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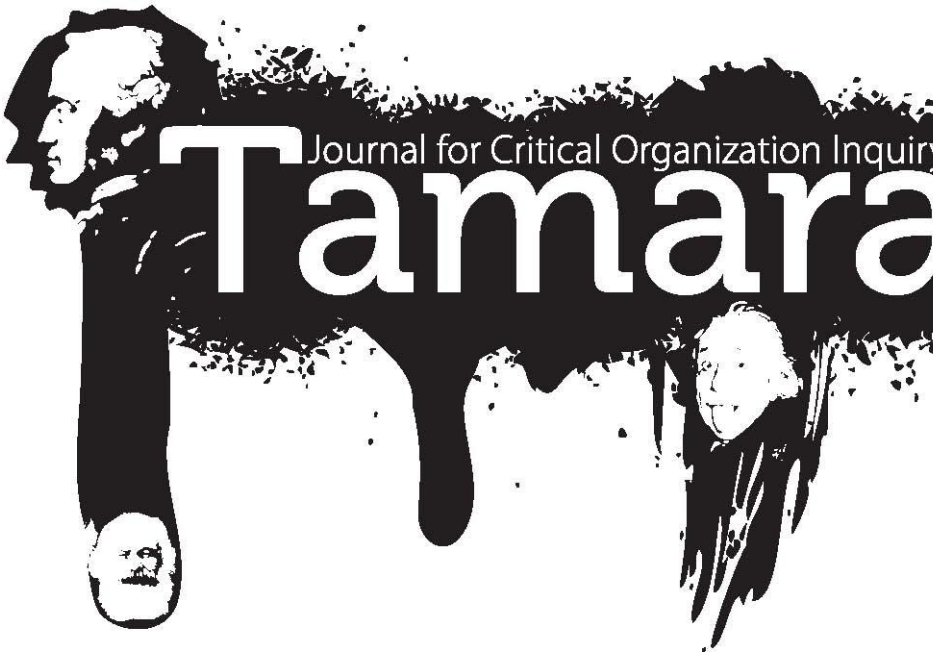

Me, We and Them: Complexity in Employee and Organizational Identity Narration

Trine Susanne Johansen

Aarhus University, Denmark
tsj@mgmt.au.dk

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Abstract

Organizational and individual identities are well-established research areas. One strand of research argues in favor of applying narrative as a theoretical lens for exploring organizational and individual identity. Rooted in a narrative conceptualization, the purpose of this study is to analyze and discuss how employees at a dairy cooperative simultaneously construct their individual identities and the identity of their organization. Based on observations of employees' practices as they narrate the cooperative to an external audience, the different subject positions assigned by employees to themselves and the organization are explored. The exploration sheds light on how the interplay between individual and organizational identities manifests as part of everyday narrative practice. The study thus contributes with insight into the complex nature of identity construction and argues that if the identity construction of individual and organization is to be fully understood, we have to explore them as separate, yet inseparable, entities.

Introduction

Studies on identities in and of organizations are plentiful. Consequently, identity has been labeled a core concept in organization studies (Gioia, 2013; He & Brown, 2013). The so-called 'turn to identity' (Alvesson et al., 2008) is visible in the increased interest in organizational self-presentation or self-narration. The organization is seen as a teller of autobiographical narratives through which it "seeks to express and negotiate aspects of its identity" (Gilpin, 2008, p. 9). Some scholars argue that a main challenge lies in telling a coherent story of the organization thereby presenting the organization as uniform entity (van Riel, 2000). Here employees are assigned key roles as those who present the organization to external audiences (Schultz et al., 2000; Heath, 1994; Cheney, 1992). As an organization is unable to speak on its own behalf, its employees must speak for it (Heath, 1994). Employees act as identity custodians who communicate identity content on the organization's behalf through the processes of saying, showing and staging (Schinoff et al., 2016). Presently,

focus is on the process of saying which is said to mainly take the form of narratives and stories. While Schinoff et al. (2016) view custodians as presenting the organization's identity towards its members (i.e. other employees), it is possible to argue that employees also act as custodians in the organization's external environment. The attention to employees as external organizational identity custodians has led to an emphasis on how to integrate employee voices into a uniform, constant story of the organization (van Riel, 2000).

Contrary to the focus on integrating or aligning employee voices to ensure cohesion in the organization's autobiography, is a focus on employees as constructing the organization through fragmented and multiple storytelling (e.g. Brown et al., 2005; Coupland & Brown, 2004; Boje 1991). Organizational identity is thus not a question of telling a coherent story of what or who the organization is; it is about weaving together complex, fragmented, and even conflicting, stories (e.g. Brown, 2006; Boje, 1995). Here the employees are seen as active storytellers, whose narrative practices give life to the organization. The perspective that identities are constructed in narrative suggests that custodians are not as much presenting a predefined organizational identity as they are engaging in constructing it through their storytelling practices. Employees simultaneously construct identities for themselves in these practices highlighting the interplay between individual and organizational identity (Humle, 2014; Ashforth et al. 2011; Alvesson & Empson, 2008; Pedersen, 2008; Garcia & Hardy, 2007; Humphreys & Brown, 2002). Garcia & Hardy (2007, p. 364) suggest that both individual and organizational identities are formed as individuals "relate themselves to organizational identities" and Ashforth et al. (2011) speak of nested identities. They, moreover, suggest scholars to direct their attention to cross-level analysis, i.e. the reciprocal dynamics between individual, group and organizational identities, arguing that different identities both enable and constrain each other.

The constructionist capabilities of employees lead scholars to address what happens to the identity construction of employees during organizational narration, i.e. how employees construct organizational identities that include themselves. And how they balance their own multiple identities with those of the organization they are (re)presenting. Brown (2006) suggests that as employees engage in identity constructing storytelling, they produce narratives that position the organization as well. This study explores the reverse link between organizational and individual identity by addressing how the employees position themselves as they narrate the organization.

This paper is motivated by a previous study on the narrative construction of organizational identity (Johansen, 2010; 2012; 2014). A main part of the study's empirical material consisted in observations and recordings of consumer visits at an international dairy cooperative's local visiting dairies. The focus of the original study was how the identity of the cooperative was continuously constructed, continued and challenged in the stories told by employees and consumers. However, as employees narrated the organization towards an external audience during the visits, they simultaneously narrated themselves in the context of the organization: Organizational and individual identity narratives seemed intertwined. Inspired by this initial observation from the original study, the focus of the present study is to address the simultaneous construction of individual and organizational identity carried out by the employees in the context of their formal roles as organizational identity custodians.

The contribution lies in adding to the growing body of scholarship that addresses multiplicity in relation to identification and identity work in organizations (e.g. Ashforth, 2016; He & Brown, 2013; Larson & Pepper, 2003; Kuhn & Nelson, 2002; DiSanza & Bullis, 1999) by addressing how identity work takes place in concrete instances of storytelling in the form of positioning. The questions guiding the study are: How do employees position their identities vis-á-vis that of the organization? And how do employees identify with and dis-identify from the organization in their intertwined narratives?

Rooted in a constructionist understanding, the study is guided methodologically by dialogical reflexivity as new insights are generated from the interplay between existing theories and empirical findings (Alvesson & Kärreman 2011; 2007). Consequently, the paper initially reviews extant literature from within the related disciplines of organizational identity, individual identity and organizational identification privileging scholars that hold a narrative view. The goal is not to offer an exhaustive overview of narrative identity scholarship per se but to flesh out an understanding that can serve as a theoretical lens for conceptualizing and exploring actual narrative practices. These practices are explored in the context of a single case (Stake, 2005; Yin, 2003) by applying subject positioning as an analytic method. The subject positions constructed by the employees are used to address how they identify, and dis-identify, with the organization and how the organization is evoked as backdrop for their subject positions. Finally, implications for the dynamics between organizational and individual identity are discussed through dialogue between the empirical findings and the theoretical lens.

A narrative view on identity and identification in organizations

Individual and organizational identities are explored using many and varied perspectives, often addressed as contrasting pairs, e.g. essentialist versus constructionist (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Cerulo, 1997) or classic (i.e. modern) versus

postmodern (Garcia & Hardy, 2007). In light of the many perspectives, definitions of identity at both the individual and organizational level abound. However, the point of the departure for this study is that of narrative. Narrative or story, the terms are used interchangeably[1], has long been used as a theoretical lens for conceptualizing and exploring organizations and their identities (e.g. Brown, 2006; Heath, 2004; Humphreys & Brown, 2002). Heath (2004, p. 175) thus suggests that narratives "are the basis for how organizations are enacted, interpreted and responded to". Moreover, Czarniawska-Joerges (1995, p. 16) illustrates how the introduction, or rather reintroduction, of narrative knowledge in organization studies entails the development of research "which conceptualizes organizational life as story-making"[2]. Although Czarniawska-Joerges (1995) does not address identity per se, it can be argued that organizational life is closely associated with the collective and individual identities fostered by the organization. Moreover, narrative is explicitly used when addressing individual identity within organization studies within a number of studies (e.g. Herrmann, 2011; Pedersen, 2008; Rhodes & Brown, 2005).

While recognizing that narrative inspired identity research streams are based on different perspectives (Boje et al., 2001), a major research stream taps in to the narrative turn which suggests that narrative constitutes or constructs our world and its phenomena (Pinnegar & Daynes, 2007). Individuals are seen as storymakers, i.e. as 'homo narrans' (Fisher, 1984) or 'homo fabulans' (Brown, 2006). Consequently, this stream of narrative identity scholarship inscribes itself in a social constructionist perspective where both organizations and their members are seen as constructed in and through narrative practices and processes (Ravasi & Canato, 2013). These narrative practices and processes are frequently linked to organizational members' individual and joint sensemaking activities, i.e. the interpretation and meaning production through which members reflect on organizational phenomena, such as a shared notion of a collective self, and produce intersubjective accounts thereof (see Weick, 1995). Numerous organizational scholars working within identity and narrative have taken an interest in sensemaking as a perspective and object of study (e.g. Brown et. al, 2008; Rhodes & Brown, 2005; Currie & Brown, 2003; Boje, 1995; Boje, 1991). In his work on the storytelling organization, Boje (1991, p. 106) thus suggests stories to be "a key part of member's sense making".

Organizational identity scholars who espouse the social constructionist perspective tend to view identity as shared or collective understandings of core features or central characteristics (see e.g. He & Brown, 2013), although they suggest that these features or characteristics are constructed through social processes (see discussion in Alvesson & Robertson, 2016). However, the present study diverges from this view in the sense that social are not necessarily taken to mean shared or collective. Instead, the study harbors the view of Brown et al. (2008) who use narratives to explore both shared and discreprent sensemaking among organizational members not taking for granted that consensus exists. Consequently, the narrative understandings of organizational identity, individual identity and identification explicated below share the view that identities do not exist a priori as coherent and consistent narratives complete with chronology and plot, but potentially are fragmented, dynamic and contradictory.

Organizational identity

Since Albert & Whetten (1985) published their seminal article on organizational identity, the concept has been explored from within a variety of perspectives including that of narrative (He & Brown, 2013). Scholars who utilize narrative as a theoretical lens view organizational identity in different ways. Amongst the different narrative optics are those of autobiographical acts (Czarniawska, 1997), narrative networks (Brown, 2006) and antenarrative networks (Boje, 2001). As an autobiographical act, organizational identity is understood as "a continuous process of narration where both the narrator and audience are involved in formulating, editing, applauding, and refusing various elements or the ever-produced narrative" (Czarniawska, 1997, p. 49). As narrative networks, the identities of organizations are discursive constructs "constituted by the multiple identity-relevant narratives that their participants author about them" (Brown, 2006, p. 731). Identity is always 'in the making' as it is constructed in "narrative episodes stitched together through shared conversations, and rippled, with stories variously borrowing threads from each other, continuing and extending some, and seeking to unravel others" (Brown, 2006, p. 735). The idea that organizations are constructed in multiple tellings is central to the work of Boje (2001; 1995;

[1] Narrative and story are used interchangeably, although it is acknowledged that meaningful distinctions between the two can be made (e.g. Boje, 2001; Gabriel, 2000; Czarniawska, 1997).

[2] Conceptualizing or theorizing organizational life as story-making is one of three ways in which narratives are said to enter organization studies. The other ways entail writing research in narrative form and collecting organizational stories (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1995).

1991) who view organizations as storytellers. Organizations "cannot be registered as one story, but instead are a multiplicity, a plurality of stories and story interpretations in struggle with one another" (Boje, 1995, p. 1001). The fleeting, fragmented nature of narrative is explicitly addressed as terse tellings or antenarratives (Boje, 2001) and collapsed stories (Hyde, 2008), i.e. story fragments where plot and chronology, normally seen as defining features of a story (e.g. Czarniawska, 1997), are absent. Therefore, story fragments need to be included in scholastic explorations to provide an in-depth understanding of organizational life (Boje, 2001; 1995; 1991).

The social constructionist narrative view suggests that organizational identity can be conceptualized as anti-essentialist, dynamic, polyphonic, complex and contextual (Johansen, 2010; 2014). Anti-essentialism suggests that identity is not intrinsic to an organization but constructed in joint narrative practices. It is thus dynamic and develops continuously with the narratives told. These are told both as complete and fragmented stories by multiple narrators making organizational identity polyphonic. The many narrators lead to variation in the stories told which suggests organizational identity to be highly complex. In addition, the narrations are embedded in concrete situations as well as in historical, social and cultural discourses pointing to the contextuality of organizational identity.

Individual identity

Individual identity is the object of study within many disciplines, e.g. sociology, anthropology, consumer research and organization studies. In addition, multiple, diverging perspectives underlie identity conceptualization (see e.g. Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Consequently, identity scholarship is marked by discussions of e.g. stability versus fluidity and coherence versus fragmentation (Brown, 2015). Similar to the identity of organizations, the identity of individuals has been conceptualized using narrative perspectives. Rhodes & Brown (2005, p. 176) summarize different narrative views by suggesting that identities "are constituted through processes of narration (Carr 1986, 5), that identities exist only as narratives (Currie 1998, 17), and that life is an enacted narrative (MacIntyre 1981)…". This suggests identity to be self-reflective, and not merely self-referential (Gioia et al., 2003). Self-reflection is often seen as a narrative endeavor as "individuals story their lived experiences and make sense of themselves and their surroundings." (Herrmann, 2011, p. 249) That an individual's self-narratives, i.e. narratives that make a point about the narrator, are tied in with his or her identity is supported by e.g. Ibarra & Barbulescu (2010, p. 135), who argue, "self-narratives are both expressive of and constitutive of identity." Thus, self-narration is closely tied to the individual's sensemaking processes, and Weick (1995) proposes that sensemaking is grounded in identity construction. Indeed, it is suggested that an individual's interpretation and understanding of self is related to his or her self-expression. As Weick et al. (2005, p. 416) puts it: "How can I know what I think until I see what I say?"

To some, identity narratives work to create a coherent, unified self and to others, identity narratives serve to construct a multiple, fragmented self (Holstein & Gubrium, 2000). Thus, while some scholars suggest that identity stories must be connected by chronological plots (see e.g. discussion in Brown, 2015), others subscribe to incoherent views (e.g. Gergen, 1994). To Gergen, and others, self-narratives are not believed to be uniform and coherent accounts of an individual; rather they are contradictory, conflicting and contextual (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010, p. 144). In line with the social constructionist perspective, the narrative view on identity adhered to in this study privileges a dynamic, fragmented and multiple conceptualization where "there is no one story to tell" (Gergen 1994, p. 202). In addition, as pointed out by Czarniawska (1997, p. 14), "we are never the sole authors of our own narratives; in every conversation a *positioning* takes place (Davies and Harré 1991), which is accepted, rejected, or improved upon by the partners in the conversation."

Organizational identification

Individual identity in the context on an organization is tied to identification, i.e. the "communicative acts illustrative of one's attachment to one or more identity structures" (Kuhn & Nelson, 2002, p. 7). Whereas organizational identity and individual identity are addressed from multiple perspectives, organization identification has predominantly been addressed from a functionalist perspective rooted in social identity theory (Alvesson & Robertson, 2016; He & Brown, 2013). Identity, at both the individual and organizational level, is perceived as a (fairly) stable and coherent construct. Alternatively, Larson & Pepper (2003, p. 532) claim that identities are "always being produced through the discursive process of identification". Approaching identification as a discursive process suggests identification to be developing and dynamic in nature.

Identification dynamics are complex as suggested in the terminology developed by Elsbach (1999) and employed in an organizational context by e.g. Kreiner & Ashforth (2004) and Humphreys & Brown (2002). The terminology operates with the notions of identification, dis-identification, ambivalent (or schizo-) identification and neutral identification. It expands the possibilities for conceptualizing employee-organization relationships, and allows the asking of questions such as: "How

might a person see him or herself as being different from or in conflict with the organization? What if a person defined him or herself as partially the same as and partially different from the organization?" (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004, p. 2)

According to Kreiner & Ashforth (2004, p.2) employees are believed to identify with an organization "when they define themselves at least partly in terms of what the organization is thought to represent." This suggests "an active and positive connection between the self-narrative and the dominant identity narrative of the organization (Humphreys & Brown, 2002, p. 425). Dis-identification suggests that employees define themselves as having different values or principles from those ascribed to the organization and they may separate their identities from the organization's identity. Consequently, "while identification is about defining oneself as *similar* to an organization, disidentification is about defining oneself as *different* from an organization" (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004, p. 7). The connection between self-narrative and organizational narrative is active and negative (Humphreys & Brown, 2002). As organizations and individuals are complex, employees may simultaneously experience organizational identification and dis-identification referred to as ambivalent identification (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004) or schizo-identification (Humphreys & Brown, 2002). Finally, the self-perception of an employee "may be based on the explicit absence of both identification and disidentification with an organization" (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004). This is termed neutral identification.

While both organizational and individual identities are explored narratively, organizational identification has infrequently been addressed in narrative terms. One exception is Humphreys & Brown's (2002) study of identity and identification in an institution of higher education. Drawing on Elsbach's (1999) terminology, Humphreys & Brown (2002) suggest that identification is constituted in individual and shared narratives infused with issues of power and legitimacy. Moreover, Herrmann (2011) introduces the idea of meso- and micro-level narratives to conceptualize the interplay between organizational and individual identities in a non-profit organization. Meso-level narratives produce organizational identities enabling member identification, whereas micro-level narratives are the personal narratives used to story individual selves. From a narrative perspective, it can be suggested that the meso-narrative of the organization's identity is a grand narrative that interpellates the individual employee to tell certain micro-level narratives; which the employee may reject or accept (see e.g. McKanna's (2010) discussion on managerial identity narratives). The relatively scarce literature aside, narrative perspectives "offer especially interesting means of exploring the phenomenon of identification in terms of how individuals' beliefs about their organizations become self-reflexively defined" (Rhodes & Brown, 2005, p. 176).

The definitions of identity and identification that frame this study share a constructionist perspective as they propose to view identities as accomplished in narration. Narratives constitute identity, rather than express identity. Thereby narrative is considered as more than a rhetorical device or strategy (Heath, 1994). The narrative perspectives on organizational and individual identity suggest identity to be complex, fragmented and heterogeneous (e.g. Brown, 2006). In addition, it points to identities as continuously constructed in narrative practices and processes (e.g. Humle, 2014; Rhodes & Brown, 2005). This frames the research interest in "how organizational identities – both individual and organizational – are constructed from the narratives that organizational members tell as they talk about specific events in their organizational life, their experiences and their concerns." (Garcia & Hardy, 2007, p. 364). Moreover, the narrative perspective challenges the predominant, even hegemonic, functionalist conceptualization of organizational identification. It is through this theoretical lens that this study explores the narratives told by employees at an international dairy cooperative's visiting dairies.

Exploring complex identities

As the study is guided by dialogical reflexivity, it seeks to generate new insights from the interplay between the theoretical framework and empirical findings (Alvesson & Kärreman 2011; 2007). Dialogical reflexivity suggests that we treat empirical material as the product of the application of specific theoretical vocabularies and hence as "inextricably fused with theory" (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007, p. 1265). As it embraces a social constructionist narrative ontology, the study rests on the assumption that social reality and social phenomena are constituted through language and narrative (see e.g. Ravasi & Canato, 2013). Thereby, the study recognizes stories as informative and valuable empirical material within organizational research (Hyde, 2008; Gabriel, 2000; Czarniawska, 1998; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1995; Boyce, 1996; Boje, 1995).

Empirical material

The original research project that motivated this study focused on how the identity of the Scandinavian-based, international dairy cooperative Arla Foods was narratively constructed in encounters between members of the organization and external audiences (Johansen, 2010; 2012; 2014). The cooperative was selected, in accordance with the recommendation by Eisenhardt (1989), as an extreme and transparent case. Its extremeness was linked to a number of different issues faced

by the cooperative, e.g. criticism resulting from legislative violation by advertising that dairy products had beneficial effects on illnesses; accusations from the co-operative farmers that the cooperative was binding them with unfair terms; competitors and authorities voicing concern in relation to the monopoly status of the cooperative; criminal charges of abusing its dominant position in the market place; and an abandoned merger. Moreover, the time of data collection coincided with the launch of a new corporate branding strategy, articulated as 'Closer to Nature', aimed at highlighting the naturalness of the organization's products and production methods which lead to renewed discussions both internally and externally (see Johansen, 2017). Whereas the extremeness of the case related to the turbulence experienced by the cooperative, the transparency stemmed from the existence of many points of contact between organizational insiders and outsiders. The many points of contact existed as the cooperative, due to the number of issues it faced, had established multiple communication platforms for engaging with the public. Based on preliminary interviews and observations, the scope was directed towards employee-consumer dialogue found on weblogs, e-mail correspondences, telephone conversations, letters and visiting dairies. Dairy visits were selected as the main empirical material as they provided the opportunity to explore storytelling in situ (Chaput et al., 2011; Gabriel, 2000). Moreover, the dairy visits allowed for the study of how an organization's identity is constructed in the multiple stories told by organizational insiders and outsiders.

The original research project (Johansen, 2010) focused on the dairy cooperative and on the narratives that emerged from public visits to its visiting dairies. The cooperative had three visiting dairies giving the public an opportunity to gain insight into the cooperative and dairy production. At the time, the three dairies hosted app. 750 yearly visits with more than 20,000 visitors. The visiting centers had 13 full- and part-time employees. Each center had a coordinator as well as a number of hosts with different areas of expertise and backgrounds e.g. nutritionist, former dairy engineer and former cooperative farmer. In addition, the centers occasionally drew on the expertise of employees from other departments in the organization e.g. marketing, branding and corporate strategy. Besides different backgrounds and job descriptions, the employees varied in terms of seniority: Some had been employed for decades while others had only been with the cooperation for a few months or weeks.

Visitors were divided in different groups, e.g. children, students, adults and seniors. The latter three groups were included in the research project. Diversity in the empirical material was sought in terms of 1) visiting groups (students, adults and seniors) 2) visit topics (agreed on by the host and the visitors before the visit, e.g. marketing, production or cooperative history) and 3) visiting hosts (as many hosts as possible were observed). In total, 14 dairy visits were observed over a two-month period and audio recorded – resulting in a little more than 25 hours of recordings.

A typical visit had three components. First, the visitors were given a talk in the visitor's lounge. The topics of the talk depended on the nature of the visit as well as the visiting hosts. Second, the visitors were introduced to the dairy before touring the diary production facilities. And third, the visitors returned to the lounge for product tasting and closing comments. Throughout the visits, the visitors were active participants asking questions and commenting on favorite products or personal history (e.g. a visitor remembering how she had spent her childhood summers on a farm). The hosts' accounts often took a storied form as they e.g. told the story of how Arla Foods came to be Arla Foods through continuous consolidation tracing its roots back to the original cooperative movement. Other stories had different protagonists, e.g. the visiting dairies or the hosts themselves. The stories at times had a scripted nature as they were aided by corporately produced materials detailing e.g. the historical growth of the cooperative or the locations of its different dairies. However, the hosts frequently ignored or diverged from the materials, resulting in varied accounts of the cooperative and the other protagonists.

The original research project (Johansen, 2010) produced three main analytic findings regarding the narrative construction of the cooperative's identity. First, the analysis located multiple themes that were interwoven in intertextual webs. The themes, which varied from visit to visit, related to different actors (e.g. visiting centers, dairies, consumer and farmers), events (e.g. incidents experienced by the cooperative), and issues (e.g. sugar contents, product quality and nutrition). Second, the themes had implied contextual frames (e.g. the tradition and history of the cooperative movement). And third, there was a difference in the narration practices of employees and consumers. Employees practiced elaborate storytellings often producing longer narratives complete with chronology and plot. In addition, the employees frequently wove different narratives together, e.g. by inserting a terse, incomplete narrative into another, complete narrative. Consumers, on the contrary, almost exclusively contributed with terse tellings. In short, the analysis pointed to the fragmented and complex nature of organizational identity construction when viewed through a narrative optic.

Compared to the original research project, which considered utterances by organizational insiders and outsiders, the empirical material used in this study consists solely of utterances made by the ten employees, or identity custodians, that were involved in the observed visits. The analytic interest is the employees' narratives of identification, which are intertwined with the stories they tell about the organization as they seek to make sense of the organization as well as

themselves. As the interest lies with the simultaneous telling of these different narratives, the employees' storytellings during the dairy visits are considered suitable as the empirical foundation of the analysis.

Analytic process

Analyzing narratives can be carried out using a multitude of methods and approaches. The multiplicity is emphasized by rich ontological and epistemological underpinnings encompassing e.g. realist, formalistic, social constructionist, critical and postmodern perspectives (for a discussion see Boje et al., 2001). Given that the intention is to explore the interplay between organizational and individual identity, the analytic focus is on explicating how identities are located in narratives, rather than on the narratives per se. Consequently, the analysis privileges a method that has construction of self at its core, i.e. subject positioning. In order to address how the cooperative's employees story themselves and their organization, the analytic process includes three phases. The first phase is to identify instances of organizational and individual identity narration. In particular, all utterances where the employees refer to the organization, parts of the organization, colleagues and/or themselves are extracted.

Secondly, the extracts are examined in order to shed light on how the employees position themselves within the context of the organization. The analysis is inspired by subject positioning which is a process where identities are located in narrative (Davies & Harré, 1990). Subject positioning has previously been applied to individual and organizational identity narratives by Garcia and Hardy (2007). Davies and Harré (1990) argue that the metaphor of an unfolding narrative can be applied to identity and suggest that: "who one is is always an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one's own and others' discursive practices and within those practices, the stories through which we make sense of our own and other's lives."(p. 46). In the unfolding narrative, individuals may be constituted in one position or another, stand in multiple positions, or perhaps negotiate new positions. A distinction is made between interactive positioning where a person's utterance positions another and reflexive positioning where a person positions him or herself (Davies & Harré, 1990). The analysis explores reflexive and interactive positioning employed by the employees.

The third analytic step links positioning to identification by exploring how the employees relate to the organization in their narratives. Inspired by Humphreys & Brown (2002), as well as the need for a systematic analytic vocabulary of the complex nature of identification, the analysis draws on the terminology of identification, dis-identification, ambivalent identification and neutral identification (Elsbach, 1999). Using these categories for characterizing the identified subject positions allows for a discussion on how the presentation of organizational self acts as a potential resource for the presentation of individual self. Moreover, it makes possible discussions on whether or not the employees accept or reject the identities they construct for the organization.

Analysis and findings

This section begins by introducing how the employees locate themselves in the stories they tell during the dairy visits identified with reference to subject positioning. Second, focus is placed on how the uses of positioning are connected by addressing the complex nature of employee identification. The section concludes by addressing different levels, or loci, of identification. Examples from the empirical material are provided in order to support the findings and secure analytic transparency. However, the findings not only draw on these examples but on an analysis of the entire compilation of material.

Positioning in narrative

The stories told by the employees during the dairy visits construct the cooperative in various ways referencing e.g. its products and history (see above description of the original study). Thereby, the employees draw on multiple resources when producing organizational identity narratives through interactive positioning. However, as employees produce organizational identity narratives, they also produce individual narratives, inserting themselves as protagonists, as they engage in reflexive positioning or sensemaking. The most explicit instances of reflexive positioning are the introductions given by the employees as they welcome visitors. This is visible in the following example where the employee, having stated her name, continues:

> *"...and I have the pleasure of helping [name of other host] tonight because you are such a large group. Myself, I am educated as a childcare worker many, many years ago. And then I have management training on top of that. And now I am lucky to be down here with an incredible number of people almost every day. Mainly, I take care of the children's groups and very much enjoy dealing with children again, but in a different way. I have them for four hours and then I*

say good-bye and hope that they have had a good experience. And then I am often here as visiting co-host in connection with large groups."

This example illustrates how employees introduce themselves by referencing their education and previous work experience, e.g. "management training" and "childcare worker", as well as their function at the visiting dairy, e.g. "take care of the children's groups". As such they position themselves both in relation to former and present work status and background, as further highlighted in the following example:

"I work in the communication department in Arla Foods which among other things is the department responsible for writing to all the dairy producers, the cooperative farmers in Arla Foods, in relation to how it is going and what they can expect, and what the current price is at the moment…"

This example shows how the employees use their formal affiliation with the cooperative as part of their reflexive positioning. Moreover, it shows how the topic and visitors influence the positioning. It this case, the visitors are young farmers. Consequently, the employee frames her employment in relation to cooperative farmers and her role in relation to this particular audience.

The employees also, frequently, mention their work history with the cooperative, i.e. when they where hired and which functions they have had previously. This is visible in the example below, where one of the more experienced hosts positions herself with reference to her long career with the cooperative:

"My name is [name of the employee] and I am visiting host here at [name of dairy] dairy. And I have been working for Arla for many, many years. I started originally as product demonstrator back in the beginning almost in 1986, and then I started here in [name of dairy] in 1995 as visiting host."

In addition, to emphasizing their work history, the hosts often provide pieces of personal information, e.g. a former cooperative farmer who, when speaking of his own historic affiliation with the cooperative, adds:

"I was very early at it. I started when I was 20, when my dad died in 1965. That was the way it was back then. Then it was home to the farm. I was the oldest son. And the farm had to function..."

Consequently, as this example illustrates, reflexive positioning not only draws on educational and professional identity markers, but also on markers associated with the private sphere, e.g. "early at it" and "the oldest son".

These short autobiographical segments, that make use of a variety of different identity markers, can been seen as intersubjective accounts of how the individual employees make sense of themselves in the context of the dairy visits. In addition to the explicit use of reflexive positioning in these segments, the employees continuously position themselves reflexively in relation to the simultaneous interactive positioning of the organization as complex means of identification which will be explored next.

Identifying with the organization

As suggested by Elsbach (1999), there are multiple ways in which employees can construct an identification with their workplace, i.e. identification, dis-identification, ambivalent identification and neutral identification. All forms of identification are, to varying degrees, constructed in the employees' stories through their use of reflexive and interactive positioning.

Employees often voice their identification with the organization by the use of 'we' in connection with e.g. the cooperative's products, history and ownership:

"We do not have any problems with that. We have some good products. Some refined, good products."

"We like the fact that our products have a history."

"Well, we are a cooperative. And that means that our suppliers are also our owners."

In addition to their use of 'we' as reflexive positioning that extends to include the cooperative, or perhaps an interactive positioning of the cooperative that includes themselves, the employees also construct different versions of 'we', referring not only to the organization per se, e.g. "we are a cooperative" but also to e.g. the dairy where the visit takes place and the visiting center as in the following two examples:

> *"We have a good story because we also make space yoghurts. We make yoghurts for astronauts."*

> *"We established the visiting center here because there was a lot of consumers who contacted us wanting to see, how it is actually done in a dairy. On a monthly basis, we have somewhere between 700 and 800 visitors through here."*

The first of these two examples includes a 'we' referencing the dairy and one of its unique products: space yoghurt. The second example shows the presence not only of a 'we' that refers to the visiting dairy, i.e. "we have somewhat between 700 and 800 visitors through here", but also a 'we' with more that one potential meaning, i.e. "we established the visiting center here". The 'we' in this latter extract could refer to the dairy where the center is located or to the cooperative. Consequently, the positioning is multiple and ambiguous.

Some employees also introduce 'we' in connection with other departments or functions in the organization, as the following extract where an employee from the marketing department talks about an ongoing restructuring and downsizing process in the department as part of the story she tells when introducing herself to the visiting group:

> *"...we have been through a process which has had as a consequence that we in the department which I am part of ... when we this morning at eight were 59, now we are only 49."*

The use of 'we' in relation to other departments is also visible in the stories told by the employees who have previously worked in, or are currently also working in, the consumer contact and service center, known as Arla Forum. This is visible in the following example, where an employee who both works at Forum and as a host at one of the visiting centers talks of procedures related to product safety and quality:

> *"Then you call us, e-mail us, write to us. And then we take a report that is sent to the dairy. They then locate their reference samples ... check them again and send an answer back to us in Forum, and then we write to you."*

This example shows how the employee positions herself as part of a different 'we' to that of the diary or the visiting center. Moreover, this example also illustrates how the reflexive articulation of Forum as 'we' produces an interactive positioning of the dairy as 'they'.

The different uses of 'we' also result in instances of unclear or ambiguous identification, as briefly commented on above. In such instances the host does not make explicit, who he or she is referring to. In the following example, the employee could be referencing the visiting center, the dairy and/or the cooperative:

> *"We are glad that you have chosen to spend an evening with us, coming here and seeing our facilities ... we will do our best in order for you to have a good evening here with us"*

In this example, the opening 'we' could be a reference to the dairy, i.e. "seeing our facilities" or to the visiting center, i.e. "spend an evening with us". However, the 'we' could also reference the cooperative or simply the other visiting hosts that are working on this specific occasion.

Although the employees most frequently express identification with the organization at different levels, there are also some examples of dis-identification present in the stories told during the observed dairy visits. These examples are often found in connection with narratives where the employees contrast or dissociate themselves with the cooperative's management who are referred to as 'they'. This is illustrated in the following two examples:

> *"Closer to Nature is the theme they want to promote with the milk production..."*

> *"And they have decided that they want to use three brands as the master brands..."*

In these instances of dis-identification, the employees make use of interactive positioning in articulating the organization as 'they'. Thereby, the employees exclude themselves as being part of the organization. What these instances have in common is that they frequently are found in stories that refer to strategic decisions, especially those related to the introduction of the new payoff 'Closer to Nature'. In addition, one of the hosts, the former cooperative farmer, refers to his previous affiliation with the cooperative, e.g.

> *"When I was part of it and that was not so long ago..."*

Here dis-identification is used as a way of acknowledging the employee's changed formal role in the organization. As a cooperative farmer, the employee was co-owner of the organization. Moreover, as is apparent from other stories told by the employee, he was actively involved in the organization. Another example of dis-identification stems from the employee from the marketing department who talks about an organizational crisis the cooperative experienced and comments on how the organization responded in the crisis situation. In particular, she tells the story of how she reacted when she saw the concrete crisis response issued by the cooperative:

> *"And I myself almost choked on my morning coffee, I can tell you that. Because I thought: What is happening here? That cannot be my company ... what was that? Well, it was a bit difficult."*

In this narrative, the employee draws on a previous experience where she questioned the organization's actions as being in contradiction with her own expectations and as out of organizational character, as she says: "That cannot be my company".

The analysis also points to a few instances of ambivalent identification and neutral identification. In the first example the host expresses his ambivalence towards the recently introduced strategy, its accompany branding campaign "Closer to Nature" and logo by initiating the utterance with 'we', but then switching to 'they':

> *"We have chosen to get a new logo on November 7th. Where they have made a new so-called strategic plan."*

As the story unfolds, the host continues to switch between the reflexive positioning ('we') and the interactive positioning ('they') indicating that he is not entirely sure how to address the new strategy and its consequences. At times, he chooses to stand on the outside, e.g. "they want to increase Arla Foods' turnover by 50%", only to include himself in the following remark, e.g. "we will not make it". Another example of ambivalence is located in one of the narratives told by the marketing employee whose department was experiencing a restructuring and downsizing process. Most of her references to the department occur by the use of 'we'. However, in a single instance related to the restructuring, she switches to the interactive positioning of 'they':

> *"Two days ago, we got a message that we had to be at our desks at eight this morning. And then they were going to take a hold of us. And then nothing else on how it was going to take place."*

Here the 'we' represents her and her colleagues in the department, whereas 'they' are the department managers. Thereby, she distances herself from the firing process and from how it was handled and positions herself as part of a group of colleagues instead.

Similar to ambivalent identification, neutral identification only occurs in very few instances. These instances happen in association with presenting different factual pieces of information related to turnover, market share, history and organization, e.g.:

> *"And well, this is just a very simply picture of how the coop is organized..."*

Here the employee does not position himself as part of the organization, nor does he choose to explicitly disassociate himself from it. Such examples are marked by a sense of dis-interest on the part of the employees who remain neutral and 'stick to the facts'. Such descriptive elements often occur as employees refer to the pre-defined materials that they have at their disposal during the visits. Materials which include organizational charts, maps of dairy facilities, production tables and the like.

The complex nature of identification highlighted by the analysis falls in line with the argument that "individuals relate themselves to their organization in multiple, ambivalent and conflicted ways" (Garcia & Hardy, 2007, p. 365). However, the findings suggest that ambivalence and conflict is less visible than multiplicity. Consequently, the subsequent section

turns its focus towards how multiplicity unfolds in positioning as multiple loci of organizational identification are present as organizational identity custodians story the cooperative to an external audience.

Multiple loci of identification

The analysis of the employee stories shows how employees identify with the organization at different levels. In other words, the reflexive positioning by the visiting hosts drew on multiple articulations of 'we'. This suggests that employees construct different loci of identification for themselves. In the case of the cooperative, the following loci were visible:

- The cooperative
- The dairy
- The visiting center
- Other departments and functions.

The locus of identification evoked in a particular narrative appears to some extent to be context dependent, e.g. when referencing the national or international market the cooperative becomes the locus of identification, whereas when speaking of concrete products the dairy is often referenced. It is worth noting, as suggested above, that the different loci of identification are not always clearly demarcated by the tellers. In other words, it is not always explicit if a given position references one of the specific collectives, to some of them or to all.

The analysis also points to differences in employee use of different loci of identification. As pointed out in the findings, the employees introduce themselves with reference to different markers, e.g. education, job experience, current job and personal history. These markers are highly individual to the employee and are often reproduced or repeated from one visit to another. However, there are also individual differences in relation to how many loci of identification are articulated. Some employees almost exclusively use the organization as the locus of identification, where others draw on all of the different loci identified above. These individual differences add to the complexity found in the analysis. Next the implications of the identified complexity are discussed.

Implications for individual and organizational identity

Before discussing the implications of the study for the dynamics between organizational and individual identity, a few reflexive comments are offered. All studies have strengths and weaknesses. One potential weakness of this particular study lies in the selection of a single case. A single case reduces the ability to generalize from the findings. However, generalization is not the intention of the study, rather the purpose is to show how employees construct themselves and their organization through positioning in a concrete setting, i.e. the telling of organizational stories to organizational outsiders. Thereby the single case allows for a more in-depth illustration and conceptualization. Another possible weakness has to do with the presence of other narratives in the organization. In other words, there are more stories available, than the ones told here. Moreover, the stories are a product of the context in which they are told. It is recognized that the context in which the observations were made is significant for the stories told by the employees. As argued, identity construction is contextual in that the situation has implications for the identity narratives told. Consequently, the dairy centers influenced the production of stories in the sense that e.g. stories related to production and products were more often told than they were in other contexts, e.g. in the stories that emerge in other points of contact such as Arla Forum (Johansen, 2010). However, within this study, the choice of a specific form of organizational narratives, the stories told by identity custodians to an external audience, helps the researcher to focus on the complex interplay between organizational and individual narratives within a specific setting. It is in light of these these potential strengths and weaknesses that I discuss the findings in light of extant literature seeking to engage with previous theoretical conceptualizations of narrative identity as dialogue partners (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2007).

The paper's theoretical framework suggests that organizational identity is a complex construction (e.g. Ashforth et al. 2011; Garcia & Hardy, 2007; Brown et al., 2005; Coupland & Brown, 2004). Identity construction is viewed as a discursive process which suggests that as employees narrate the organization to others in their formal capacity as identity custodians, they simultaneously construct a sense of organizational and individual self through interactive and reflexive positioning. The autobiographical narratives told by organizations through their employees are said to be marked by similarities and cohesion as well as differences and fragmentation. Similarly, the narratives of the employees' individual identities have some shared characteristics, but are also marked by individuality and discreprent sensemaking (Brown et. al, 2008). The analysis suggests that some organizational narratives are reproduced or retold by the employees across visits, e.g. the history of the cooperative as emerging from the cooperative movement as a result of industry consolidation. Such reproduction can be argued to support consensus-building sensemaking as the repetition of narratives reinforces shared interpretation among

organizational members. This observation, moreover, is in line with the idea of a "narrative repertoire that informs and guides narrative episodes" (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010, p. 144). It can be argued that the presence of a narrative repertoire makes possible organizational and individual narratives as they provide contents for the stories told by the employees during the dairy visits. The shared repertoire aside, the employees' individual narratives differ with their use of reflexive positioning which also influence their organizational narratives, e.g. the former co-operative farmer draws on his experiences from previous involvement in the organization and the employee from the marketing department draws on her knowledge on how products are branded and marketed as well as her experience with restructuring and downsizing. Thereby, the employees do not simply reproduce repertoires, but construct their own with different tellings. As such employees can be argued to engage in retrospective sensemaking in their accounts; bringing the past to bear on the present.

Identity construction is said to play on identification and dis-identification, on agreement and conflict, or association and disassociation. Dis-identification marks a perceived distance between the employee and the organization, and may be seen as resistance towards the organization's master narrative: A rejection of the story on offer from the organization. But perhaps also a rejection of the individual narrative interpellated by the organizational narrative (Herrmann, 2011). However, in the concrete study identification seemingly outweighed dis-identification. There were only few instances where the employees explicitly distanced themselves from (parts of) the organization. The clearest indication of dis-identification was the marketing employee reacting with disbelief towards the crisis response of the cooperative as she proclaims: "That is not my company". One possible interpretation of the lack of dis-identification could be that the narrative repertoire associated with the dairy visits prevents employees from disassociating with the organization. Such understanding could be inscribed into a discussion of narrative hegemony within the organization (e.g. Brown, 2006) and points to the fruitfulness of exploring power in connection with the stories told by identity custodians. An avenue for further exploration could be the role played by the corporately produced materials applied by the hosts during the visits. As noted, the host used the materials actively by diverging from or ignoring them during their accounts.

That the employees construct multiple organizational entities as a point of departure for their self-narrations adds complexity to the notion of organizational identity as a backdrop for individual identity. It suggests that what actually constitutes the organization to the employees changes with different tellings. This is supported by Alvesson et al. (2008, p. 13): "Notions of 'we' vary widely by person and context, ranging, for example, form generic company references to people embedded in specific spatial locations to subcultural tensions...". Therefore, the meso-level narrative of the organization's identity (Herrmann, 2011) has many dimensions and needs to be addressed as a complex concept. The meso-level contains both vertical and horizontal multiplicity. Vertical multiplicity is visible in the way in which the organizational identity custodians articulate different hierarchical levels in the organization when they speak of "we", e.g. the cooperative and the visiting dairy. Horizontal multiplicity becomes manifest when the custodians distinguish between e.g. dairy and visiting center. Furthermore, if the organizational identity is seen as constructed through a narrative repertoire drawn upon in individual, or micro-level, narratives, potentially it has to be thought of as narrative repertoires in the plural.

In addition to the multiple loci of identification, what is also relevant in relation to the narrative practices of the employees are the instances of unclear identification, i.e. the tellings where employees do not clearly identify the nature of the 'we' in use, e.g. the welcoming statement by one of the hosts: "We are glad that you have chosen to spend an evening with us". This suggests that ambiguity is a characteristic of the simultaneously construction of organizational and individual identity. Similar to the existence of different narrative repertoires, ambiguity introduces an element of flexibility in to the narrative practices of employees. Moreover, it suggests that identification consists in complex processes and not as a relatively fixed link between stable organizational and individual identities.

Conclusion

This paper addresses and explores how employees construct conceptualizations of self and organization through positioning when they tell stories as organizational identity custodians. The questions guiding the study are: How do employees position their identities vis-á-vis that of the organization? And how do employees identify with and dis-identify from the organization in their intertwined narratives?

The study contributes with insight into the complex nature of identity construction at multiple levels. It argues that if the identity constructions of individual and organization are to be fully understood, they have to be explored together as separate, yet inseparable, entities. Thereby it supports the extant literature that frames the study by showing that a organizational identity does not emerge as a single, constant expression, but rather as different stories of the organization, its different departments and different employees.

The additional contribution made to extant literature is an expansion of the argument that individual and organizational identities are simultaneously constructed by shedding light on how this is accomplished in an everyday organizational practice, i.e. identity custodian's organizational presentation to an external audience. The study highlights that the complexity of identity construction potentially results from multiple sources. The main sources located are: The construction of different loci of identification, the ambiguous construction of loci of identification and the use of different repertories to position an individual self within the context of the organization. Firstly, the study supports the idea that organizations are not seen as one, coherent entity possessing a unified identity narrative with which an employee can choose to identify or not to identify. Instead, the employee constructs multiple understandings of the organization that offer different subject positions and consequently tell more than one story. Secondly, the different understandings of the organization are not necessarily clearly separated from each other as the organization, its different departments and subunits, at times, converge as suggested in the identified ambiguity. And finally, the study suggests that while certain repertories seem to inform the positioning used by the employees, and hence their identification, these repertories are not necessarily stable across different stories, i.e. reproduced by the individual employee, or shared, i.e. reproduced by the different employees. Rather the repertories of the organizational identity custodians emerge and change with each telling.

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