach to operationalization and measurement was mirrored in public relations and marketing studies of organizational reputation, image, and identity (e.g., Fombrun, 1996). Notions of identity as an accomplishment, as a focal point, as a presentation, or as a package for wider consumption are all suggestive of the product- or outcome-oriented conceptions.

Bullis and Bach (1989) are among the earliest organizational communication scholars to examine an individual’s change in organizational identification at different points in time. In addition, Scott, Corman, and Cheney’s (1998) structural model of organizational identification notes a duality between, on the one hand, identity as a set of resources (i.e., a pool of symbolic as well as material points of reference and supplies for identity construction for individuals, groups, and the organization as a whole), and on the other hand, the very process through which these resources are mobilized and their reference points invoked. This model is logically applicable to studying the construction and reproduction of identities at the organizational level, particularly in terms of how resources for identity both enable and constrain new formulations.

Another process-centered or developmental approach to organizational identification has emerged under the rubric of consubstantialization. Chaput et al. (2011) described how identification processes unfold through everyday interactions, which “play into the coproduction of the organization’s substance” (p. 254). Their study of a Canadian nonprofit organization, Quebec Solidaire, demonstrated how identification occurred through the (re)negotiation of various mobilizing agents, including (1) a policy document; (2) the organization’s name; and (3) its history, foundation, and basic principles, which, in turn, fed into the communicative constitution of this young political party.

Treating identification as a process that is constantly in the making points to the notion of identity as an organizational dimension that is realized over time (King, Clemens, & Fry, 2011). By examining the identity emergence of new charter schools, King and colleagues developed a theory of identity realization, described as “the process whereby organizations make concrete their organization-level identity” (p. 561). King et al.’s analysis of Arizona schools showed that there was a great deal of variance among organizational identities, because identity is realized in local and institutional contexts. Put together, these studies illustrate a recursive loop between organizational identity and identification. While identity constitutes the grounds for identification, it is these latter processes that shape and develop organizational identity.

In reviewing the past and current literatures on organizational identity and identification and in reflecting on future directions of this work, we have identified the following communication-sensitive themes that arise from our initial interrogation of these concepts: (1) traversing and transforming formal boundaries, (2) reconsidering organizational membership, (3) encountering
identity and identification through technology, (4) challenging the desirability of identification and unitary expressions, and (5) grasping material-symbolic dialectics in identity formation and expression. Each theme can be rephrased usefully as an issue of importance for organizational communication scholars who conduct research on identity.

**Traversing and Transforming Formal Boundaries**

Although it is generally accepted that internal and external dimensions of an organization's communication are interrelated and difficult to distinguish from each other (e.g., Cheney & Christensen, 2001), much theorizing continues to think of an organization's communication as something that occurs within the organizational setting (Carlone & Taylor, 1998). The field thus is still largely shaped by what Axley (1984) calls a container metaphor of organizational communication. This metaphor assumes that organizational communication is encapsulated within the confines of a preestablished organization and views communication as messages, events, and episodes within organizations and, more specifically, within the bonds connecting individuals to those organizations. Organizations, in other words, produce communication not as their general way of being or existence but as something distinct and separate from other organizing practices. This containment of communication was for decades reinforced by the regulation of activities and associated media such as advertising, public relations, and marketing to domains entirely external to the organization.

Recently, work in organizational communication has taken a different perspective, one that considers organizing as emergent in communication itself (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). Inspired by phenomenology, speech-action theory, and conversational analysis and with a strong orientation toward sociolinguistics, Taylor and Van Every show how an organization comes into being through the ways its leaders and members speak about and account for its actions and activities. Communication and organization are, from this standpoint, equivalent terms (see also Cooren, 2000; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004; Putnam & Nicotera, 2009). Obviously, this latter perspective, sometimes referred to as the communicative constitution of organization (CCO), owes much to Weick (1979), who initiated a dramatic shift in how scholars approach organizational communication by focusing on the power of talk to enact and thus constitute organizational reality, albeit often within the established boundaries of authority and decision making for an organization.

Yet much of the literature in the field continues to assume that organizing and identification occurs in organizations. Ashcraft (2007) speaks to the “lingering legacy” of the site-bound lens, as “many studies continue to treat organizational discourse/communication as phenomena in organizations or within their physical borders, no matter how much we interrogate the ontological status of such boundaries” (p. 11). Furthermore, when theory and research considers the organizational environment, it narrowly treats it as consisting of other institutions (Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007). Of course, none of this is to deny the concrete, ontological presence of specific organizations and sites, not to mention centers of power, authority, and membership, in individuals’ experiences of work and other activities. Rather, the point to consider is the range of multiple influences that bear on identity formation and expression within any particular case and to recognize that professional identities are established both across and within sites (see Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007). There are several useful illustrations that bear mention here.

For example, Kuhn (2006) demonstrated how locales, identities, and organizational practices shape discursive resources and identity construction. Sociologists of work and occupations have long charted multiple levels of and influences on identity (e.g., Abbott, 1988; Larson, 1977; Macdonald, 1995), but recently,
this research has been complemented by more attention to discourse. For example, in her study of occupational identities of airline pilots, Ashcraft (e.g., 2007) emphasized the importance of “dislocating” or decentering the organization and moving identity research in organizational communication toward considering broad professional fields (see also Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007). Gossett’s work (2002, 2006) on identification in the temporary work industry likewise moved beyond the implied container metaphor by examining employees’ attachment (or lack thereof) to their staffing agency and the clients that contract for their labors. This research illustrated how identification is not bound by the physical location or even abstract boundaries of the organization. Similarly, Stephens and Dailey (2012) showed how a new employee’s prior experiences with an organization can influence his or her organizational identification, which also reinforces the notion that identity formation occurs in a variety of ways and places. Also, Richardson and McGlynn (2011) demonstrated how highly identified sports fans—that is, non-organizational members who were, formally speaking, outside of the sport organization—acted as agents of retaliation against collegiate whistle-blowers who took corrective action against the organization’s tarnished identity. Pratt (2000) also explored the process of identification for Amway distributors, who are employees of an organization with “no central business location, and [whose] work occurs outside of a traditional organizational context” (p. 456). Furthermore, several scholars in organization studies and organizational communication have examined identification in geographically dispersed organizations and virtual organizations (Scott, 1997; Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, & Garud, 1999, 2001). Kraimer, Shaffer, Harrison, and Ren (2012), for example, who explored employees of multinational corporations who were returning from international assignments, found that returning employees often face identity strain between their roles, which can lead to turnover. Also, in professional and organizational cultures, Lair’s (2011) study of the TV reality series The Apprentice and its spin-offs has shown how discourses about economy, career, and success are negotiated at several different levels, often within uncertain results for identity formation.

Organizational efforts to construct identities for themselves and their members are equally dependent on communication that crosses formal organizational boundaries. The concept of auto-communication, or self-communication, places communication about organizational identity within a broad systemic context and explains how externally directed messages may influence internal audiences. Born out of semiotics, anthropology, and biology, auto-communication was initially conceived as an act in which all cultures engaged. Lotman (1990), who coined the notion of auto-communication, was primarily interested in understanding what happens to an individual speaker when he or she addresses an audience but emphasized that all societies and social institutions communicate with themselves to a higher or lesser degree. Rituals, for example, confirm a culture’s basic values and introduce members to the community and reinforce their feeling of belongingness (e.g., Geertz, 1973). Auto-communication thus helps cultures maintain, construct and develop themselves.

Applying auto-communication to the organizational context, Broms and Gahmberg (1983) showed how companies, through strategic planning documents and annual reports, are projecting their identities for the future. Extending this perspective to marketing, Christensen (1997, 2004) has emphasized the significant role an external medium may play in the process of auto-communication. External media grant status and authority to organizational messages and influence how members evaluate communication from their own workplace (Christensen, 2004). More than a century ago, large monopolistic corporations, such as AT&T, recognized that internal audiences could be reached more convincingly through external messages and thus began depicting their employees as essential nodes in a large neighborhood (Marchand, 1998). And today,
organizations increasingly talk to themselves while pretending to talk to somebody else (that is, in external media) in order to confirm and reproduce their own cultures (Cheney & Christensen, 2001; Christensen, 1997).

Research has in various ways illustrated the inward effects of external communication on processes of identity and identification. In addition to Dutton and Dukerich's (1991) now-classic study of the New York Port Authority, Elsbach and Glynn (1996) demonstrated the effect of United Parcel Service employees being featured in an advertisement, resulting in an increase in their sense of identification with the company. In a similar manner, Gilly and Wolfinbarger's (1998) study of how organizational members perceive advertising campaigns from their own workplace confirms the idea that employees are generally involved in such messages and evaluate dimensions such as accuracy, value congruence, and effectiveness in advertising messages with far more interest and detail than external audiences usually do. Moreover, positive evaluations along these dimensions are crucial to maintain employee pride and loyalty. Likewise, Cheney's (1999) work with the Mondragón Cooperative Corporation in the Basque Country of Spain shows how “externally driven programs and messages are also serving to maintain a need to identify with one's place of work” (Cheney & Christensen, 2001, p. 247). Along the same lines, Morsing (2006) argues that organizational members usually are more dedicated readers of corporate social responsibility (CSR) messages than other audiences and that “corporate CSR communication profoundly influences the willingness of managers and employees to identify with their workplaces” (p. 171). In this perspective, auto-communication is essential in building and maintaining an organization's identity and in stimulating organizational identification.

Focusing on potentially dysfunctional aspects of auto-communication, however, Christensen and Cheney (2000) argue that many organizational identity projects become highly self-centered undertakings, characterized by self-absorption and self-seduction. This finding has become even more applicable in the age of electronic organizational presence. While external audiences rarely care about the specifics of an organization's identity, members (and managers in particular) are often so deeply involved in the organization's expressions of identity that they lose touch with the issues of stakeholder relevance and interest. Hatch and Schultz (2002) take this point a step further and argue that such identities are pathological and narcissistic. They cite the example of Royal Dutch Shell and its decision to dump the oil platform Brent Spar in the North Sea, as an illustration of an organization that was so engaged in reflections about its own identity that it could not respond adequately to external stakeholder interests and demands. Hatch and Schultz emphasize that narcissism, if more than temporary, poses a real threat to the survival of the organization. In a similar manner, Ganesh (2003) applies Christensen's (1997) notion of marketing as self-referential to the discourse surrounding information and communication technology (ICT) and its relationship to the organizational identity of an Indian nongovernmental organization (NGO). Like Hatch and Schultz, Ganesh (2003) uses the term organizational narcissism to describe the organizational identity “that is so oriented toward improving itself and enhancing its legitimacy at the expense of some of its constituents that it sees itself as the only active agent in a larger process of social change” (p. 568).

While such dysfunctional aspects of organizational identity work are important to illuminate and critique, auto-communication may still be indispensable in processes of building identities and fostering identification. As Lotman (1977, 1990) pointed out, messages are not neutral; they potentially affect and shape the sender. Externally directed messages may help organizations explore the boundaries of their identities and the ideal roles they hope to play in the world. And the mere possibility of expression may be essential in stimulating participation and involvement (Pingree, 2007). The articulation of organizational aspirations (for example, in the area of
CSR) may be essential for stimulating new insight and moving the organization toward better standards and practices (Christensen, Morsing, & Thyssen, 2011).

Reconsidering Organizational Membership

The relevance of approaching organizational communication as less bounded is obvious when we address the intricacies of organizational membership, inclusion, and socialization. The concept of membership is usually treated as binary—either you are a member or you are not. Thus, most scholarship in organizational communication tends to approach membership as paid, full-time, and permanent employment (Ashcraft & Kedrowicz, 2002). Considering the development of the field, this makes sense. Traditionally, organizations served as identity resources for individuals because they were physically and temporally present in the organization. In contemporary organizations, however, one might have many other forms of attachment with an organization, and some of these are not well recognized in the research literature. In addition, economic shifts have resulted in so-called contingent employment as being a far bigger part of the economy than before, say, the 1980s (Bennett, 1991). Moreover, as we discuss in the subsequent section on technology, membership in many types of organizations is greatly complicated by the growth of technology.

Several broad societal trends have both enabled and constrained the capacity for membership and identification in organizations. First, temporary employment, which has grown in part due to the capacity to perform work at a distance, complicates traditional understandings of identification. Research demonstrates that the process of organizational identification is different for these nonstandard employees. Gossett (2001, 2002), for example, finds that temporary work may serve as a barrier to organizational identification, as contingent workers draw boundaries around their membership and maintain separate social identities. Similarly, Ashcraft and Kedrowicz (2002), who explored staff-volunteer relations at a domestic violence shelter, discuss how volunteers may experience conflicted identification because “they labor for the organization on leisure time, though not for livelihood” and often interact with the organization in different ways, as “many volunteers are present infrequently [and] some conduct the bulk of their work outside formal organizational space” (p. 91). As a result, volunteers may see their identities within the nonprofit as neither work nor leisure but rather as a “third membership contract.”

Second, virtual work also makes the discussion of membership and identity more complex. Research on work performed via technology has shown that identifications can both wax and wane as a result of dispersion (Rock & Pratt, 2002). Because individuals can be physically and/or temporally removed from others, their membership and identities in the organization are nontraditional. Ballard and Gossett (2007) discuss how virtual workers’ identities within their respective organizations fundamentally change as a result of their lack of physical connection to the organization. Whereas all employees manage their work and home identities and the various degrees to which those overlap, identity issues may be a more salient concern for virtual employees who often work from home (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000).

Yet even as the notion of membership evolves and grows more complex, concepts of membership, inclusion, and socialization will continue to be intimately related to organizational identity and identification. Burke (1969) noted that organizational efforts to socialize newcomers are successful when the individual identifies with the organization. Identification and socialization are empirically, highly correlated processes (e.g., Klein & Weaver, 2000; Myers & Oetzel, 2003), and discursive resources (Kuhn, 2006), such as sensemaking and sensebreaking socialization practices, lead members to deidentify or disidentify, or experience ambivalent identification with
the organization (Pratt, 2000). In addition, Scott and Myers (2010) propose a membership negotiation perspective, which acknowledges a mutually implicative relationship among the organization, incumbent members, and newcomers. In this perspective, identification is one medium of membership negotiation, “because it aids attempts to resolve tensions between individual needs for identity and collective organizational interests” (Scott & Myers, 2010, p. 95).

At a broader level, scholars might consider how organizations “socialize” each other by acknowledging the typical imbalance of power, a concept that does not usually appear in research on socialization and assimilation. Such mutual socialization occurs as organizations are constantly communicating messages to express themselves as special and unique. At the same time, however, they are looking over their shoulders at the expressed uniqueness of their competitors (e.g., Martin, Feldman, Hatch, & Sitkin, 1983).

Encountering Identity and Identification Through Technology

As organizational membership grows more complex with advances in computer-based technology and mobile applications, full-time members, nonstandard employees, virtual workers, and individuals outside of the organization may see the organization as an identity resource, even if in oppositional terms. So what implications does technology have for the creation and maintenance of individual and organizational identity?

On the one hand, technology enables or allows individuals with various types of membership to experience the organization as a resource for identity in ways that would otherwise have required physical (co)presence. However, group cohesion and identity may have different features and limits when interaction is online (Rock & Pratt, 2002; Thatcher & Zhu, 2006). The history of technology shows that its usage can help shape the very nature of work and the identified dimensions of it. Certainly, cases as diverse as oil drilling and micro computing testify to this, where the material presence of technology and its powers become important resources of identity. With the rise of the Internet, social media, and mobile applications, ICT use has become more ubiquitous and more interactive in the lives and work of individuals. Microblogging and social networking websites, in particular, have created space for individuals, who may not be physically or only temporally aligned with the organization, to learn about and feel part of it. For example, one recent study at IBM found that geographically distributed as opposed to colocated employees used the company’s social media tool to integrate the organization’s values into their identity (Thom-Santelli, Millen, & Gergle, 2011). As another example, NGO Amnesty International relies heavily on computer-mediated communication in its global network of information, advocacy, and action. Interactive information and communication technologies that facilitate two-way communicative exchanges have the potential to establish and maintain identification among parties, even if strictly supported by virtual means. Social networking sites open up new pathways of communication between individuals who would not otherwise connect because such sites contain socially relevant information (e.g., profile, picture, mutual friends) that “serves as a social lubricant, providing individuals with social information that is critical for exploiting the technical ability to connect provided by the site” (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011, p. 887, emphasis removed). Just as these sites strengthen connections, they are also likely to foster attachments. In just a decade, the possibility for organizational identification and various other forms of attachment have dramatically expanded. Technology even allows nonmembers to feel consistently connected to an organization. For example, Marine wives cultivate and share their identification with the Marines online, even though they may not be Marines themselves (O’Brien, 2010).
While technology provides temporary workers, virtual workers, and even nonmembers with flexibility to engage with organizations remotely, it may also remove individuals from elements that foster identification. Specifically, identification may be more difficult to sustain because values and norms, traditionally communicated through artifacts (dress codes, shared language, rituals, routines, buildings) and identifiers (such as logos and decorative material) are less readily available in a virtual context. When working from a distance, face-to-face interaction and behavioral cues are less readily available, which pose as a threat to organization-related identities (Scott, 2001; Thatcher & Zhu, 2006). Similarly, and echoing media richness theory, Pratt, Fuller, and Northcraft (2000) argue that “communication technologies vary in the extent to which they make it easier or harder to send rich messages, and this will affect identification by influencing the salience of different referent groups” (p. 241).

In exploring the relationship between technology and identification, various studies have examined if there are specific communication technologies that enhance identification. Overall, this body of research suggests many moderators of the relationship between ICT usage and identification. For example, Timmerman and Scott (2006) showed that communicative predictors (i.e., efforts to understand, responsiveness, thoroughness) moderate the relationships between electronic messaging (e.g., e-mail and instant messaging) and identification. Other moderators include social support (Wiesenfeld et al., 2001), amount of ICT use (Scott & Timmerman, 1999), and stress (Fonner & Roloff, 2012). Future research should collect longitudinal data of ICT use and identification, as it may be that over time, the relationship between these variables may change.

Several scholars have suggested how organizations can overcome the dispersion that technology creates. Rock and Pratt (2002), for example, assert that organizational symbols could be used to enhance identification among distributed individuals (e.g., business cards and laptops with corporate logos). Here, qualitative research may aid in understanding the meanings that members attach to these organizational technologies and how those materials impact identification.

### Challenging the Desirability of Identification and Unitary Expressions of Identity

In the multidisciplinary literature, identification is typically deemed unequivocally desirable by both individuals and organizations. However, recent work has questioned this notion. Challenging the desirability of identification is an important endeavor, especially in the domains of politics and ethics. As history has clearly demonstrated, investment of the self in one resource, an organization, can easily slide into extremism. Examples are prevalent in politics, religion, economy, work, intergroup relations, and the family. Moreover, the ethics of identification raise questions about the loss of self or the drastic conditions that an individual undergoes to become part of an in-group. For example, divestiture socialization tactics (which involves stripping away certain personal characteristics) almost require a recruit to sever old friendships, undergo extensive harassment from experienced members, and engage for long periods of time in doing the “dirty work” of the trade typified by low pay, low status, low interest value, and low skill requirements. (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979, p. 64)

Questions about excessive identification rest to some extent on concepts of subjective (un)certainty and self-conceptual uncertainty reduction, which assume that individuals strive for certainty in the areas of life that are important to their self-concept. Subjective certainty is connected to group membership, as “things that we are certain about are linked to who we are via the prototypical features of social groups with which we identify and which form our self-concept”
Extending this line of work, Alvesson and Willmott (2002) have analyzed the discursive and reflexive processes of identity constitution and regulation in contemporary work organizations. Rejecting the notion that management is omnipotent in determining employee identity, they nonetheless focus their analysis on identity regulation as a significant “modality of organizational control” (p. 621). Specifically, they suggest that the employee of today is an identity worker. While employee identities are not regulated exclusively by managerial sources, organizations intentionally provide a significant part of the discursive material through which individuals accomplish their life projects and recognize themselves as carriers of specific identities. However, the connection between power/control and identity needs to be fully explored in communication research, especially through multiple levels of analysis and new means of messaging that may not be classed as propaganda yet in practice function that way.

The “dark side” of identification has been explored through notions of disidentification, deidentification, ambivalent identification, underidentification, overdisidentification, schizo-identification, and dual identities—all of which describe different forms of organizational attachment (Blazejewski, 2012; Dukerich, Kramer, & Parks, 1998; Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001; Pratt, 2000). Several potential negative consequences for individuals and organizations emanate from these alternative expressions of attachment, such as whistle-blowing, distrust, paranoia, and burn-out (e.g., Dukerich et al., 1998; Pratt, 2000). In contrast, some research shows that disidentifications may be just as useful for enhancing positive social identities as identifications are (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001), as is the case of productive dissent, for example (Kassing, 2007; Waldron & Kassing, 2011). One area that begs the question for further research is the connection between charismatic leadership and overidentification, something investigated extensively in the sociological and psychological literature on cults (Cook, 2010) but not examined in organizational communication.
Material-Symbolic Dialectics in Identity Formation and Expression

The interplay of materiality and symbolicity in workplace and professional identities has been given relatively scant attention in organizational communication in contrast to the sociology of work (Smith, 2000). Three distinct but interrelated issues are important in this work, namely, (1) the in-depth engagement of work activities, work contexts, conditions and activities (see, e.g., Evans, Kunda, & Barley, 2004; Kunda, Barley, & Evans, 2002); (2) the recognition that material as well as symbolic work contexts are wrapped up with identity both with respect to the embodiment of roles and experiences and their various other representations, including, for example, well-established public images of various types of work (Tietze & Musson, 2010; Turner, 2004); and (3) the fact that materiality, as with symbolicity, has multiple senses that have yet to be fully articulated and applied in organizational communication research (Ashcraft, Kuhn, & Cooren, 2009; Simpson, Cheney, & Weaver, in progress).

In organizational communication, scholars have been a bit slower to go back to work in examining detailed specific work activities and communication processes (for exceptions, see Ashcraft, 2007; Gossett, 2002). More research needs to focus on how organizational identity and identification shape the work that people do and how the complete context of work shapes identity (both directions of influence are illustrated beautifully in the 1999 film Human Resources). For example, scholars interested in investigating the meaning of work might ask about the ways in which people actually structure and use their time vis-à-vis their stated life and professional goals (Cheney, Zorn, Planalp, & Lair, 2008) or how they relate to official expressions of what their workplace stands for (Llewellyn & Harrison, 2006). Researchers could examine multiple roles and situations in terms of identity formation, transformation, and narratives of work and life aimed at various audiences across domains.

Three examples are important when considering the intersection of materiality and identity. First, the material and the symbolic both play an important role in the process of identity work. For instance, Alvesson and Willmott (2002) examine identity work as a medium and outcome of organizational control by showing how employees are encouraged to align their identities to managerially inspired discourses. Yet the authors note that “the role of discourse in targeting and moulding [sic] the human subject is balanced with other elements of life history” (p. 628).

Second, Ashforth et al. (2000) have conceptualized the shift between boundaries—home, work, and social—as micro role transitions. The authors note that role identification is a factor that is likely to affect the boundaries that one creates, maintains, and crosses. Tracy (2005) found, for example, that correctional officers who highly identified with their professional roles had more difficulties managing emotional labor. This form of identification occurs when “a role occupant defines himself or herself at least partly in terms of the role and its identity (e.g., ‘I am a machinist, a bowler, a parent’)” (Ashforth et al., 2000, p. 483, emphasis in original). While research has studied multiple targets and sources of identification on a large scale (e.g., during company transition; see Larson & Pepper, 2003), scholars have done little work on what Ashforth and colleagues call micro role transitions or ones between roles and other levels of identification.

Third, an interesting example of an organizational and social context especially appropriate for considering the interplay of body, place, symbolism, organization, and identity is that of retirement communities. As both landscapes (e.g., Laws, 1993, 1995) and organizations (Simpson & Cheney, 2007), retirement communities influence identities and expectations of residents and employees. Retirement villages are organizing landscapes and corporate bodies, where residents and employees respond to and
enact physical and symbolic dimensions of aging identities as well as organize their work and relationships with each other. Retirement villages represent a division or a transition between work and retirement (Laws, 1995), one that signals a departure from and yet a reminder of the familiar work spaces. Following Laws, Simpson et al. (in progress) argue that the process of *emplacement* may help to navigate relationships between organizing work and organizing elders. Emplacement is a conceptual and practical means of conceiving of the complex relationships of material conditions/contexts and symbolic/discursive formulations that bear on the positioning and identity of retirement village residents (Simpson & Cheney, 2007).

Future studies need to investigate the material grounds, contexts, and resources for identity and work. In some ways, popular culture and everyday understandings of work, identity, and materiality are more advanced or at least more penetrating than the ways organizational scholars have examined material conditions. In this regard, the metaphor of *translation* has contributed greatly to understanding of how physical objects achieve a kind of agency as they enter streams of consciousness and discourse (Ashcraft et al., 2009; Latour, 1993). This perspective is clearly relevant to identity formation in work, professional life, and occupational contexts, especially regarding how such identities are formed and expressed (Ashcraft, 2007; Cheney & Ashcraft, 2007). At the same time, however, the *mythos* and attendant biases of organizational communication often lead scholars to overlook the powerful and sometimes overwhelming presence of the material. Thus an unintended empirical bias in research may make it difficult to account for the role of materiality in a complete way. Where identity and identification are concerned, even the context of virtuality has important material dimensions that scholars are only beginning to understand in their studies of physical, physiological, cognitive, emotional, and social factors.

### Conclusion

In this chapter, we have brought together established and emerging lines of research, including diverse theories and methodologies that highlight the historical and cultural contexts of organizational identity and identification studies. Above all, though, we have argued for the simultaneous consideration of multiple levels of analysis and suggested theoretical and practical bridges as areas of investigation for organizational *identity* and *identification*. Our review has been multidisciplinary, with a focus on communication-oriented insights that have not yet realized their full potential in this long-standing arena of investigation.

We conclude this review with a call for specific types of research on organizational identity and identification that are

- culturally and historically informed by being sensitive to both synchronic and diachronic analysis;
- integrative in moving across levels of analysis from micro to macro and vice versa;
- multimethodological in bridging case-based investigations, critical reflections, and broad-based empirical data;
- engaged with assisting organizations not only in crafting identities but also in producing them and their members to reflect on the meanings of them; and
- ethically aware in grappling with key practical and policy-related issues of identity, work, and institutions today.

The cultural situatedness of identities and identifications is, by now, well established; however, it is equally important to consider how economic, political, and social trends shape and are shaped by those identities and identifications. Spanning levels of analysis in research on organizational identity and identification is as important now as it was in the early 20th century not only because of interrelated developments at the levels of nation state, corporation, and community but
also because studies of reformulations of national identities have enormous implications for positioning corporate identities and vice versa. Frequently, studies address both team and organizational identification (Barker & Tompkins, 1994). A great deal remains to be explored regarding how organizational identities and identifications connect “upward” to broader institutional and cultural formations (as called for by Carlone & Taylor, 1998).

Studies of organizational identities and identifications have used empirical, interpretive, and critical methodologies. To date, however, few investigations take full advantage of multiple strategies or methods that are in conversation with one another, for example, surveys that also include interpretive and/or critical reflection. In addition, we echo calls for major longitudinal case studies, voiced in 1981 at the Organizational Communication Conference in Alta, Utah (see Cheney, Grant, & Hedges, in press).

Engagement is a popular but ambiguous theme in the contemporary academy; we use it here to advocate critical reflection by producers and consumers of the key messages that represent organizations, especially with an eye toward agency and pragmatic implications of such messages. Finally, we highlight ethics, because it has not received much attention in the research on organizational identity and identification (Hedges, 2008). Intense and enduring loyalties or affiliations make a difference in the lives of individuals and groups, and abuses as well as noble achievements can occur in their names. This observation alone is an important reason for scholars to give more attention to the ethics of identification in work and organizational settings.

In closing, given the enormous volume of research on organizational identity and identification, the centrality of the concepts to contemporary social life, and the important insights that communication studies offer, we call for investigations of both wider scope and greater depth with the aim of contributing to the key issues and discussions of our simultaneously local and global world.

References


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