Identity in Organizations: Exploring Cross-Level Dynamics

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Most research on organization-based identities focuses on a single level of analysis, typically the individual, group, or organization. As a spur to more cross-level identity research, we offer speculative discussions on two issues concerning nested identities. First, regarding the processes through which identities become linked across levels, we explore how identities at one level of analysis enable and constrain identities at other levels. We argue that, for a collective identity, intrasubjective understanding (“I think”) fosters intersubjective understanding (“we think”) through interaction, which in turn fosters generic understanding—a sense of the collective that transcends individuals (“it is”). Second, regarding the content of linked identities, we suggest that identities are relatively isomorphic across levels because organizational goals require some internal coherence. However, for various intended and unintended reasons, isomorphism is often impeded across levels, and identities tend to become somewhat differentiated.

Key words: group identity; organizational identity; multilevel; cross-level; sensemaking

History: Published online in Articles in Advance.

Introduction

The topic of identity in and of organizations remains very popular in academia and practice, in large part because identities constitute a “root construct” (Albert et al. 2000, p. 13) for a wide variety of organizational phenomena and outcomes. From the formulation of strategy to the enactment of leadership, and from the genesis of intergroup conflict to the pride felt by employees, the role of identity is apparent.

Most identity research has focused on a particular level of analysis, primarily the individual, group (including occupation), or organization, and secondarily the dyad or industry.1 This is understandable given the complex and somewhat unique nature of each level of analysis. However, the tendency toward within-level research has left important questions regarding between-level dynamics largely unanswered. Indeed, writing more broadly about systems, Wiley (1988, p. 260) refers evocatively to “levels-imperialism, i.e. the subordination of one level to another.” As in most areas of organizational studies, to truly understand the organization as a system of interacting identities, we must understand how levels of analysis interact (Klein and Kozlowski 2000).

To be sure, identity research has begun to examine the rich cross-level dynamics regarding levels of self (see Ashforth et al. 2008 for a review of identification research). Levels of self and levels of analysis are easily and often confused: levels of self refer to how the individual conceives of his or her identity, from the level of the individual (“I am ambitious”), to the dyad or relationship (“I am a friend”), to the group (“I am a team member”), to the organization and industry. Research on levels of self typically focuses on identification, the extent to which the individual internalizes a given identity as a valid definition of self. Levels of analysis refer to the identity of an entity as an entity (i.e., at extratypial levels, as a property of the collective rather than any individual) and again range from the level of the individual (“I am ambitious”) to the dyad (“We are a partnership”), to the group (“We are a team”), to the organization and industry.2

Our objective here is to help spur conversations on the nature and dynamics of nested identities across levels of analysis, where “nested” means embedded (e.g., a job is nested within a department, which is nested within an organization; Ashforth and Johnson 2001, Feldman 1979). Specifically, we discuss two related questions: (1) how do nested identities become linked across levels of analysis? And, once linked, (2) how isomorphic are nested identities across levels of analysis? The first question pertains to the processes by which organization-based identities come into existence and come to influence the nature and enactment of identities at other levels, whereas the second question pertains to the content of those identities. To realize our objective and help prod research on cross-level dynamics, we offer some initial, speculative answers to these questions. Our initial answers will suggest that much of the impetus for—and form of—a given identity can be explained by
between-level rather than within-level dynamics, implying that the current emphasis on the latter is missing much of the story. Furthermore, rather than develop parallel models of identity for each level of analysis, the systemic focus facilitated by cross-level models should lead to greater parsimony.

Before plunging in, we need to define identity and discuss why it matters. Different research traditions inform work at each level of analysis, making an all-inclusive definition of identity problematic. The sociologically oriented frameworks that inform research on social or collective identities are quite different from the psychologically oriented traditions that inform research on individual or personal identities. Not surprisingly, then, many definitions of identity have been offered. As Bartel et al. (2007, p. xiv) note, “The irony, of course, is that a field so singularly focused on issues of collective definition is actually lacking a coherent identity of its own.”

Given our interest in levels of analysis in organizational contexts rather than levels of self, we offer Albert and Whetten’s (1985) seminal definition of organizational identity as serviceable for all levels of analysis (Whetten 2007). Accordingly, we define identity as the central, distinctive, and continuous characteristics of an entity (see also Gioia 1998). Identity thus describes the essence of an entity (“Who am I as an individual?” “Who are we as a collective?”), whether that essence is thought to reflect an objective reality and/or a subjective construction (Corley et al. 2006, Whetten 2006).

Scholarly perspectives that view an entity’s essence as relatively objective tend to focus on the mission or role of the entity (e.g., a low-cost manufacturer of consumer electronics, a sales department, a financial analyst). Perspectives that view essence as relatively subjective focus more on the identity attributes itemized by Ashforth et al. (2008)—their values, goals, beliefs, stereotypic traits, and knowledge, skills, and abilities—and the narratives that are invoked to articulate the identity. Regardless of the perspective, it is difficult to conceive of a reasonably strong identity (that is, an entity that appears to have a clear sense of who/what it is) that does not have a more or less clear mission or role, along with certain values, goals, beliefs, and so on.

It is important to note that, when applied to the individual level of analysis, “central, distinctive, and continuous” is not meant in this paper to refer to traits and other personal attributes that make a given person more or less unique (as per social identity theory; see Haslam and Ellemers 2005), but to one’s job and, more broadly, role, i.e., what the person is more or less expected to do on behalf of the organization. Although jobs and roles are typically social categories (e.g., many departments have an office manager), there is often only one person in the dyad or collective who fulfills a particular job or role and, as such, his or her identity within the dyad/collective can be said to be more or less unique.

Why does identity matter? Morgeson and Hofmann (1999, p. 255) argue that the functions of multilevel constructs “generally remain the same across levels,” and we believe this is also true of nested identities as utilized in organizational studies. At the individual level, identity has been argued to address psychological motives “for locating and learning about the self (self-knowledge), for maintaining integrity between self and behavior (self-expression) both within and between situations (self-coherence) and over time (self-continuity), and for attaining a positive sense of self through differentiation (self-distinctiveness) and betterment (self-enhancement)” (Ashforth 2001, p. 56, italics in original).

At the group level, identity has been argued to define the group and differentiate it from relevant “outgroups” (typically in ways that edify the group), providing a foundation for member commitment to the group and action on behalf of the group (e.g., Haslam and Ellemers 2005). At the organizational level, identity has been argued to provide coherence to often disparate subunits (Barney 1998) and to differentiate the organization within an industry context, thereby increasing awareness of—as well as the motivation and capability to react to—competition, ultimately influencing strategic decisions (Livengood and Reger 2010). Although the emphases may differ across levels of analysis and between scholars working within a given level, the common denominator among these arguments is that identity serves to define (usually positively) and locate the entity in a network of related entities, providing a basis for action (and for collective identities, commitment to the collective). Indeed, Haslam and Ellemers (2005, p. 87) go so far as to say that “without social identity . . . there could be neither organization nor organizations.”

**How Do Nested Identities Become Linked Across Levels of Analysis?**

Our discussion of how identities become linked across levels of analysis draws loosely on structuration theory, negotiated order theory, and the inhabited institutional perspective (Fine 1984, Giddens 1984, Hallet et al. 2009). These perspectives basically argue that action and structure are recursive: action shapes structure, and structure shapes action. Thus, action and structure are said to both constrain (by bounding choice) and enable (by facilitating choice within those boundaries) one another (see Barley 1989 and Scott et al. 1998 for applications of structuration theory to organization-related identities; see Bechky 2010 for applications of negotiated order and inhabited institutions to organizational dynamics; see also Westenholz 2006). Thus, macro and micro levels of analysis are reciprocally linked. Accordingly, identities at higher levels of analysis simultaneously constrain and enable the form and enactment of identities at lower levels, which similarly constrain and
enable the higher-order identities. Although this creates something of a chicken and egg conundrum (which comes first?), we begin our discussion with the formation of collective identities.

**How Do Collective Identities Form?**

To foreshadow our conclusion, individual cognitions about identity (“I think”) facilitate the emergence of shared cognitions (“we think”), which over time may transcend particular individuals and are seen simply as an institutionalized reality (“it is”). How does this occur? To begin, it is instructive to review how Weick (1995) uses Wiley’s (1988) notions of levels of social theory to describe organizational sensemaking. Of the three extra-individual levels Wiley (1988) identifies, the “intersubjective” and “generic subjective” are most important here (the other is the “extrasubjective,” or macroculture, the most abstract). The intersubjective level moves beyond any single individual and is “emergent upon the interchange and synthesis of two, or more, communicating selves” (Wiley 1988, p. 258). As Weick (1995, p. 71) notes, “This transformation is not simply interaction in which norms are shared. . . . Instead, a ‘level of social reality’ ([Wiley 1988,] p. 254) forms, which consists of an intersubject, or joined subject.” In turn, the generic subjective occurs as “[s]elves are left behind” (Wiley 1988, p. 258), and the incipient understanding is seen as a reified social structure, including interaction patterns, role relationships, common purpose, and taken-for-granted beliefs. Both Wiley (1988) and Weick (1995) recognize that although collective identity likely resides in the social structures comprising the generic subjective (“who we are as a collective”) exists separately from any individual in the collective), its formation (and daily reconstruction) occurs in the movement from intrasubjective to intersubjective (as “the self gets transformed from ‘I’ into ‘we’”; Weick 1995, p. 71).

Consider identity formation (see Figure 1), as in an entrepreneurial firm. We will draw on the Drori et al. (2009) description of “Art,” a computer graphics start-up, as an example. Art’s founder enacted his own (intrasubjective; i.e., “I think”) identity as a creative and innovative graphic artist. As his artwork attracted client demand, he assembled other computer graphic artists and incorporated the nascent company. The founder’s principles of creativity and innovation infused the work of employees such that they presumably talked and thought of themselves (intersubjectively; i.e., “we think”) as creative and innovative graphic artists. Soon the “Art framework united the group in terms of a shared mental model that aided in...sensemaking and was manifested through its products, values, and activities” (Drori et al. 2009, p. 724); that is, as employees enacted their intersubjective understanding, they created a seemingly objective reality—a sense of organization—that transcended their individual and joint constructions. Ultimately, the intersubjective understanding was likely encoded in goals, routines, information flows, and so on, and came to be seen as a reified, taken-for-granted reality that was not tied to any particular individual (generic subjective; i.e., “it is”), including the founder. As one graphic artist put it, “Our artistic mark had a life of its own” (Drori et al. 2009, p. 724). The company became institutionalized in Zucker’s (1977, p. 728) sense of an objective (“potentially repeatable by other actors without changing the common understanding”) and exterior (“seen as part of the external world”) reality. Indeed, it is likely that new members could have gradually replaced departing members with little loss to the generic subjective. The greater the institutionalization, the stronger the situation, and the more the generic subjective comes to dominate subsequent intrasubjective and intersubjective constructions (cf. Barley and Tolbert 1997, Crossan et al. 1999).

The founder’s individual-level identity can be said to have influenced the formation of Art’s identity (with the help of employees who subsequently enacted that identity until it became seen as “who we are”) inasmuch as the sense of “who we are” became self-referential for the collective (Pratt 1998) and useful in distinguishing the company from others (Corley et al. 2006) over time (Albert and Whetten 1985). The ease with which the entrepreneurial example works here is instructive because it highlights the role of powerful individuals in “upward identity influence,” such that those individuals who have greater potential to influence the thinking and actions of others are more likely to be involved in the process through which individual identities affect collective identities. Indeed, Haslam and Reicher (2007, p. 137) refer to organizational leaders as “entrepreneurs of identity.” Furthermore, as Scott and Lane (2000) argue, leaders are gatekeepers regarding stakeholders’ input to the organizational identity.
As Wiley (1988) notes, the intervening step between individual and collective—the intersubjective—is often neglected in social theory, and this is no less true of many conceptions of collective identity. Instead of individual identities forming collective identities out of whole cloth, individual identities interact with others’ individual identities at the intersubjective level and are thereby transformed into something extra-individual. These extra-individual notions of “we-ness” are enacted by members of the collective and, over time, can become recurring and taken for granted (or “synthesized,” using Wiley’s 1988 terminology). In so doing, they move up a level of abstractness and take on characteristics of the social structure at the generic subjective level and become what the literature most often describes as collective identities. Thus, individual identities are best seen not as forming collective identities per se, but instead forming the basis for social interaction, which, if found to satisfy the collective’s needs over time, can become reified and synthesized into a social structure recognizable as a collective identity (cf. Crossan et al. 1999, Morgeson and Hofmann 1999).

It is important to note that the generic subjective applies not just to the organizational level but to any form of collective (although the more members, the easier it is to conceive of the collective in depersonalized terms). For example, members of a project team can develop a sense of the team that transcends particular members. Indeed, just as individuals are constructing a sense of “who we are” as an organization, they are simultaneously constructing a sense of “who we are” as members of incipient subgroups, which—as the organization grows and matures—may ultimately resolve into more or less formalized project teams, work groups, and divisions. Undoubtedly, the intersubjective and generic subjective constructions of a given collective affect and are affected by the constructions of other collectives.

Of course, identities are not constructed in a vacuum. As Coupland and Brown (2004, p. 1327) put it, “identities of organizations are authored...through interactions between ‘insiders’ and ‘outsiders.’” Scott and Lane (2000) discuss the influence of organizational stakeholders such as customers, suppliers, and shareholders on the identity-making activities of managers. Returning to the Art example, Drori et al. (2009) note that client interest in the work of Art’s founder enabled the early shift from “I think” to “we think” and that the later shift to institutionalization (“it is”) was facilitated by acclaim from an international exhibition and orders from renowned firms. External constituents play a vital, ongoing role in negotiating and validating the organization’s identity (“you are”) (Dutton and Dukerich 1991, Gioia et al. 2000, Hatch and Schultz 2002) and in holding the organization accountable for its identity claims (Cheney and Christensen 2000, Price and Gioia 2008).

Moreover, all of this occurs within a wider institutional context (which in turn occurs within a wider historical, political, and cultural context, all existing at Wiley’s 1988 extrasubjective level) that strongly shapes the possible identities that individuals and collectives may beneficially assume. Chreim et al. (2007, p. 1523) argue that the institutional context provides “interpretive, legitimating, and material resources” that entities may draw upon in defining who they are. They describe how physicians in a Canadian health clinic sought a nontraditional identity of preventive and holistic care. This quest was facilitated by an institutional context of government support for patient wellness and a guardedly supportive professional association. The physicians negotiated their nontraditional identity with governing and funding agencies and other occupational bodies (e.g., nursing), altered compensation plans and information systems, and created multidisciplinary teams to deliver integrative solutions; “[h]us, organization-level changes came to be as a result of the interaction between microlevel action and macrolevel institutional forces” (Chreim et al. 2007, pp. 1526–1527).

Institutional theory indicates that mimicking successful organizations in one’s institutional field is one route to legitimacy, suggesting a certain sameness in organizational identity within a field (as indicated, for example, by a convergence of symbols such as organizations’ names in a given industry; Glynn and Abzug 2002). Conversely, research on competitive dynamics and organizational identity indicates that organizations that carve out a niche by espousing relatively unique identities within a field tend to be more effective (e.g., Norman et al. 2007; cf. Pedersen and Dobbin 2006). Ashforth (2007, p. 91) posits that organizations can in fact have it both ways: institutional norms typically allow for some discretion such that an organization can opt for an identity that establishes it “as a member of a particular category (e.g., hospitality industry, retail banking industry) and as relatively unique within that category” (cf. discussion of strategic balance theory in Deephouse 1999; Lounsbury and Glynn 2001).

The Impact of Ongoing Enactment on Nested Identities

As the generic subjective crystallizes—the sense of what constitutes the collective identity apart from its specific members—it in turn affects the enactment and ongoing elaboration and reconstruction of the intersubjective and intrasubjective (as indicated by the bottom arrows in Figure 1). Just as the intrasubjective initially enabled and constrained the intersubjective, which in turn enabled and constrained the generic subjective, so the generic subjective in turn enables and constrains the other subjectivities, thus completing the recursive loop. Note that, as depicted in Figure 1, the generic subjective can directly as well as indirectly affect the intrasubjective (i.e., not all individual constructions are socially
mediated), whereas the intrasubjective only affects the
generic subjective indirectly because the intersubjective
necessarily mediates the impact of the individual on
the collective. Thus, as entities enact a collective identity,
they express the core, distinctive, and continuous fea-
tures of the collective identity, and thereby reinforce
the identity for themselves and their “audience.” Pratt
(2000) describes how Amway encourages distributors to
recruit family and friends as a way of enacting the orga-
nization’s identity. Through choosing to enact the iden-
tity in familiar relationships, the individuals increasingly
see themselves as distributors. Indeed, it appears highly
likely that an identity that remains unenacted will also
remain tenuous (Ashforth 2001).

In terms of cross-level effects, it seems reasonable
that enactment of a given collective identity will tend to
have its largest impact on identities at proximal (espe-
cially adjacent) rather than distal levels, with possible
ripple effects spreading to other levels (Kozlowski and
Klein 2000). Thus, a divisional identity is far more likely
to shape a departmental identity than a project team’s
identity. Furthermore, once lower-order and higher-order
identities are reasonably established, it is likely that
the downward effects of enactment will tend to be
much stronger than the upward effects because power
is generally strongly correlated with hierarchical level
(Pfeffer 1981). That said, given that collective identities
are socially reconstructed on a day-to-day basis as the
members of the collective interact with each other and
key constituent groups (cf. Nag et al. 2007), it is possible
for individual-level identities to “intervene” in that
reconstruction process and change the course of how
members of the collective interact with each other and
how the collective thinks of itself.

According to Gioia et al. (2000), identity change typi-
cally involves either (1) alteration to the labels represen-
tative of the collective identity (e.g., moving from “we
are a company rooted in tradition” to “we are an innova-
tive company”; see also Gioia and Thomas 1996, Ravasi
and Schultz 2006) or (2) shifts in the meanings under-
lying those identity labels (what it meant to be innova-
tive yesterday, “purveyor of cutting-edge technology,”
is different than what it means today, “industry-leading
customer service”; see also Cheirim 2005; Corley and
Gioia 2003, 2004; Nag et al. 2007). Although members
that occupy positions of power have far more opportuni-
ties to alter labels and shift meanings, Meyerson and
Scully (1995) suggest that tempered radicals can initiate
change in organizations by breaking problems down and
focusing on “small wins” (Weick 1984), which have the
potential to gain momentum and snowball into a larger
success. For instance, Meyerson and Tompkins (2007),
in reinterpretting research done by Sturm (2006), cite the
example of organizational catalysts within the Univer-
sity of Michigan who used their own sense of feminine
identity as the basis for sparking change in how the
organization viewed itself as advancing gender equity in
science and engineering. Barley and Tolbert (1997)
add that microlevel change is more likely to precipi-
tate macrolevel change if the former is (1) prompted by
external events (which legitimate the need for change)
and (2) consciously undertaken (given the typical resis-
tance of systems to change). In short, “random devi-
ations are apt to have only passing impact on social
arrangements” (Barley and Tolbert 1997, p. 102).

As with the impact of collective identities noted
above, individuals are more likely to influence prox-
imal higher levels than more distal higher levels. Indeed,
only limited empirical evidence exists for individual-
level effects on the organizational level (see Corley and
Gioia 2004, Fiol 2002, Gioia and Thomas 1996); thus,
it may be more fruitful for future research to focus at
the individual–group interface. Evidence of individual’s
upward influence on group-level identities could then be
used as the basis for theorizing on emergent influence
at the individual–organization interface (cf. Staw and
Sutton 1993) or from individual to group to organization.

In sum, the upshot of these structuration processes
is that higher-order and lower-order identities are for-
ever reciprocally linked such that both stability (when
enactments reinforce identities) and change (when enact-
ments challenge identities) may emerge over time. As
Wiley (1988, p. 260) notes, there is a “continuing pro-
cess of emergence.” A necessary but often neglected step
in theorizing about the construction of identities at each
extra-individual level is the shift from individual cog-
nitions about identity (“I think”) to shared cognitions
(“we think”) as a prelude to a seemingly institutionalized
given (“it is”).

How Isomorphic Are Nested Identities
Across Levels of Analysis?

Our previous discussion provided a sense of the pro-
cess through which identities across levels of analy-
sis become linked. With this grounding, we turn to the
issue of content—namely, how isomorphic are identi-
ties across levels? By isomorphism we mean “the degree
to which the constituent components of a phenomenon
and the relationships among the components are similar
across levels of analysis” (House et al. 1995, p. 87), not
isomorphism à la institutional theory.

We believe that the core, distinctive, and continuous
aspects of nested entities in organizations do tend to
be isomorphic across levels of analysis. This is because
lower-order entities typically serve the cause of higher-
order entities, and vice versa. Individuals facilitate not
only the development but the ongoing fulfillment of the
identities of dyads (e.g., individuals’ roles as manager
and employee provide the foundation for their relation-
ship as mentor and protégé), dyads facilitate the identi-
ties of groups (e.g., relationships between coworkers
affect the nature of the work group), and groups facilitate the identity (or identities) of the organization (e.g., departments contribute to organizational goals), just as the organization facilitates the identities of groups and so on. In general, then, structuration processes tend to lead to convergence in identities across levels, and the more tightly coupled the levels of analysis, the more isomorphic their identities are likely to be. Using Kozlowski and Klein’s (2000, pp. 16, 30) terminology for multi-level theorizing, identity tends to represent a “composition” (rather than “compilation”) form of emergence in that identity is typically similar across levels of analysis, resulting in “shared unit properties” (i.e., the identity is more or less common to the members of a given collective).

**Discursive Resources and Isomorphism**

Isomorphism is usually reinforced by the “discursive resources” that are used to frame and convey identity. Kuhn (2006, p. 1341) defines discursive resources as “concepts, expressions, or other linguistic devices that, when deployed in talk, present explanations for past and/or future activity that guide interactants’ interpretation of experience while molding individual and collective action.” The use of two major discursive resources for articulating identity in organizations, narratives and metaphors, has been particularly well documented at both the organizational (e.g., Brown 2006, Czarniawska 1997, Vaara et al. 2003) and individual (e.g., Down and Reveley 2009, Sveningsson and Alvesson 2003) levels of analysis.

A rich set of discursive resources can be viewed as an overarching claim to what the organization and its constituent parts represent (Albert and Whetten 1985, Ashforth and Mael 1996). Claims are often couched in positive and optimistic terms, serving as much to inspire as to inform (e.g., Alvesson and Empson 2008). As such, discursive resources may be crafted and enacted self-consciously, even manipulatively. It would be a mistake, however, to cast discursive resources as simply cynical ploys for legitimacy; they often assume a mythic quality, embodying an idealized past and the good faith aspirations and hopes for the organization’s future. In conveying (and thereby reinforcing) what the organization and its constituent parts represent (or are hoped to represent), rich discursive resources often articulate the organization’s origin(s) and preferred destination(s), creating a sense of trajectory and momentum.

Given that narratives and metaphors tend to draw on culturally available archetypes and are often used by stakeholders not only for sensemaking but for senseng purposes (thus restricting the choices to a socially desirable subset), the number of popular narratives and metaphors is likely limited for a given field (e.g., the innovative start-up). A promising research direction would be to map the diversity of identity archetypes and the conditions under which each is likely to be invoked and most effective. Extant research on allied frameworks like entrepreneurial identity stories (Lounsbury and Glynn 2001), entrepreneurial metaphors (Dodd 2002), organizational transition archetypes (Miller and Friesen 1980), and the competing values framework (Cameron and Quinn 1999) offer illustrative leads. Moreover, what Martin et al. (1983, p. 439) said of the “uniqueness paradox” in organizational culture may be equally true of an entity’s identity: “A culture’s claim to uniqueness is expressed through cultural manifestations that are not in fact unique.” The generic archetypes confer the appearance of uniqueness within a given field by being grounded in and nuanced with local details. For example, the generic archetype of the blue-chip traditionalist firm may be fleshed out by the story of a firm’s emergence within the German banking industry. Furthermore, the uniqueness paradox is likely abetted by the tendency of entities to seek uniqueness by emphasizing differences and de-emphasizing similarities with other entities at their level of analysis (Turner et al. 1987).

The articulation of identities at lower levels of analysis is likely to involve variations on the socially desirable archetypes that are articulated at the organizational level. Moreover, as individuals come to identify with their organization, they are likely to internalize the cascading narratives and metaphors as their own. Thus, Brown et al. (2005) found that employees of a tour operator appeared to conflate their individual narratives with those of the organization (i.e., “I am/we are a responsible provider of pleasurable experiences in Greece while respecting the residents, environment, and each other”).

Given our argument thus far, why did we say that isomorphism is only “usually” reinforced by discursive resources? As discussed below, there are dynamics present in organizational contexts that can prompt differentiation and impede isomorphism in nested identities, suggesting that discursive resources may at times be used to promote, ratify, and reinforce discrepant rather than convergent identity claims. For example, Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) describe how a subunit manager—drawing on loosely coupled organizational discourses of globalization, management control, facilitating creativity, and exploiting external networks—eschewed an organizationally prescribed identity of operations manager (tied to the first two discourses) in favor of a somewhat radical identity of research culture generator (the last two discourses). Furthermore, what is intriguing about the literature on narratives and metaphors is the creative range of loosely coupled narratives and metaphors that are often invoked in a single organization and the varying insights they provide for understanding emic (insider) constructions of identities. Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) also report that the manager used metaphors like “janitor,” “farmer,” and “hotel manager” to describe her work identity. Finally, as Fine (1996), Kitay and Wright (2007),
and Meisenbach (2008) document, the construction of multiple and loosely coupled—and even competing—narratives and metaphors provides diverse resources for addressing the complexities and tensions that buffet entities within and between levels of analysis. Meisenbach (2008) describes how higher-education fund-raisers deal with the inherent tensions in their occupational identity by readily “layering” multiple frames to make sense of their work in an edifying manner; for example, a fund-raiser might deal with the stigma of “begging” for money by invoking the educational mission of the organization. Indeed, “fund-raisers who primarily articulated only one frame ... more strongly expressed difficulties in negotiating, embodying, and presenting a positive occupational identity” (Meisenbach 2008, p. 278).

**Dynamics That Prompt Differentiation in Otherwise Isomorphic Identities Across Levels**

In theory, nested identities unfold in a relatively logical “identity cascade,” where a clear organizational identity directly informs and legitimizes, say, a clear divisional identity and, in turn, clear departmental and work group identities. Furthermore, clear group identities directly inform and legitimate relational identities, although given Sluss and Ashforth’s (2007) contention that relational identities necessarily implicate individual differences, there is always some variance across relationships. Finally, these nested identities situate the individual, informing certain tasks and roles. Research on substantive and symbolic management indicates that managers utilize diverse mechanisms for facilitating identity cascades, from reward systems to rituals and corporate newsletters to role models (e.g., Alvesson and Willmott 2002, Ashforth and Mael 1996). Recalling our earlier discussion of process, just as the generic subjective enables and constrains the intersubjective and intra-subjective within a given collective level of analysis, so too do higher-order identities enable and constrain lower-order identities.

However, isomorphism is not as elegant in practice as it is in theory. There are a number of obstacles to smooth identity cascades. In the following paragraphs, we discuss dynamics that prompt differentiation, and in the section below, we discuss dynamics that impede isomorphism.

Even where identities are otherwise isomorphic across levels of analysis, there are various dynamics that may induce some differentiation. First, given that nested identities become increasingly focused and grounded as one descends the cascade, their attributes are also likely to become less abstract. For example, a value of integrity at the organizational level may be fleshed out in terms of specific behaviors, such as full disclosure to customers, at the departmental level. Moreover, to the extent that an identity allows latitude in its enactment, as most do, individuals or groups will tend to flesh out the identity through their idiosyncratic behaviors. Ibarra (1999) found that new consultants and investment bankers established a credible professional identity by observing successful role models, experimenting with similar behaviors, and retaining those that were positively reinforced. This experimentation with “provisional selves” enabled employees to create an identity that was tailored to their personal attributes and the formal role.

Second, within a given level of analysis below the organizational level, different entities will likely emphasize different attributes of the higher-order identity (or identities). One way this occurs is through structural differentiation, where entities at the same level specialize in certain aspects of the inclusive higher-order identity, such as the marketing department focusing on customer service while the operations department focuses on efficiency, or one project member focusing on the role of client interface while another focuses on the role of technical analysis. Another way these within-level differences occur is through “identity differentiation.”8 Optimal distinctiveness theory indicates that individuals seek to balance a sense of inclusiveness with a sense of exclusiveness (Brewer 1991). Although the theory focuses on nested groups (i.e., how groups of varying inclusiveness may address this balance), we speculate that within a collective, individual differentiation furnishes the sense of exclusiveness, whereas the collective itself furnishes the sense of inclusiveness; that is, the common collective identity is not particularly salient when the individuals are interacting with one another—it is simply the water they all swim in (Ashforth and Mael 1996). Thus, research indicates that individual-level attributes that serve to differentiate between group members within the context of the group identity are apt to be particularly salient (Postmes and Jetten 2006). For example, within the context of an achievement-oriented work team, one’s sense of humor may mark her as relatively unique. In short, sameness frees one to seek uniqueness, and the group identity influences which individual identities will be salient.

We further speculate that optimal distinctiveness theory can be extended to each level of analysis; that is, dyads, teams, and so on may also seek to balance a sense of inclusiveness with a sense of exclusiveness, such that identity differentiation is potentially relevant to each level. This argument is perhaps most readily illustrated at the industry level, where organizations often compete head-to-head under the auspices of an overarching industry identity. (As noted, institutional theory focuses primarily on the pursuit of inclusiveness within an industry or institutional field, whereas competitive dynamics focuses primarily on the pursuit of exclusiveness.) Porac et al. (1989) studied 17 Scottish knitwear manufacturers that focused on high-quality cashmere sweaters. The authors found that the firms were culturally homogeneous and geographically isolated from other knitwear...
firms, contributing to a shared identity (i.e., “high quality fully-fashioned classic knitwear”; Porac et al. 1989, p. 409) that set them apart from these firms. Yet within their shared identity, the firms distinguished themselves from one another “on the basis of design, service, and quality” (Porac et al. 1989, p. 411) and garments (classical elegance versus sportswear).

Stepping even further out on the limb, the notion of identity differentiation suggests that perceived diversity is inevitable within each level of analysis (although a salient overarching identity can temporarily suppress these perceptions). Whether this inevitable diversity is desirable depends on the particular characteristics. Some characteristics (such as the humorist on the otherwise high-strung team) may provide a welcome note of synergy, whereas others may be seen as divisive (e.g., Williams and O’Reilly 1998), and still others may be largely irrelevant.

**Dynamics That Impede Isomorphism Across Levels**

One set of dynamics that may actually impede isomorphism is unintended. First, identities at all levels of analysis are typically multifaceted, and these facets may be only loosely coupled and even contradictory (cf. Gioia 1998). Furthermore, identities may be in flux during turbulent times (e.g., Storey et al. 2005). Thus, there is often variance in the complexity, coherence, and stability—in short, the clarity—of the identity that one level of analysis “prescribes” for the next level (cf. discussion of post-structural identities in Collinson 2006). Second, in a poorly managed organization, identities may be misaligned, among other problems. As with any complex system, it takes a certain degree of managerial competence to maintain isomorphism. Third, and relatedly, identities that are not perpetually affirmed and renewed may drift over time away from their base. The Drori et al. (2009) discussion of Art also provides an example of such “identity drift” (cf. Albert and Whetten 1985). After the successful start-up phase, the company opportunistically experimented with new business forms, “shooting in all directions” (Drori et al. 2009, p. 726) as the founder put it. The founder aggressively pursued Internet opportunities, implicitly marginalizing those employees steeped in the original graphic arts identity. As one artist said, “We had the spirit of Art; we came every morning with a feeling that something big was happening... In the new Art, we, the original staff of creators, are left out” (Drori et al. 2009, p. 728). Although identity drift may alter or at least blur or dilute the identity of the organization, this may in fact prove desirable if it ultimately fosters needed change and better congruence with the environment.

A second set of dynamics is typically intended. First, entities at any level of analysis may deliberately deviate from their “prescribed” identity (e.g., Foreman and Parent 2008), whether for purposes of self-aggrandizement (i.e., negative deviance) or for the betterment of the entire organization (i.e., positive deviance). As research on identity work (e.g., Watson 2008) and resistance to unwanted identities (e.g., Ashforth and Mael 1998) makes clear, individuals and, by extension, more collective entities often have their own ideas about who they want to be. Indeed, entities may cultivate a certain strategic ambiguity in their identities to accommodate the diverse preferences of their members and to provide latitude in action and in the potential for change without being accused of contravening core principles (Eisenberg and Goodall 2001, Gioia 1998). Second, in organizations with multiple and especially conflicting identities, different entities may emphasize different mixes of the identities, leading to discontinuities across levels of analysis. For example, Glynn (2000) describes how the Atlantic Symphony Orchestra had a hybrid identity of business acumen and musical excellence, with senior management focusing on the former and the musicians focusing on the latter. Corley (2004) also documents how different hierarchical levels can generally agree on the content of the organization’s identity but differ in their detailed perceptions of the identity and the way they talk about the identity; specifically, top managers tended to view and talk about organizational identity as being like organizational strategy, whereas lower level employees tended to view and talk about identity more in line with organizational culture.

Finally, perhaps the most provocative of the intended dynamics is the “identity foil” (Ashforth and Johnson 2001). An identity foil exists where an entity defines itself at least partly in opposition to or as the antithesis of another entity, in short, where the entity disidentifies with the other (Elsbach 1999). Identity foils can exist within a level of analysis (indeed, the desire for identity differentiation often fuels the development of foils) and between levels, the focus of this paper. Examples of between-level identity foils include Collinson’s (1992) study of how shop-floor employees actively defined themselves as the antithesis of the organizational identity espoused by management (e.g., independent versus interdependent), Corley and Gioia’s (2004) study of a soon-to-be-spun-off subunit’s collective identity being based in differentiation from the parent organization (“In response to questions relating to ‘Who are we as an organization?’ most answers involved how Bozkinetic was not like Bozco”; p. 185), and the finding of Jermier et al. (1991) that four of five subcultures in a police force formed in resistance to top management’s propounded organizational identity of traditional policing (i.e., a “crime-fighting command bureaucracy”; p. 176). As these examples suggest, foils often emerge as a bulwark against the identity of a higher-order entity. Although identity foils appear dysfunctional in that they institutionalize a divisive conflict, they may actually...
serve a quite functional purpose by providing checks and balances on the inherent myopia that informs any entity. Indeed, identity foils may not only be complementary (two foils jointly constituting a holistic approach), but at times compensatory (one foil atoning for the shortcomings of another).

The upshot is that all this complexity and lack of coherence, exacerbated by flux and conflict, creates both challenges and opportunities for structuration processes (Watson 2008). The challenge for members of lower-order entities is in cobbled a reasonably clear and seemingly enduring identity from the available bricolage; the opportunity is that the dissensus and lack of clarity often provide latitude for members to construct identities that are suited to their particularistic needs and preferences.

In sum, we speculate that nested identities tend to be relatively isomorphic in content across levels of analysis because lower-order and higher-order identities typically need to work in concert. However, isomorphism requires ongoing attentiveness, because various forces—unintended or otherwise—may impel differentiation in identities and impede the realization of isomorphism. That said, it is important to add that these forces are not necessarily dysfunctional for the organization because they may provide the necessary “requisite identity variety” (Brown 2006, p. 740) and flexibility for interfacing with a complex and turbulent environment.

Conclusion

As research matures on identity at specific levels of analysis—typically, individual, group, or organization—diminishing returns set in, and the important and provocative research questions regarding cross-level dynamics come to loom larger. Our purpose was to spur conversations on the processes through which nested identities may become linked across levels of analysis and the convergence and divergence of the resulting contents of those identities. Regarding process, we argued that identities at each level of analysis simultaneously enable and constrain identities at other levels. Individual identity shapes collective identity just as surely as collective identity shapes individual identity, although a given level of analysis is most likely to impact dynamics at proximal (particularly adjacent and lower) levels. We contended that the impact of individual identity on collective identity is mediated by social processes; that is, at each extra-individual level of analysis, intrasubjective understanding (“I think”) gives rise through interaction to a shared understanding (“we think”) that, when enacted, in turn gives rise to a sense of the collective that transcends the individuals who comprise it (“it is”)—and, indeed, can survive the turnover of its members. The resulting “generic subjective” identity (Weick 1995, Wiley 1988) may be encoded in goals, operating routines, information flows, and so on that give it a reified and institutionalized quality. These dynamics transpire in a wider institutional context, which serves to shape and validate the incipient identities. Finally, although change in the interlocked identities is most likely to be fomented by individuals at higher levels of analysis, change can be initiated throughout the organization.

Regarding content, because organizations are goal-directed entities, requiring a certain coherence, we posited that nested identities tend to be relatively isomorphic across levels of analysis. Furthermore, we speculated that this isomorphism is reinforced by the discursive resources used across levels of analysis, as entities draw on a limited number of socially desirable narrative and metaphor archetypes for both sensemaking and sensegiving purposes. In theory, the nested levels give rise to an identity cascade where the organizational identity informs convergent lower-order identities. In practice, however, identities tend to become somewhat differentiated as lower-level entities flesh out and individualize generic identity cues, become structurally differentiated, and pursue a sense of both inclusiveness (via convergence with higher-order identities) and exclusiveness (via divergence). Additionally, isomorphism may be impeded by the complexity, incoherence, and instability that often plague identities, by incompetent management, by identity drift (where entities wander from their initial moorings), by deliberate deviance (whether for the self-aggrandizement of the entity or the betterment of the organization), by the splitting of multiple identities across levels, and by the emergence of identity foils (where an entity defines itself as the antithesis of another entity). It should be noted that the differentiation of identities and impediment of isomorphism across levels may well have functional as well as dysfunctional effects, the most important of the former being greater diversity for addressing environmental demands.

We noted at the outset our desire to spur research on cross-level dynamics. We will close with several suggestions that extend the above analysis. One intriguing issue is the potential interactions of the process and content issues. Clearly, the way that structuration processes play out strongly affects the degree of isomorphism in identity across levels. Although the thrust of structuration is toward convergence, our discussion of differentiation and impediments to isomorphism clearly indicates that divergence is not a rare experience. Thus, future research should attempt to map how structuration gives rise to convergence and to divergence. For example, should divergence be seen as simply a failure to converge, like falling short of a goal, or, as we suspect, is divergence often impelled by its own set of complicated motives and dynamics? Furthermore, our hints at the potential functional side of differentiation and impediments to isomorphism raise the question of when each type of differentiation and impediment is in fact desirable.
Our analysis has tended to focus on how entities at one level of analysis enact an identity relative to those at adjacent levels. An interesting research question is how these dynamics play out when more than two levels are involved, including levels less frequently examined such as relational, occupation (again, a form of group), business unit (group), or industry. For example, in discussing identity foils and identity differentiation, we noted how entities may intentionally deviate from the identity of the (typically) higher level. Assume that a strategic business unit (SBU) positions itself as an identity foil to the parent corporation. If a group or individual within the SBU were also so inclined, how might they position themselves as foils to the SBU? We speculate that they would tend to position themselves as counterfoils to the SBU, essentially reverting to the original identity of the parent corporation. Why? Because the identity of the parent provides a template for the groups and individuals that is simultaneously legitimate and yet serves the role of foil to the SBU. Furthermore, the counterfoil serves as a corrective to the SBU’s deviation from the parent, such that the hierarchy of entities provides a fairly diverse and perhaps complementary set of identities for engaging the external environment.

Finally, examining the cross-level dynamics of nested identities naturally invokes the related notion of image and the external forces that act upon an entity’s sense of self. Image accounts for both (1) the actual perceptions that others have of an entity (e.g., the perceptions key stakeholders have of an organization, commonly referred to as organizational reputation; Fombrun and Shanley 1990) and (2) how an entity prefers to be perceived by others (as evidenced by impression management efforts). Little consideration has been given to the interactions between the dynamics of image and the cross-level dynamics of identity (Cheney and Christensen 2000, Gioia et al. 2000, Hatch and Schultz 2002), providing numerous avenues for future research. For example, Elsbach and Kramer (1996) detailed the role played by images of business schools—published in the form of rankings—on the emergence of identity threats within those schools; however, their analysis only scratched the surface of how those identity threats were intertwined around the downward cascades and upward enactments of cross-level identity within each school. Likewise, research on organizational identity change has highlighted the role of construed external images in sparking change (Corley and Gioia 2004, Dutton and Dukerich 1991) but has remained relatively silent on how construed images at different levels within the organization affect the corresponding levels of identity and their interactions with each other.

In closing, viewing identity not as a property of a single level of analysis but as embedded in a dynamic system encompassing multiple levels opens many new and important avenues worth exploring.

Acknowledgments
The authors are indebted to Linda Argote, Stuart Bunderson, Peter Foreman, Denny Gioia, and Kyle Lewis for their very helpful comments on an earlier draft of this paper.

Endnotes
1Occupational identity presents an odd case: although jobs are nested within organizations, implying a discrete level of analysis, occupations transcend any single organization (e.g., many companies have lawyers), implying some independence from specific organizations.
2Note that the level of self and the level of analysis are the same at the individual level.
3Although Albert and Whetten (1985) used the term “enduring” rather than “continuous,” subsequent research suggests that identity change at the collective is not only possible, but likely (Corley et al. 2006, Gioia et al. 2000), even if only over extended periods of time. Thus, “continuous” is a more appropriate descriptor than “enduring,” especially across levels.
4It should be noted that post-structuralists view identity as more fragmented and dynamic than this definition suggests (e.g., Meisenbach 2008).
5It is important to note that the levels of social theory do not correspond to the levels of analysis (or levels of self). As will become apparent, the three levels of social theory considered here may each be present in a given collective level of analysis, whether it be a team, department, or the organization itself.
6The notion of intrasubjective (“I think”), intersubjective (“we think”), and generic subjective (“it is”) is similar to the Crossan et al. (1999) “4I” model of organizational learning (i.e., intuiting, interpreting, integrating, and institutionalizing). Crossan et al. (1999) regard interpreting as linking the individual and group levels, integrating as linking the group and organizational levels, and institutionalizing as residing solely at the organizational level. Conversely, we argue that each extra-individual level (whether group or organization) can involve “i think,” “we think,” and “it is” as members’ socially construct identity. (Alternatively, members at a given level may essentially import an identity—or accept an imposed identity—from another level.)
7Relational identities are different in this regard. Following Sluss and Ashforth (2007), relational identities represent a confluence of role- and person-based identities such that the relationship does not transcend the individuals involved.
8The difference between structural differentiation and identity differentiation is formalization: structural differentiation reflects more or less institutionalized mandates, whereas identity differentiation, as described shortly, reflects social comparison processes. Thus, identity differentiation can morph into structural differentiation if it becomes formally recognized.
9To the extent that the organization actually endorses otherwise divergent initiatives as a means of assessing the desirability of identity change, even if only tacitly, the initiatives should not be characterized as unintended drift.

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Ashforth, Rogers, and Corley: Identity in Organizations: Exploring Cross-Level Dynamics
Organization Science, Articles in Advance, pp. 1–13, © 2010 INFORMS


