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Organizational Identity Formation and Change[†]

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Abstract

Theory and research concerning organizational identity (“who we are as an organization”) is a burgeoning domain within organization study. A great deal of conceptual and empirical work has been accomplished within the last three decades—especially concerning the phenomenon of organizational identity

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change. More recently, work has been devoted to studying the processes and content associated with identity formation. Given the amount of scholarly work done to date, it is an appropriate time to reflect on the perspectives, controversies and outcomes of this body of work. Because organizational identity change has received the preponderance of attention, we first review that extensive literature. We consider the conceptual and empirical work concerning the three putative “pillars” of identity (i.e. that which is ostensibly central, enduring, and distinctive). We devote particular attention to the most controversial of these pillars—the debate pitting a view that sees identity as stable over time (a position we term as the “enduring identity proposition”) and a contrasting stance that sees identity as more changeable (the “dynamic identity proposition”). Following our review of the identity change literature, we next take up a review of the notably smaller compendium of work on identity formation. We consider the conceptual and empirical work devoted to studying the external influences on, as well as the internal resources used, to fashion a nascent identity. Finally, we discuss in more depth the controversies associated with the pillars of identity, assess the four prevalent views on organizational identity (the social construction, social actor, institutionalist, and population ecologist views), assimilate the research on both identity formation and change, and consider the prospects for future work on both phenomena.

Introduction

By and large, the critics and readers gave me an affirmed sense of my identity as a writer. You might know this within yourself, but to have it affirmed by others is of utmost importance. (Ralph Ellison)

Intel equaled memories in all of our minds. How could we give up on our identity? How could we exist as a company that was not in the memory business? It was close to being inconceivable. (Andy Grove, 1996, p. 90, as quoted in Tripsas, 2009)

Consider the following now famous exchange on the floor of the U.S. Senate in July of 2005 . . . Senator Jeff Sessions spoke out against legislation that would have prohibited cruel, inhumane or degrading treatment of prisoners in U.S. custody, arguing that there was no need for the legislation because, as he put it, these are not prisoners of war, “they are *terrorists!*” Senator John McCain, a decorated former prisoner of war himself, countered passionately that, “It’ not about who *they* are. It’ about who *we* are!” In a subsequent letter he argued that, “The abuse of prisoners . . . is anathema to the values Americans have held dear for generations.” (Excerpted in Hamilton and Gioia, 2010)

If there is any concept that is essential to any member of society, it is the concept of identity. Whether considering an individual (the first epigram above), an organization (second epigram), or even a nation (third epigram), identity is a core concept invoked to help make sense and explain action. Indeed, identity now has become one of *the* core concepts in organization study itself. The idea of identity is easily understood as crucial at the individual level, but over the last generation, its importance has become increasingly apparent at more macro-levels of analysis as well. Indeed, the study of identity seems now to have taken on a life of its own and has evolved into a lasting domain of study in our field, despite fears 15 years ago that it might become yet another a faddish topic. Indeed, two of the present authors felt some sense of urgency to have what became the Gioia, Schultz, and Corley (2000) article published as soon as possible because they thought the “identity wave” was cresting and that the topic would then recede over time. How very wrong they were. Intense interest in identity remains with us and, if anything, that interest is stronger than ever, as evidenced by the increasing number of works dealing with the subject. Witness the following rationale for the still burgeoning interest in the study of identity:

Why is identity becoming an emerging perennial domain of interest? Here’ what I think: The idea of organizational identity simply *resonates*. It resonates with people in organizations, and it resonates with those of us who study organizations. It resonates because it constitutes the most meaningful, most intriguing, most relevant concept we deal with in both our personal and organizational lives. Identity is about *us*—as individuals and as organization members—and it enquires into the deepest level of our sensemaking and understanding. When you study identity you are delving into the inner reaches—of yourself and your subject of study. There is just something profound about the idea itself, as well as the scholarly effort to study it. Identity also has the requisite mystery that characterizes all the great domains of study It is a stable over time concept, and I prophesy that it will continue to emerge and re-emerge in different guises over the coming years. (Gioia, 2008)

In this review, we will focus mainly on an organization-level identity. In keeping with many of the writings on organizational identity, we will adopt a definition of identity as those features of an organization that in the eyes of its members are *central* to the organization’ character or “self-image”, make the organization *distinctive* from other similar organizations, and are viewed as having *continuity* over time (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Features that are central are manifested as key values, labels, products, services, or practices, etc. and are deemed to be essential aspects of organizational self-definition of “who we are”. An important part of identity is history because an organization can only know if it is acting “in character” if it has a history of

action consistent with its founding or adopted core values. Of the three definitional pillars noted above, this one has emerged as perhaps the most essential feature, simply because if there are no perceived central or core features, it is difficult to even conceive of the idea of identity.

Features that distinguish the organization from other organizations, the second pillar, are also important. Implicit in the concept of identity is difference or separation from someone or something else. A key notion related to this aspect of identity is the concept of “optimal distinctiveness” (Brewer, 1991), wherein organizations as entities in social space want to see themselves—and to be seen by others—as similar to relevant members of a category or industry and yet somehow distinctive from those other members (Corley et al., 2006). Such distinctions are arguably harder to make in this modern era, however, because organizations so frequently benchmark the features and “best practices” of other organizations, which has the perhaps unintended effect of reducing the range of truly distinctive features possessed by any given organization—an effect that parallels Martin, Feldman, Hatch, and Sitkin’s (1983) “uniqueness paradox”, wherein organizations were observed to be asserting the ostensible distinctiveness of their cultures despite the fact that so many of those cultures shared the same values, norms, metaphors, and practices. Such findings point up the major recognition that what really matters is that organization members themselves *believe* that they have distinctive identities, regardless of whether such beliefs are “objectively” verifiable.

The third identity pillar is perhaps the most controversial. Albert and Whetten variously described a key feature of identity as either “enduring” or having “continuity” over time and there has been some lively debate, in particular, over the issue of whether identity is actually enduring or can change within relatively short spans of time. That debate has effectively been resolved by a now substantial body of work that affirms that identity often changes over relatively short time horizons, albeit perhaps in subtle ways. The important recognition is that insiders tend to perceive identity as stable, even when it is changing, because they continue to use the same labels to describe their identity even as the meanings of those labels change without conscious awareness. In other words, *the labels are stable, but their meanings are malleable*—thus leading to the appearance of stability even as identity evolves (Gioia et al., 2000). The more appropriate question, then, is not whether identity is enduring, but whether people think it is enduring and act as if it were immutable . . . even if it is not. Overall, then, we maintain that it is more appropriate and accurate to refer to identity as having continuity over time rather than labeling it as “enduring”, which we consider to be a subtle but significant misnomer.

Over the relatively brief history of organizational identity study, a number of perspectives on the phenomenon have evolved. One perspective, which has come to be known as the “social construction” view (Gioia et al., 2000) holds that organizational identity is a self-referential concept defined by the members

of an organization to articulate who they are as an organization to themselves as well as outsiders. This view focuses primarily on the labels and meanings that members use to describe themselves and their core attributes. A second perspective, known as the “social actor” view (Whetten & Mackey, 2002) also sees organizational identity as self-referential, but emphasizes a view of organizations as entities making assertions about who they are as actors in society and, therefore, focuses on the overt claims made in articulating the features of organizational identity. A third perspective, which we term the “institutionalist” view, and which complements the social construction and social actor views, treats identity as an internally defined notion, but has traditionally regarded organizations as highly socialized entities, subject to the strong influence of institutional forces. Consequently, unlike the social actor and social construction views that focus on the “distinctiveness” aspect of organizational identity, this perspective has traditionally emphasized the “sameness” or isomorphic aspect of organizational identity (Glynn & Abzug, 2002). Although recent institutionalist studies have moved away from mainly deterministic arguments by adopting a more constructivist perspective and attempting to explain the “distinctiveness” element of identity as well (Glynn, 2008), the emphasis on institutional processes set this view apart from the social construction and social actor views. Finally, the “population ecologist” perspective (Hannan & Freeman, 1977) adopts an externally defined view of organizational identity, essentially seeing identity as a concept held by outsiders about organizations (Polos, Hannan, & Carroll, 2002). In this view, organizational identity is overwhelmingly defined by category (industry) membership and, therefore, any given organization’s identity is rather simply and starkly described by the attributes associated with that category by outside parties.¹ Of these views, we as authors are best described as favoring a social construction view, but with a deep appreciation for the influential role of claims, images and institutional contexts in affecting the forming, sustaining, and changing of organizational identity. We reject the traditional population ecologist view as an inappropriate use of the term “identity”. In fact, we do not even consider the phenomenon described by most pop ecologists to be identity, but rather a mis-labeling of the concept of image. More on this issue will be discussed later.

In accordance with our preferred perspective, we see another key aspect of identity as its being not only self-referential, but also self-reflective—that is, it is a reflexive consideration of the existential question “who-am-I-as-an-individual?”/“who-are-we-as-an-organization?”. Identity, at all levels, taps into the apparently fundamental need for all social actors to see themselves as having a sense of “self”, to articulate core values, and to act according to deeply rooted assumptions about “who we are and can be as individuals, organizations, societies”, etc. Identity is one of a number of multi-level notions that stem from what most laypeople would think of as a micro-level individual notion (other concepts include knowledge, learning, memory, and mind) that have been applied to

a more macro-level by various scholars and it is the latest of such anthropomorphized notions to be the subject of intensive study at the organizational level.

In terms of development as a theoretical concept, identity now has moved on from its infancy stage represented by the foundational Albert and Whetten (1985) work and the follow-on Dutton and Dukerich (1991), Fiol (1991) and Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) works (although the latter study was somewhat disguised because it was not framed in overt identity terms). Work on organizational identity subsequently went through a “developmental” period in the mid- to late-1990s represented by Reger, Gustafson, Demarie, and Mullane (1994—also nicely disguised behind a title that did not allude to identity), Elsbach and Kramer (1996), Gioia and Thomas (1996) and included the works in the edited Whetten and Godfrey (1998) volume and the Special Topic Forum edited by Albert, Ashforth, and Dutton on Organizational Identity and Identification in *Academy of Management Review* (2000). The study of organizational identity soon, thereafter, reached a stage that Corley et al. (2006) labeled as “aged adolescence” in the wake of works by Fiol (2002) on identity and sustainability, Hatch and Schultz (2002) on identity dynamics, Corley (2004) on hierarchical differences in identity perceptions, Corley and Gioia (2004) on identity ambiguity, Chreim (2005) on continuity and change in identity, and Brickson (2005) on identity orientation. We believe that identity study’s ongoing transition to a mature stage (as a core and more-or-less permanent domain within organization study) will likely concern the question of how identity theory and research relate to some of the other important issues and conceptualizations of our field (e.g. knowledge, learning, strategy, innovation, institutionalization, and even organizing itself).

Historically, the study of identity change pre-dated the study of identity formation, which does not seem to make logical sense, but it is not at all an unusual attribute of organizational study (consider all the work on institutional theory before taking up a consideration of how institutions come about). It seems to be our penchant for describing observed phenomena *before* asking how those phenomena come to be in the first place. How did this apparently inverted state of affairs come about? In part, it was the result of studying the larger question of organizational change itself and discovering that identity was heavily implicated (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Fiol, 2002; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Reger et al., 1994). Dealing with the gravitas of organizational change meant that a theoretical understanding of related identity change became a scholarly imperative. Another reason for the rather relentless focus on identity change is simply the availability of research sites and the admittedly intriguing theorizing that pertained to conceptualizing identity change as an organization-level phenomenon. Finally, it is probably fair to say that identity theory and research got caught up in debates about the durability of identity, which, as theoretically interesting as they might be, nonetheless distracted from consideration of questions concerning the more fundamental issue about the origins of organizational identity. All these

interesting pursuits led us to overlook asking the basic question about how organizational identity forms to begin with.

In this monograph, despite a logic that might argue for first reviewing the works that generated an initial understanding of organizational identity formation, we will follow the emergent chronological progression of scholarly investigations into organizational identity and first consider the work on identity change. The reason for doing so is because much of the motivation for studying identity formation is actually rooted in the questions raised by studying organizational identity change. Then, we will take up a review of the relatively sparse work on organizational identity formation. Taken together, both literatures (and there are some overlaps, in that several studies serve as lenses on both organizational identity formation and change) can inform our understanding of what might come next. Overall, at this moment in its history, we see organizational identity study as standing on the verge of adulthood, ready for its senior prom. Is the field now “all dressed up with no place to go?” or is it instead “all dressed up with some intellectually exciting places to go”, now that almost all the germane concepts are in place and all the basic issues identified? We believe it is the latter and, if we do our job well, this review can serve not only as an integrated review of the relevant work to date, but also could be a harbinger of work that takes place in the coming mature years.

Organizational Identity Change: Review and Reflections on Three Decades of Study

Nothing endures but change. (Heraclitus, 540–480 BC)

The Greek philosopher Heraclitus’ words are perhaps most tested in the case of organizational identity. Albert and Whetten (1985) declared that identity must be “enduring” as an essential (and essentially non-negotiable) feature of the concept. The issue of the temporal aspect of organizational identity—*does it endure and/or is it dynamic*—features prominently in organizational identity discourse, however—perhaps not just because it flies in the face of the ancient wisdom that change is the only constant, but that even when the inevitability of change is accepted, it is easier said than accomplished. Especially, when we consider that identity is the very “essence of an organization” (Margolis & Hansen, 2002, p. 277) and one of the “carriers” of institutions (Scott, 2008), a better understanding of identity change becomes valuable not only to the domain of organizational identity, but to the larger discourse on organizational change itself.

As noted, research on organizational identity has primarily rested on Albert and Whetten’s (1985) initial conceptualization—as a self-referential definition held by members of an organization (“who we are, as an organization”). This self-concept ostensibly must meet the three originally specified criteria of core,

enduring, and distinctive (CED), “each necessary, and as a set sufficient” to qualify as the identity of an organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985, p. 292).² Albert and Whetten’s early conceptualization, specifically, the CED definition, not only paved the way for a new stream of research on organizational identity, but continues to be a touchstone for studies in this domain, despite the profusion of definitions and conceptualizations that have followed in the literature. With growing research on organizational identity has come a closer examination of the concept, however. Although the notion of identity as defined by CED elements is prevalent, the conceptualizations of these attributes leave much that is unarticulated. Taking stock of two decades of research on organizational identity, Corley et al. (2006, p. 90) observed: “. . . what it actually means for an identity to be made up of attributes that are central, distinctive and continuous still remains unclear”. They add: “. . . few specify the actual criteria they would use to determine whether an attribute was central, distinctive, or continuous enough to be considered part of an organization’ identity” (Corley et al., 2006, p. 90).

On the issue of centrality, Corley et al. (2006, p. 90) indicated that the notion “. . . can be problematic, not because there is any question about whether or not an organization can have characteristics that are central, but because it is so difficult to define what makes a characteristic central”. Corley et al. (2006, p. 93) also observed that, barring Elsbach and Kramer’s (1996) work, the attribute of distinctiveness has received a “superficial” treatment, with the criterion of distinctiveness rarely being demonstrated. Whereas centrality and distinctiveness remain under-examined, theory and research about the “enduring” nature of organizational identity has been at the forefront of several debates, discussions, and developments in the literature on organizational identity. Beginning with the very fundamental challenge of whether organizational identity endures, to a more detailed understanding of *how* temporal aspects of identity unfold, the last two decades or so have witnessed a stream of research pertaining to the temporal aspect of organizational identity (Chreim, 2005; Corley, 2004; Fiol, 1991, 2002; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Gioia et al., 2000; Gustafson & Reger, 1995; Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Ybema et al., 2009).

Observing the trajectory of the identity change literature over the past three decades, we discerned two distinct themes. The early parts of this discourse, beginning with Albert and Whetten’ foundational 1985 piece, clearly portray identity as “enduring”,—that is, stable and durable over long periods of time. By the mid-1990s, however, changes in the regulatory, political, and technological environment had rendered organizational change and development a “central research issue” (Greenwood & Hinings, 1996). Although the early part of the discourse on organizational identity change was dominated by debates between two extreme schools of thought—one deterministic, which asserted the supremacy of environmental and inertial influences (Hannan &

Freeman, 1977), the other accounting more for human agency, which emphasized the role of choice (Child, 1972)—later phases were characterized by attempts to reconcile the two perspectives and understand how organizational actors interpret and act upon issues of change. It was the cognitive approach to organizational change that drew attention to the role of organizational identity in organizational change. Although, on one hand, this enriched the organizational change discourse by offering insight into the micro-processes that undergird a macro-phenomenon such as organizational change, on the other hand, it also energized the organizational identity discourse by raising questions about what had been taken-for-granted—the “enduringness” of organizational identity (what we might term in retrospect as the *enduring identity* proposition). Consequently, the latter parts of the organizational identity change discourse, prompted by the studies of Dutton and Dukerich (1991), Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991), and Gioia and Thomas (1996) view organizational identity as changing or capable of being changed in shorter durations of time. We term this counter-point view as the *dynamic identity* proposition.

It is important to note at this point, however, that even some of the research in the enduring identity tradition actually does accommodate the notion of change, albeit utilizing different theories and perspectives on change than the dynamic identity tradition. Drawing from Van de Ven and Poole’s (1995) framework for understanding organizational change—their four ideal-type theories of change—we concluded that the “enduring identity proposition” adheres well to the life-cycle theory of change, whereas, the “dynamic identity proposition” subscribes to the teleological theory of change. We discuss these theories in greater detail in the sections that follow. To begin, we outline the identity-as-enduring proposition and discuss studies that demonstrate *why* and *how* organizational identity endures.

The Enduring Identity Proposition

Before we delve into the stream of studies that view identity as “enduring”, it is essential to understand the source of such an assertion. What informs extant conceptualizations of identity as “enduring”? Although Albert and Whetten’s (1985) notion of organizational identity was motivated by a phenomenon they observed at the organizational level—organizational members’ “overreaction” to a seemingly insignificant budget cut at their university (Whetten, 1998)—in defining the contours of the concept of organization identity, they extended studies of identity at the individual level to the organizational level (an approach they described as “extended metaphor analysis”). Specifically, they drew the two criteria of continuity and distinctiveness from conceptions of individual identity (Whetten & Mackey, 2002). The aspect of *continuity* can be directly traced to Erikson’s (1968) work on identity at the individual level. Observing the sense of disorientation (“identity crisis”) experienced by WWII

soldiers as they returned home from war and struggled to reconcile their new selves with their previous selves, Erikson portrayed “personal sameness and historical continuity” (1968, p. 22) as necessary for psychological well-being. He defined “ego identity” as “the awareness of the fact that there is a self-sameness and continuity to the ego’s synthesizing methods and a continuity of one’s meaning for others.”

Extending this notion to the organizational-level, Albert and Whetten defined organizational identity as those “features that exhibit some degree of sameness or continuity over time” (1985, p. 265). Summarizing their work, Whetten and Mackey noted: “. . . organizational identity anchors the stability end of the stability–flexibility dimension, often used to characterize organizational elements and activities” (2002, p. 396). They added: “Identity is thus conceived of as those things that enable social actors to satisfy their inherent needs to be the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow and to be unique actors or entities” (2002, p. 396). In summary, the terms that these authors used—“enduring” and “sameness”—suggested identity as something *durable, permanent, unchanging, and stable* over long periods of time. This view resonated with the extant literature on population ecology and institutional theory where organizational identity is conceptualized as very stable because of structural inertia (Hannan & Freeman, 1977) and institutional pressures (Benner, 2007; Porac, Wade, & Pollock, 1999; Zuckerman, 1999), respectively.

As noted, we locate a life-cycle theory of organizational identity change within the identity-as-enduring school of thought. Although scholars discussing identity change often associate Albert and Whetten’s (1985) definition with a stable concept of identity, it is essential to note that, even in that article, they in fact engaged with the temporal aspect of identity change, albeit over notably long periods of time. Defining identity in terms of “continuity” and “sameness,” Albert and Whetten contemplated: “Is this the same as saying that change is difficult?”. Observing that “organizations change over time” (1985, p. 269), Albert and Whetten proposed a temporal aspect of identity that would align with what Van de Ven and Poole categorize as life-cycle theory of change (1995). In the life-cycle perspective, an entity (individual or organization) is seen as changing at critical transition points. In this conceptualization, change is in-built to the entity such that the “logic, program, or code” (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995, p. 515) regulates the process of change and moves an entity from one state to another prefigured, future state. Although this accounts for external environmental influences, it is the in-built logic that determines the entity’s development. The process of change is gradual, cumulative (attributes acquired in earlier stages are retained in later stages) and the progression of change is unitary (a single sequence) and essentially linear.

Albert and Whetten outlined “four common life-cycle events (birth, growth, maturity, retrenchment) as markers for the temporal dimension” of

organizational identity (1985, p. 275). They suggested that, over the course of the organization's life, identity shifts by both "substitution" (one identity giving way to another) and "addition" (one identity joining another—leading to dual or multiple identities—see also Albert, 1995). In terms of substitution, they often describe identity change as a "punctuated equilibrium" (Gersick, 1991; Romanelli & Tushman, 1994), unfolding over longer periods of time and that identity change "may lead to loss" (a proposition drawn from Erikson's observation of identity loss among WWII soldiers). Consequently, they discuss ways in which organizations may grieve and mourn this loss of identity and engage in "identity-related rituals" (organizational "funerals" and so on). Alternatively, in discussing identity change through addition, they speculate that organizations, in the initial phases of the life-cycle, subscribe to a *utilitarian identity* (economic value-oriented) and, in the later phases, add on a *normative identity* (social values-oriented). So, for instance, observing the commercial music industry and noting how the market center radically shifted from classical music to non-classical jazz music, Phillips and Kim (2009) suggest that an organization's founding identity is likely to shift in the face of market innovations. Based on this, the authors suggest a "theory on organizational identity as a dynamic organizational life-cycle construct" (Phillips & Kim, 2009, p. 496).

In summary, Albert and Whetten recognized that indeed "organizations change over time" (1985, p. 269), and thus organizational identity can also change, but only over extended periods. Support for the "enduring" proposition has been found in a variety of explanations—ranging from micro-level factors that "resist" change to macro-level factors that act as "barriers" to change (Nag, Corley, & Gioia, 2007).

Micro-Level Sources of Resistance to Identity Change

One micro-level factor discussed by several authors is a need for stability. At the individual level, identity "sameness over time" is considered critical for psychological well-being (Erikson, 1968). Organizational members, too, are depicted as having an "intrinsic desire to sense and experience coherence and continuity" (Weick, 1995, p. 20). Gustafson and Reger (1995) posit that, in changing times, stability of identity provides a needed sense of psychological anchoring. Taking a psychodynamic perspective, Brown and Starkey suggest that, "like individuals, the psychological organization seeks to maximize self-esteem and, in doing so, acts conservatively to preserve its identity" (2000, p. 104). The authors also assert that a change in organizational identity causes its members psychic pain, discomfort, anxiety, conflicts, and overall loss of self-esteem. There is, however, mixed response to extending the individual-level findings on identity to the organizational-level. For example, Gioia (1998) questions whether all the dynamics of identity at the individual level

are applicable to the organizational level. Christensen and Cheney (2000) too assert that "... although it is widely accepted that continuity is an important dimension of individual identity (Erikson, 1968; Mead, 1934), it is not clear in exactly what respects this observation applies to organizational identity" (p. 258).

Another frequently cited micro-level influence is the need to maintain a positive social identity. Organizational members pursue an enduring identity as a way of preserving their individual social identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Brown & Williams, 1984; Kramer, 1993). Social identity is that aspect of a person's identity that stems from affiliation and association with a social group (Brewer & Kramer, 1985; Hogg & Abrams, 1990; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Organizational members are motivated to affirm positive perceptions of their organization's identity to preserve and affirm a positive social identity for themselves (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). Therefore, when organizational aspects that members cherish—both as part of the organization's enduring identity and as part of their own social identity—are threatened, they employ various tactics to preserve the organization's identity. Similarly, Fiol (1991, 2001) suggests that strong identification (defined as a person's sense of oneness or belongingness with an organization—see Mael & Ashforth, 1992), although leading to enhanced collective efforts, could lead to resistance to identity changes. Weak identification, although enabling identity change, may not lead to advantageous outcomes because of member apathy and lack of commitment. This paradoxical requirement for greater and less identification further renders identity change as challenging (Fiol, 2001).

Macro-Level Barriers to Identity Change

At the macro-level, studies indicate that the enduring aspect of identity may, in large part, stem from its *centrality* element. What is central is deliberately preserved. Tannenbaum and Hanna (1985) and Corley et al. (2006) speculated that the "centrality" feature of identity makes it so "core" to the organization that organizational members resist any changes to it. Ashforth and Mael averred that, "... given the importance of an organization's soul to its members, a certain degree of inertia is not only inevitable, but desirable" (1996, pp. 52–53). Selznick (1957) also long ago observed that "organizations intentionally perpetuate their central and distinguishing features, preserving for tomorrow what has made them what or who they are today". Defining identity as inhering in a set of "core" features (Hannan & Freeman, 1984) that include the organization's mission, form of authority, core technology, and general marketing strategy, these authors reason that any effort to change identity or these "core features" is resisted as it raises "fundamental questions about the nature of the organization" (2005, p. 156). Finally, Van Rekom and Whetten (2007) argued that central organizational characteristics are likely

to be viewed, retrospectively, as enduring organizational characteristics in the future. Building on this tight centrality–stability link, some scholars have even taken the extreme view that the notion of organizational identity change is incompatible with the very essence of identity: in effect, taking a stake-in-the-ground stance that if it changes, it is not identity (Whetten & Mackey, 2002), thus excluding the possibility of identity change by definition.

Identity is seen as enduring not just because organizational members will it, but also because of organizational inertia, that is, organizational members often find it too difficult to bring about a shift in identity. Organizational attempts to adapt to environmental changes are likely to fail because of “structural inertia” (Hannan & Freeman, 1977) arising from external and internal sources. Among the important external sources are legitimacy imperatives. An enduring identity can be desirable because consistency over time is rewarded with legitimacy from external stakeholders. The stream of literature on ecological categories, markets, and organizational forms (Hannan, 2005; Hsu & Hannan, 2005; Polos et al., 2002) asserts that external audiences hold “identity codes” or perceptions about what it means to be a prototypical member of a category and, consequently, hold expectations about how the organization will and should act. Institutional pressures to conform to this identity become pronounced (Benner, 2007; Porac et al., 1999; Zuckerman, 1999). When the organization’s identity meets these expectations, the organization is rewarded with legitimacy, thereby improving its chances of acquiring and mobilizing resources. When organizations deviate from these identity codes, it causes confusion among audiences thus evoking disapproval, devaluation and sometimes even bringing long-term survival into question (Hannan, 2005). Glynn and Abzug (2002) demonstrated that in the pursuit of legitimacy, organizational identity—as cued by organizational names—tends to conform to industry naming practices and patterns. Citing the results of the Stanford Project on Emerging Companies, Hsu and Hannan observed the organizational implications of identity change:

... hazard of mortality for firms that experienced change in labor market identity was three times that of nonchangers; growth in market capitalization was roughly 5% per month lower for changers than nonchangers; and for some types of identity changes, the hazard of completing an initial public stock offering was lower. (2005, p. 477)

Polos et al. clarified, however, that conforming to identity codes or default expectations about identity does not imply “the absence of change in an entity” (2002, p. 111), but that such codes describe the limits within which entities are free to change their features without the risk of devaluation. Such changes, however, could be expensive and time-consuming.

It is essential, however, to note here that such studies—specifically their use of the term identity—are at odds with the widely held understanding among

organizational identity scholars that identity is *internally* defined (Gioia, Price, Hamilton, & Thomas, 2010). Identity theorists usually view outside perceptions as *images*—which affect identity, but are not identity, per se. Recognizing this, some authors (Tripsas, 2009) use the term “external identity” to refer to what ecological scholars refer to as “identity” (or code or category) and organizational behavior scholars refer to as “image.” Our stance is consistent with the original definition of organizational identity as an internally defined phenomenon.

Tripsas (2009) observed that identity inertia could also stem from external audiences for reasons other than legitimacy, such as cognitive inertia. Studying the identity-challenging, new-technology adoption process at Linco, Tripsas (2009) observed that even though the firm’s claims and its business strategy indicated a clear shift in identity—from a digital photography company to a memory card company—it took three to five years before external audiences perceived and responded to these changes. Until this period, business directories—e.g. SIC (Standard Industrial Classification) code listings—continued to list the company as a photography company. Even financial analysts lagged behind in recognizing that the company’s identity had shifted. While computer-peripheral analysts, rather than semiconductor analysts, continued to cover the firm’s financial performance, those analysts who had covered the firm for a long period continued to use financial models (including market projections) based on the photography industry long after the company’s business and identity had shifted to that of memory cards. Zuckerman (1999), too, demonstrated that firms that operate in combinations of markets of industries that do not fall into one of the securities analysts’ categories are less likely to be followed by analysts—resulting in diminished attractiveness to investors and fall in stock market returns.

Several internal pressures also encourage organizational identity stability. Organizational identity acts as a perceptual screen or filter that influences how organizational members’ process and interpret issues (Dutton et al., 1994; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Reger et al., 1994). Tripsas (2009, p. 451) observed how Linco, the company with a deeply embedded identity as a “digital photography company”, failed to recognize the commercial opportunity in USB flash drives (even though its employees had been developing and using flash drives) because “. . . Linco’s interpretation of the flash drive opportunity was driven by the firm’s digital photography identity, and because USB flash drive did not fit with that identity . . .”. Explaining the failure of total quality management initiatives in organizations despite their widespread popularity, Reger et al. (1994) observed that radical organizational changes are inhibited when actions are inconsistent with organizational identity, because members find it difficult to comprehend and implement changes. Building on their logic, we speculate that, in the course of time, this could lead to a double-looped process where an incumbent identity colors the way

incoming information is screened, interpreted, and acted upon—thereby causing the incumbent identity to be further reinforced and strengthened, eventually making it even less likely for members to process information that is contrary to identity.

Organizational practices can also be a source of identity inertia. Identity is deeply embedded and inextricable from organizational routines, practices, knowledge, skill, and capabilities (Kogut & Zander, 1996; Nag et al., 2007; Oliver, 1997), as well as distinctive competencies (Selznick, 1957). Thus, even when organizations pursue strategic change by announcing and acknowledging a shift in identity, the change may not materialize unless there are attempts to examine and revise routines and organizational practices. Observing the case of a firm attempting strategic transformation from an engineering-oriented R&D company to a business development-oriented R&D company, Nag et al. (2007) noted that although leadership formally announced a shift in identity claims (toward becoming a market-based organization), successfully disseminated new knowledge across the organization (pertaining to business development and marketing), and even made major structural changes to the organization, a failure to bring about a shift in practices eventually led the firm to revert to its previous identity. Moving beyond the cognitive approach to identity—identity as “something residing principally in the minds of organization members” (Nag et al., 2007, p. 824)—to a more practice-based perspective—identity as “embedded in the social practices of everyday work life” (Nag et al., 2007, p. 824), the authors noted that “. . . deterrence to change occurs at the intersection of identity (‘who we are’), knowledge (‘what we know’), and practice (‘how we do things here’).” Tripsas (2009), too, observed that in the case of Linco’s new-technology adoption, even when the “identity-challenging” technology was eventually noticed and the CEO announced a shift in the firm’s identity, existing organizational routines (such as resource allocation and retailing strategy) and symbolic elements (logo, office stationery, and so on) that remain locked in the previous identity inhibit the firm from accomplishing identity change.

Enablers of Identity Persistence

Beyond change resistance, organizational identity can persist as the organization staves off external pressures to change. Studies indicate that, to prevent a shift in identity, organizations and their members take recourse in a wide range of options that include putting up ego-defenses, and interpreting information differently, changing aspects of the organization other than identity and, at times, even engaging in deception. Taking a psychodynamic perspective, Brown and Starkey (2000, p. 104) indicate that “organizational concepts of self are maintained by a variety of defenses that are engaged in order to avoid psychic pain and discomfort, allay or prevent anxiety, resolve conflicts,

and generally support and increase self-esteem.” The defenses—raised automatically and unconsciously—include *denial*, *rationalization*, *idealization*, *fantasy*, and *symbolization*. These authors assert that, although ego-defenses are essential to regulate self-esteem among psychologically healthy organizations too, ego defenses among organizations with extremely high and low self-esteem could lead to a “net negative contribution to psychological health” and signal “pathological disorder” (Brown & Starkey, 2000, p. 105).

Research implicates other cognitive mechanisms in attempts to avoid organizational identity change. Elsbach and Kramer (1996) demonstrated that organizations can face “identity threats”—a mismatch between members’ perceptions of identity and external perceptions of identity (image). Instead of defending, denying, or making excuses for the gap in identity perceptions or even attempting to influence the image of the organization, they preserve their positive identity perceptions by resorting to cognitive tactics. Responding to identity threats stemming from *BusinessWeek* rankings of their MBA programs, U.S. business schools deflected attention away from threatened dimensions of organizational identity and selectively focused on organizational categories that highlighted favorable identity dimensions (e.g. “. . . some of the things that improve rankings are part of what we don’t want to change”). They also invoked organizational comparisons not recognized by the rankings (e.g. “we are considered to be the best in our region”). The authors indicate that engaging in such “identity management” was not just restricted to those in charge of public relations, but by “any member who identifies with the organization” (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996, p. 471).

Gagliardi paradoxically suggested that, under threatening conditions of change, “organizations cultures usually change to remain what they have always been . . .” (1986, p. 126) and that “the firm must change in order to preserve its identity” (1986, p. 127). In other words, when confronted by identity threat, to keep identity stable, organizations are willing to make changes in other aspects of their organization (excluding identity). Dutton and Dukerich (1991, p. 550) observe:

. . . individuals have a stake in directing organizational action in ways that are consistent with what they believe is the essence of the organization. Actions are also directed in ways that actively try to manage outsiders’ impressions of the organizations’ character [its image] to capture a positive reflection.

Thus, when confronted by identity threats, given the strong links between image and identity (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Gioia et al., 2000; Gioia & Thomas, 1996), an organization can attempt to shape the image and “pull it” back in alignment with identity. This can be achieved either through public relations initiatives (advertising, press, social media, and so on) or by engaging with business issues that would help re-shape the image of the organization.

For instance, Dutton and Dukerich (1991) demonstrated that the pressure to manage its deteriorating image led the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey to engage with the issue of homelessness, which it had previously considered as outside the scope of its operations.

Deception is another method for avoiding organizational identity change. Studying the early jazz recording industry, Phillips and Kim (2009) demonstrated how firms engage in acts of deception to preserve their identity. They revealed that when Victorian-era recording firms (historically catering to cultural elites) ventured into more profitable products geared at the mass market (a move antithetical to its Victorian-era identity), they began engaging in “identity-preserving acts” such as using pseudonyms or fictitious names. They engaged in such deception even when it did not hold direct tangible benefits in the form of consumer demand or profits.

Interestingly, a majority of these arguments for the “enduring proposition” are largely conceptual in nature (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Brown & Starkey, 2000) or cross-sectional in design, thereby offering only a snapshot view of organizational processes (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996) or “point-in-time” depictions of failed identity transitions (Reger et al., 1994). Empirical studies based on longitudinal data, on the other hand, often demonstrate shifts in identity even while capturing resistance to identity change in an initial period (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Gioia & Thomas, 1996). These studies significantly shift discourse on the temporal aspect of identity to one of dynamism. In the following section, we discuss the dynamic conception of identity and discuss studies that demonstrate *why* and *how* identity changes (or has the potential to change).

The Dynamic Identity Proposition

A number of studies indicate that despite the various deterrents to change and the ways organizational members attempt to avoid it, organizational identity does indeed change. The “enduring” identity proposition accommodates some change, but only over longer periods of time; in contrast, the “dynamic” identity proposition depicts change in more vibrant terms—as occurring over notably shorter periods (even occasionally radically and perhaps sometimes even continuously). Although capturing different dimensions of the change—*pace* of change (“shorter time horizons” vs. longer periods), *nature* of change (continuous vs. discontinuous), *source* or impetus for change (internal vs. external) and *context* of change (technological changes, high-velocity environments, mergers, and so on)—in general, these studies have an overarching theme that distinguishes them from studies assuming the enduring identity proposition: with few exceptions, they subscribe to a “teleological” theory of organizational change (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995).

The teleological theory of organizational change assumes that change is purposeful and adaptive. Here, the changing “entity constructs an envisioned end state, takes action to reach it, and monitors the progress” (Van de Ven & Poole, 1995, p. 516). The changing entity does not override environmental or internal constraints, but makes use of such constraints to accomplish its purpose. Gioia and Thomas (1996) first empirically captured planned identity change with the process of “proactive” strategic change among U.S. higher education institutions (specifically, adoption of a more business-like orientation).³ They observed that “to induce change, the organization must be destabilized and convinced that there is a necessity for a different way of seeing and being” (Gioia & Thomas, 1996, p. 375). Their study significantly shifted the discourse on the temporal aspect of identity. First, it demonstrated that identity change could be deliberate and planned; second, it explained the process (identity-image interdependencies) by which such a change could be initiated; third, in contrast to the life-cycle theory, it indicated that identity could shift in shorter periods of time; finally, studying identity in the context of organizational and strategic change, it highlighted the incompatibility between the enduring identity proposition and the larger discourse on organizational change. Juxtaposing organizational and strategic change perspectives with their findings, Gioia and Thomas (1996, p. 394) challenged the enduring identity proposition:

The definition of identity as enduring obscures an important aspect of identity within the context of organizational change. What does “enduring” mean if organizational actors presume identity to be (and treat it as) malleable as a matter of practical necessity?

The idea that identity is not enduring and the same over time, but is instead fluid, in flux, and arguably unstable, forms the premise of a subsequent statement by Gioia et al. (2000). Building on Dutton and Dukerich’s (1991) empirical demonstration of a tight coupling between organizational identity and construed external image (or how insiders think outsiders see the organization—see also Dutton et al., 1994), Gioia et al. (2000) argued that in the face of environmental challenges, it is unlikely that organizational identity can be enduring, but instead displays what is more accurately described as *continuity*. This unstable character of identity (enabled by stable labels whose meanings are nonetheless malleable) helps render the organization adaptive to environmental changes, a characteristic they label “adaptive instability” (Gioia et al., 2000). Thus, in a seemingly paradoxical manner, identity can change over time in a way that retains its coherence and provides a sense of continuity across the various time periods—in effect creating an illusion that it has indeed remained the same. Following Gioia and Thomas’s call to “soften the stricture on the conception of identity as more or less fixed to include a dimension of fluidity” (1996, p. 394), studies began to explicitly engage with the temporal aspect of identity.

This dynamic view of identity resonates with the social construction perspective on identity (Corley et al., 2006)—which views identity as emerging from the shared interpretive schemes that members collectively construct. If identity is derived from repeated interaction with others (Cooley, 1982) and collectively negotiated and shared, it should also be malleable and capable of shifting in the short term.

Impetuses for Identity Change

Several impetuses for organizational identity change have been identified. For example, as noted above, empirical studies and conceptual treatments trace the malleability of organizational identity to the fluidity of organizational image (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Gioia et al., 2000; Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Dutton and Dukerich (1991) demonstrated how disparity between current (favorable) identity and current (unfavorable) image can motivate an organization to take up issues and actions that influence identity. Gioia and Thomas (1996) extended these findings to demonstrate how image could be used as a means to change identity. Describing the planned identity change process in the U.S. higher education industry, Gioia and Thomas (1996) revealed that chief administrators of universities believed that “altering image was the path to altering identity” (1996, p. 394) and, therefore, projected a “desired future image” (“in the future, how we would like to be seen by others”), believing it would act as a catalyst and destabilize current identity, eventually pulling it to align with the desired future image. Hatch and Schultz (2002, p. 1004), too, affirm the dynamic relationship between identity and image:

Organizational identity is not an aggregation of perceptions of an organization resting in peoples’ heads, it is a dynamic set of processes by which an organization’s self is continuously socially constructed from the interchange between internal and external definitions of the organization offered by all organizational stakeholders who join in the dance.

Identity gaps are another potential impetus for changes in organizational identity. Reger et al. (1994) propose that identity gaps, or the “cognitive distance between the perception of the current and ideal identities”, (1994, p. 574) play an important role in motivating a paradigm shift in an organization’s identity. In other words, a discrepancy between perceptions of *who we are* and *who we want to be* motivates organizational members to initiate and embrace change. Gioia and Thomas (1996), too, speculated about the role of organizational vision in inducing identity change. Studying the relationship between identity gap and the impact on motivation for organizational change, Reger et al. (1994) observed an inverted bell shaped curve, wherein a small identity gap provided little incentive to overcome cognitive inertia, too

wide a gap leads to cognitive opposition, and an optimal gap leads to maximum motivation.

Relatedly, perceptions among organizational members are another influence on organizational identity change. Gioia and Thomas (1996) demonstrated that top managers' beliefs about identity (as fluid and malleable) and "prospective sense-making" contributed, in large part, to an identity-change initiative. Corley (2004) offered a more nuanced perspective of the role of managerial perception in organizational identity change, observing that identity-related perceptions of change and stability are largely a function of organizational members' location in the organizational hierarchy. He demonstrated that those at the upper echelons of the firm focused more on strategic issues and the external environment of the organization and tended to work in a mode of "constant change" and see identity as fluid, malleable, and changing more quickly; whereas, those at the lower levels of the hierarchy engaged more at the behavioral and cultural level and with the internal environment of the organization and viewed identity as stable and amenable to change only in the long run. Consequently, organizations attempting to implement identity change are likely to experience "perceptual hysteresis" (Corley, 2004, p. 1171), as those at the lower levels of the hierarchy "lag behind" in perceiving and implementing change. Interestingly, Biggart (1977) observed that "ideology-changing activities" of the organization are most successful with junior organizational members, as they have "least commitment" to the previous ideology (identity). Assuming that junior members tend to be found in the lower levels of an organization's hierarchy, Biggart's (1977) notion suggests a potentially moderating influence for Corley's (2004) findings, that could merit further investigation.

Among the external influences on organizational identity, legitimacy imperatives loom large. Although the need for external legitimacy can inhibit identity change (Hannan & Freeman, 1977), it can also present a necessity for change. It is well established that, in the pursuit of legitimacy, organizations align with the institutional context within which they are embedded (Czarniawska & Wolff, 1998; Glynn & Abzug, 2002; Glynn & Marquis, 2005). It is clear that the traditional perspective about institutions as mostly stable and homogenous settings (DiMaggio, 1988) supported the enduring identity proposition. The dynamic perspective about institutions as capable of change and transformation (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Kostova, Roth, & Dacin, 2008; Leblebici, Salancik, Copay, & King, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1977) compelled a more malleable view of identity, however. For example, Glynn and Abzug (2002) showed that in the pursuit of legitimacy, organizations adopt names that are in sync with that of the industry or institution within which they are embedded, and similarly, with institutional change and a shift in institutional norms, organizations change their names to align with the new norm.

Attempts to improve financial performance can also trigger identity change. Studying a digital photograph company's response to technological changes, Tripsas (2009) found that an organization's failure to act on new opportunities that are identity-threatening can be reversed when the failure to capitalize on such an opportunity is seen as negatively affecting profitability and/or eroding competitive advantage. Explaining the organization's eventual decision to adopt a new technology and thereby change its identity, the CEO declared: "... I needed a path to break even, so I made a lot of quick changes". Similarly, studying the reorganization of the U.S. Post Office Department to the U.S. Postal Service, Biggart (1977) observed that when survival is in question, identity-change is more easily accepted.

Finally, it is important to note that some identity change is neither planned nor even involves conscious effort, but instead emerges as the organization makes other changes in response to either environmental shifts or other changes occurring within the organization itself. Unfortunately, little conceptual or empirical consideration has been given to the non-teleological perspective and emergent organizational identity change. Cook and Yanow's (1993) study of how the Powell Flute Company responded to a discontinuity in its competitive environment provided a preliminary glimpse of what emergent identity change might look like in practice (even though the authors concentrate their efforts on the cultural changes that take place within the organization), whereas Corley and Gioia (2003) provide an initial conceptualization of how emergent identity change might interrelate with organizational learning.

Processes of Change

Studies that demonstrate the processes by which organizational identity changes tend to hold a microscope to the concept of organizational identity and break it down to its structural components. Gioia et al. (2000) took a more linguistic approach to the phenomenon of identity change and treated identity as comprising both labels and meanings; Gustafson and Reger (1995) discussed identity as a nested structure composed of tangible and intangible attributes; and Margolis and Hansen (2002) examined the content of identity and listed its "core attributes."

Portraying identity as comprising a label and closely associated set of meanings, Gioia et al. (2000) proposed that identity change could manifest in two ways (i) a change in the labels or (ii) a change in the meanings associated with those labels. Although either could lead to a revision in the organization's identity, a change in identity through a shift in label is likely to be more visible and obvious as compared with a shift in meanings only. The authors asserted that when labels persist (and the meanings change), one gets an impression of a stable and enduring identity, but "... the durability is in the label, however—

not in the interpretation of the meanings that make up the ostensible core” (Gioia et al., 2000, p. 75). Examining a meanings-based change in the context of a spin-off, Corley and Gioia (2004) observed that, even when labels persist, the transition from one set of meanings to another is often characterized by a state of “identity ambiguity”—equivocality among organizational members as to the meanings underlying the identity labels. The authors revealed that sensegiving efforts by top managers eventually helped to resolve the identity ambiguity. Observing identity change in the context of an organization adopting new technology, Tripsas (2009) also documented a phase of identity ambiguity where negative identity claims (“who we are not”) were well-defined, but positive claims (“who we are”) were ambiguous. Observing that identity ambiguity opens organizational members to new alternatives, Tripsas (2009) termed it a “useful stage” in the identity change process. As noted earlier, Corley (2004) demonstrated that organizational members’ use of the labels-meanings processes can differ across hierarchal positions within a firm. Investigating the change process in a technology service provider that was spun off from its parent company, Corley (2004) observed that those at the upper echelons of an organization (looking externally and engaged at a strategic level) were focused on label changes, whereas those lower in the hierarchy (looking internally and engaged at a behavioral level) were focused on meaning-level changes.

Taking a discursive approach to studying identity change, Chreim (2005) observed how senior managers of a bank managed subtle and continued shifts in organizational identity over decades by retaining old labels and adding/subtracting meanings from those labels. She demonstrated that organizations rely on rhetorical tactics and discursive strategies to achieve “confluence”—the simultaneous occurrence of continuity as well as change—in identity narration. Studying identity change at Bang and Olufsen, Ravasi and Schultz (2006, p. 449) observed that, in imbuing old labels with new meanings or new interpretations, top managers turn to organizational culture and the “web of familiar stories, objects, and practices to facilitate interpretation of the new claims”. In this manner, identity claims are revised—and not presented as radically new, but as “a rediscovery of values and attitudes that were already part of the collective heritage of the organization”. In a related fashion, Clark, Gioia, Ketchen, and Thomas (2010) showed the overriding importance of labels and meanings in the context of an almost intractable identity setting—the proposed merger of two “equal partner” organizations. An impasse over organizational identity issues that was inhibiting the merger was only broached when the leader of one of the organizations proposed a “transitional identity” (an interim sense by members of what the two organizations would become as a merged entity), which was acceptable to both parties as a way-station on the road to a radically different future. The transitional identity label (“Newco”) was effective because it was ambiguous enough to allow multiple meanings

and interpretations about the proposed merger by each party, but not so ambiguous as to be threateningly unfamiliar to either one.

Observing that identity research has paid little attention to environmental factors, Gustafson (1995) and Gustafson and Reger (1995) theorized about the process of identity change in high-velocity environments, which are continuously and radically changing. Gustafson and Reger (1995) portrayed organizational identity as a nested structure—with *intangible identity* at its core, and *tangible identity* attributes at the periphery. Intangible identity attributes (reflected in organizational culture) are general, “transcend any particular product, process, time or environment”, “establish the context for the organization, rather than focus on concrete outcomes” and stable, whereas tangible or substantive identity attributes (e.g. product and market strategies) are specific, tied to particular times and environmental conditions and, thereby, also semi-permanent. Intangible attributes address “why and how things are done” and substantive attributes engage with “what things are done” (1995, p. 464).

Similarly, examining identity change in the context of a merger, Margolis and Hansen (2002) isolated a general list of organizational attributes and clustered them into two main categories: *core attributes*, which satisfy the organizational identity definition (core, enduring, distinctive), and *application attributes* that do not meet the organizational identity definition. Core attributes comprised two subcategories: organizational *purpose* and *philosophy*; application attributes included *priorities*, *practices*, and *projections*. The authors observed that core attributes (purpose and philosophy) represent and constitute organizational identity; application attributes do not constitute organizational identity, but are “manifestations of organizational identity” (Margolis & Hansen, 2002, p. 286). Any modification in purpose or/and philosophy would qualify as bona fide organizational identity change and any organizational change that does not involve change in purpose or/and philosophy would not qualify as genuine organizational identity change. Consequently, a change in application attributes (without a change in core attributes) is likely to give a sense of “continuity,” whereas any change in core attributes (thereby qualifying as identity change) is likely to lead to a sense of “discontinuity.”

Change-with-Discontinuity

The idea of identity change as “discontinuous” was a break from the notion of identity change as offering a sense of continuity despite changing (Chreim, 2005; Gioia et al., 2000; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). A few studies discuss the discontinuous aspect of identity change. Studying the reorganization of the Post Office Department into the U.S. Postal Service, Biggart viewed change as “a complex and multidimensional process that destroys as it creates” (1977, p. 424). Discussing “revolutionary and radical changes,” which call for not just embracing the new, but establishing a

“discontinuity” from the past, Biggart considered previous ideology/identity as a “threat” to the organization, and proposed three ways of destroying or replacing it with a new ideology: remove and replace employees that continue to embrace the competing ideology; re-socialize employees or—an option that most organizations adopt—changing the behavior of the employees.

Fiol (2002) suggested that when confronted with the need to change organizational identity to remain competitive—and when replacing the current workforce or when incremental identity change is not an option—organizations are required to undergo a radical change or transformation of identity. She demonstrated that, in such a radical or revolutionary identity change context, identification can serve as a pivotal process by which leaders can guide change. Specifically, leaders can rely on language and rhetoric to guide the *de-identification* and *re-identification* processes that allow organizational identity transformations to occur in a phased approach and by leveraging the paradoxical demands for both strong identification (leading to enhanced collective efforts) as well as weak identification (enabling identity change).

Stating that “collective identity should not necessarily be equated with the experience of continuity”, Ybema (2010, p. 494) also remarked that when organizational identity scholars account for change, they tend to only account for a “single temporal template: one that constructs a linear self of self-continuity” and not with “temporal discontinuities” (2010, pp. 483–484). In an ethnographic study of identity change at a Dutch national newspaper office, Ybema observed that organizational actors discursively enacted old and new identities by invoking clear contrasts between different periods in time and discussed two different ways in which organizational actors “exaggerate the symbolic distance between the past, present and future” (2010, p. 496). “Organizational nostalgia” (Gabriel, 1993) involves a “good past/bad present” narrative; in contrast, “managerial post-algia” (Ybema, 2004) involves a “bad past/great future” narrative.

Ybema (2010) further contemplated whether themes of “continuity” and “discontinuity” are peculiar to identity-as-claims and identity-as-social construction perspectives, respectively. In other words, when we take an outside-in view and understand identity from claims or other-directed identity talk (Alvesson, 1994), we are likely to confront identity talk that emphasizes CED; whereas, when we adopt an inside-out view and seek to understand identity by observing “backstage identity talk” as it is negotiated and constructed, we are likely to confront themes of “discontinuities, ambiguities and conflict”. Taking a discursive approach, Chreim (2005) observed that continuity of identity is a matter of discursive strategy rather than some kind of objective reality.

Change-as-continuous

Discussing organizational identity as a core competency that offers sustained competitive advantage, Fiol (1991) initially portrayed organizational identity

Table 1 Summary of Literatures Pertaining to Organizational Identity Change

	Authors	Year of publication	Article	Publication
	<i>Identity as relatively enduring and stable; changes are life-cycle based: occasional, gradual, and imminent</i>			
1	Albert, S.	1995	Towards a theory of timing: An archival study of timing decisions in the Persian Gulf War.	In L.L. Cummings & B.I.M. Staw (Eds.), <i>Research in organizational behavior</i> (Vol. 17, pp. 1–70). Greenwich, CT: JAI.
2	Albert, S., & Whetten, D.A.	1985	Organizational identity.	In L.L. Cummings & M.M. Staw (Eds.), <i>Research in organizational behavior</i> (Vol. 7, pp. 263–295). Greenwich, CT: JAI.
3	Ashforth, B.E., & Mael, F.	1989	Social identity theory and the organization.	<i>Academy of Management Review</i> , 14(1), 20–39.
4	Brown, A.D., & Starkey, K.	2000	Organizational identity and organizational learning: A psychodynamic perspective.	<i>Academy of Management Review</i> , 25(1), 102–120.
5	DiMaggio, P.J.	1988	Interest and agency in institutional theory.	In L.G. Zucker (Ed.), <i>Institutional patterns and organizations: Culture and environment</i> (pp. 3–22). Cambridge, MA: Ballinger.
6	Dutton, J.E., Dukerich, J.M., & Harquail, C.V.	1994	Organizational images and member identification.	<i>Administrative Science Quarterly</i> , 39, 239–262.
7	Dutton, J.E., & Dukerich, J.M.	1991	Keeping an eye on the mirror: Image and identity in organizational adaption.	<i>Academy of Management Journal</i> , 31, 517–554.
8	Elsbach, K.D., & Kramer, R.M.	1996	Members' responses to organizational identity threats: Encountering and countering the Business Week rankings.	<i>Administrative Science Quarterly</i> , 41(3), 442–476.

Table 1 Summary of Literatures Pertaining to Organizational Identity Change (Continued)

	Authors	Year of publication	Article	Publication
9	Fiol, C.M.	1991	Managing culture as a competitive resource: An identity-based view of sustainable competitive advantage.	<i>Journal of Management</i> , 17, 191–211.
10	Gagliardi, P.	1986	The creation and change of organizational cultures: A conceptual framework.	<i>Organization Studies</i> , 7, 117–134.
11	Glynn, M.A., & Abzug, R.	2002	Institutionalizing identity: Symbolic isomorphism and organizational names.	<i>Academy of Management Review</i> , 45(1), 267–280.
12	Glynn, M.A., & Marquis, C.	2005	Fred's Bank: How institutional norms and individual preferences legitimate organizational names.	In A. Rafaeli & M. Pratt (Eds.), <i>Artifacts and organizations</i> (pp. 223–239). Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
13	Hannan, M.T. & Freeman, J.	1984	Structural inertia and organizational change.	<i>American Sociological Review</i> , 49, 149–164.
14	Hannan, M.T.	2005	Ecologies of organizations: Diversity and identity.	<i>Journal of Economic Perspectives</i> , 19, 51–70.
15	Hsu, G., & Hannan, M.T.	2005	Identities, genres and organizational forms.	<i>Organization Science</i> , 16(5), 474–490.
16	Kramer, R.M.	1993	Cooperation and organizational identification.	In J.K. Murnighan (Ed.), <i>Social psychology in organizations: Advances in theory and research</i> (pp. 244–268). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.

- 17 Phillips, D.J., & Kim, Y.K. 2009 Why pseudonyms? Deception as identity preservation among Jazz record companies, 1920–1929. *Organization Science*, 20(3), 481–499.
- 18 Polos, L., Hannan, M.T., & Carroll, G.R. 2002 Foundations of a theory of social forms. *Industrial and Corporate Change*, 11(1), 85–115.
- 19 Porac, J.F., Wade, J.B., & Pollock, T.G. 1999 Industry categories and the politics of the comparable firm in CEO compensation. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 44(1), 112–144.
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- 22 Tannenbaum, R., and Hanna, R. 1985 Holding on, letting go and moving on: Understanding a neglected perspective on change. In R. Tannenbaum, N. Margulies, & F. Massarik & Associates (Eds.), *Human systems development* (pp. 95–121). San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass
- 23 Tripsas, M. 2009 Technology, identity and inertia through the lens of “The Digital Photography Company”. *Organization Science*, 20, 440–461.
- 24 Weick, K.E. 1995 *Sensemaking in organizations*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- 25 Whetten, D.A. 2006 Albert and Whetten revisited—Strengthening the concept of organizational identity. *Journal of Management Inquiry*, 15(3), 219–234.
- 26 Zuckerman, E.W. 1999 The categorical imperative: Securities analysts and the illegitimacy discount. *American Journal of Sociology*, 104(5), 1398–1438.

Table 1 Summary of Literatures Pertaining to Organizational Identity Change (Continued)

Authors	Year of publication	Article	Publication
<i>Change-with-continuity</i>			
27 Corley, K.G.	2004	Defined by our strategy or our culture? Hierarchical differences in perceptions of organizational identity and change.	<i>Human Relations</i> , 57, 1145–1178.
28 Corley, K.G., & Gioia, D.A.	2004	Identity ambiguity and change in the wake of a corporate spin-off.	<i>Administrative Science Quarterly</i> , 49(2), 173–208.
29 Coupland, C., & Brown, A.D.	2004	Constructing organizational identities on the web: A case study of Royal Dutch/Shell.	<i>Journal of Management Studies</i> , 41(8), 1325–1347.
30 Fox-Wolfgramm, S.J., Boal, K.B., & Hunt, J.G.	1998	Organizational adaptation to institutional change: A comparative study of first-order change in prospector and defender banks.	<i>Administrative Science Quarterly</i> , 43, 87–126.
31 Gioia, D.A.	1998	From individual to organizational identity.	In D.A. Whetten & P.C. Godfrey (Eds.), <i>Identity in organizations. Building theory through conversations</i> (pp. 17–31). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
32 Gioia, D.A., & Chittipeddi, K.	1991	Sensemaking and sensegiving in strategic change initiation.	<i>Strategic Management Journal</i> , 12(6), 433–448.
33 Gioia, D.A., Price, K.N., Hamilton, A.L., & Thomas, J.B.	2010	Forging an identity: An insider-outsider study of processes involved in the formation of organizational identity.	<i>Administrative Science Quarterly</i> , 55(1), 1–46.

- 34 Gioia, D.A., Schultz, M., & Corley, K.G. 2000 Organizational identity, image, and adaptive instability. *Academy of Management Review*, 25(1), 63–81.
- 35 Gioia, D.A., & Thomas, J.B. 1996 Identity, image, and issue interpretation: Sensemaking during strategic change in academia. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 41(3), 370–403.
- 36 Glynn, M.A., & Abzug, R. 2002 Institutionalizing identity: Symbolic isomorphism and organizational names. *Academy of Management Review*, 45(1), 267–280.
- 37 Hatch, M.J., and Schultz, M.S. 2002 The dynamics of organizational identity. *Human Relations*, 55, 989–1018.
- 38 Gustafson, L.T., & Reger, R.K. 1995 Using organizational identity to achieve stability and change in high velocity environments. *Academy of Management Best Papers Proceedings*, 464–468.
- 39 Margolis, S.L., & Hansen, C.D. 2002 A model for organizational identity: Exploring the path to sustainability during change. *Human Resource Development Review*, 1(3), 277–303.
- 40 Nag, R., Corley, K.G., and Gioia, D.A. 2007 The intersection of organizational identity, knowledge, and practice: Attempting strategic change via knowledge grafting. *Academy of Management Journal*, 50(4), 821–847.
- 41 Ravasi, D., & Schultz, M. 2006 Responding to organizational identity threats: Exploring the role of organizational culture. *Academy of Management Journal*, 49, 433–458.
- 42 Reger, R.K., Gustafson, L.T., Demarie, S.M., & Mullane, J.V. 1994 Reframing the organization: Why implementing total quality is easier said than done. *Academy of Management Review*, 19(3), 565–584.

Table 1 Summary of Literatures Pertaining to Organizational Identity Change (Continued)

Authors	Year of publication	Article	Publication
<i>Change-as-discontinuity</i>			
43 Biggart, M.W.	1977	The creative destruction process of organizational change.	<i>Administrative Science Quarterly</i> , 22, 410–425.
44 Brun, M.	2002	Creating a new identity for France Telecom: Beyond a visual exercise.	In B. Moingeon & G. Soenen (Eds.), <i>Corporate and organizational identities: Integrating strategy, marketing, communication, and organizational perspectives</i> (pp. 133–155). London: Routledge
45 Fiol, C.M.	2002	Capitalizing on paradox: The role of language in transforming organizational identities.	<i>Organization Science</i> , 13(6), 653–666.
46 Ybema, S.	2010	Talk of change: Temporal contrasts and collective identities.	<i>Organization Studies</i> , 31(4), 481–503.
<i>Change-as-confluence</i>			
47 Chreim, S.	2005	The continuity–change duality in narrative texts of organizational identity.	<i>Journal of Management Studies</i> , 42, 567–593.

Change-as-emergent

- 48 Cook, S.D.N., & Yanow, D.
49 Corley, K.G., & Gioia, D.A.

1993
2003

Culture and organizational learning.
Semantic learning as change enabler:
Relating organizational identity &
organizational learning.

Journal of Management Inquiry, 2, 373–390.
In M. Easterby-Smith & M. Lyles (Eds.),
*Handbook of organizational learning and
knowledge management*, Ch. 31 (pp.
621–636).

Change-as-continuous

- 50 Fiol, C.M.

2001

Revisiting an identity-based view of
sustainable competitive advantage.

Journal of Management, 27, 691–699.

Identity-as-process

- 51 Gioia, D.A., & Patvardhan, S.D.

2012

Identity as process and flow.

In S. Maguire, M. Schultz, A. Langley, &
H. Tsoukas (Eds.), *Constructing identity in
and around organizations* (Vol. 3, pp. 50–
62). Oxford: Oxford University Press.

as the crucial interface between organizational values and actions—where punctuated changes to organizational identity enable contextualizing behaviors so as to translate them into a relatively stable culture. In a later piece, Fiol (2001, p. 692) discussed the infeasibility of “sustainable competitive advantages” in a highly dynamic environment and made a case for “renewable competitive advantage” (Useem, 2000, p. 104) that requires firms to “constantly destroy and cannibalize prior competencies” than to “build up a stock of inimitable and unique competencies” (Fiol, 2001, p. 692). She suggested that a strategy of “continuously changing temporary advantages” may call for organizational identities to be “continuously fluid.”

Table 1 summarizes the literature we have reviewed on organizational identity change according to our categorization scheme for organizing the existing literature. Although, on the surface, the table provides a convenient look at the central themes to emerge from the identity change literature and thus where we have been as a field, it also provides the potential to reveal spaces for future research and where we should go as a field. For instance, the areas represented by the “Change-as-confluence”, “Change-as-emergent”, “Change-as-continuous”, and “Identity-as-Process” labels show relatively little research to date, even though each represents an approach to theory and research (e.g. emergence, process) that is prevalent in related domain areas. Perhaps most importantly, however, the categorization scheme illustrated in the table (and the above text) provides the wherewithal for identity scholars to begin finding opportunities for cross-pollination across ways of researching to help the area of identity change mature even further.

Organizational Identity Formation: A More Recent Turn in Identity Theory and Research

It was impossible to say who or what we were at first. Having ourselves categorized as an “information-related school” wasn’t enough. Figuring out who we were couldn’t come until we decided who we weren’t We couldn’t become a fellowship without going through the Mines of Moria first, so to speak. Had to be lost before we could be found. And we found ourselves by putting substance into the void. I had to let that process play out and it wasn’t comfortable. Dean of a new information school. (Quoted in Gioia et al., 2010)

Scott (2008) described identity as one of the principal “carriers” that sustain the cognitive pillar of institutions. Organizational identity links an organization to the institutions in its environment, and establishing an organizational identity is a crucial element of forming an organization as a viable entity. The large majority of research on organizational identity has focused on issues relevant to organizations as going concerns, that is, organizations that currently

exist and are expected to do so for the foreseeable future. As noted, it is somewhat paradoxical that the organizational identity change literature not only dwarfs in volume, but also precedes in time the work on organizational identity formation. A relatively recent stream of work has begun to redress this imbalance (Ashforth, Rogers, & Corley, 2011; Clegg, Rhodes, & Kornberger, 2007; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Czarniawska & Wolff, 1998; Gioia et al., 2010; Kroezen & Heugens, 2012), and in the present section, we draw from these studies as well as related works concerning ongoing identity construction (Glynn & Watkiss, 2012; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Scott & Lane, 2000) to assemble a coherent depiction of what we know about organizational identity formation and to speculate on its implications for management theory and research more generally.

In the relatively small body of literature dealing specifically with identity formation per se, research has most often tended to investigate particular aspects of organizational identity formation rather than the overall processes through which it occurs (see Ashforth et al., 2011, for a conceptual exception). In addition, some of the works that tentatively explored identity formation did so from an institution theory point of view and, therefore, did not explicitly account for internal processes that affected (and even defined) the specifics of organizational identity features. For example, Czarniawska and Wolff (1998) compared and contrasted the fates of two new organizations that formed in highly institutionalized organizational fields and focused on the issue of how identity could facilitate (or undermine) legitimacy and success for newcomers in such contexts. The authors studied two new universities founded in two different European settings (Italy and Germany) and juxtaposed the factors that contributed to the success of one with those that brought about the failure of the other. They found that organizational identity was a crucial deciding factor in the fates of both universities. The Italian university was successful in establishing itself because it was attuned to its institutional environment and ended up constructing an identity similar to the other universities in its organizational field. Although the putative purpose of the university was to reform its field, it ultimately survived by molding itself to the existing environment and being accepted as “one of us” by its peers (Czarniawska & Wolff, 1998, p. 44). The German university, however, was not well-attuned to its environment and formed an identity that differed significantly from other universities in its field and was deemed to be a stranger. Failing to be recognized as a legitimate university, the German university was unable to gain the resources it needed for survival and was ultimately absorbed into an existing university. The comparative case study suggests that emulation may be one important facet of organizational identity formation processes, an idea echoed by Gioia et al. (2010). More generally, the study demonstrated that in well-established fields, organizational identity formation is a pivotal phase in a new organization’s development, with the

potential to foster acceptance and legitimacy on the one hand or contribute to lack of acceptance and an early demise on the other.

Similar to Czarniawska and Wolff (1998), Clegg et al. (2007) also focused on the relationship of organizational identity formation to legitimacy, but looked at organizational identity formation in a very different context—that of a newly forming field (business coaching in Australia). The authors found that the lack of a clear industry identity presented special challenges to organizational identity formation. Clegg et al. (2007) noted that when no order is previously established, such as in the case of emerging industries, organizations need to construct their own, striving to establish ties in an environment that does not recognize them as a legitimate entity. They found that organizations in Australia's nascent business coaching field focused on building the stable and distinctive dimensions of organizational identity. Specifically, business coaching firms attempted to “perform” a consistent identity over time as they interacted with stakeholders (thus connoting stability), and because their developing field was not well-understood by potential clients, they emphasized the similarities and differences between themselves and organizations in related, more-established industries (thus connoting distinctiveness). Clegg et al. (2007) found that through ongoing interactions, the new business coaching organizations eventually converged on a workable identity for the industry as a whole. Further, the authors surmised that organizations form identities that afford them a unique position within an industry, while still being similar enough to other firms as to define themselves as legitimate members, an idea consistent with other research (Gioia et al., 2010; Porac, Thomas, Wilson, Paton, & Kanfer, 1995) and discussed in more detail below.

Note that both of these studies adopted a fairly arms-length, dispassionate approach to deriving some insight into the larger issues involved in organizational identity formation. A different approach by Corley and Gioia (2004) emphasized the perceptions and actions of organization members experiencing a profound identity change—one that was so foundational (transitioning from the identity of a staid traditional company to that of an adroit internet-age company) that it might instead be seen as a study of identity formation. These authors investigated the creation of a new organization as it was spun off from its Fortune 100 parent company. As the spun-off organization attempted to establish its identity as an independent entity in a different industry than its parent, its members were presented with a major challenge. A key finding that informs our understanding of identity formation processes is the notion that the spin-off prompted “identity ambiguity” as members struggled with incongruities between the current and desired future identity and also discrepancies that they perceived between the new organization's developing identity and its external image. This study found empirical evidence for the distinction between identity labels (or claims) and the meanings of those labels

that had been theorized in prior work on identity (Gioia et al., 2000). Additionally, they found that during and after the spin-off the meanings and labels changed, but not at the same time, thus suggesting that labels and their associated meanings can play different but related roles in identity formation processes.

The aforementioned studies by Czarniawska and Wolff (1998) and Clegg et al. (2007) explored circumscribed aspects of organizational identity formation, while Corley and Gioia's (2004) study is distinctive in the organizational identity literature because it is about both identity formation and change. Besides these three works, only two studies have explicitly investigated the formation process itself in brand new organizations (Gioia et al., 2010; Kroezen & Heugens, 2012). Therefore, although we devote some space in the following pages to synthesizing what we know about the nature of the identity formation process, we dedicate most of this section to two major underlying themes found in the two process studies, as well as the related work on organizational identity formation and identity construction: (1) *external influences* on organizational identity formation; and (2) *internal resources* employed in identity formation.

Organizational Identity Formation Processes

Answering the question of how organizational identity forms requires a longitudinal stance tracing the arc of identity formation processes as they unfold over time. Ashforth et al. (2011) illustrate this point in their conceptual examination of what occurs during identity formation, as part of a broader discussion on how different levels of identity influence each other. Relying on Wiley's (1988) notion of levels of subjectivity (inter-, intra-, and generic), and Drori, Honig, & Sheaffer's (2009) empirical example of a new entrepreneurial firm, Ashforth and colleagues note that the intrasubjective meanings of the founders come together at the intersubjective level (i.e. moving beyond any single individual) to create a social reality about "who we are" as an organization. Over time, and across multitudes of interdependent co-actions, those intersubjective meanings of "who we are" become reified and taken-for-granted, perhaps even becoming "encoded in the goals, routines, information flows, and so on" (Ashforth et al., 2011, p. 1146) until the organization's identity exists at a generic subjective level. Once established, the influence begins to work downwards, with the generic subjective impinging and facilitating identity processes at the intersubjective and intrasubjective levels, as well as with the intersubjective affecting the intrasubjective sense of identity.

Ashforth et al.'s (2011) conceptualization suggests that we can learn a great deal about organizational identity formation via multiple levels of analysis and with an eye toward cross-level dynamics. An additional implication, however, is the necessity of a processual approach to this iterative and complex

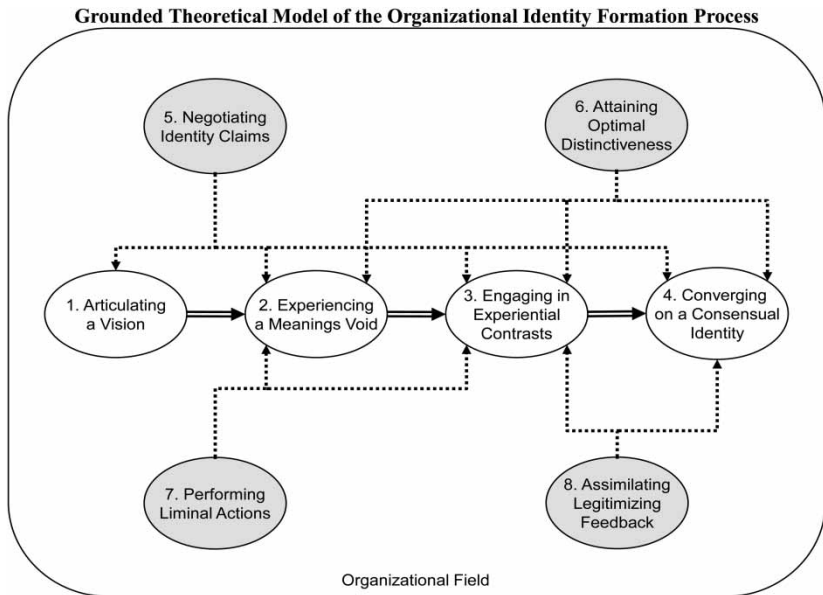


Figure 1 Grounded Theoretical Model of the Organizational Identity Formation Process. Reproduced from Gioia et al. (2010).

phenomenon. To date, two studies (Gioia et al., 2010; Kroezen & Heugens, 2012) have empirically addressed the challenges of studying organizational identity formation by providing somewhat different, albeit complementary, perspectives on the longitudinal processes involved.

Gioia et al. (2010) conducted a qualitative case study of a new school of information science and technology, collecting data over an extended period that spanned from just before the organization's formal inception to eight years into its existence. They developed a grounded model of the organizational identity formation process, which consisted of a sequence of thematic phases and a set of recurring themes that were associated with multiple phases of the more-or-less linear progression (Figure 1).

These authors found that the first step in the identity formation process involved the articulation of the organization's initial identity claims by its founders. These initial claims established the guiding vision, that is, the new entity's broadly construed intentions about ideals and goals, as well as the appropriate organizational field and comparison group. Through these preliminary claims, founders demarcated the contours of the eventual organizational identity by generally ruling in certain categorical features of identity while explicitly or implicitly ruling out others (e.g. we are a school of information, not a school of culinary arts, for example, and, more specifically, not a school of computer science). Articulation of the vision was just the first step in the identity

formation process, however. In the second phase, the undefined identity content prompted founders and founding members to experience a meanings void (“we don’t know what it means to be who we think we would like to be”). The meanings void was problematic as members conducted their day-to-day business and tried to get the organization up and running. At first, members filled the meanings void by defining “what we are *not*,” because members found it easier to arrive at consensus about this than about “who we are”, (which Gioia et al. termed as a “via negativa” approach). In the third phase, members began to fill in identity details by engaging in experiential contrasts—comparing their prior personal experiences to their experiences in the new organization, a process prompted in part by the absence of a shared history in this new organization. This phase led to more precise conceptions by members of how the organization was similar to and different from other entities in the field. In the final phase of the process, members began to form a consensus about what they believed were the central and distinctive features of the organization that would carry into the future. Building on the previous steps, they were able to go beyond agreement on who they were *not* and started agreeing on affirmative aspects of who they *were* as an organization. In addition to these four more-or-less sequential “stages” of identity formation, there were a number of recurring themes that were associated with multiple stages: negotiating collective identity claims, performing “liminal actions” (tentative, provisional structuring activities), attaining “optimal distinctiveness” (in being similar to, but distinguished from a referent group) and assimilating legitimizing feedback to affirm the validity of their identity-related beliefs and/or to point out areas of identity that needed additional clarification because of internal discrepancies or divergences with external audiences (Figure 1). All of these recurring aspects of the organizational identity formation process helped to “solidify” the developing, albeit still tentative identity.

Gioia et al.’s (2010) grounded model provided a thick description of a multi-year process of identity formation in a single organization. There is evidence to suggest that some key aspects of the model point to deep processes common to many organizations. For example, Corley and Gioia (2004) found that employees of a corporate spin-off also experienced a meanings void when their company was launched, and we suspect that this phase of identity formation may be common to any newly forming identity. A related notion, the *via negativa* stance (focusing on “who we are not”) also finds support in other studies, such as Elsbach and Battacharya (2001), Corley and Gioia (2004), and Clegg et al. (2007). In these studies, as well as Gioia et al. (2010), members defined themselves by exclusion, suggesting that this may be another typical aspect of identity formation processes. Additional studies of other nascent organizations would be helpful in determining how much of this model is transferable.

The other longitudinal study of identity formation process, conducted by Kroezen and Heugens (2012), complements the Gioia et al. (2010) study by

focusing on the development of identity content, as opposed to the process through which members arrive at a consensual organizational identity. The authors drew on “old” institutional theory (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983; Selznick, 1957; Stinchcombe, 1965) to inform their analysis of identity formation in Dutch microbreweries. In contrast to the Gioia et al. (2010) study, Kroezen and Heugens (2012) studied the entire field, obtaining data for a majority of breweries that formed around the same time. Combining data from multiple organizations, they provide a generic model of how identity content forms in a typical organization via a two-step process. The first step, identity imprinting, involves drawing potentially suitable identity elements (“proto-identity attributes”) from various external and internal sources, such as peer organizations, audiences, and founders. These proto-identity attributes contribute to an organizational “identity reservoir”, which is an organization-specific set of features that can be drawn on to substantiate identity claims. In the second step, enactment, members select attributes from the reservoir to enact as identity claims.

Importantly, Kroezen and Heugens locate organizational identity content formation in an institutional theory framework by explicating how key concepts such as an organization’s normative core, human agency, and environmental adaptation figure into the process. Further, they provide additional support for the notion of the *via negativa* aspect of organizational identity formation processes in their finding that breweries enacted identities by *dis*-identifying with peer organizations as a means for achieving distinctiveness. The Kroezen and Heugens study raises interesting questions about organizational identity content because Albert and Whetten (1985) in their original conceptualization, make it clear that organizational identity has a strong contextual component, in that members emphasize and present different pictures of organizational identity for different audiences (see also Price, Gioia, & Corley, 2008 and their related notion of an organization’s need to account for “scattered images”). In addition, Pratt (2012) theorized that identity dynamics are associated with “claiming and granting” done by both organizational constituents and outside stakeholders. Organizations express requests, reflect on expectations, and decide their acceptance or rejection of those expectations. The process of claiming and granting shapes the view that both constituents and stakeholders have of the organization.

Overall, what we now know is that organizational identity formation processes involve the co-evolution of claims and understandings that are not only complementary (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006), but mutually constitutive (Gioia et al., 2010). Thus, when studying organizational identity, we must consider both claims, understandings and their interplay to have a complete and in-depth portrayal of identity formation. Identity claims “give sense” to audiences about “who we are as an organization”. Identity understandings develop in conjunction with claims. Understandings provide the raw material for claims made and also reflect the process through which members “make

sense” of their own claims, as well as outsiders’ responses to those claims—hence, the mutually constitutive nature of claims and understandings. Paralleling the intertwined relationship between claims and understandings is another insight from the identity formation research: that formation processes meld external influences and internal resources in developing an optimally distinctive identity (Gioia et al., 2010; Kroezen & Heugens, 2012). In the following subsections, we address first the external influences and then the internal resources associated with organizational identity formation.

External Influences on Organizational Identity Formation

Organizational identity provides a guide for what an organization’s members should do and how other organizations should relate to it (Albert & Whetten, 1985). In these dual roles, identity serves purposes of both internal coordination as well as external interaction. Similarly, research on organizational identity formation indicates that it is a complex process subject to multiple influences outside and inside the organization (Gioia et al., 2010; Kroezen & Heugens, 2012). In this section, we also draw on related studies of ongoing identity construction—that is, those that study processes that sustain or change an existing organizational identity. The primary external influences identified by organizational identity formation research are an organization’s institutional context and more specifically, peer organizations in the environment (Clegg et al., 2007; Czarniawska & Wolff, 1998; Gioia et al., 2010; Kroezen & Heugens, 2012).

Critical to an organization’s survival is its ability to obtain and maintain legitimacy in its environment (Suchman, 1995), and this is especially true for new organizations. An important way new organizations achieve legitimacy is by attempting to emulate the identities of existing organizations in their fields (Labianca, Fairbank, Thomas, Gioia, & Umphress, 2001). As noted earlier, Czarniawska and Wolff (1998) demonstrated that an organization that constructed an identity similar to the institutional field within which it operated achieved greater legitimacy and success. As also noted Clegg et al. (2007) highlighted the importance of the institutional context, suggesting that new organizations form identities for the express purpose of gaining legitimacy, such that identity work is especially intense in the case of new-industry contexts that do not provide already-endorsed categorical identities. In particular, similar to the findings of Gioia et al. (2010) and Corley and Gioia (2004), Clegg et al. (2007) found that uncertainty prompted new organizations to seek legitimacy by defining themselves in terms of how their business differed from similar, established industries, that is, by basing identities on “who they were not”.

The importance of institutional context to identity formation finds support in other work as well. Suddaby and Greenwood (2005), for example, observed

that identity claims gain legitimacy when they reflect the wider environment. Glynn and Abzug (2002) found that even an organization's name, which is typically viewed as a powerful and distinctive symbol representing "who we are as an organization", is highly influenced by institutional pressures for conformity. The authors found strong indications of isomorphism in organizational names, suggesting that organizations and their identities cannot be fully differentiated from the institutions within which they are embedded. Further, multiplicities and conflicts in that broader environment are likely to have profound effects on organizational identity formation. For example, Patvardhan, Gioia, and Hamilton (2012) studied field-level identity formation among colleges in the emerging academic field of information science and technology. They found that organizational identity and field identity co-evolved and that organizational identity transformation was an important part of the process of field-level identity formation. These findings accord with those of Navis and Glynn (2010), who found that the new market category of satellite radio influenced the identities of member organizations. The market category provided a reference for legitimacy, but individual organizations then tailored distinctive identities within that broader institutional narrative. In addition, Patvardhan et al. (2012) found that "nested" identities (which derived from parent organizations) as well as "legacy" identities (based on affiliations with existing fields) were two important influences on organizational identity and also contributed to an identity crisis at the field level. Together with theorizing by Kraatz and Block (2008), this study points to the salience of "institutional pluralism" on organizational identity formation, a concept that merits additional investigation.

Conflicting institutional logics present another type of institutional complexity that likely influences organizational identity formation. For instance, Greenwood, Raynard, Kodeih, Micelotta, & Lounsbury (2011) theorize that organizational identity is one of several "filters" through which organizations process and interpret conflicting logics and that organizational identity, therefore, affects ways in which organizations respond to this complexity. These authors note that emerging fields are especially fraught with conflicting logics as institutional entrepreneurs contest what rules, norms, and practices prevail, but that some established fields such as healthcare are likely to have ongoing complexity as innovations continually change their contours (Greenwood et al., 2011). Recent work has investigated identity formation in emerging fields (Clegg et al., 2007; Gioia et al., 2010; Navis & Glynn, 2010; Patvardhan et al., 2012), but another interesting context for additional work on organizational identity formation would be an industry that experiences ongoing turbulence and accompanying conflict in institutional logics.

Legitimacy imperatives encourage new organizations to form identities that are isomorphic with their institutional environments, yet they also must address strategic imperatives to be competitive with other organizations.

Pedersen and Dobbin (2006) argued that seeking legitimacy through isomorphism and distinctiveness by setting oneself apart from other organizations are in fact two sides of the same coin. Hence, new organizations can again be seen as striving for “optimal distinctiveness,” developing identities that balance what they believe to be similar with other organizations against what they believe is different (Gioia et al., 2010; Kroezen & Heugens, 2012). Deephouse (1999) describes this condition as “strategic balance”. Thus, identity formation is influenced not only by what is institutionally “in the air,” so to speak, but also by the attributes of specific peer organizations.

For example, as noted, Gioia et al. (2010) found that organizational identity formation involved an intense phase of articulating both similarities and differences between an organization and its peer organizations. Similarly, Kroezen and Heugens (2012) found that rival organizations were an important source of identity content for new microbreweries and that these firms tended to enact this identity content by stressing their distinctiveness from those rivals. These findings accord with prior work, such as DiMaggio and Powell (1983), that observed that organizations tend to define themselves in terms of other organizations in a given industry, and more specifically, that organizations define themselves as being like some organizations and unlike others (Glynn & Abzug, 2002; Porac et al., 1995; Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2003), which amounts to a variation on the theme of optimal distinctiveness.

Other research on identity suggests additional influences that are likely to be important, but have not yet been thoroughly examined in the context of organizational identity formation. For example, Jack and Lorbiecki (2007) found that national identity can have a profound influence on organizational identity. More broadly, Glynn and Watkiss (2012) suggested that societal culture plays an important role in shaping organizational identity. Their premise is that an organization is a social actor that reflects cultural themes and interprets cultural resources in the construction of “who we are” and “what we do”. They identified six cultural mechanisms which form the building blocks for organizational identity construction: framing, repertoires, narrating, symbolization and symbolic boundaries, capital and status, and institutional templates. For example, cultural framing can define organizational identity in terms of social issues, mobilizing collective action that is consistent with that identity. Framing an identity around a prevailing cultural sentiment can also enhance organizational appeal. In utilizing a cultural frame in organizational identity, organizations can signify “cultural fitness” and facilitate an audience’s evaluation of their business as credible. Together, the six mechanisms make organizational identity more familiar and appealing. The authors suggested that by aligning identity with prevalent cultural sentiments and through the use of cultural mechanisms, an organization gains audience acceptance, thereby conferring legitimacy and value on the organization (Glynn & Watkiss, 2012).

In addition, research by Kjærgaard, Morsing, and Ravasi (2011) suggested that influential outsiders, such as the media, could play an important role in organizational identity formation. In their study of the effects of media coverage on an organization's identity, these authors found that extremely positively toned media coverage brought celebrity status to the firm, which affected identity construction. They found that being a celebrity firm mediated members' sense of organizational identity such that this external influence "captivated" members to the point that they felt compelled to uphold the external celebrity image even though it differed from their experience of reality. An interesting yet unexamined question concerns the effect of intensely positive (or negative) media reports on the trajectory of organizational identity formation.

Internal Resources for Organizational Identity Formation

Existing research has identified three important categories of internal resources that organizations employ in identity formation processes. These include founders and leaders' beliefs and values, past experiences of organizational members, and organizational narratives. Gioia et al. (2010) and Kroezen and Heugens (2012) both document the importance of founders to organizational identity formation. Together with Hannan, Baron, Hsu, and Koçak (2006), these studies show that founders' beliefs and values provide valuable identity referents for new organizations. Hannan et al. (2006) noted that an alteration in the "founders' blueprints" for human resource practices was more destabilizing to organizations than was replacing the founding CEO with an outsider. The authors theorized that founders' blueprints were a core part of the organizational identity that could not be changed without significant implications for organizational survival. In addition, founders articulate identity claims on behalf of the organization, effectively giving sense to both insiders and outsiders about the mission of the organization and how it intends to achieve that purpose (Gioia et al., 2010). Also, Corley and Gioia (2004) showed the central role played by leaders in resolving identity ambiguity so that a newly spun off organization could move forward.

Studies suggest, however, that in identity formation processes, it is likely not enough for founders and other leaders just to "give sense" to members about who we are as an organization (Corley, 2004; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Gioia et al., 2010). Rather, leaders must allow members to make sense of the new identity on their own to a certain extent if they are to "buy in" to the new organization. This is an intriguing question for future research to explore further. The main point here, though, is that members use many resources to make sense of the new organizational identity, including their experiences with prior organizations (Gioia et al., 2010). Members' histories appear to serve as a kind of surrogate for institutional memory in nascent organizations that, by virtue of their newness, lack the quality of "identity continuity".

Further, Walsh and Bartunek (2011) noted that past experiences can be a strong motivation for organizational formation itself. Echoing other work referenced herein (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Patvardhan et al., 2012), Walsh and Bartunek (2011) demonstrated that a prior organization's identity—or perhaps especially a defunct one—can be an important referent for a new organization's identity labels. Implicit in the authors' findings is the role of emotions in organizational identity formation, an intriguing potential internal resource also hinted at in work on community identity. For instance, Howard-Grenville, Metzger, and Meyer (in press) found that community members' emotional connection to the community's erstwhile positive identity was a key factor in identity renewal and a more general renaissance of the town. Other studies have noted the importance of other internal resources enacted by members such as organizational culture (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006) and knowledge and practices (Nag et al., 2007) to the ongoing construction and maintenance of organizational identity. We suggest that identity-building provides a foundation for culture and practices, and it is likely that these resources, which are informed by organizational identity and then also inform it, co-evolve with identity as an organization matures.

One especially potent internal resource is organizational narrative or storytelling (Boje, 1991; Czarniawska, 1997). Narratives play an important role in organizational identity construction (Humphreys & Brown, 2002), suggesting that they are likely to be important elements of organizational identity formation as well. Wertsch (2012) theorized that narratives are the key to understanding actions of individuals and identity and suggested that collective identity is a narrative shared by members of a group. Rather than focus on the individually employed narratives, the emphasis is on the shared cultural resources of the members of a group. The use of narratives by members of a group establishes and reinforces a collective identity. Similar to becoming members of the same community through language, individuals become members of "mnemonic communities" finding commonality in shared stories (Wertsch, 2012). Instead of the mindset that narratives are products of individual imagination, it is important to note that they are an "off the shelf technology," that is, that individuals borrow and embellish narratives from institutional, cultural, and historical contexts (Wertsch, 2012, p. 144).

Humphreys and Brown (2002) found that large, complex organizations can be characterized by multiple and sometimes conflicting identity narratives. In their study of a failed change effort, the authors found that senior managers of an educational institution strived to redefine the traditional teaching-oriented identity into one of a modern, research-led institute, attaining a national or even international profile (Humphreys & Brown, 2002). They found that the success of this strategy hinged on senior management's attempt to "delete" other established identity narratives by overwriting them

with the new identity. This insensitivity toward existing organizational narratives failed to make an impression on important internal and external stakeholders, as after more than four years, the institution was not closer to a grant of university status. One important implication of this study is that general organizational narratives are composed of multiple plot lines that individuals and groups elaborate, refine, accept, and discard as they make sense of their current work, organization, and themselves. Individuals are involved in complicated, competing dialogues, wherein they become familiarized and accepting of some views and resistant to others. As a result, individuals and organizations continually create and re-create themselves.

The Ongoing Construction of Organizational Identity

A certain subset of organizational identity research pertains to ongoing organizational identity construction, which refers to the continuous inter-subjective negotiation of claims and understandings that constitute organizational identity (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). In this sense, it represents an important bridge between work on organizational identity formation and that on organizational identity change because it sheds light on the ways in which organizational identity can be developed, maintained, or altered over time. One of the main messages of this body of work is that organizational identity is continually reproduced and reinforced through myriad micro-level interactions among organizational stakeholders. Identity formation processes ideally allow convergence on a consensual organizational identity, but they also likely set identity construction processes in motion such that organizational identity is continually renewed and reaffirmed through everyday interactions and continuity of practices (Nag et al., 2007). Further, these processes are likely to involve the continued influence of external forces on organizational identity. For example, Gioia et al. (2000) noted that interactions between insiders and outsiders, in addition to interactions among members, were crucial for organizational identity construction. Similarly, Czarniawska and Wolff (1998) also noted the importance of the audience and the performative nature of organizational identity. Further, Ybema et al. (2009) highlighted the importance of “self-other” discourse to identity construction, which was echoed in Gioia et al.’s (2010) findings of the importance of negotiating identity claims, not just among insiders but also between insiders and outsiders.

Discussion

At this point in its maturity, work on organizational identity seems to have taken on a life of its own. Yet, organizational identity theory and research

are at a transitional point. It has been through its formative years in the mid-'80s and early '90s, traversed some developmental years in the mid-'90s before arriving, in the estimation of Corley et al. (2006) at "aged adolescence" by the mid-2000s, and followed shortly, thereafter, by Gioia's (2008) characterization of the subject as 'an emerging perennial domain,' but still in need of more work to remain a vibrant area that can fulfill its capacity for new revelation. Recent publications concerning identity have tended to use what we know about identity to explain other concepts—rather than research into identity itself—and that is probably the direction in which identity work needs to continue. There is quite a lot we can learn about identity by trying to understand identity's role in other important organizational phenomena. We are at a transition point—transitioning from studying identity as a phenomenon to using identity as a useful theoretical lens for understanding *other* phenomena (organizational strategy, culture, learning, knowledge, etc.). The growth and development of the identity concept has not been without its questions, debates, controversies, and multiple perspectives, which is of course both predictable and healthy in the progression of any field of study—perhaps especially one that is based on an extended metaphor from an individual-level concept. What constitutes the 'core' of organizational identity? Is identity "enduring"? Do organizations have demonstrably distinctive identities? How does organizational identity relate to organizational culture? How do we account for the various views of organizational identity (and especially the locus of identity)? What do we think we know about organizational identity formation and change after almost three decades of conceptual and empirical work?

The Pillars of Organizational Identity

As noted, in so many works, Albert and Whetten (1985) defined organizational identity as that which is CED about an organization. What does the work since this foundational statement have to say about each of these features?

Centrality. Although there has been some question about pinning down the meaning of the term "central" (Corley et al., 2006), we see this notion as essential to the concept of identity at any level. What is central are those features that are deemed to be so core to the organization's sense of "who we are in social space" that they are deliberately preserved and almost never questioned unless seriously challenged. Members will inevitably resist any attempts to change the sense of these features and their pivotal place the spectrum of possible descriptors. We are taken with Ashforth and Mael's (1989) characterization that such features metaphorically constitute the 'soul' of the organization to its members. Members perpetuate these features (Selznick, 1957) and even if they accept the need to change so they can stay the same (Gagliardi, 1986), the labels for such features seldom vary very much. Furthermore, as Van Rekom and Whetten (2007) observed, central characteristics are

also likely to be viewed retrospectively as the most enduring organizational characteristics. For these reasons—and because there must be some sort of perceived anchors to even talk about identity—we do not view the notion of “central” features as particularly controversial unless scholars want to pick a fight on arcane philosophical grounds.

Enduringness. The question of whether identity is enduring, however, has been the subject of much more intense debate. In one sense, this debate could be construed as something of a distraction, revolving around the choice of label and its semantics (“identity as enduring” vs. “identity as having continuity”), but the lively debate has nonetheless prompted some informative if extreme and provocative statements of position. Those statements range from one extreme that says essentially that “if it changes, it’s not identity” (Whetten & Mackey, 2002) to one that holds essentially that identity is constructed and reconstructed every day, such that it is almost absurd to talk about an enduring identity (choose your favorite postmodernist philosopher). Nonetheless, the controversy around the putative enduringness dimension has led to more enlightening issues that now have to do less with whether organizational identity changes, but instead with the time horizons over which identity can change and the processes by which identity actually changes.

Of course there are strong grounds for an enduring identity proposition, wherein identity implies some sense of sameness over time and, therefore, can be viewed as stable. Indeed, if there was not some sense of lasting or stable element to “who we are as an individual” and “who we are as an organization”, we would find it difficult to assert that we are talking about identity. Factors enabling identity to endure or be perceived as enduring include: members’ need to view identity as stable (Brown & Starkey, 2000); the tendency of organization members to pursue an ostensibly enduring identity as a way of preserving their own individual social identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Brown & Williams, 1984; Kramer, 1993) given that organization membership is so often important to social identity; structural inertia (Hannan & Freeman, 1977) arising from legitimacy imperatives; the power of entrenched practices (Nag et al., 2007); and the proclivity for impression management (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). All these factors encourage the maintenance (or at least the appearance) of a stable identity.

Can organizational identity change nonetheless? Of course it can. It does not change easily, however, and when it does, it often tends to maintain the appearance of *not* changing because identity labels can remain stable even as their meanings become malleable (Gioia et al., 2000). For that reason, the “enduring” label is conceptually imprecise, so we would argue for a more consistent use of “continuity” as a label, which is more theoretically defensible. (See below for a more comprehensive discussion of factors and processes

that facilitate organizational identity change). Albeit rarer and more challenging, rapid and discontinuous changes in the environment sometimes even compel discontinuous changes in identity (Biggart, 1977; Fiol, 2002; Ybema, 2010).

Distinctiveness. As with the other pillars, the distinctiveness pillar of the definition of organizational identity has generated some controversy (Corley et al., 2006), not necessarily because of substantive theoretical concerns (after all, implicit in the concept of identity at any level is some notion difference or differentiation from someone, some other organization, or some other society). Rather, the issue is the extent to which organizations *actually* are demonstrably different from those from whom they wish to differentiate themselves. The main concept having to do with this aspect of identity is the pivotal notion of “optimal distinctiveness” (Brewer, 1991), wherein organizations work rather assiduously to see themselves (and just as importantly, have others see them) as simultaneously similar to some desirable referent group (a market category or industry) and yet notably distinctive from those other members (Corley et al., 2006; Gioia et al., 2010). If there is any process that looks like a universal in the identity literature, it is probably this one. Of course, in an era where benchmarking and emulation are all the rage, a logical argument would hold that such practices cannot help but reduce the range of distinctiveness, so the issue becomes not one of actual distinction, but perceived distinction. The most important recognition here is that distinctiveness resides in the eye of the beholder (most notably, the perceptions of organizational insiders) and their ability to frame the perception of distinctiveness for outsiders. From our point of view, the fact that insiders *believe* that they have distinctive identities is one of the keys enabling the sense of identity itself. The degree to which they can sell their distinctiveness in the marketplace of competitors generates a more-or-less useful image among outsiders (an observation that has implications for our conceptualization of the locus of organizational identity itself).

Multiple identities. Although a full discussion is beyond the scope of our review, it is important to mention theory and research on the notion of multiple organizational identities. Albert and Whetten (1985) theorized that an organization can possess multiple identities, and Pratt and Foreman (2000) later provided a rich theoretical treatment and typology of multiple organizational identities and the ways in which they might be managed. The authors did not dispute the CED definition of organizational identity, but posited that different beliefs about exactly what is CED can co-exist in an organization (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Subsequent empirical works (Corley, 2004; Glynn, 2000; Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997) provide evidence of multiple organizational identities and their far-reaching consequences for organizations. Clearly, the concept of multiple organizational identities must be

taken into account as identity theory's nomological net continues to be refined and expanded.

Multiple Views on Organizational Identity

As noted earlier, there are four views on the character of identity in the existing literature: a social constructionist view, a social actor view, an institutional view, and a population ecology view. The *social constructionist* view sees organization members as meaning creators—as the ultimate generators of the labels, meanings, and other cognitive features that produce the “understandings” (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006) that constitute the essence of organizational identity. Critics of this view (Whetten, 2006) take issue with the anthropomorphism assumed about organizations—that is, assigning too much influence to labels and meanings and treating organizational identity as a more-or-less direct analogue of individual identity. They also argue that identity is cast in ways that make it difficult to measure. The *social actor* view emphasizes the notion that organizations as entities are actors in society, gives prominence to the overt “claims” made by organizations about who they are in society, and assigns great weight to the role of categories in determining organizational identity. Critics of this view (Gioia et al., 2010) acknowledge that category matters for identity (e.g. at the individual level, seeing oneself as female, and not male is often a major facet of a woman's identity; at the organization level, seeing oneself as a bank and not a bakery is similarly important), but argue that an emphasis on categories is in many ways uninformative about the nuanced differences that make a difference in perception and action (i.e. to know that an organization is a bank does not tell us enough about its identity). Critics also argue that the excessive focus on overt claims puts us in the position of attending mainly to assertions (e.g. in annual reports) that are not necessarily expressions of identity, per se, but projected images the organization hopes others will accept as legitimate. Often, these can be fictions that do not square with actual insider perceptions of identity.

Although the *institutional* and *population ecology* literatures take a markedly different approach to the study of identity as compared with traditional identity scholars (both social actor and social constructivist views), and hence sometimes have not been viewed as studies in the organizational identity mainstream, they are important on two accounts. One, our readings indicate that the recent surge in identity research has been influenced by studies on identity from the institutional and population ecology perspectives, especially the former. Further, the institution-theory based studies, in particular, appear to have moderated their historical approach to organizational identity and attempted to integrate the institutional view on identity with more mainstream organizational identity views, signaling an opportunity to regard these perspectives as complementary (e.g. Glynn, 2008; but also see Hsu & Hannan, 2005).

More importantly, we see this trend as harboring the potential for reinvigorating the study of organizational identity. Overall, the renewed focus on identity among institutional theorists can be traced to three factors: (1) a fundamental shift from studying the enduring aspects of institutions to studying their dynamic aspects; (2) an interest in investigating the micro-foundations and micro-processes of the macro-phenomenon of institutions; and (3) a shift in interest from investigating the normative and regulatory pillars to investigating the cultural-cognitive pillar of institutions, especially the identity element.

Historically speaking, in keeping with the traditional institutionalist perspective, organizational fields were mostly conceptualized as stable and homogenous settings (DiMaggio, 1988); consequently, identity—as most other institutional aspects—was treated as given and essentially fully-formed. Studies in the institutional tradition that invoked identity typically did so to demonstrate the isomorphic influence of institutions on organizational processes—especially on something as seemingly unique as identity. In other words, whereas studies in the organizational identity tradition (rooted in Albert and Whetten's (1985) CED triumvirate) emphasized the uniqueness aspect of identity, institutional studies (rooted in a legitimacy orientation), highlighted the mimetic nature of identity (Glynn & Abzug, 2002; Glynn & Marquis, 2005).

In recent years, however, the shift in institutional research—from focusing on the enduring aspect of institutions to exploring its dynamic aspects—and the consequent surge in literature on institutional entrepreneurship, formation, and change (Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Leblebici et al., 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Rao et al., 2003) has resulted in an interest in exploring the dynamic aspect of institutional features—including identity. Although the focus on institutional change has demonstrated the “change” aspect of identity (Rao et al., 2003) research on institutional formation and change has thrown light on the “emergence” and “growth” aspects of identity (Creed, Dejordy, & Lok, 2010; Lok, 2010; Navis & Glynn, 2010; Wry, Lounsbury, & Glynn, 2011). Overall, we observe that the prominence of identity in the discourse surrounding institutional change and formation has led to a surge in identity-related research.

Studies on identity also appear to be flourishing because of the recognition that macro-phenomena such as institutions and institutionalization are better understood if the micro-processes that undergrid them are examined (Powell & Colyvas, 2008). Such a focus on micro-level explanations also intersects with the interest in accounting for human agency in institutional change (Glynn, 2008) and, therefore, examining the “endogenous drivers of change” (Thornton, Ocasio, & Lounsbury, 2012, p. 147). Recognizing that these influences typically involve processes of enactment, interpretation, translation, and meaning construction, Powell and Colyvas call for studies that “link key micro-concepts, e.g. identity, sensemaking, typifications, frames, and

categories with macro-processes of institutionalization, and show how these processes ratchet upwards” (2008, p. 278). Here, we also note that the interest in identity coincides with an increasing recognition that much remains to be known about the cultural-cognitive pillar of institutions. In delineating the three pillars of institutionalism, Scott (2008) terms identity as one of the “vehicles” or “carriers” of the cognitive-cultural element of institutions. This view presents identity as not only contributing to the development and change of institutions, but, more importantly, as an integral element of what we term as “institution.”

Beyond the quantum leap in the appearance of the theme of identity in institutional discourse, we also see a qualitative shift in the way identity is discussed. Specifically, we observe an attempt to discover common ground between the institutional and traditional organizational identity views. Observing that institutionalism and organizational identity had progressed on divergent paths and were seen as effectively “antithetical”, Glynn (2008) threw light instead on the similarity between them—specifically, their focus on meaning—and theorized the “subtle points of connection” between the two perspectives. Although Pedersen and Dobbin’s (2006) attempt to integrate the institutional and organizational identity views by discussing the organizational search for identity via uniqueness and creation of legitimacy through uniformity as “two sides of the same coin”, Glynn (2008) moves away from the traditional view of institutions as constraining organizational identity, and portrays them as enabling organizational identity processes. She proposes that institutions can aid organizational identity construction by supplying “raw materials” such as meanings and symbols. Further, organizations “graft” these institutional elements onto their identities in the pursuit of legitimacy as it “enables resource flows favorable to their enterprises” (2008, p. 414). Consequently, Glynn portrays organizational identity construction as a form of institutional bricolage. Empirically investigating identity emergence in a nascent field, Patvardhan et al. (2012) observe that organizations indeed configure their local identities by selecting elements from other institutions within which they are embedded (as well as those in which they were previously embedded), ensuring that these elements are within the boundaries of the institutional environment. We anticipate that the growing interest in the above three themes will lead to greater interest and insights on identity.

Overall, the institutional approach to the study of identity appears to have enriched our understanding of organizational identity in three distinct ways. One, by approaching institutional phenomena from the vantage of identity, these studies have elevated the study of identity that was hitherto limited to the organizational level to a more macro, collective level. We note that, although it was the notion of “collective identity” that extended the study of identity from the personal to the organizational level, organizational identity theorists have typically not engaged with identity issues beyond the

organizational level, so institutional studies on identity offer an impetus for further extension here (Navis & Glynn, 2010; Wry et al., 2011). Two, given institutionalists' predominant focus on explaining legitimization processes, these studies have thrown more light on the legitimacy aspects of identity—a crucial element, which, although acknowledged by mainstream identity theorists, have been understudied. Where mainstream identity studies focus on the emergence and change of the central, distinctive and continuous elements, institutional studies focus on the legitimacy aspects of these elements. Finally, the institutional view sensitizes us to the context or social milieu within which identity construction processes unfold. Here, the institutional view helps “locate identity in broader frames of meaning that arise from industry, cultural and societal institutions” (Glynn, 2008, p. 414).

We also believe, however, that the institutional approach has hidden from view certain critical identity processes. To the extent that institutional theorists define identity as a “set of claims to a social category” (Glynn, 2008, p. 419), they encourage a rather limited understanding of identity as inhering mainly in claims and do not adequately attend to the meanings underlying those claims. This focus only on claims does not attempt to eavesdrop into the backstage negotiations and conversations that reveal the fundamental meaning construction processes germane to identity construction. In our estimation, a meanings-based perspective is essential to understand identity construction. The meanings-based approach to identity (typically adopted by advocates of the social construction view) indicates that although identity is influenced by the social context, individuals and organizations experience it as a deeply personal phenomenon. Unless we understand identity and identity-related processes, the way organizational actors understand and experience them—and not just project them—our understanding of identity is likely to be impoverished and lacking in relevance to practitioners. Further, the institutional view with its overt concern about legitimization processes tends to focus on the processes by which identities are legitimated (Khair & Wadhvani, 2010; Navis & Glynn, 2010). Although legitimacy is a crucial aspect of the identity construction process, the more fundamental question of how identities emerge and are negotiated is relegated to backstage.

In summary, the *institutional view*, although more akin to the social actor perspective, in that it emphasizes labels (Glynn & Abzug, 2002) and claims (Navis & Glynn, 2010) as representing identity, nonetheless also acknowledges the social elements of identity (as the social constructionists do). In the institutional view, much like the social construction and social actor views, identity remains an internally defined notion, but is circumscribed by what is acceptable and legitimate.

Finally, the traditional *population ecologist view* (Polos et al., 2002) takes an “external” view and casts identity inevitably as socially determined. This perspective holds an organization's identity to be essentially assigned by external

observers; identity is, therefore, imposed by category (industry) membership and thus overdetermined. The idea of “category identity” is viewed as useful for understanding that audiences/stakeholders and even organization members themselves compare the organization to a “default code” to make sense of the identity of the organization. For that reason, any objective observer would conclude that if they can accurately assign an organization to an industry category, then the identity attributes are known and stereotypical. We consider this view of identity to be oversimplified and starkly impoverished. Actually, we consider the view to be an inaccurate application of the concept of identity itself. Because it involves the perception of organizations from an outsider perspective, it is better described as focused on image (the perceptions that outsiders hold—see Gioia et al., 2000). Consistent with the social construction, social actor, and institutional views, we see the essence of organizational identity as an internally defined phenomenon.

Overall, although progressing along divergent paths, the four perspectives on identity—the social actor, social construction, institutional, and population ecologist views—offer some convergence toward a more holistic understanding of organizational identity and its associated processes—ranging from the essential attributes of identity, the construction, projection, and legitimization of these attributes at both the micro- and macro-levels, the influence of social context on the emergence and change of organizational identities, to the role of various organizational members, entrepreneurs, and external audiences, the role of discourse and narratives, and so on. Although approaching identity from these different perspectives has produced a multi-dimensional view of identity, the time is ripe for these different schools of thought to move beyond highlighting their differences and further explore areas of complementarity. Here, we view the burgeoning work from the institutional perspective to be particularly useful and promising for identity research because this work suggests that the social constructionist, social actor, and institutional views on identity may not be as far apart as previously presumed. Traditionally, the mainstream organizational identity and institutional views on identity have developed as parallel and almost antithetical streams—the former emphasizing distinctiveness and the later emphasizing similarity (via isomorphism). Although recent studies in the mainstream tradition have recognized the isomorphic influences of institutions (Gioia et al., 2010; Patvardhan et al., 2012), institutional theorists now speculate that institutional processes enable not just isomorphism but also distinctiveness (Glynn, 2008). Further, similar to studies that have reconciled the social actor and social construction views (Gioia et al., 2010), we see an opportunity to reconcile the institutional and social construction views (especially given that both emphasize identity construction as a socially negotiated process), and perhaps even the social construction and population ecology views (because both emphasize the role of external audiences in identity construction). In fact, it may not be far-

fetches to imagine a study that attempts to accommodate all the prevailing views. Here, collaborations among scholars rooted in each of these traditions may provide rich insights on the strengths and complementarities of each of these views.

We also urge identity scholars to turn their attention to identity processes at the collective level. Although the interest of institutional and population ecology theorists in studying identity has elevated the study of identity to more macro-levels, much of the work on identity at the collective levels is in the context of categories, markets, and organizational forms, where “collective identity” is used interchangeably with category identity and/or market identity (Khairi & Wadhvani, 2010; Navis & Glynn, 2010; Weber, Heinze, & DeSoucey, 2008). Though these studies offer insightful contributions, we believe that by equating “collectives” with categories and markets that are primarily “conceptual systems” (Navis & Glynn, 2010), we overlook the social dynamics and relationships that lead to the collective “we”-feeling among the members of an institution. In exploring the concept of “collective identity” or identity at the meta-level, scholars may find some pointers from the literature pertaining to social movements—especially, the development of collective identity in social movements. Social movement theorists’ portrayal of collective identity as constructed, set in motion and sustained through interaction among members of a community (Taylor & Whittier, 1992) indicates that its emergence involves processes of social construction as members interact and negotiate to arrive at “shared values, definition of the situation and plan of action” (Gecas, 2000, p. 100). It is here that the social construction view of identity may offer newer insights on identity at the macro-level.

Assimilating Research on Identity Change

First of all, it is by now clear that organizational identity can change and that there are a number of conditions under which it changes in notable ways. Most of those conditions tend to be associated with major organizational or strategic change efforts. In one way of thinking, it has been noted that bona fide strategic or transformational change is unlikely to be accomplished *without* associated identity change (Clark et al., 2010; Gioia & Thomas, 1996).

So, in light of the empirical work over the past two decades, what factors contribute to the malleability of identity? The compendium is fairly voluminous. First, given the inextricably intertwined relationship between identity and image (Gioia et al., 2000), image is heavily implicated in identity change. The malleability of organizational identity is thus seen as a consequence of the fluidity of organizational image (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Similarly, the discrepancy between the perception of current and desired identity or what Reger et al. (1994) termed an “identity gap” is an impetus for identity change (and,

similarly, what Gioia & Thomas, 1996, characterized as striving for a “desired future image” via prospective sensemaking). In addition, it is clear that the pursuit of external legitimacy can also serve as an impetus for change, as organizations try to align with their institutional contexts (Glynn & Abzug, 2002; Glynn & Marquis, 2005). Finally, an early study by Cook and Yanow (1993), although framed as a culture study, can be easily viewed as an identity study showing that it is possible for identity change to be an emergent phenomenon as members confront changes occurring within the organization.

This last-noted study, however, prompts us to acknowledge a frequent question about the relationship between organizational identity and organizational culture. Without rehashing that debate, we will note that from our perspective, identity constitutes the deepest of Schein’s (1990, 1996) three cultural levels (the readily obvious level of “artifacts,” the next deeper level of “values,” and the deepest level of “basic assumptions”). In our view, this deepest level is actually better construed as the identity level. Is identity then a subset of culture or is identity the root of culture? Although it is possible to conceive of either as a derivative of the other, we prefer to view identity as the generative basis of culture, which is especially evident when one considers that identity formation likely precedes and provides a foundation for the formation of culture.

As for processes associated with identity change, we have noted that malleable meanings associated with stable labels constitute a subtle, covert process whereby identity can change over time without the conscious awareness of organization members and, therefore, amounts to a stealth identity change process. Changing overt labels, however, constitutes a notably less subtle process of identity change. Gustafson (1995) and Gustafson and Reger (1995) noted that identity change processes accelerate in high-velocity environments, which are continuously and radically changing. These authors viewed organizational identity as a nested structure—with more-difficult-to-change intangible identity attributes (beliefs) at the core, and more changeable, tangible identity (product/market) attributes at the periphery. Finally, we also recognize that identity change can be either relatively continuous (Chreim, 2005; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006) or discontinuous (Biggart, 1977; Fiol, 2002; Ybema, 2010).

Prospects for Future Organizational Identity Change Research

Taking stock of the research on organizational identity change it appears that, although the discourse on identity has shifted significantly since early conceptualizations of the “sameness” and “enduringness” of identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985), we have examined only the tip of a very large iceberg—at least with regards to organizational identity’s temporal and dynamic aspects. Where regulatory and technological changes in the 1990s initiated the

discussion on organizational identity change and challenged the life-cycle theory or “enduring” hypothesis of identity, rapid globalization and the explosion of social media in the past decade, have re-invigorated the discussion on organizational change more generally—thereby implicating organizational identity change, as well. We suggest four possible directions for future research.

The first has to do with conceptualization, operationalization, and measurement. Although a significant number of studies engage empirically with the temporal and dynamic aspects of identity and demonstrate why and how identity endures and/or changes, few are explicit in declaring the criteria they employ to measure identity. Albert and Whetten (1985) define identity as changing over “longer periods of time” and Gioia and Thomas (1996) talk about change in “shorter time horizons”. In the absence of a well-defined time scale, these time-related assertions appear relative, fuzzy, and ambiguous—rendering it difficult to derive more general, theoretical-level understanding. A review of the organizational identity literature (Corley et al., 2006) reveals, however, that this problem is not limited to the temporal aspect of identity. Corley et al. (2006, p. 94), too, observed that “there are so few examples of empirical research with explicit, detailed discussions of how organizational identity is to be operationalized and assessed” (for a key exception, see Brickson’s (2005, 2007) work on organizational identity orientation).

The significance of having validated measures of (or at least having researchers explicitly state how they conceptualize) organizational identity and each of its three criteria is driven home when one attempts to investigate the temporal dimension, or for that matter any one aspect of organizational identity (be it centrality or distinctiveness) in depth. The three elements of identity appear to be intertwined. This, however, does not come as surprise given Albert and Whetten’s conceptualization of the three criteria as “each necessary, and as a set sufficient” to qualify as the identity of an organization (1985, p. 292). Many questions remain unanswered, however: Must all dimensions of an organization’s identity meet the criteria of CED? Might a few elements signify centrality more than others? And do some elements score higher on “distinctiveness” than others? In other words, in the absence of operationalizable measures, it becomes difficult to examine each element in greater depth. This issue becomes clear when we consider the two criteria of centrality and continuity: given that central features of an organization are deliberately preserved (Corley et al., 2006; Selznick, 1957; Tannenbaum & Hanna, 1985)—at least in the labels (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Gioia et al. 2000)—how do we study temporality to the exclusion of “centrality”?

A second issue has to do with the frequency of identity change. Although no previous organizational identity research has explicitly discussed frequency of change, it is nonetheless an important aspect to consider as issues of frequency and rate-of-change have arisen in the more general literature on organizational change (Amis, Slack, & Hinings, 2004; Klarner & Raisch, in press). Relying on

general organizational change research, it is possible to distinguish between two basic frequencies or tempos of change, *episodic* and *continuous* (Weick & Quinn, 1999). Generally, episodic change involves periods of relative stability punctuated by episodes of change, while continuous change involves periods of ongoing change punctuated by episodes of perceived stability. Multiple forms of episodic change have been the focus of much of the organizational change research. One of the more studied forms of episodic change involves change arising from environmental disruptions or what researchers call “discontinuous change”. For example, the notion of “punctuated equilibrium” (Gersick, 1991) describes a situation where the status quo of stability is punctuated by episodes of radical transformation, often arising from the introduction of a fundamentally new technology (Romanelli & Tushman, 1994; Tushman, Newman, & Romanelli, 1986). Other examples of episodic change include discrete change efforts strategically undertaken in response to environmental shifts (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Meyer, 1982) or in attempts to maintain or strengthen competitive position (Biggart, 1977; Gioia & Thomas, 1996).

Less well studied and, therefore, less well understood, continuous change can also be in response to ongoing shifts in the organization’s environment (Plowman et al., 2007). In general, continuous change involves extended periods of incremental adjustments followed by brief periods of perceived stability, or what D’Aveni has referred to as a “fluctuating equilibrium” (1999). More often than not, continuous change is conceptualized as not involving strategic organizational interests (see Fox-Wolfgramm, Boal, & Hunt, 1998, for an exception) nor observable differences in behavior (Orlikowski, 1996) and is viewed as being less critical to the bottom-line of the organization. For these reasons, processes of continuous change are harder for researchers to capture and examine and thus have received less attention from organizational researchers than episodic change. These two tempos represent pure states of change frequency; it is also possible to conceive of the frequency of organizational identity change being a continuum where changes in identity are seen as being more episodic or more continuous. To date, most conceptualizations of organizational identity change have tended to reside on the “episodic” end of the continuum; however, as research efforts continue to explore non-traditional organizational contexts (e.g. start-ups, spin-offs, virtual organizations, etc.) this imbalance may lessen over time.

A third and related issue for future research concerns the speed at which identity change occurs—that is, how long it takes for organizational identity change to be accomplished. Again, using a continuum, the anchor points can be represented by notions of slow and rapid change. Albert and Whetten’s (1985) original notion of an enduring organizational identity recognized the potential for change to occur only over very long-time periods (similar to notions of cultural change—Hatch, 1993), representing the slow end of the continuum. Alternatively, Gioia et al. (2000) lay out an argument for

	Episodic	Continuous
Slow	<i>Unchanging / Frozen</i>	<i>Incremental Change</i>
Rapid	<i>Radical Change</i>	<i>Instability / Chaos</i>

Figure 2 Combination of Change Frequency and Change Speed.

viewing organizational identity change from a post-modern perspective, a view that can push the notion of rapid identity change to an extreme, sometimes occurring very fast and often without warning. In between these two extremes, numerous examples exist of differently paced identity changes, from Fiol's (2002) relatively rapid identity transformation process at Tech-Co to Dutton and Dukerich's (1991) relatively slow adaptation process at the New York/New Jersey Port Authority to the moderately paced change noted by Brun (2002) at France Telecom.

An interesting avenue for future identity research to consider emerges from combining the dimensions of "frequency of change" and "speed of change" into a 2×2 matrix (Figure 2). Doing so provides insight into currently underspecified but intriguing states of organizational identity change, some of which have connections with more general organizational change research—the combination of "episodic identity change" and "rapid identity change" resulting in a type of change similar to notions of radical organizational change and the combination of "continuous identity change" and "slow identity change" resulting in a notion of change similar to the incremental change. Other combinations do not seem to be well represented in the organizational change literature—for example, combining "episodic" and "slow" to get a form of identity change that appears extremely slow over long time horizons, or combining "continuous" and "rapid" to get a (perhaps soon-to-be more common) form of fluid identity that would require a continuously morphing organization (Rindova & Kotha, 2001) or, perhaps more likely, one that could engage in fluid organizing (Hamilton & Gioia, 2011; Schreyögg & Sydow, 2010).

Our review revealed that much of what we know about organizational identity, including its dynamic aspects, is based on the study of organizations

located within a single and uniform geographic market (U.S./European) and/or stable institutional environment (developed markets). In the past two decades, with liberalization of economic policies in emerging economies, rapid globalization and the consequent emergence and rapid adoption of the multi-national enterprise (MNE) today's organizations have an additional dimension to cope with: geographic and institutional diversity. As organizations internationalize and move beyond the boundaries of the home country and beyond market-level and institutional-level challenges, they are faced with an even more critical and fundamental issue of identity. What happens to the organization's sense of self as it moves beyond the boundaries of its home country? Even if there is no deliberate shift in the organization's identity, would a shift in image threaten its identity? For example, expressing outrage at the appointment of Jeffrey Immelt, Chairman and CEO of GE Corporation, to chair the President's Council on Jobs and Competitiveness, a blogger remarked: "GE is not an American company. It is a foreign company that happens to be headquartered in the US, and that happens to have a chairman/CEO who was born in the US, and holds a US passport." The challenges of managing organizational identity for MNEs is pronounced when we consider that they have to be both globally integrated as well as nationally responsive, given market and local governmental pressures. Pant and Ramachandran (2011) studied the evolution of identity claims made over a period of half a century by the subsidiary management at Hindustan Lever, the Indian subsidiary of Unilever Inc., and demonstrated the identity-related challenges faced by subsidiaries of multi-nationals as they try to conform simultaneously to isomorphic pressures emanating from two distinct institutional environments: the multi-national organization and the host country. Specifically, they observe that subsidiaries not only possess a hybrid identity (an MNC identity and a host country identity), but also that the subsidiary actively conducts identity work to adapt to the dynamic balance between multi-national organization pressures and home country pressures.

As a final comment on the prospects for future work on organizational identity change, we would note that the discourse on the dynamic aspects of identity, especially the "enduring" vs. "change" debate, suggests the predominance of an essentialist view of organizational identity as "thing". Whether one holds a social actor view or a social construction view, the overriding image of identity is that of some "entity" that experiences change. In recent times, process theorists have been urging organizational scholars to go beyond examining an organization as an entity and to place more emphasis on the *process* of "organizing" (Barley, 1990; Langley, 1999; Pentland, 1999; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995). On the topic of organizational change, Tsoukas and Chia asserted that, "Change must not be thought of as a property of organization. Rather, organization must be understood as an emergent property of change. Change is ontologically prior to organization—it is the

condition of possibility for organization” (2002, p. 570). Extending this ontological view to the study of identity—identity as a “process” rather than an “entity”—presents a challenge to the phenomenon of identity change.

Could it be that the identity of an individual, group, or an organization is not as fixed and central as is currently conceptualized? Do “bounded rationality” and our need to simplify and order a seemingly complex and changing world explain why we wish to see—and consequently, project—our identities, and the identities of those around us, as relatively stable—when, in fact, they are as much in flux as they are fixed? And, consequently, does the anxiety over identity change stem, not as much from its fluid nature, but from our expectation that, when well-defined, it is central and enduring? After all,

... the way we talk about identity is an artifact of the way we think about it. Because we are so inclined to talk about identity as a thing, we both color and constrain the scope of how we consider identity. (Gioia & Patvardhan, 2012, p. 52)

Overall, following the lead of process theorists who recommend the study of “organizing”—rather than “organizations”—might we gain richer insights by studying identity as a process and flow rather than a thing?

Assimilating Research on Organizational Identity Formation

Organizational identity formation is clearly a complex process. Organizations are varied and complicated entities, so it is likely that the identity formation process varies across organizations, although the grounded theory model developed by Gioia et al. (2010) gives us a good picture of some fundamental concepts, phases and sub-processes germane to the general process. Organizational identity formation (along with organizational identity construction more generally) involves interplay between external influences and internal resources. Authors have tended to focus on one or the other and the salience of specific influences is likely to vary depending on contextual factors (e.g. new versus established industry, legacy, and nested identities). There is an important yet subtle distinction, however, between organizational identity formation’s being *influenced* by external forces versus being *determined* by them. We would argue that it is important to reinforce this distinction.

So, what do we think we know about identity formation? We know that founders and leaders matter for articulating vision and for making defining claims. We know that past experience matters, that organizational narratives matter, and that the issue of balancing similarities and differences (being seen as similar to some preferred referent group and yet distinctively different from them in the pursuit of optimal distinctiveness) are hallmarks of the formative process. We also know that every organization trying to forge a new

identity is likely to experience identity ambiguity, to experience a meanings void that begs to be filled. They are also likely to engage in “the negative way” (via negativa) in deciding who they do not want to be. We can fully expect any new organization to engage in a greater or lesser degree of emulation or mimicry of other existing organizations. We also can expect that societal culture will play an important role in shaping organizational identity and that the media will have its say in the attributes that the resulting identity will display. It should come as no surprise that organizational identity formation is influenced by both external and internal factors, or that the first step in forming a sense of the new organization involves what Kroezen and Heugens (2012) termed identity imprinting—that is, drawing on “proto-identity attributes” available from the founders’ own vision and from aspirational peer organizations. Such attributes can be viewed as constituting an “identity reservoir,” which can be drawn on to make identity claims.

Overall, what we now know is that organizational identity formation processes involve the co-evolution of understandings, claims, and institutional forces that are not only complementary (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006), but mutually constitutive (Gioia et al., 2010). Identity formation processes meld external influences and internal resources in a complex stew in which all involved parties work to develop some optimally distinctive identity (Gioia et al., 2010; Kroezen & Heugens, 2012)—one that the involved players fervently hope will secure legitimacy in the institutional environment. Thereafter, organizational identity is continually reaffirmed through everyday interactions and continuity of favored practices (Nag et al., 2007).

Prospects for Future Identity Formation Research

Organizational identity formation research is still in its early stages, and we see several fruitful avenues for additional contributions. First, building on Gioia et al.’s (2010) model of the process of organization identity formation, we suggest that future studies continue elaborating what we know about “deep processes,” that is, those processes that may be common across organizations and periods of time. The articulation of founders’ values, the experience of a meanings void and the use of via negativa seem likely “deep process” candidates, and additional research would serve a useful purpose in examining those in greater detail and perhaps identifying others. Although this line of research would address *how* identity forms, another valuable contribution would be made by additional research into *what* identity content forms and *why*. This second stream of work could build on the basic model of imprinting and enactment developed by Kroezen and Heugens (2012) by contributing in-depth studies that provide thick description of identity content formation in organizations. As noted, one particular area of inquiry should focus on how organizational members select claims from the identity reservoir theorized

by Kroezen and Heugens, as well as the patterns of relationships (or networks) that link those claims together. Further, identity content has two aspects, meanings and labels (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Gioia et al., 2000), so an important part of future identity content formation research would be to untangle the interplay between the adoption of labels and the creation of their meanings (Rerup & Gioia, 2011). Going a step further, research that connects the “how” and the “what” and “why” of organizational identity formation would be extremely valuable. How and why some organizations form multiple organizational identities are two other potentially important questions for future research.

Another important part of a call for future research would be to broaden and deepen an understanding of the role played by diverse contexts on organizational identity formation. The extant literature includes more work on identity formation in emerging fields than in established ones. Clegg et al. speculated that organizations engage in identity work “not for its own sake, but to facilitate legitimacy formation” (2007, p. 509). Gioia et al. (2010) suggested that there are other compelling reasons as well, including the need to develop an internal guide for strategic action and day-to-day practices. Work on new organizations attempting to enter established fields would be helpful in furthering our understanding of how the external and internal purposes served by organizational identity affect the formation process. We suspect that even in highly institutionalized fields, members must “make sense” of the identity and claim it for their own, yet empirical work might show that this aspect of formation is less salient in such settings. In addition, organizational identity formation in several other contexts that are important in organizational life, has not been examined thoroughly and could provide valuable contributions. These include situations in which legacy and nested identities figure prominently, as well as institutionally complex settings (e.g. conflicting logics and institutional pluralism).

Finally, additional work needs to be done on the co-evolution of field and organizational identities, as well as the consequences of identity formation. The sobering example provided by Czarniawska and Wolff (1998) clearly indicates that organizational identity formation can contribute to overall success or failure, but there is a great deal more here to be done. Pratt (2012) calls for additional work on “identity and . . .”—a view toward what organizational identity influences rather than what it is. Understanding how organizational identity formation affects other significant activities for better or worse would be a very valuable contribution. This stance would be beneficial to organizational identity research more generally as well, by linking it to other important areas of strategic management and organization studies.

Our hypothetical agenda for additional research on organizational identity formation is an ambitious one. Done properly, this work requires extensive

longitudinal observation and data collection, as well as an eye toward unraveling complex processes. This type of research can be quite challenging, yet the potential rewards are immense in that understanding how we come to be “who we are, as an organization” has implications beyond the organization—as the macro-setting for individual and group endeavors and as the micro-foundations of meta-institutions.

Conclusion

We believe that it is necessary to conduct more empirical work on both organizational identity formation and change. Identity is such a deep and close-to-the-bone concept at all levels of analysis that we need to garner a better understanding of its origins and its transitions. Do we have a good understanding of all the relevant processes involved in identity formation? Undoubtedly we do not. Quite simply, we need more research across a wider range of contexts. Is identity difficult to change? Yes, it is. Does it change? Yes, it does. But how? It turns out that it often changes in ways that make it appear unchanging to its very agents of change, which only deepens the intrigue associated with the concept. If we observe, however, that there can be no profound organizational change without attendant identity change, we are forced to ask, “How can such an essential concept apparently be both immutable and mutable?”. That is a fascinating question for both laypeople and scholars. As the bard in *Shakespeare in Love* put it, “It’s a mystery!” (Gioia, 2008). Addressing this mystery is one of the charges of future research in this most important of scholarly domains. It is by now clear that identity is a central node in a wide and complex nomological net within organization study. Identity would appear to be connected to so many other key organizational concepts that it is imperative that we get a theoretical handle on the character of those linkages. Talk about an intellectually exciting endeavor that could well define one of the most important organizational concepts of our time . . .

Endnotes

1. In more recent works, however, some population ecologists have proposed a more “general view” of identity as something that “inheres in the expectations and beliefs of diverse audiences, both internal and external to the organization” (Hsu & Hannan, 2005, p. 477).
2. The acronym CED (central, enduring, distinctive) promulgated by Albert and Whetten (1985) is now prevalent in the organizational identity literature. The “C” term, however, also can be taken to stand for “core” and often is used interchangeably with “central”. Similarly, Albert and Whetten used the term “enduring” to describe a key property of identity, but they also alluded to identity as having “continuity”. As will become evident in this review, we believe “continuity” to be

a more appropriate and accurate descriptor and will therefore often refer to identity as having continuity over time, rather than being “enduring”.

3. As noted in the Introduction section Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) studied the initiation of the strategic change process at the same university as Gioia and Thomas (1996) and thus studied the beginnings of an identity change effort, although that study was not framed explicitly in identity terms.

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