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Temporalized Identities: How Organizations Construct Identities in a Society of Presents

Jasmin Siri
LMU Munich, Germany
Jasmin.Siri@soziologie.uni-muenchen.de

Victoria von Groddeck
LMU Munich, Germany
victoria@vongroddeck.de

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Abstract
From the beginning of sociological reasoning about organizations, the loss of identity of individuals in the iron cage of an organization has been a prominent image. From the grandfathers of sociology through contemporary researchers, the identity of the person and the identity of the organization have been seen as antipodes that put the identity of the individual at risk. In this paper, we used systems theory to reconsider the relationship between identity and organization. We argued that both the individual and the organization must balance various expectations that occur in real time. Using empirical data, we demonstrated how multi-identities are constructed, referring to specific societal presents and their restrictions. We argued that conflicting identity constructions of individuals in organizations must not be interpreted as symptoms of alienation or oppression. For example, talking about conflicting requirements of organizational practice may affirm the professionalism of an employee. Moreover, the display of different identity constructions of organizations (e.g., in reports and resolutions) does not point to programmatic inconsistencies or indecisiveness, but to the organization's need to deal with the expectations of a modern society that does not allow its organizations to follow only one purpose.

Introduction

Empirical analyses of organizations often contain self-descriptions that seem somehow paradoxical and conflicting. Corporate enterprises engage in ethical discourses and proclaim moral values that should lead their actions; for example, universities have used business-related semantics to describe themselves as institutions of excellence, and public authorities frequently proclaim themselves to be service providers and citizens to be clients. The basic assumption of scholars and practitioners who describe these developments as paradoxical or conflicting is that social entities should produce holistic and time-stable self-descriptions. Thus, a report from a manager who describes his problems when it comes to firing employees is interpreted as an alienating conflict between the individual identity and organizational requirements. In addition, political parties' engagement of consultants, who support and professionalize the choice of

issues during election campaigns, may be judged as a crisis of legitimation or interpreted as weakness in decision making. The subjects of these interpretations – regardless of whether they are articulated by scholars, members of organizations, or journalists – are the diagnosis, problematization, and 're'-establishment of an assumed lost identity.

In our empirical work on corporate enterprises and political parties, we often encounter self-descriptions that do not describe holistic entities, but rather the opposite. In our opinion, however, this should not lead to a diagnosis that these organizations are somehow in crisis; in this article, inspired by a theoretical perspective of functional differentiation, we demonstrated that identities are always constructed in current practices within restricting social contexts. In these practices, identities that are functional in a specific practice are constructed. These identities do not refer to a propagated, stable organizational identity perceived as a time-stable structure. As a consequence, we argue that every organization has a multiplicity of identities. Furthermore, we argue that in a society of presents (Nassehi, 2003c, 2006) conflicts and ambivalent circumstances do not necessarily lead to problems or crisis, but may constitute organizational solutions for coping with different expectations within and outside the organization. In this context, the expectation of a consistent and time-stable identity is only one of a multiplicity of expectations, which, like every expectation, is only problematic in a specific current present.

First, we describe the sociological discourse of identity and organization. Second, we present our theoretical perspective, based on perceiving identity from a systems-theoretical perspective, and a theory of operative practice. Third, we outline an epistemological position without a normative bias to a time-stable conception of identity that should enable researchers to observe the extensive effort within social practices to construct identities. Fourth, we present empirical examples from studies on value communication in business firms and the changing forms of membership of political parties. We illustrate how in social practices specific identities are constructed based on specific expectations associated with these practices. We interpret these forms of construction as a means of coping with the challenges of a polycontextual society. Finally, we conclude with a discussion of how the presented observations can be connected to organizational studies and how organizational studies and a theory of society are correlated.

Organization and Identity

If one asks about the nucleus of the classical perspective of the sociology of organization, the answers would point in the same direction. The classical sociological perspectives on organizations emphasized the processes of how organizations reduce complexity for modern society. Organizations thereby transform individuals into exchangeable members and role takers, which is seen as crucial for the evolution of modern societies. The answers would probably also involve references to authors like Max Weber (for a summary of Weber's organization theory, see Mayntz, 1971) and Emile Durkheim (1992). Classical sociology was also interested in dysfunctional effects concerning organizations' members and the organization itself. Thus, authors like Karl Marx (1969), Robert K. Merton (1995), and Erving Goffman (1973) would have been cited.

The antiquated sociological gaze – which we construe here in a rather simplified manner to provide an accommodating introduction to a rather specific organization-theoretical text – observes mechanisms of rationalization and integration by organizations and their dysfunctional effects in regard to the individual and organization and to society. We abstain from retelling the history of sociological organization theory. For us, the important point is that the question of identity and organization is as old as at least 100 years of sociological theorizing.

Although the following considerations of identity and the organization focus on a systems-theoretical perspective, both terms have a broad history in sociological reasoning and are extensively used in academic and non-academic discourses. Thus, the meaning of these terms is somewhat fuzzy. Therefore, we begin with reflections on different perspectives on organizational observation and conceptions of identity.

Descriptions that function to protect the individual from the all-encompassing grasp of the organization as an inhuman bureaucracy have a long tradition. Organization theory evolved from three fundamental experiences of modernity—industrialization, rationalization, and the loss of a functional primacy for securing the order of the whole society—which implies the simultaneity of different societal contexts and their seemingly irreconcilable differences (Luhmann, 1997; Nassehi, 2003c). Only in a society without a center, with no location from which it can be described in its wholeness, does organizing become possible and necessary. In addition, only the liberation of humans from exclusively interactional settings can lead to the necessity of sociological theorizing of imagining individuals who are integrated into social structures where they create biographical experiences (Nassehi 2003a, b). The perception of society as functionally differentiated led to the organization-theoretical diagnosis of the alienation of the worker who suffers from living in the organizational iron cage (Coleman, 1986; Weber, 1920). The evolution of society from a stratified structure to functional differentiation produced sociological descriptions that considered individual identity to be jeopardized. The individual

thereby must build the antipode to society and its changing demands on role takers and membership conditions. In the process, organizations themselves are attributed with a personified individuality and depending on the picture of this identity – as a shareholder value-optimizing monster or a value-sharing culture (Schein, 1991) – the contrast between individual and organization becomes sharper or is reduced. These *demands for identity* refer to the assumption that identities are needed as semantic forms to create plausible descriptions of how to act in a complex, contradictory world, regardless of whether we observe people, organizations, or societies. Only by reference to identities does it seem possible to cope with a world that is constantly changing even though from the perspective of people and organizations a certain degree of stability can be observed.

Identity and Systems Theory

Luhmann's (1987) theory of social systems used the term *identity* non-normatively, neither in regard to a holistic subject nor to a perfect cosmos or right meaning (p. 111). Identity would then be connected with a distinction between sense and nonsense, which in Luhmann's reasoning is not adequate for modern society. The conversion of the sociological observation from identity to difference (Luhmann, 1987, p. 112ff.) makes it possible to show that the construction of identity is a process of a distinction in reaction to complexity and the experience of contingency. Identity is thereby nothing more than the determination and localization of reduced complexity (Luhmann, 1987, p. 252). In this line of theorizing, identity is built as a temporal form without substantial meaning. The demand for identity-related communication (in both theory and practice) results from the experience that social (and psychic) systems in modern society are observed by others and selves, but these observations do not determine the location, the substance, or the form of these systems. To differentiate one system from another, self-descriptions must communicate these differences. Semantics and theories that focus on identity must then be read as answers to sociological questions about the relationship between the collective and the individual. The irony of the term identity is that it is associated with the collective; identity is – speaking dialectally – determined by differences, which secures the identity of both sides of the difference. The concept of identity is the bridge between a functionally differentiated society and its political and cultural representation (Nassehi, 2003a, p. 6; Reckwitz, 2008).

The classic sociological antagonism between a subject that has identity and organization/society that until now has informed some parts of sociological research has consequences for the development of research questions and methodology. We argue that organizational research that expresses interest in rescuing authentic and holistic individuals from alienation jeopardizes the opportunity to observe and that the inclusion of different contexts unavoidably leads to context-related self-descriptions that are functional in relation to the specific, time-actual context. Empirically, one can observe that both individuals and organizations must react to different system rationalities, which depending on the specific present and context make only specific identity constructions possible. Therefore, identities are different in different contexts (Baecker, 2007, p. 229). For example, an individual perceives self and speaks differently as a family father than that individual does when working as a bank counsellor or talking to people about different identities in life.

We will show how differently in regard to specific situations identities are constructed by organizational members and organizations themselves. In the tradition of difference-theoretical thinking, we will argue that contradicting (or very general and therefore not conflicting) identity descriptions are a way to express identity in a society of presents where unavoidably heterogeneous expectations emerge. The function of these descriptions is not in the construction of a time-stable description, but in the possibility of coping with specific expectations in specific situations and thereby securing the continuance of this social process.

Thus far, we have shown how full of preconditions a sociological text is that operates using the term identity. We assume that identity in its theoretical explanation camouflages data rather than sharpens empirical observations. We therefore will use the term to describe our empirical material, but theoretically we will stick to the term *self-description*. For us, identity relies strongly on semantics, and the historical program of processing self-descriptions has the function in a specific present to construct an entity by distinguishing between self and other.

From the Imposition of Holistic Entity to Multi-Referentiality

Every academic description is an observation that can describe or observe only what the perspective of observation allows. This seemingly tautological notion refers to the constructionist insight that academic observation is only possible via a reduced horizon of contingency. By deciding on specific theories, methods, or terms, the object of academic observation is constructed. In the following paragraphs, we describe on which decision the observations of this article are constructed.

Our empirical observations and theoretical arguments follow systems-theoretical thinking, which sees communication rather than action as the basic element of social practice (Luhmann, 1987, 1997). Social systems emerge through communication, in contrast to psychic systems which emerge through perception. Communication is not considered a process between individuals, but the basic element of all social systems (Luhmann, 1991, p. 9). In this vein, communication is a synthesis of three elements: information, message, and understanding (Luhmann, 1987, p. 193ff.). Understanding only means that information and message are differentiated and that somehow something is connected to this difference. These elements are actual selections from a wide range of potential selections. From the specific way these selections are performed, social meaning emerges (Luhmann, 2000). If one wants to analyze communication practices, for example the description of identity, the task is to observe not only the communication addresses, but also the opening up and restriction of communication scopes (Baecker, 2007, p. 9).

Thus, communication is the basis of social reality construction, and the processes of communication must take into account how selection of the communication elements evolves. The term *society* is based on this assumption. It refers to functional differentiation and emphasizes that a functionally differentiated society should not be perceived as having different, but complementary, functional logics (Parsons, 1960). The term society, as used here, emphasizes the fact that different communication processes with different rationalities and logics are simultaneously performed (Nassehi, 2003c, 2006).

Luhmann (1991) differentiated three forms of social systems: society and functional systems, organizations, and interactions. The criteria for differentiation are the differences involved in the elements of each system. Functional systems are built through communication that is oriented toward a specific code; in interactions, the communication is oriented toward mutual perception and in organizations all communication has a reference to decision making. However, if one analyzes communication practices of identity construction in organizations, it is not possible to only concentrate on decision making; one also has to reconstruct the references to interactional and functional logics. Observation and analysis of communication practice in the context of organizations is always a process of societal and interactional communication.

Functional systems, interactions, and organizations have in common that their communicational operations, however different they may be, are real-time operations that can produce meaning only in real time. Systems are thereby *temporalized systems*. Operations are only operations in the present; they cannot be perceived as time-stable structures. Nassehi (2003c) pointed out that the operations of a system are radically self-referential and cannot endure. A system can only connect to an operation with a new operation; thus, one can trust neither the past nor the future and actually should not trust the present (p. 73). Operations disappear immediately in the moment they operate. Only by the construction of time, which means that a system itself can differentiate past and future, is one able to connect operations recursively. In this process, *structures* can emerge. As all systems operate in real time simultaneously, we characterize the operative process of social practices using Nassehi's (2003c, 2006) notion of *a society of presents*.

Organizational systems elaborate their own logic of description about themselves and their relationship to their environment and thereby their own criteria on how to organize themselves. However, this intrinsic logic of organizing must be actualized in real time in different decoupled spheres and subsystems, such as departments. This process of actualization takes place in a society which does the same: actualizes its own logics in real time. Nassehi stated:

> This simultaneity of dependence and independence sometimes turns society into a drama. This drama is due to the fact that a "stage director" neither coordinates different "roles" nor does he or she follow a certain "script" that has to be fulfilled. Even more, on the "stage" of society, "lay-actors" perform, but have no opportunity to practice or correct their performance because every social action takes place in real time. They have to improvise and self-stabilize the structures referring to the interdependence of operative independent functional systems. It is a fundamental society of presents (2003, p. 165; translated by the authors).

This emphasis on the temporality of society has consequences for empirical research. To understand the "dramas," it is crucial to analyze the dependence and independence of the intrinsic logics of social practice.

We therefore perceive the construction of identities as an empirical, observable social practice in the context of organizations that can only be understood when one takes into account that identities have to be stabilized in *acute* presents. To maintain stable structures, an organization has to cope with contradictory environmental expectations. In addition, by referring to different expectations in the environment, an organization cannot construct only one single identity, but has to construct a context-related identity in reference to specific expectations. The same can be said for individuals; their identity constructions are also related to the real-time context in which they describe themselves.

Luhmann showed that self-descriptions that are plausible in a specific context are always a product of the actual possible forms of description. He wrote in his early book on organization, "Funktionen und Folgen formaler Organisation" (1964):

> While expressing itself, an organization – like every actor – faces unavoidable difficulties and paradoxes that only can be solved if the self-description restricts itself to only one part of reality, if it opens only some rooms of the house. Like for internal functions of formal systems, it is crucial to generalize symbols and expectations; it is necessary in external contact to communicate idealizations. […] Every person has to present his personality in an ideal, socially expected way, which dismisses specific parts; otherwise, he encounters difficulties of adaption. In the same way, a social system requires an effective self-expression of its own significance. It is not simply there, but must be constructed, built, and permanently maintained and changed for the better. This process needs more consciousness, as many participate compared to one individual. All apparent facts have to be prepared, liberated from defects and inadequacies, and exaggerated in direction to an acceptable value" (p. 113; translated by the authors).

Luhmann here described the peculiarity of identity constructions. Although different identities – or self-descriptions – would always also be plausible, the selected expressions have to be adequate in the single present/situation. Especially for organizations, this produces difficulties because their structures are always rather complex. Every organization has various sub-systems: A university has different departments, a hospital has different wards, and corporations own different firms. Every subsystem builds its own perspective on the organization and its environment. Universities, for example, orient themselves by the values of scientific system, but how these values are interpreted and lived can differ among disciplines and institutes. Furthermore, not only one single logic or value provides orientation for an organization. The organizational practice in a university, for example, is also structured by budgets and access to third-party money; if a university hires people, it is required to follow certain laws. Thus, identities are not determined by a specific functional system, but have to take simultaneously different functional logics into account:

> [O]rganizations and functional systems constitute each other's external environments, but organizational systems are always linked to at least one functional system. Organizational systems operate with a horizon of premises instead of a code, which is precisely what allows for the multiplicity of codifications (Åkerstrøm Andersen & Born, 2007, p. 5).

Organizations cannot orient themselves only by a single functional system. Organizational practice must react to different, heterogeneous logics. In different presents (e.g., an annual meeting of investors, a party convention, lunch break in the cafeteria, an internal meeting), an organization confronts different premises. Even if hierarchy and labor division have already reduced the array of premises, there is still a multiplicity of logics, which influences the process of a specific situation (e.g., in a negotiation where different perspectives must be reconciled). This all has consequences for the description of identity because the description must be adequate for the specific situation. For example, at an annual meeting, a business has to present itself as successful and capable of producing sustainable products, whereas at a party convention, fundamental values are recited, which build the normative base of all actions. In contrast, during lunch in a cafeteria, an identity that criticizes the culture of communication and decision making might be constructed.

Thus far, our examples have referred to identity descriptions of organizations, but nearly the same can be said for members of an organization. Individuals also construct their identity in reference to their present; they select adequate possibilities of self-description. For example, the life story provided in a job interview might differ from the story provided on a date with a new lover. Offering overly intimate communication to an employer seems inappropriate, and a date would be weird if one talked only about success in previous jobs, punctuality, and ambition during a candlelight dinner.

The different identity descriptions provided in a job interview and during a romantic date – and this is our point – should not be played off against each other. Moreover, they should stand equally next to each other as plausible descriptions in reference to a specific situation (Nassehi, 1997). Nevertheless, organizational members can get into trouble when the integration of the inclusion into different contexts becomes problematic or difficult. For example, the mass media produce attention when they report about public officials who engage in sexual dalliances. In therapeutic presents, however, it seems functional to talk about the excessive demand that stems from the inclusion in different contexts (e.g., when an application for a therapy or cure must be made). Beyond the discussion of difficulties, the inclusion into different

contexts is a pre-condition to describing an identity as individual (Beck, 1994, p. 55) and to justify the stability of one's own identity in a world that is permanently changing. Luhmann said that strong social and personal integration has fallen apart, but this should not lead to the conclusion that isolation is the only way to maintain a personality:

> Also, this possibility belongs to the "old style." This means that actions and expectations, symbols and means of expression have different functions for organizations and the individual person. As far as the actions of a person are included in the organization, they no longer serve its own self-expression. The person has to react to the rationalization of the social system with his or her own rationalization and self-abstraction, emotions and desires of expression have to be postponed, new strategies of self-consciousness have to be elaborated and maybe new ethics have to be found, all in order to cope with the multiplicity of system references and to learn more complex forms of the coordination between conscious interests of the person and the social system (1964, p. 26; translated by the authors).

In the following sections, we focus on different strategies of self-rationalization and self-abstraction. We attempt to demonstrate how organizations and persons construct identity differently based on their specific presents and that identity constructions can but do not have to exist in relation to each other.

Temporalized Identities: A Functional Analysis of Organizational Self-Descriptions

After outlining the theoretical fundamentals of our approach, we will now introduce examples from our own empirical data. We used data from two studies. The first provided an analysis of form and function of value communication in corporations (von Groddeck, 2011a,b). The study's methodology combined participant observation, interview analysis, and document analysis. The second study examined metamorphoses of party membership and party organization (Siri, 2012). The data consisted of narrative interviews, media communications (print, TV, social media), and campaign materials. We aimed to show how organizational presents allow one to observe different forms of identity construction that fulfill different functions. Both our studies followed a qualitative methodology inspired by Luhmann's functional analysis (Luhmann, 1964, p. 17 ff.; 1987, p. 83ff.; 1990) and systems-theoretical hermeneutics (Nassehi & Saake, 2002). Basically, we were interested in the contribution of particular structures and their sense-generating selection effects on social practice. We therefore analyze the communication's potential to solve a specific problem of reference (in German: *Bezugsproblem*), whereat a problem and its solution are not causally, but functionally, determined (Luhmann, 1987, p. 84). Analyzing the function of a communication does not mean relating a cause to an effect, but rather detecting the "functional equivalence of several possible causes with regard to a problematical effect" the communication seeks to solve (Luhmann, 1974, p. 14, translated by the authors). "Consequently, if one utilizes Niklas Luhmann's functional analysis, significant paradigm shifts are evolving with regard to empirical research. The functional analyst asks: What problems does this communication (cf. a text) solve? (…) Which semantics or self-descriptions appear? What are the narrations we know through other organizational communications (documents, media etc.)?" (Mayr & Siri, 2010, Par. 15). Earlier, we said that in organizations several constructions of identity coexist equally. A look at the empirical data also relates the bonding of organizations to functional systems: Political parties do not follow only the code of the political, and corporations do not exclusively follow economic devices.

The Construction of Personal Identity

So far, we have outlined the benefits of a sociological analysis of the organization that theoretically accounts for the temporality of social systems. We will now illustrate how this perspective can be applied to empirical data. First, we look at the self-descriptions of members of organizations. In the following passage from an interview, an employee and party member of the German Social Democratic Party described his everyday work life:

> It is not so easy to estimate, how to talk in miscellaneous situations. Imagine you must address the party executive committee and you are basically sticking to facts. Then you'll be told you lack idealism and since you are young you need to be an idealist. They are not idealistic themselves, but you ought to be. And one day later you attend a meeting on public opinion polling and impulsively say something political. Like talking morals. Then they look at you with big eyes and think: "Now he's gone mad!" And sometimes, in the evening, I try to work it out for myself. What's better? Being a swine or staying neat and clean? I mean, you must juggle there" (Mr. X).

Mr. X expounded the problem of not knowing whether the job at the party required a strategic or an idealistic attitude. This refers to the idea that different organizational contexts demand different behavioral patterns and ways of speaking. Because Mr. X described himself as rather satisfied with his job (in other parts of the interview), we cannot interpret the passage as a narration of organizational pressure. But why would somebody who is happy with the organization point out such a problem? The reflection on the question of whether it is better to be "a swine" or to stay "neat and clean" refers to the simultaneity of two contexts in the organization: strategic and idealistic (or ideological) political communications. The passage reveals that the party requires both these contexts and that party members must balance them to succeed in the political system. On the one hand, there is the need for professional, rational, and realistic debates on strategic decisions about the party's and society's future-to-be. On the other hand, the party is obliged to affirm its ideational terms and conditions and, thus, its normative objectives and ethical values. It seems as if the party can only describe itself effectively if it succeeds in oscillating between self-descriptions as strategic machine and ethical observer of society.

From Mr. X's perspective, the interview represented an occasion to reflect on the coherency of such complex representations of identity. In the present of the interview, he could thereby show that he is not only called upon, but also is able to "juggle" the different requirements of modern party organization. Pointing to the necessity of juggling different organizational presents, therefore, suits the purpose of demonstrating a professional habitus. This habitus is usually not discussed in the organization but needs to be constructed by means of laborious work on one's identity.

Similar self-descriptions can be found in economic enterprises, as the following passage demonstrates. The interviewee addressed what is important about being an executive manager in a large concern: "To me, it is important to be exactly informed about the world of numbers. And the thing about folks. I need to know about that, too" (Mr Y, manager).

This passage also deals with the need to balance different logics, in this case the logic of numbers and hard data and the logic of "folks." The "world of data" refers to the company's rate of return (economy) and the consequential practices of control (politics). "Folks," of course, refers to employees of the company, who realize the company's economic aims. However, the expression transcends the usual practices of personal management by not addressing only employees who are to be managed in the interests of the company. The economic orientation is supplemented by something in addition to economic logic that is important. Talking about "folks" communicates that there is a world outside the company and that employees are people who are included in diverse societal contexts beyond the organization. With the narration above, Mr. Y argued that a good manager must know about the employees as "folks," and this is how he described himself as a professional.

Our interview data showed a second reference to "personhood" and "folks." While Mr. Y aimed to describe himself as a professional leader by showing that he understands things beyond the organization, the following quotation shows how members of the organization can communicate expectations toward the organization by referring to personhood: "Everybody is an employee and therefore knows how to be decent and fair with people. Because everybody knows how they wanna be treated themselves!" (Mr. Z, sales staff).

This quotation suggests that employees want to be treated as individuals. In the context of the interview, this meets the need to formulate expectations toward the organization. These expectations are within the role and latitude of the employee, and such discussion enables descriptions of personhood and personal identity in the organization.

The Construction of Organizational Identity

We now shift the perspective toward organizational constructions of identity. The first example illustrates a rational self-description, the second aims to describe a corporation with a creative staff, and the third shows how a new political party formed from two former leftist parties balances different political factions:

> The management of product projects and product programs described above is subject to basic conditions which result from periodic planning. The aim here is to monitor and manage periodic targets on a long-term basis. Periodic performance is managed in the light of defined accounting policies and external financial reporting requirements (BMW Annual Report 2006, p. 43).

> Intercultural competence is a clear advantage in global competition. Diversity means variety and incorporates all facets that an employee brings to working life at BASF worldwide. We understand and appreciate the diversity of our employees at all levels of the hierarchy as a major gain. Diverse cultural backgrounds, individual perspectives, expertise, mind-sets, and

> approaches help to ensure greater creativity, a faster pace, and more innovative solutions in responding to the challenges of our business (BASF Annual Report 2007, p. 86).

> The "programmatic issues" reflect the common ground that WASG and Linkspartei.PDS have reached on the way to a new party. This common ground is a solid basis upon which to build a new party of the left. We will conserve and develop the traditions, experiences, and competencies of those groups, building the new party. The "programmatic issues" are not a closed party platform of the new left. To work on such a program, we invite everybody. We pick up a diversity of interpretation of analysis, politics, worldviews, strategies, antagonisms, and similarities and productively develop them to the strength of the new party (…). We are a part of the European left, of the social and peace movement" (Resolution of German WASG and Linkspartei.PDS, March 24-25, 2007, p. 1, translated by the authors).

These passages from annual reports and a political resolution show how differently – but also similarly – organizations describe themselves. Given that these self-descriptions come from different organizations, they all clarify that an organization is always operating with a variety of self-descriptions. BMW does not describe itself only as an enterprise assuring itself of its ability to manage periodic targets. A look at the homepage makes this clear. For example, the homepage displays self-descriptions of BMW as a considerate corporate citizen regarding ecological issues and as an employer that values the potential of the individual employee. The same is true for BASF. We selected the third example to illustrate the resemblance between a party's and a corporation's method of self-description. Also, the party DIE LINKE ("the Left") was struggling for a peaceful settlement of conflicts that arose from the broad array of ideologies and groups. The text cited above combines different historical views and semantics—different self-descriptions of what is considered to be part of the left. After the momentum of the first page, illustrated above, the text proceeds with rational political considerations and appellative communications in regard to the new party's closeness. The paper ends with a battery of questions, such as: "To what extent does the capitalistic ownership structure need to be abolished?" (ibid., p. 19). In the framework of our analysis, therefore, the following question arose: What is the function of the synchronistic existence of diverging self-descriptions?

From a systems-theoretical perspective, this question can be answered by pointing out that modern society does not clearly specify which expectations its organizations must meet to reach societal acceptance. Luhmann argued that rationality is modern-age semantics that is replaced by the semantics of culture: "To the content, to which one substitutes rationality at the best by 'culture,' it begins to show that organizations do not legitimate themselves by their products anymore. They now need to adapt themselves to societal expectations, first and foremost to the public opinion" (Luhmann, 2000b, p. 428, translated by the authors). Following this thought, the examples above not only illustrate the usage of culture and rationality in organizational semantics, but they also reflect the emergence of concurrent operations of different and possibly conflicting self-descriptions. This phenomenon can be traced back to the simultaneous processing of different societal expectations. That is, to reach communicative connectivity, an organization must no longer confine itself to only fulfilling organizational objectives.

The fact that organizations describe themselves differently depending on different societal presents bears consequences. This is because self-descriptions like those cited above are not only glossy brochures or resolutions that end in themselves. The structural coupling of the organization to different functional systems leads to self-descriptions that meet the expectations of the respective systems code.

Since functional differentiation has emerged, modern society can by no means describe itself as a purely political or purely religious society. Also, there is no role or place in an organization that can definitely determine organizational identity. Rather, the organization consists of loosely coupled elements, of different constructions of the past and the future-to-be, which cannot be harmonized (Weick, 1976). Our third example makes this abundantly clear. The text can refer to "similarities," "common ground," "antagonisms," and "diversity" at once.

All these examples use descriptions of identity to form and display the organization's unity regarding the environment. How this is accomplished depends on environments' expectations (e.g., voters' expectations, employees' expectations, customers' expectations). Self-descriptions depend on those expectations, and several expectations can be processed simultaneously. The more those expectations are ambiguous and vague, the more abstractly the self-description is worded:

> Hopefully, "Allianz" – The slogan makes clear what we stand for: security and reliability.
> (Allianz AG 2007, p. 16, translated by the authors).

> Our government program is an offer to the entire society. It addresses all those who want to make our country a better, more righteous and more human place (government program of the Social Democratic Party of Germany, June 14, 2009, p. 5, translated by the authors).

Both texts refer only to abstract values like security, reliability, righteousness, and humanness. The function of such abstract values is to form semantic parentheses that can hold together the most diverse identities. This is necessary to create a document that refers to a future-to-be but whose authors do not know which people will read it, when they will read it, or whether they will read it at all. The writers cannot determine in advance the most feasible identities to address and display.

To speak from Weick's perspective, the organizations are sense-making. They are trying to arrange different identities: "The more selves I have access to, the more meanings I should be able to extract and impose in any situation" (Weick, 1995, p. 23). Abstract value communication fulfills the function of camouflaging the problem to display changing and conflicting identities simultaneously. This strategy seems to be reasonable in the case of public self-descriptions like those of parties and big corporations. Value communication allows for the diversity of the organizational machine and a description of the organization as one whole, an entity with one voice. Value communication therefore allows for the organization to prove its identities' wholeness.

Temporalized Identities in a Society of the Presents

A society of presents allows neither the individual nor the organization to expect that only one self-description will fit all contexts to which they are attached. One would think that such discrepancies would lead to a problem of consistency. However, apparent discrepancies between diverse self-descriptions seldom infect the process of identity displaying. In fact, these discrepancies can be interpreted as a solution to the demand to respond to differing expectations promptly.

The method of functional analysis allows for the sociologist to observe the organizational self-descriptions as a practice of processing identity in an actual present. We argue that we can then analyze the process as to the function and processing of different forms of identity and their potential aftermath. Our empirical analysis thus benefits from a definition of identity that does not predetermine the empirical findings. Rather, we are interested in the empirical execution of identity construction as real-time communication. In doing this, one can see how laborious and complex the process of the "being" somebody or something really is. We therefore come to a sociological observation of the organization that does not easily claim partisanship with a subordinated subject but speculates generally about the "modernity of modernity." We focus on understanding the function of the observed identity constructions for the individual and for the organization.

There is surely a need to research the influence of mass media on identity constructions in organizations. We have only argued for a prudent use of semantics that dock to the alleged problem of inconsistent identities. Of course, empirical findings have shown how people struggle to balance the different expectations of modern life and organizations, particularly if it comes to the relationship of inner closeness and environmental contact. This is exactly why we call the construction of identities in heterogeneous contexts a laborious process. All organizations, but especially political and religious organizations, must make sure that they communicate according to their historical evolution and the semantics that come with that *and* react to actual social expectations. The balance of these two restrictions involves the potential for huge conflict. This reveals a problem of reference of identity constructions, which results from different time relations in the organization. The time of the organization may not match the time of societal environments. In particular, if organizations are observed by mass media, follow-up problems and collisions are likely. Sociologically, how mass media communication is processed inside the organization system is interesting but under-researched. Such effects on modern organizations need to be observed because most members of organizations learn what they know through mass media.

Are any implications derived from our observations that apply to organizational practice? We believe that the results of this study can sensitize practitioners to the laborious act of forming an organizational identity, which is not a given. The multi-identity organization is a pre-condition for the balance of heterogeneous expectations and as such a pre-condition to solving complex problems. Only multi-identity allows for the organization to activate different perspectives. At the same time, internal coordination and mass media observance necessitate organizational contexts, which can promote the multi-identity without abolishing it. Management, therefore, needs to balance stabilizing semantics and identity constructions on the one hand and versatile identity constructions on the other. Management must consider that some presents call for making visible that which is conserving, traditional, and soothing – and that other presents may call for exactly the opposite. Identity construction in organizations is a permanent process that can never be completed. If organizations want

to be recognized as social addressees, they must simultaneously observe their own indolence in a world that is permanently changing and observe and describe themselves as a system that is prepared for change.

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