Autobiographical Memory and Identities in Organizations
The role of temporal fluidity

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Abstract

Current theories of identity in organizations assume and valorize stability of identity over time. We challenge this assumption by introducing contemporary understandings of the fluidity of time in the construction of autobiographical memory. We argue that, both in individual and organizational memory, narrative constructions of the self fluidly incorporate episodes from the past, present and future in an ongoing effort to create a coherent autobiography. We elaborate the construct of autobiographical memory as constituted by autonoetic consciousness, life narrative and collective memory and discuss the implications for identities in organizations.

Keywords: autobiographical memory, organizational identification, organizational identity, temporal fluidy, autonoetic consciousness, life narrative, collective memory, history

One of the defining features of magical realism in literature is the fluidity of time. In Arundhati Roy's novel, *The God of Small Things*, for example, we observe a 'bewildering mix of different times: images, stories and sensations from the past blend together with present moments and even future experiences' (Outka, 2011: 21). Similarly, in Quentin Tarantino's screenplay for *Kill Bill*, the main character, Beatrix Kiddo, represents the 'assumption and rejection of alternate identities (lover, killer, mother) through the various names assigned to character (Kiddo, Black Mamba and Arlene Machiavelli, among others)' that make sense only through the disorder of time which allows her to become '*more* comprehensible and coherent as she – and the film, through flashback – recovers and incorporates her past selves' (Bealer, 2009: 177). Both Roy and Tarantino exhibit an emerging understanding that a 'coherent' identity is one that can be readily positioned in a pre-existing social category, and is a temporally fluid form of autobiographical construction - an ongoing and complex negotiation between past, present and future in an effort to construct a coherent sense of self.

More critically, these authors implicitly reject the notion that identity construction at the individual level of analysis is somehow separate from identity construction at the group, organizational or societal level of analysis. Rather our sense of self is an amalgam – a "blooming, buzzing confusion" (James, 1890: 488) – that occurs at the intersection of role expectations, societal norms, and individual subjectivity. The idea that identity work occurs at the intersection of individual, group/organizational and societal levels of analysis contradicts most theories of identities in organizations which have carefully separated individual and collective levels of identity construction (Caza, Vough & Puranik, 2018). Reciprocally, much of the theorization of organizational identity has been equally vigilant in parsing organizational identity work from

processes that construct identity at the individual level (Albert & Whetten, 1985). When viewed through the lens of temporality and memory, however, as we do in this chapter, we see that the clinical rigour of separating levels of analysis may misguidedly mask the interstitial fluidity of identity work which not only transcends the boundaries of past, present and future, but also moves effortlessly between levels of analysis.

Research on organizational identity has only started to embrace the notion that identities are often much more contingent than the essentialist assumptions embedded in early theories of organizational identity. There is an emerging but distinct shift away from theorizing organizational identity as a property (Albert & Whetten, 1985) and toward theorizing identity as an ongoing process (Schultz, McGuire, Langley, & Tsoukas, 2012; Schultz & Hernes, 2017; Pratt, Schultz, Ashford, & Ravasi, 2016). The processual turn is supported by empirical research that characterizes organizational identity as a process of social construction in an ongoing present (Schultz & Hernes, 2013; Howard-Grenville, Metzger, & Meyer, 2013), an unremitting linguistic performance (Hardy, Lawrence, & Grant, 2005) or a constant negotiation of competing narratives (Brown, Humphreys, & Gurney, 2005) of multiple identities (Caza, Moss & Vough, 2018). Collectively, this research begins to articulate a conceptualization of fluidity in the construct of organizational identity in which, at any given moment, some elements of identity are maintained while others are actively being reconstructed.

Understandings of organizational identity, however, have not yet embraced contemporary notions of the fluidity of time. This is somewhat surprising because temporality is a core element of the original articulation of organizational identity. As Whetten (2006: 223) observes, much of

organizational identity is enacted in a temporal conceptualization of 'acting in-character, commonly expressed as "honoring the past"' in which a proposed future action is legitimate because it is 'consistent with our organization's history of strategic choices'. The implicit understanding of time in this conception of organizational identity, however, is linear, sequential and largely deterministic, a form of path dependence that ignores the subjective experience of time as a chaotic and disordered process of ongoing reconstruction of the past, present and future.

It is the temporal fluidity of identity construction that we address in this chapter. Our core argument is that *autobiographical memory* – both individual and collective – is the primary mechanism through which the temporal aspects of identity construction occurs. Autobiographical memory is 'a uniquely human system that moves beyond recall of experienced events to integrate perspective, interpretation and evaluation across self, other and time to create a personal history' (Fivush, 2010: 559). Autobiographical memory integrates memories of past experiences into an overarching narrative of personal identity (Nelson, 2003). Although the construct was originally generated to account for processes of memory construction of individual identity, we believe the construct is equally useful in accounting for processes by which collective memories can be integrated into ongoing narratives of identities in organizations.

Our chapter proceeds in three stages. First, we reverse the typical approach of theorizing individual identification from the organization and, instead, elaborate how organizational identity parallels the construction of individual identity through the continuous construction of autobiographical memory. Our core argument is that, in contrast to the dominant assumptions in the literature, the temporal construction of identity is not a linear, sequential accretion of experience over time, but

rather is a process by which past experiences are constantly constructed, deconstructed and reconstructed in an ongoing present. Second, we introduce the concept of *autobiographical memory* and its critical role in organizational identity. We demonstrate how organizational identity is constituted in practice by an ongoing and overarching internal narrative in which the past is reconstructed in the context of the future. Third, we describe how the construction of organizational identities through autobiographical memory spans levels of analysis. Organizational identity, we suggest, coheres only to the extent to which each individual and collective autobiographical memories reinforce each other.

Memory and identity

Scholars have long understood that organizational identity is constructed over time. The original articulation of the concept of organizational identity acknowledged that identity emerges and endures as a result of the accumulated history of the organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Organizational identity usefully determines the appropriateness of action in the present by comparing each choice to the history of past choices (Whetten, 2006). History and memory are critical elements of organizational identity because organizational environments tend to reward consistent and coherent organizational practices (Czarniawska, 1997). The existential need for continuity is perhaps best captured by the growing research on nostalgia in organizations which explicitly connects memory and identity as an emotional antidote to disruptive change (Strangleman, 1999). Nostalgia, Gabriel (this volume) observes, is "an anchor to the past, one that stops identities from drifting or being overwhelmed or weakened by a changing world".

Memory and temporality

The challenge in using the past to inform present and future choices, however, is that the past is subject to interpretation and, as a result, may not necessarily provide an enduring and coherent identity narrative that satisfies organizational preferences for stability and predictability of behavior. Organizational scholars have suggested the interpretive ambiguity of the past with the term rhetorical history which acknowledges the capacity of organizations to strategically use 'the past as a persuasive strategy to manage key stakeholders of the firm' (e.g. Suddaby, Foster & Quinn-Trank, 2010: 157; Suddaby, Foster, Quinn-Trank, 2016). While a single overarching narrative may provide the coherence that will satisfy all stakeholders, there remains a high probability of competing understandings of the past that can be marshalled to support conflicting strategic choices for the future (Kaplan & Orlikowski, 2013).

An emerging stream of empirical research has begun to explore the various ways in which organizations use the past to construct identity. Some studies demonstrate the deliberate use of rhetorical history to present a positive identity for the organization (Brunninge, 2009; Foster, Suddaby, Minkus, & Wiebe, 2011; Oertel & Thommes, 2018). Others show how reclaiming past memories is a way to reassert identity and inform strategic choices for the future of the organization (Schultz & Hernes, 2013; Howard-Grenville et al., 2013; Hatch & Schultz, 2017). Still others focus on how the products generated by corporations provide a form of 'material memory' through which present and future organizational members can actively and continually reconstruct the historical thread of firm continuity. This does not occur by rhetorical claims of identity, but rather by examining the enduring and coherent history of products upon which the company has built its success (Ravasi, Rindova & Stigliani, 2018; see also Schultz & Hernes, 2013) or by 'imprinting' past artifacts into the present (Kroezen & Heugens, 2012). Also, scholars have pointed at how

deliberate neglect and/or forgetting of memories is a way to underpin desired future identities (Casey & Olivera, 2011). This growing body of research suggests that identity is a form of collective temporal sensemaking in which elements of the past are selectively used to construct meaning in the present directed at the future.

While this research impressively demonstrates what material is used to construct a narrative of the self, it fails to provide a comprehensive account of the processes of collective cognition by which organizations construct a coherent biographical account of their identity. More critically, current explanations of how memory is used to construct identity fail to specify a theoretical construct through which individuals and organizations use memory to syncretically fuse past, present and future into a coherent internal narrative of identity.

The magical realist literature that we used to introduce this chapter offers important clues as to how memory is an active and important agent in ongoing processes of sifting through the past, imagining the future and actively and continually constructing an ongoing internal narrative of the self. Identity emerges from an internal conversation that draws from embodied memory, and internal experience of the individual. But it also borrows from, and internalizes, broader socio-cultural accounts of the self – the roles (e.g., mother) that one occupies, extant relationships with other selves (e.g., lover) and ones idealized future self (e.g., killer). These accounts reveal both the complexity and agency of memory in practice at the individual level. They also expose the inadequate theorization of organizational memory and the critical but unexamined role that it plays in creating, maintaining and changing collective identities. To address this issue, we turn to the cognitive sciences and the emerging construct of autobiographical memory.

Autobiographical Memory

Autobiographical memory is a construct developed in social psychology that describes the process by which individuals integrate "memories of past experiences into an overarching life narrative" (Fivush, 2010: 559; Fivush, Habermas, Waters, Zaman, 2011). Early studies of human memory focused on the ability to remember specific experiences in the past, termed 'episodic' memory. Autobiographical memory extends episodic memory in three important ways. First, it incorporates an awareness of the self as the focal subject of the act of remembering into the memory, a uniquely human form of reflexive memory that Tulving (2002) has termed *autonoetic consciousness*. Second, in contrast to episodic memory which recalls events as relatively disconnected experiences, autobiographical memory positions the individual as an active author of her memory by stitching past experiences together into a continuously constructed personal history. In order to create an autobiographical memory, individuals draw selectively from actual episodes from our past and imagined episodes from our aspirational future (Habermas & Bluck, 2000). Finally, and most critically, autobiographical memory is not solely a product of individual recollection, but rather draws equally from the social and cultural context within which the individual engages in symbolic interaction and through which their sense of self or identity is constructed (Fivush, 2010; Fivush et al., 2011). We elaborate and illustrate each of these characteristics of autobiographical memory.

Autonoetic Consciousness. Autonoetic consciousness refers to the reflexive awareness of ourselves in acts of remembering. It is the uniquely human ability to mentally position ourselves in our memories in constructing a narrative of ourselves as continuous entities in time. In its

original conceptualization, Tulving (1985: 5) observed an amnesiac patient who, as the result of a closed head injury in a traffic accident, retained much of his memory both short and long term, but was unable to position himself in his memories:

> 'N.N.'s amnesia for personal events is profound. … N.N. has no difficulty with the concept of chronological time. He knows the units of time and their relations perfectly well, and he can accurately represent chronological time graphically. But in stark contrast to his abstract knowledge of time, his awareness of subjective time seems to be severely impaired. When asked what he did before coming to where he is now, or what he did the day before, he says that he does not know. When asked what he will be doing when he leaves "here," or what he will be doing "tomorrow," he says he does not know'.

Autonoetic consciousness, thus, gives individuals the capacity to maintain a sense of continuity of identity by virtue of the ability to represent oneself in multiple episodic memories in the past, present and future. This awareness is the foundational element of identity because it provides the ability to conceive of oneself as being coherently continuous in time.

Life Narrative. Sensory recall of past events is necessary but insufficient for autonoetic consciousness. The act of retrieving and reconstructing memories about oneself requires significant skill in temporal reorganizing. Young children gain an initial sense of self by learning how to organize memories of their participation in past events in temporal sequences which bring past experiences to bear on present and future goals (Zaman, 2011). Identity, thus, is constructed, in large part, through the narration of one's participation in the past, present, and imagined future in the form of a *life narrative*.

Life narrative is defined as 'an overarching narrative that integrates specific autobiographical memories along a personal timeline from past through present and into the future (Fivush, 2010: 561). The ability to weave a life narrative out of episodic memory and recurrent events is not innate

(Fivish et al., 2011: 334). It is an acquired organizational skill requiring both linear and nonlinear representations of time. While young children and inexperienced narrators tend to struggle to impose linear order on the chaos of time, even skillful narrators will intersperse a primary linear story line with anachronies such as *prolepses* (flash-forwards) and *analepses* (flashbacks) (Genette, 1982). Narrating one's life story often requires an ability to project oneself as thinking retrospectively in an imagined future in what has been termed 'future perfect thinking' (Weick, 1995).

Collective Memory. Because autobiographical memory is premised on a reflexive awareness of the self as the focal subject of memory, the process of constructing one's life history is not simply a reconstruction of individual experiences, but must necessarily incorporate the memories, accounts and life histories of other members of the community in which the individual resides. Much of our individual memory is derived from the collective memory of the group, culture or society in which we live (Halbwachs, 1992; Olick, 2008). Personal memory is profoundly influenced by 'what we come to remember *as social beings*' (Zerubavel, 2003: 2). An individual's affiliation with and participation in a group, therefore, profoundly influences what she remembers. The notion of collective memory is an integral element of autobiographical memory. The development of autonetic consciousness, or the 'sense of a subjective self as an experiencer of events, depends on participating in socially and culturally organized reminiscing in which one's own memories of a past event can be compared to 'another's' (Fivush, 2010: 565). In acts of collective remembering, we tend to rely on culturally defined modes of expressing our memory and adopt linguistic terms, vocabularies of motive (Mills, 1940) and culturally accepted cognitive schema for organizing and expressing our memories. Acquiring 'a group's memories and thereby

identifying with its collective past is part of the process of acquiring any social identity' (Zerubavel, 2003: 3). Over time, we tend to incorporate and conflate the collective act of group reminiscence with the original individual experience. Autobiographical memory, thus, is largely informed by the self interacting with others (Conway et al., 2004).

Fluidity of memory

Autobiographical memory requires an individual to construct a coherent sense of self in two dimensions – temporal and social. Temporally, identity is constructed by selectively and creatively drawing from past experiences to construct a sense of continuity in the present and future. According to the implicit theory approach in psychology, individuals tend to prefer internal narratives of a stable self by projecting attributes and feelings of the present into both the past and future in an effort to create a sense of continuity. Ross (1989) observed that, because our feelings in the present are more accessible than those in the past or the future, and because we prefer self narratives of identity that are based on stability and coherence, we start our ongoing autobiographical narratives with self-appraisals based in the present – i.e. how do I feel about my job today – and project that feeling into the past by selecting memories of episodes that reaffirm their attitude in the present.

Individuals tend to construct narratives of their past and their future co with attitudes, beliefs and images of the self based largely in the present (Wilson & Ross, 2003). In constructing one's internal narrative of self, individuals cognitively represent or draw from individual experiences over time in an effort to 'connect the past self to the current self as a continuous being in time' (Fivush, 2010: 563). Our need for continuity of the self, requires an active and somewhat fluid

process of autobiographical memory. Considerable research in psychology supports the notion that individuals tend to recall pasts that are consistent with their self-image in the present. Conway and Ross (1984), for example, created an experiment in which subjects were exposed to a fake study skills training program and concluded that the subjects retrospectively revised their initial self-assessment down in order to present a coherent narrative of self-improvement. Memories of the past, thus, are revised based on projecting the demands of the present into an idealized future.

Identity is similarly premised on a degree of social fluidity in which the construction of one's internal narrative of self requires the ongoing integration of competing narratives of self that occur across the different sources of our collective and/or cultural memory. That is, in constructing our autobiographical memory, we also draw from different institutional communities within which one's experience occurs – e.g., family, tribe, society – to connect the various collective memories of self into a continuous being in space. Drawing from the expansive literature on collective, cultural and social memory described above, we can see that memory is often a socially selective act. Memory is also culturally fluid.

Considerable research has been devoted to understanding how autobiographical memory is constructed when the primary communal structure is the family (Nelson & Fivush, 2000) or the tribe (Zerubavel, 2003). In creating our autobiographies, the personal and the cultural are connected in the flow of time. Memories, shared in a collective context, not only influence the tribe, they also reciprocally reform, amend and edit individual memories. Similar research in sociology suggests that individual memories are profoundly influenced by the social context within which we live. For example, individuals in Asian cultures have fewer and later memories than

individuals in Western cultures and report having fewer autobiographical memories (Wang, Leichtman & Davies, 2000).

Little or no research effort has been devoted to understanding how the construct of autobiographical memory operates at the organizational level of analysis. Next, we explore the question of how autobiographical memory might inform our understanding of identities in organizations.

Organizational autobiographical memory

Like individuals, organizations actively construct autobiographical memory. Organizational autobiographical memory shares the three defining characteristics of individual autobiographical memory – autonoetic consciousness, life-history narrative, and collective memory. We define *organizational* autobiographical memory as *the process of enacting a distinct identity of the organization as a coherent actor in time by selectively integrating episodes from the past, in the present and for the future into an overarching life narrative of the firm.* We elaborate this definition and the characteristics of organizational autobiographical memory in the balance of this section. Before doing so, however, we briefly review the construct of organizational memory.

Organizational memory achieved prominence in Walsh and Ungson's (1991: 74) definition of the process by which organizations acquire, store and retrieve 'stored information from an organization's history that can be brought to bear on present decisions'. While the concept of organizational memory has been widely accepted, it has also drawn a broad range of critiques, most of which focus on the limitations of its implicit reliance on a computer metaphor in which

organizational memory is understood as a storage bin and the process of remembering as mechanical and static. A number of alternative models of organizational memory have been proposed that introduce a range of more dynamic and interpretive elements of memory – including how organizations use memory to learn and improvise (Moorman & Miner, 1998) and to strategically forget (de Holan & Phillips, 2004).

Perhaps the most powerful critique of how organizational memory has been theorized in the management literature, however, is that it theorizes memory as a property or asset of the firm and overlooks the distinctly interpretive and subjective process of remembering that is so evident at the individual level of analysis. Not only does the construct ignore the growing literature on collective memory, it ignores the critical function that collective memory, life history and autonoetic consciousness play in the creation, maintenance and erosion of organizational identity. How do corporations use autobiographical memory to create organizational identity? And, in turn, what are the relations between the multiple stories told amongst internal constituencies (Brown, 2006) and the overarching life narrative of the organization? A rapidly accumulating body of research has begun to document both the sites and practices of corporate memory. The primary focus on the *sites* of memory are corporate museums (Nissley & Casey, 2002), corporate archives (Decker, 2013) and corporate artefacts (Ravasi et al, 2018). Collectively, this research has begun to explore the process by which collective memory is accumulated and managed to create a coherent sense of self. Artefacts, archives and museums, however, do not construct memory in the absence of distinct practices of selection, organization and interpretation of memory.

With respect to the *practices* of memory, current research has focused on acts of commemoration, such as the micro-processes of historicizing as collectives rediscover and renew past memories for the future (Hatch and Schultz, 2017) and use of historical narratives in organizational transformation. Dalpiaz and DiStefano (2018), for example, analyze the transformation of a generic manufacturer of kitchen appliances to a high-design producer of artisanal crafts. The dramatic change was engineered by the strategic use of historical narratives that redefined the collective memory of change with three rhetorical strategies; *memorializing* (which masked change as continuity), *revisioning* (which masked continuity as change) and *sacralising* (which motivated change by characterizing it as a noble endeavor). Collectively this research has started to delineate the way in which the core narrative material that forms the life history component of autobiographical memory is assembled and manipulated to create an internal conversation about the self to the self.

We extend this growing body of scholarship through a deeper understanding of the processes through which organizations re-organize episodic memories from past, present and future to create a conscious sense of a coherent 'self' in time. Drawing on the concept of autobiographical memory we propose three implications for the study of identities in organizations.

The corporate historian as the architect of autonoetic consciousnes*s*

In contrast to episodic memory, which offers an eidetic version of the past, autonoetic memory requires considerable organization. Memories are selected and sequenced in order to give meaning and structure to an entity's life-history. Autonoetic consciousness, thus, is a form of reflective memory through which an entity constructs a coherent sense of self across time, a form of temporal sensemaking that blends episodic memories of the past with an idealized self-image projected in

the future. This is a process that Weick (1995) defined as future perfect thinking and is a critical mechanism for creating identity. Increasingly, corporate historians are the agentic actor through which autonoetic consciousness is maintained in organizations.

The corporate historian is a relatively recent invention, emerging in the USA in the early 1900s but gaining formal professionalization only by the 1980's (Suddaby, Coraiola, Harvey & Foster, 2018). Fuelled by a growing awareness that history of the enterprise can instill a sense of identity and purpose in large organizations, the role of the corporate historian is largely built around an emerging understanding that history is a 'manageable asset' of the firm (Wadhwani, Suddaby, Mordhorst & Popp, 2018). So, for example, Seaman and Smith (2012) describe the critical role played by the corporate historian in overcoming the resistance among top managers in British confectioner Cadbury corporation to integrating with US based Kraft foods. To smooth the merger company archivists created an intranet site aptly titled 'Coming Together' that reinforced selective points of historical commonality between the firms, focusing particularly on the founders, both of whom were deeply religious individuals whose values formed, not just a common bond between the two firms, but a shared, albeit invented, past. As a result of such demonstrated skill in using history to manage processes of change and identity, the corporate historian is now a well established role in large corporations (Suddaby, 2018).

Corporate historians understand the importance of an autonoetic consciousness in organizations and the strategic power of reinterpreting history. Following Weick (1989) they understand that action often precedes thought and, as result, history can be a useful tool for imposing meaning and order on the flow of experience. Critically, the relative malleability of the past, in processes of

autobiographical memory, is also an excellent means of legitimating action in the present and the future. 'Equivocality' Weick (1989: 195) observes, 'is removed when an enactment is supplied with a history could have generated it'.

In contrast to traditional, academic, historians who are primarily concerned with understanding the past in the present, corporate historians are more concerned with understanding the past in the future. The future-perfect orientation of the corporate historian is perhaps best articulated by Bruce Weindruch, founder and CEO of the corporate history consulting firm The History Factory, in his aptly titled book *Start with the Future and Work Back: A Heritage Management Manifesto*. The title describes his strategy for constructing organizational identity through strategic storytelling (see also, Barry & Elmes, 1997). The starting point is always the aspired future goal of the organization and the challenge, he argues, is identifying a plausible historical path that, in Weick's words, could have generated it.

The corporate historian, thus, is emerging as a key agent for nurturing autonoetic memory in organizations. By creating an awareness of the relative fluidity and fungibility of past, present and future, corporate historians are simply making explicit the previously implicit temporal embedding of the dominant life narrative of the organization . This, in turn, becomes part of the cultural and collective memory feeding into the localized narratives of the various social units in the organization.

The temporal fluidity of autobiographical memory

In order to construct a coherent sense of identity, both at the individual and the collective level, an entity must develop the ability to creatively develop a sense of coherence by selectively and fluidly imagining the entity as a continuous structure in time. Tulving (2002) referred to this ability to maintain awareness of the self as existing, simultaneously in the past, present and future, as the conscious awareness of subjective time. Diachronic identity, or the ability to maintain a subjective awareness of identity across time, Luckman (1983) observes, is premised on an understanding of time, not as a linear progression, but as a narrative perception of time that allows the subject to 'travel' in time while creating an ongoing narrative of self (see also Cunliffe, Luhman & Boje, 2004).

The concept of time and its relationship to identity is elaborated by Freeman's (1993) three categories of time; historical, mythic and narrative. Historical time is linear, rational and amenable to scientific measurement and standardization. It is consistent with the objective use of the past as described in traditional notions of organizational memory. Mythical time, by contrast, is cyclical where the past is repeated in the present and the future as myths that give meaning and structure to individuals. Mythic time, however, like historical time tends to follow a chronological flow from past, present to future. Meaning, in mythical time, is constructed by the intrusion of the past on the present and in the future.

Narrative time, however, defies our presuppositions of chronology. Narrative time is distinctly non-linear. Narrative time is premised on assumptions of autonoetic fluidity in which the narrator must travel backward and forward in time in an effort to create a coherent sense of self. Narrative time is characterized by deviations from the temporal order, through prolepses (flash forwards)

and analepses (flashbacks), temporal leaps, and related anachronies, all of which sacrifice temporal and historical accuracy in the interests of creating continuity of the entity through time. Critically, in narrative time, meaning and identity are not created by the original event (i.e. episodic memory) but, rather by the sensemaking created by retelling the original event in the present with implicit reference to the future. Like the magical realist literature introduced at the beginning of this essay, narrative time is disjointed and fluid.

We see the fluidity of time in processes of the autonoetic reconstruction of organizational identity in Dobusch and Shoenborn's (2015) analysis of the hacker organization Anonymous. Because it is comprised of a network of individual members who conceal their personal identity from each other and interact exclusively through technology, Anonymous is a 'fluid' organization. Organizational boundaries are permeable and hackers can act on behalf of the organization without formal membership. By analyzing both the chronological pattern of events and the communicative identity claims made in two identity challenging episodes, the researchers conclude that the coherence of identity of the organization was established, not by the pattern of decisions and actions of the hackers, but rather by the narrative identity claims or speech acts of the organization. While temporality was not the primary focus of the study, the reader can clearly discern that the temporal structure of the speech acts is less chronologically linear than the acts that they describe. The sense of Anonymous as a coherent entity 'was accomplished through carefully crafted and staged speech acts that were claimed to have taken place on behalf of Anonymous as an organizational endeavor' (Dobush & Schoenborn, 2015: 1027).

The understanding that narrative temporality is different from and often disconnected from the temporality of lived experience is reinforced by O'Connor's (2000) study of the narrative history of a Silicon Valley technology firm engaged in a strategic planning exercise. In comparing different stories told by individuals at a variety of planning events, O'Conner concludes that the stories are temporally fluid, embedded in the past, present and future. The narrators, she notes, are willing to sacrifice chronological accuracy in favor of offering a better articulation of the identity claim about the company that the storyteller is trying to create.

Co-production of individual and organizational memories

Collective memory exists both in material form and in communicative practices of remembering by a mnemonic community. Halbwachs (1992), in his early articulation of the concept of collective memory, reminds us that even our personal memories are, in large part, borrowed from the primary social groups within which we reside – the family, the school, the nation-state. Because of this, Luckman (1983: 69) observes, identity, both individual and collective, is 'built on the stuff of time'.

A logical extension of this argument, thus, is that the identity of the group and the individual is an act of co-production. The communicative practices by which individuals narrate stories of themselves, as part of their autobiographical memory, necessarily includes references to the social context within which those experiences occurred. That is, the stories that we tell about our self to our self must necessarily incorporate stories of our group to our group. Reciprocally, the narratives of the life history of the organization not only reproduce the identity of the organization in the present, they also reproduce the identity of the narrator.

In highly institutionalized social structures, such as corporations, the social context will weigh heavily in the process of the co-production of identity. This was the observation of Merton (1939) who observed that over the course of a career, bureaucrats tend to adopt the conservative, rule-bound identity of the organizations within which they work. Bureaucratic personalities, Merton argues, emerge from the synthesis of individual career ambitions and organizational expectations over time.

In a provocative essay titled *Disturbing Memories*, Richard Sennett offers a glimpse of the process by which corporate and individual memories co-construct identity. Sennett (1998) provides an account of an extreme case in which individual and corporate identities are cleaved as the result of layoffs and the act of autonoesis – which Sennett terms 'remembering together' – is disrupted. Sennett studied computer programmers who had been made redundant at IBM, because of a growing preference for desktop and corporate outsourcing of programming work to India. The layoffs were shocking to the largely middle aged employees who, when they began their professional lives, were promised 'lifetime employment, generous benefits extending even to a corporate golf course, and a clearly outlined map of possible future promotions' (Sennett, 1998: 15).

So profound was their dislocation that the now unemployed programmers would meet regularly for coffee at a hotel restaurant near their former workplace, where, still dressed in their corporate uniform of white-shirt and ties, the men would nurse coffees and engage in a process of collective sensemaking of what had happened to them and to their company. Sennett identifies three distinct

stages of remembering together. First, they would 'dredge up corporate events or behaviours in the past that seemed to portend the changes which subsequently came to pass'. This stage was devoted largely to identifying the moment in time in which the process of co-production of identities began to disintegrate. In this stage the organizational identity was often portrayed as more calculatingly evil in memory than it likely was in fact.

In the second stage of 'rewriting their collective history' the programmers engaged in demonizing the Indian programmers who displaced them. At this stage, the coproduction of collective identity slipped, for a time, away from the corporation and to the nation state. The programmers worked hard to reconstruct their identity as Americans and to engage in demonizing the ethnic identity of 'others', including the new president of IBM who, it was noted, was Jewish. In the final stage, however, the unemployed programmers began to reconnect their sense of self with the corporation and in their acts of collective remembering began to describe a shared strategic blindness, both at the individual and the corporate level, in their collective failure to foresee the telltale signs of the rise of the desktop computer and their mutual stubborn commitment to the failing mainframes. In Sennett's poignant account we can observe hints of the process by which the co-production of identity through autobiographical remembering occurs.

Conclusion

Our intent has been to redirect studies of identities in organizations. First, we problematize current conceptions of identity which have been seen as a static property of, rather than a fluid and ongoing process within, organizations. We elaborate the processual character of identity, and focus

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attention on the temporal foundations of identity as an act of continuous reconstruction of past and future in the present. *Organizational identity is a process of becoming*.

Second, we advance how the fluidity of time is a determinative but understudied characteristic of identity by conceiving identity as a reflective process of narrating an autobiography. But autobiographical memory-work is not the mere recollection of a linear past. Rather, it requires the author to become a time-traveller, moving effortlessy between past, present and future to construct a narrative of the self as a coherent and enduring entity through time and space. *Identity is ongoing memory work*.

Finally, we introduce the notion of identity as a co-production of individual and collective memory. Prior definitions of organizational identity have struggled to analytically separate individual and organizational conceptions of identity. We suggest that this effort is misguided and causes us to lose focus on the degree to which collective and individual acts of re-membering cohere and reinforce each other. Individual and collective memories are mutually constitutive of identity, both of the person and the group. Sennett (1998) reminds us that modern capitalism encourages the fallacy that memories are private property as part of a larger project of isolating individuals and eliminating collective action. We have all had the experience of meeting a new person or joining a new organization, and then looking back on our life in a very different way. *Organizational identity occurs at the intersection of individual and collective memory.*

We began this chapter by referring to the how artists working in the magical realist tradition understand that identity and memory are intimately connected, inherently fluid and in a constant

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state of becoming. Their impressionistic understanding of memory is validated by scientific descriptions of autobiographical memory and its relationship to individual identity in psychology. We adapt these insights to the organizational level of analysis and identify some fruitful prospects for future research. Our hope is that, by offering a more dynamic and nuanced view of memory and identity in organizations we can begin to understand organizations as trans-temporal phenomena, with varying levels of coherence and continuity in an ever expanding present, carved out of the mnemonic debris of the past and the future.

Similarly, we challenge the somewhat artificial separation of levels of analysis in identity research which has carefully segregated work on identities of individuals in organizations from organizational identity. While we understand the potential risk in mis-specifying individual level data for processes that occur at the organizational level, and the related risk in reductive theorization, there is an equal risk of ignoring the important processes of identity work that occur at their intersection. By viewing processes of identification and identity work through a temporal lens we see that the collective and the individual converge in the construction of autobiographical memory. The construct of autobiographical memory serves as a useful nexus, not only for individual and collective concepts of self, but also for the different categories of identity work – cognitive, discursive, artefactual and practice. Our chapter offers a sketch of the construct and encourages future research on the fluidity of memory and identity.

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