The Identity Paradox and an Expanded Framework of Organizational Identity

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Abstract

This conceptual paper is guided by three objectives: First, to bolster the argument for organizational identity as a defined concept, as compared with a metaphor or paradigmatic perspective. Second, articulate a clearer and more fully developed connection between the concepts of individual identity and organizational identity. Third, specify a distinctive, defensible conceptual domain for the concept of organizational identity and align the definition of organizational identity with that domain. Guided by these objectives, we argue that the tension between being similar and different is a fundamental and distinguishing feature of identity – and that this "identity paradox" exists at both the individual and organizational levels. We then propose a two-dimensional form of this identity paradox and suggest that the resulting framework serve as the conceptual domain of organizational identity. In the end, we examine the implications of the proposed conceptual space for Albert and Whetten's (1985) definition of organizational identity and propose two new definitional elements.

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Identity theory suffers from "identity confusion". (Pratt and Foreman, 2000b:142)

"Identity" tends to mean too much, too little, or nothing at all. (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000:1)

In the 25 years since Albert and Whetten's foundational paper on organizational identity, the construct has become firmly embedded in the organizational studies literature. Identity has been employed in conjunction with a wide range of established organizational theories—including institutionalism, ecology, and competitive strategy—to examine an array of phenomena, such as managing change, competitive positioning, legitimation, and strategic decision-making. However, some researchers have questioned specific taken-for-granted assumptions about the identity construct (Corley, 2004; Gioia et al, 2000). Others have gone further, proposing very different alternative perspectives to thinking about and studying organizational identity (Alvesson, 1994; Chreim, 2006).

As a result, a persistent criticism or concern of the organizational identity construct and the wealth of literature on the subject is that it lacks clarity, coherence and consistency (Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000; Ashmore et al, 2004; Corley et al, 2006; Cornelissen, Haslam & Balmer, 2007; Pratt, 2003; Ravasi & van Rekom, 2003; Whetten, 2006). Some critics have questioned whether authors writing on this topic are even talking about the same subject matter (Brown et al, 2006; Pratt & Foreman, 2000b). Others have wondered whether the ambiguity and expansiveness of the identity construct have rendered it nearly useless as a tool for social science research (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Cornelissen, 2002).

In response, several scholars have attempted to sort out the confusion in the study of organizational identity. Recent reflections and appraisals of the field have often emphasized epistemological differences and issues (Corley et al, 2006; Whetten, 2006), or have sought to clarify terminological overlap and ambiguity (Brown et al, 2006; Price et al, 2008), or have

attempted to bolster the construct with various mechanisms such as culture, sensemaking, or institutionalization (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Polos et al, 2002; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). This paper focuses more on the construct itself, seeking to place it on stronger conceptual ground. This effort is in line with Suddaby's (2010) call for increased emphasis in organizational studies on construct clarity.

We believe that one major source of confusion and lack of clarity stems from the fact that the Albert and Whetten articulation of organizational identity, including their proposed definition, was not informed by a conceptual framework. Although their definition, commonly referred to as that which is central, enduring and distinctive (CED) about an organization, contains three elements, the authors did not offer a supporting theoretical rationale. Some twenty five years later, our objective is to seek from the individual identity literature an understanding of the concept's distinctive utility as an explanans for certain organizational conduct and action— how, compared with related perspectives, using identity to explain behavior yields distinctive insights. Using the resulting conceptual framework we will then revisit the CED definition, evaluating its construct validity and making any necessary modifications.

From our review of individual identity scholarship we identify two fundamental properties or dimensions of the construct. As Mead's distinction between the "I" and the "me" intimates, a person's self-understanding includes both an awareness of their role in society (me)—what Mead referred to as the "generalized other"—and their recollections of how they've responded to these social expectations (I) (see Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Pratt & Kraatz, 2009). Mead argued that the ability to view one's self as both subject and object was a distinctive feature of human consciousness. He further posited that the ability to choose between alternative courses of action associated with the self-self and self-other perspectives was a hallmark of

3

agentic human action. Within psychology, the notion that identity is a person's self-view distinguishes it from other individual-difference explanans. Hence, the distinction between the "self" (I) and the "other" (me) serves as our first dimension of an identity-distinguishing conceptual space.

Acknowledging the inherent difficulty of directly observing another's self-view, identity theory has a strong functional orientation. As Baumeister argued (1998), identity is defined in part by what is does for the self, including the satisfaction of essential human needs. Two of these needs have been highlighted in identity scholarship: the need for assimilation or belongingness and the need for individuation or uniqueness (similarity and difference). As scholars have noted, a person's identity specifies their distinctive position in social space, denoted by a compilation of similarities and differences (e.g., Brewer, 1991; Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Serpe, 1987). Thus, what we might think of as the distinctive "structural" features of the self-view include important positional information about who I'm similar to and how I'm different from all similar others.

Thus, the self-self/self-other referents and the similarity/difference tension constitute two fundamental properties of the identity construct and delineate a conceptual framework that is at the core of identity theory. This conceptual space denotes what is distinctive about identity theories in characterizing an individual or organization. It clarifies what is different about identity from other views of the actor—e.g., personality theories of the individual or configuration theories of the organization. In addition, as we elaborate on below, this more comprehensive framework provides a holistic view of the identity construct that embodies the tensions inherent in identity and suggest a way to move beyond the disjointed nature of the literature on the subject.

One particularly influential manifestation of this similarity-difference tension—what we call the *identity paradox*—is found in Brewer's (1991, 2003) principle of optimal distinctiveness. She posits two conflicting identity requirements, the need for assimilation and the need for differentiation, which are expressed in the tension between inclusive versus exclusive social identities. She argues that, given these equally important and opposing needs, individuals express a general preference for social identities that are optimally distinctive (i.e., referents that are not excessively inclusive or distinctive). Historically, applications of the identity paradox – such as Brewer's principle of optimal distinctiveness – have focused largely on *self-other,* or social and contemporaneous, comparisons: i.e., how the self is similar to and different from others, at a given point in time. We extend the similarity-difference tension to *self-self*, or internal and spatiotemporal, comparisons—how one's self-definition at a given point in time and space is similar to and different from other "versions" of itself. That is, we take the identity paradox – the simultaneous needs for similarity and difference – and alternatively conceive of it as both an *inter*-personal and an *intra*-personal phenomenon.

After we formulate this two dimensional treatment of the identity paradox, we explore its implications for the study of organizational identity. Specifically, we propose that this four cell model, consisting of the twin identity requirements (similarity and uniqueness) and the related twin points of comparison (social and spatiotemporal), serve as the conceptual boundaries of organizational identity. Thus, we argue that an organization's identifying features are the subset of all features that satisfy the requirements for a functioning identity, specified by this two dimensional treatment of the identity paradox. In the course of this discussion, we examine the implications of this framework for the CED (central, enduring, and distinctive) definition proposed by Albert and Whetten (1985). We observe that tying the CED definition to the four

cell model provides a sound rationale for Albert and Whetten's choice of definitional elements. We also point out that the CED definition leaves out two of the four cells in the model and explore the implications for an expanded definition. Thus, in the end we propose an expanded version of the CED definition.

In summary, this theory development project is guided by three inter-related objectives: First, our aim is to bolster the argument for organizational identity as a defined concept—an organizational-level construct, compared to it being a broad conceptual lens or perspective. Second, we intend to articulate a clearer and more fully developed connection between individual-level theories of identity and organizational identity. Third, and subsequently, we wish to specify a distinctive, defensible conceptual domain for the concept of organizational identity and align the definition of organizational identity with that domain.

In Search of a Distinctive Conception of Organizational Identity

In the 20 years since the Albert and Whetten paper was published, their definition has been widely referenced among organizational identity scholars. However, relative to the number of times it is cited in this literature, surprisingly little work has been done to unpack the CED definition and examine its three components (Corley et al, 2006; Pratt, 2003; Ravasi & van Rekom, 2003). As a result, scholars have noted that the lack of consensus about the CED definition has created confusion and limited the progress of research (Brown et al, 2006; Pratt & Foreman, 2000b; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). More specifically, several studies have challenged the enduringness element of the CED definition, arguing that organizational identity tends to be relatively fluid or dynamic, allowing organizations to readily adapt to changing circumstances and capitalize on emerging strategic opportunities (Chreim, 2003; Corley, 2004; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Fiol, 2002; Gioia et al, 2000; Hatch & Schultz, 2000; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006).

6

One prominent indicator of the need for greater consensus about the distinctive conceptual domain of organizational identity is the persistent efforts to distinguish it from related organizational studies concepts. These have included multiple efforts to draw a clearer line between organizational identity and organizational culture (Barney & Stewart, 2000; Hatch & Schultz, 2000), organizational image (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000a), and organizational reputation (Whetten & Mackey, 2000).

A central, although certainly not always visible or explicit, source of disagreement among organizational identity scholars involves the appropriate use of individual identity theory and research as a suitable template. There is a long standing tradition in organizational studies scholarship of adapting individual level concepts to the study of organizations (Whetten, Felin, & King, 2008). Examples include "organizational" learning, memory, creativity, knowledge, decision-making, and growth or development. While such cross-level theorizing has been the source of considerable generative insight, it has also been the source of much consternation and conflict (Heath & Sitkin, 2002; Meek, 1988; Van de Ven & Poole, 1995).

Two decades of scholarship on the subject of organizational identity exemplifies the benefits and the challenges of cross-level concept "borrowing." It is noteworthy that Albert and Whetten (1985) and other early attempts to specify the domain of organizational identity drew heavily on the work of individual identity scholars, such as James (1890), Burke (1969), Erikson (1959, 1980), and Mead (1934). For example, the widely-used organizational identity question, "Who are we as an organization?" is a direct extrapolation of Mead's individual-level identity question, "Who am I?" This practice of looking to the individual identity literature for inspiration has persisted in much of the growth in organizational identity literature since. For example, a great deal of Pratt and Foreman's (2000a) framework of how managers respond to multiple

organizational identities is directly extrapolated from or conceptually built upon theories of multiple individual identities.

Conflicting views regarding the appropriateness of cross-level theorizing have colored many aspects of organizational identity scholarship, including debates over definitions. In particular, although Albert and Whetten's definition of organizational identity – as that which is central, enduring, and distinctive (CED) – has been almost universally cited (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997; Pratt & Foreman, 2000; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006), it has come under scrutiny and debate. Some have taken issue with the specific criteria, such as enduringness (Corley, 2004; Fiol, 2002; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Hatch & Schultz, 2000), while others have proposed entirely different ways of conceptualizing identity – e.g., the narrative approach (Brown, 2006; Chreim, 2005; Czarniawska, 1997). Some have expressed concerns that, because individuals and organizations are such different objects-of-investigation, it is perhaps inappropriate to use individual identity as the model for organizational identity (e.g., Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000b).

Our approach to this controversy is to shift its focus, from thinking about the CED definition as a set of abstract, theoretical parameters, to framing it as a particular operational solution to a specified set of design requirements. First, we will make the case for a clearer, more explicit and direct, use of individual-level theories of identity. We justify our practice of borrowing an individual-level concept (Whetten, Felin, & King, 2008) on the grounds that organizations and individuals are both social actors and that all social actors share a common set of identification requirements.

A Functional – Structural View of Organizational Identity

As our point of departure, we view organizations as social actors (King, Felin & Whetten, 2010; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Whetten, 2006; Whetten & Mackey, 2002). Although organizations are constituted as social collectives, in modern society they are commissioned as collective social actors, sharing with individual actors the need to be properly identified and to act in a socially accountable, self-directed, self-governing manner (Coleman, 1974; Czarniawska, 1997; Whetten, 2006). Indeed, it has been noted that a coherent, widely-understood and accepted identity is an essential requirement for successful collective action within and between organizations (Hsu & Hannan, 2005; Ruef, 2000). One of the implications of treating identity as a requirement for social intercourse in modern society, applying equally to individual and organizational actors, is that it facilitates cross-level theorizing—positioning organizational identity as a functional-structural analog of individual identity (Morgeson & Hoffman, 1999). Thus, while not ignoring the obvious ontological (i.e., structural) differences between individuals and organizations, our perspective focuses on the specifications of a "functional" organizational identity. More specifically, in line with Morgeson and Hoffman's (1999) distinction between functional and structural cross-level comparisons, drawing from the individual identity literature we will characterize an organization's identity as a set of organizational (structural) features that satisfy the posited functional requirements of a social actor's identity. We will further argue that the subset of organizational features that are generally experienced by organizational members as central, enduring, and distinctive satisfy these identity requirements.

It has been observed that identity serves as a counterpoint to behaviorism, in that it views consequential human behavior as the product of intentional, self-directed, motivated choice (Baumeister, 1998; Epstein & Morling, 1995; Gecas, 1982). The social actor view of

organizations and organizational identity holds an analogous view of organizational behavior. Modern society provides a grant of limited sovereignty to organizations, allowing them to specify the terms and conditions of membership, and when necessary to act independently of the wishes of their members (King, Felin, & Whetten, 2010). In return, society holds organizations accountable for their actions. An important component of organizational accountability is the expectation that an organization's collective behavior is on a par with the actions of a single individual—that organizations "act as one actor" (Coleman, 1974; Czarniawska, 1997). Importantly, organizational accountability presumes organizational intentionality, and a condition of intentionality is that the associated actor is capable of subjective thought—what identity theorist's refer to as the self-view (Whetten, 2006; Pratt & Kraatz, 2009).

The Identity Paradox and the Principle of Optimal Distinctiveness

As several scholars have explained in some detail (Brewer, 2003; Hogg, Terry, & White, 1995; Pratt, 1998; Stets & Burke, 2000, 2003), current theories of the self and identity draw primarily on two conceptual foundations: social identity theory and role-identity theory. Beginning with Mead (1934) and Burke (1969), there is a line of work in sociology that argues for an "interactionist" view of the self. This led to the development of the role-identity construct and "role-identity theory" [RIT] (McCall & Simmons, 1978; Stryker, 1980). According to RIT, one's identity is largely a function of socially-structured roles and the ways in which these roles are negotiated in varying situations (Gecas & Burke, 1995). Thus, the self consists of a set of role-identities or hierarchically-arranged, nested identities.

A parallel line of thinking, influenced by social psychology, focuses on the ways in which external social groups or categorizations define the self and shape one's identity. This

interpersonal focus is the basis of social categorization theory and "social identity theory" [SIT] (Tajfel, 1978; Turner, 1982). The notion that part of "who I am" is reflected in what it means to be a member of salient groups, referred to as the extended self-concept, is a hallmark of SIT. An important component of SIT is its socialized treatment of individual identity, reflected in the presumption that social identities convey social expectations regarding what constitutes appropriate behavior for group members. It is also important to note that SIT characterizes a person's identity as a unique social space—that is, the composite of a person's memberships in salient demographic categories and other types of groups constitutes a unique social identity profile (Pratt, 1998, 2001; Hogg & Terry, 2001). Relevant to the objectives of this paper, it has been argued that the notion of identity as a person's distinctive social space, with an accompanying set of responsibilities and rights for appropriate thoughts, emotions, and actions, is a distinguishing feature of identity-based explanations (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Hogg & Terry, 2001)—compared with related individual differences explanations, such as personality.

This characterization of identity as the product of an ongoing social-categorization process has inspired a stream of scholarship on the "identity paradox" – being simultaneously similar-to and yet different-from. In particular, Brewer (1991, 2003) has examined in considerable detail the tension inherent in two equally compelling but conflicting individual identity needs: inclusion/assimilation and differentiation/distinctiveness. Focusing on the functional aspects of this tension, Brewer argues that it helps prevent extreme, imbalanced, self-concepts – i.e., those too focused on either inclusive or exclusive identity profiles. Brewer (2003: 493) refers to this moderating effect as the principle of *optimal distinctiveness*, whereby "individuals will actively seek to achieve and maintain identification with groups that are optimally distinctive within a given social context."

Extending this line of argument to the organizational level of analysis, and following the lead of Whetten (2006), we posit that an organization's identity specifies who or what the organization is similar to in terms of its adopted social forms or social categories. (e.g., limited partnership, credit union, global distributor, Montessori pre-school, religious university, etc.), and how it is different from all similar others (e.g., the only locally owned and operated public hospital in this region). That is, through the use of self-selected identifying features organizations are recognizable as a) a particular kind of organization (i.e., who we are similar to), and b) a particular organization (i.e., how we are different from similar others).

We are not, of course, the first to make this argument. Several treatments of organizational identity bear the imprint of the identity paradox and the associated principle of optimal distinctiveness (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Brickson, 2000; Brickson & Brewer, 2001; Pratt, 2003; Ravasi & van Rekom, 2003; Whetten, 2006). For example, in the course of theorizing about the intersection between organizational legitimacy and competitiveness, Deephouse (1999) advanced an argument similar to Brewer's, suggesting that organizations strive to be as unique as they legitimately can be.

Interestingly, the principle of optimal distinctiveness in particular, and the notion of the identity paradox more broadly, have generally been applied only to contemporaneous social (self-other) comparisons, at both the individual and organizational levels of analysis. Virtually nothing has been said about how these competing identification requirements might inform our understanding of self-self comparisons spatiotemporally. We wish to apply the similarity-difference logic of the identity paradox to such internal, spatiotemporal comparisons, wherein individuals and organizations face the tension between being different versus being the same intra-personally, as well as inter-personally.

12

Within this treatment of organizational identity formulation, the identity paradox operates as a design parameter, in the sense that a functional identity must facilitate predictable social intercourse within and between organizations by clearly specifying each organization's distinguishing pattern of similarities and differences—both comparatively and spatiotemporally. Following this line of argument, a two dimensional treatment of the identity paradox can be thought of as the analytical space specifying the distinctive conceptual domain of organizational identity. Thus, our motivation for proposing a two dimensional treatment of the similarity-difference tension inherent in identity is not simply to demonstrate that it is a logically feasible extension. Instead, we will argue that this two dimensional space constitutes a conception of organizational identity that is both consistent with the distinguishing features of individual identity theory and capable of distinguishing organizational identity from related organizational studies concepts. After examining the proposed two dimensional version of the identity paradox in some detail we will examine its implications for the Albert and Whetten (1985) definition.

A Two Dimensional Formulation of the Identity Paradox

The proposed conceptual domain for organizational identity is depicted in Figure 1. This figure contains four cells, representing the dual needs for similarity and uniqueness underlying both self-other (social) and self-self (temporal) comparisons. Each of the cells in this figure signifies a requirement of a functional identity. Specifically, the *comparability* requirement is associated with self-other social similarities (Cell 1) and the *distinctiveness* requirement is associated with self-other social differences (Cell 3). In addition, the *enduringness* requirement is equated with self-self temporal similarities (Cell 2) and the *adaptability* requirement with self-self temporal differences (Cell 4). We will first briefly explore the traditional domain of the

13

identity paradox (self-other comparisons) followed by a fuller examination of the proposed

spatiotemporal extension (self-self comparisons).

Insert Figure 1 about here

Self-Other Comparisons

The upper left cell (Cell 1) in Figure 1 corresponds with Brewer's need for assimilation

in her formulation of optimal distinctiveness. In organizational studies, Stinchcombe (1965) was

one of the first to posit that a key to overcoming the so-called "liability of newness" was for new

organizations to be viewed as legitimate. Contemporary treatments of organizational legitimacy

are comparable to what in identity terminology is referred to as recognizability (DiMaggio &

Powell, 1991; Haveman & Rao, 1997; King & Whetten, 2008). More specifically, it is widely

accepted that organizations gain legitimacy / become recognizable by their comparison to known

prototypes—the social forms and organizing logics characterizing a certain type of organization.

This view of organizational formation and evolution is central to contemporary organizational

theory. For example, institutional theory points to isomorphism as a predictable outcome of the

institutional forces shaping the organizing process within organizational populations, manifested

as a prototypical set of type-distinguishing, organizational features, routines, and practices (Hsu

& Hannan, 2005; Scott, 1995).

The lower left cell (Cell 3) corresponds with Brewer's need for distinctiveness and

individuation. This, of course, is the other horn of an existential dilemma: human survival

requires cooperative interdependence but interdependence can lead to abuse and opportunism.

According to Brewer (2003), one practical solution to this dilemma is to select intermediate-level

groups—those that are large enough to satisfy one's needs for protection and resources, yet small enough where bonds of loyalty and trust are possible. By extension, Brewer argues that individuals have difficulty identifying with highly inclusive groups because the attributes of fellow members are so diffuse.

Brewer posits a second means whereby the need for individuation can be satisfied—the "personal" self-concept, linked to personal traits and anchored in interpersonal, rather than intergroup, comparisons (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Brickson & Brewer, 2001). Thus a person's sense of individuality can arise from between-group comparisons (i.e., "My group is different from all others") or within-group comparisons (i.e., "I'm different from other members of my group"). While it is to be expected that organizations use both types of differentiation strategies (Brickson, 2000) the within-group-comparison strategy has received the most attention in the organizational theory literature. Indeed, it is central to most theories of organizational competition and competitive advantage, derived from economic theory (Aldrich, 1979; Barney, 1991; 2001; Deephouse, 1999).

There is an additional attribute of the different-from-others aspect of identity that warrants further consideration. Consistent with the notion that identity is a motivated self-construal and that one of the fundamental human needs shaping a person's self-view is the need for positive self-regard, it is generally believed that self-defining features must be positively distinguishing (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Said differently, individuals are motivated to view themselves as not just distinguishable from similar others, but as positively distinguished. Hence, whereas the reference point for the social comparison process in Cell 1 is the prototypical group member, in Cell 3 it is the ideal group member (Hogg & Terry, 2001).

15

In organizational studies, what identity theorists call the motive for high self-regard is evident in treatments of organizational reputation (Fombrun, 1996; Fombrun & van Riel, 2003), as well as organizational prestige and status (Benjamin & Podolny, 1999). Viewing organizations through a narrative lens, Czarniawska (1997) argues that organizational autobiographies must cast the organizational actor in a positive light. And, of course, the importance of positive distinctiveness is at the core of economics-inspired theories of business competition, where to be competitive means to be perceived as being better than similar others (Barney, 1991; 2001; Barney & Stewart, 2000; Deephouse, 1999).

Taken together, Cells 1 and 3 highlight the relevance of organizational identity as a bridging concept in organizational studies, spanning the sociological focus on similarity, reflected in the concepts of isomorphism and legitimacy, and the economic focus on differentiation, reflected in various theories of competition, and concepts like reputation, status, and prestige (Benjamin & Podolny, 1999; King & Whetten, 2008; Whetten & Mackey, 2002; Whetten, 2006). As the notion of optimal distinctiveness suggests, it is not just that the concept of organizational identity is capable of spanning these polar perspectives, rather, it is logically positioned astraddle this paradigmatic fault line. This "both/and" bridge-position is nicely captured in Deephouse's (1999) argument that organizations should strive to be as unique as they legitimately can be.

Self-Self Comparisons

The right side of Figure 1 reflects the proposed extension of the similarity-difference identity paradox to encompass spatiotemporal, self-self comparisons. We will focus on comparisons between different "variations" of the self across time and space—how an organizational actor's contemporary identity profile may be similar to and different from other

versions. Because this side of the figure constitutes an extension of the typical application of the similarity-difference identity paradox we will discuss it in more detail. One way to think of the temporal comparison tension depicted in the right side of the figure is to imagine an organization's history represented as a time-ordered, path-dependent series of eras, epochs, or stages, and visually represented as a punctuated equilibrium time line. In corresponding autobiographical accounts we can think of the content of each chapter as representing periods of stability, and the transitions between chapters as representing periods of instability, often associated with organizational redirection.

There are precedents for a spatiotemporal form of the identity paradox in the individual identity literature. Both what sociologists refer to as role-identity theory [RIT] and social psychologists refer to as social identity theory [SIT] deal with the tension between spatiotemporal continuity and adaptation. Beginning with Mead (1934) and Burke (1969), sociologists have developed a view of individual identity as a function of socially-structured roles and the ways in which these roles, or role-identities, are negotiated in varying situations – i.e. across time and space (McCall & Simmons, 1978; Stryker, 1980). A distinguishing feature of RIT is its emphasis on the stability of role-related definitions of the self that satisfy individuals' needs for security, continuity, simplicity, and uncertainty reduction (Gecas & Burke, 1995; Hogg, Terry & White, 1995; Stets & Burke, 2000).

That being said, RIT also recognizes the need for the self to be able to adapt to the needs of a wide range of social situations. As such, the individual embodies a range of role-identities, sufficient in number to accommodate the spectrum of activities the person is engaged in (Thoits, 1983). These various role-identities are arranged in a salience hierarchy, activated according to the nature and needs of the social situation (McCall & Simmons, 1978; Stryker & Serpe, 1982).

In this sense, the self, while embodying a stable set of role-identities (each of which represents a relatively stable set of role-related requirements), is flexible and adaptive to differences in responsibilities and expectations across time and space. Such a "negotiated" view of the self (Serpe, 1987) balances the tensions between the needs for similarity or continuity and difference or flexibility. Similarly, SIT argues that identities are fluid and dynamic – as opposed to being rigid or static. Instead, individuals' cognitive representations of their identity tend to fluctuate according to their shifting group memberships and the meanings attached to those groups (Hogg, Terry, & White 1995).

In sum, the concept of the self and identity in IT and SIT encompasses the simultaneous and conflicting demands for consistency/stability and adaptability/relevance of the self over time and space. There is a similar argument for temporal continuity balanced with adaptiveness in developmental theories of identity (DIT). Beginning with James (1890) and articulated more clearly by Erikson (1959), DIT recognizes that as individuals grow and develop physically and socially their identity evolves, such that a person's sense of "who I am" today reflects both their past and current life stages. The general belief among adolescent psychologists is that successful movement through life-shaping developmental stages involve stage-appropriate preservation and selective winnowing of self-defining attributes and activities (Harter, 2003). The ability of individuals to align their current self-view with the appropriate developmental-stage prototype is considered to be a critical indicator of developmental competence. In summary, according to DIT, there is an inherent degree of connectedness and continuity in one's identity, and yet the self is also constantly growing and adapting over time. Thus, similar to RIT, DIT encompasses the tension between continuity or sameness and adaptation or difference.

The two cells comprising the right side of Figure 1 each represent one component of the temporal, self-self comparison dilemma. The focus of the upper right cell (Cell 2) is the posited need for temporal consistency in a social actor's identifying features. The need for temporal continuity in the self-concept is a hallmark of individual identity scholarship – as noted in the discussion above. For example, Baumeister (1998) treats continuity as a type of consistency: temporal consistency, and holds that perceived consistency is a universal human need. Also, according to self-verification theory (Swann, Rentfrow & Guinn, 2003: 369) it is assumed that "stable self-views provide people with a crucial source of coherence, an invaluable means of defining their existence, organizing experience, predicting future events, and guiding social interaction." At the organizational level, Czarniawska (1997) has advanced a similar argument regarding the importance of autobiographical organizational accounts communicating a coherent "life story," what Van Riel (2000) refers to as a "sustainable story." As an aside, within the philosophy literature there is a longstanding argument for spatiotemporal continuity as a necessary condition for identity (Scaltsas, 1981; Wiggins, 1967).

Moving to the lower right cell (Cell 4), the focus here is identity differences, or adaptability. What is distinctive about Cell 4 is its assertion that being adaptive is an identity requirement on a par with identity continuity (Cell 2) and self-other distinctiveness (Cell 3). In other words, the model posits that organizational actors naturally avoid the extreme case of inflexibility in CED features, in the same way that they avoid the extreme cases of no-stability and no-distinctiveness. Logically, the need for identity adaptability can be satisfied by either a) modifying the meaning of adopted identifying features, or b) periodically changing some of an organization's identifying features.

In the first case, a central and distinguishing organizational feature is an enduring element of an organization's identity profile, but its meaning is adjusted across time and space, to reflect new circumstances, new stakeholders, new members, and so forth (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000a; Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). This treatment is reflected in the notion of "robust identities" and "multivocality" (Alexander, 1995; Padget & Ansell, 1989; Zuckermann et al, 2003). Here an organization's identity is framed in such a way that it is defined clearly and powerfully enough to capture the minds of its stakeholders and satisfy their demands for continuity and consistency, while at the same time being framed in a way that allows it to resonate with a broad range of groups in a broad range of contexts, such that it transcends time and place and allows the organization to be seen as current and relevant in a variety of conditions. Similarly, this can be compared to Fox-Wolfgramm et al's (1998) notion of identity plasticity, where identity has the characteristic, much like a balloon, of being stretched to adapt to or meet the demands of changes in the environment, and yet it retains its essential shape and characteristics (and it can only stretch so far before is breaks).

It is important to note that the identity requirement of stability (Cell 2) places logical limits on the degree to which the meaning of an organization's identifying features can be subject to local interpretation. Specifically, an assumption common to all forms of identity theory, ranging from sociological to social psychological versions, is that at a given point in time and within a given social context, the meaning of an actor's social identity referents (e.g., group or social category membership, role, social status) is widely understood and accepted by the focal actor and relevant others. Using the terminology of Cell 2, we can refer to this as contemporaneous, situated identity stability. In contrast and in keeping with the self-self comparison process envisioned in Cell 4, it is both a logical and practical necessity that the

meanings of identifying features evolve through time and space (Corley & Gioia, 2004).

Regarding the second form of identity adaptability – constituted as changes in identifying features – we see this as occurring only rarely and in discrete stages – as in a punctuated equilibrium. Given the nature of identity and the role of CED features, changes in such features would seem to be risky and thus rare. It is noteworthy that Albert and Whetten (1985) centered their discussion of identity change in a broader treatment of life-cycle, evolutionary change, building on parallel treatments of the subject in the developmental individual identity (DIT) literature. Central to this developmental view of organizational identity change is the notion of life-stage prototypes—that is, over the course of their life span organizations are expected to conform to the expectations associated with nominally specified life stages (Cameron & Whetten, 1981). This line of reasoning argues for developmental versions of concepts like isomorphism and legitimacy. Thus, just as organizations positively distinguish themselves from their competition using comparisons that place themselves in a positive light, they also point to stage-appropriate differences in their identifying features, as evidence of valued, distinguishing, qualities, including the ability to adopt life stage-appropriate identifying features.

Taken together, Cells 2 and 4 direct our attention to the tension between stability and adaptability, as the temporal-comparison analogue of the social-comparison tension between comparability and distinctiveness. It is also important to note that the stability–adaptability tension has long characterized scholarship in organizational studies in general – and organizational identity more specifically. On the one hand, it has been demonstrated that continuity over time increases an organization's "life chances," from an ecological perspective (Hannan & Freeman, 1984), and ensures stability and loyalty, from an institutional perspective (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Selznick, 1957). More broadly, institutions, including institutionalized

policies, practices, and procedures, are meant to be stable—to endure. In sensemaking terminology they serve as the stable, taken for granted, frames of reference that allow individuals to make sense of novel experience (Weick, 1995). Furthermore, a lack of identity continuity and stability is a precipitating cause of confused or mistaken identity, characterized by Czarniawska (1997) as a fatal organizational flaw (see also Foreman & Parent, 2008).

But organizations also need to be able to respond and adapt to their environment and adopt stage-appropriate social forms. Although some have argued that "sticking to your knitting" (Peters & Waterman, 1982) and being "built to last" (Collins & Porras, 1994) are characteristics of persistent success, organizations must also stay in step with the changing needs and expectations of their external stakeholders (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Foreman & Parent, 2008; Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997). It is, thus, not surprising that scholars studying organizational adaptation often express concern that the inertial forces associated with an immutable organizational core tend to inhibit any form of organizational change that might threaten the established order (Gioia & Thomas, 1996). In particular, scholars writing on the subject of organizational identity have expressed concerns about the potential change-inhibiting consequences of members' core beliefs (Bouchiki & Kimberley, 2003; Fiol, 2002).

A Two Dimensional Formulation of Organizational Identity

Our focus now shifts from specifying a two dimensional formulation of optimal distinctiveness to making the case that the requirements of a functional identity shown in Figure 1 constitute suitable phenomenological reference points for defining and studying organizational identity. As a starting point, Figure 2 posits that the central, or core, element of the Albert and Whetten definition should be positioned at the origin of the two dimensional space, signifying that only central organizational features are capable of serving as identifying features—that is,

meaningful social and spatiotemporal comparisons. Based on the presumption that the forms of

the identity paradox, as evidenced in optimal distinctiveness theory, that are associated with

social, self-other comparisons and temporal, self-self comparisons are equivalent identity

requirements, the four cells are each logical components of an organization's identity.

Insert Figure 2 about here

The self-other triangle on the left side is most closely aligned with the current

comparative treatment of the similarity-difference identity paradox. This component of

organizational identity encompasses central organizational features that signify how the

organization is similar to and different from other organizations, at any point in time. It also

highlights the conceptual affinity between organizational identity and the tension mentioned

earlier in the macro organizational studies literature between legitimacy and competitiveness.

The self-self triangle, on the right side, represents a spatiotemporal version of the identity

paradox. It encompasses central organizational features that specify how the organization has

made (and continues to make) adaptive changes across time and space in some identifying

features while preserving most others. In addition, it directs attention to the logical link between

organizational identity and the tension described in the organizational studies literature between

the needs for stability and flexibility.

This two dimensional treatment of organizational identity has important conceptual and

methodological implications. First, the vertical dimension highlights the paradoxical nature of

identity. An organization's identity is, at its root, governed by conflicting identification

requirements. Consistent with this inherent tension in the concept's specified meaning, scholarly

23

characterizations of a particular organization's identity should acknowledge tradeoffs between being similar yet different. It follows that depictions of an organization's identity should be characterized as inherently stable and yet also adaptive, and as both recognizable and distinctive.

This general proposition brings into relief the complementary strengths and weaknesses of contemporary characterizations of organizational identity. On one hand, psychologically oriented research that frames organizational identity from the perspective of individuals' perceptions tends to emphasize the adaptability and distinctiveness of an organization's identity, as reflected in the views of an organization held by members and external audiences (Gioia, et al, 2000; Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Dutton & Dukerich, 1996; Dutton et al, 1994). On the other hand, sociologically oriented scholarship that frames organizational identity from the perspective of the institutional environment (e.g., adopted social forms / social categories) tends to emphasize the stability of an organization's identity and the similarity among organizations within a population (Baron, 2004; Hsu & Hannan, 2005; Polos, Hannan, & Carroll, 2002).

Second, the horizontal dimension suggests that efforts to understand an organization's identity need to examine both social (self-other) and spatiotemporal (self-self) comparisons. Said differently, focusing on only the left or the right side of Figure 2 leaves out half of organizational identity's conceptual domain. It is noteworthy that while some studies of organizational identity change have encompassed a multi-year time period (Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Corley & Gioia, 2004), on the whole, organizational identity research is remarkably non-historical and non-developmental, in that it overlooks the effects of an organization's early self-defining choices on its contemporary identifying features (for an exception, see Baron, 2004).

In brief, the broad implication of this framework is that the proposed four-fold conception of organizational identity operates as a coherent whole, avoiding extreme, one-dimensional

treatments of the subject. As an illustration, consider the implications of this framework for the transformation of a four-year college to a research university. In order for a college to become recognizable as a research university and be seen as legitimate (Cell 1) it must replace college-specific organizational practices, policies and routines with a complementary set of university-specific features (Cell 4), while at the same time convincing faculty, devoted alumni, and financial supporters that the central features of the "old" organization with which these individuals closely identified (Cell 3) have been intentionally preserved and/or are manifested in some fashion (Cell 2). Failure to do so risks organizational failure as a consequence of confused identity or erosion of organizational support (Czarniawska & Wolff, 1998).

This holistic view of organizational identity also has important research design implications. First off, it suggests that data collection tools should be calibrated to detect identity-related dilemmas, trade-offs, and predicaments arising from both social and spatiotemporal forms of comparison. For example, the widely employed Repertory Grid technique (Kelly, 1955) is designed to uncover an organization's identity through an exhaustive process of social comparisons. A parallel process should be employed which incorporates spatiotemporal comparisons. Second, it suggests that organizational identity scholarship should approach the subject from the perspective of the organizational actor. For example, examinations of how an organization formulates or modifies its identifying features should be informed by an organization's overarching need to be properly identified as both a particular type of organization and an organization with a unique history (Foreman & Whetten, 2002).

Diagonal Forms of Optimal Distinctiveness and the CED Definition

One of the benefits of adding a second dimension to the conventional treatment of the identity paradox is that it invites an examination of the diagonal forms, or versions, of the tension

between the needs for similarity and difference. The diagonal version of the identity paradox represented by Cells 1 and 4 (R-A) can be characterized as follows: An organization's identity must be both adaptive/flexible over time and recognizable/legitimate at any point in time. Using the language of optimal distinctiveness, this tension can be expressed as a) flexibility over time is constrained by the expectations associated with adopted social forms/categories at any point in time, and b) comparability to similar others at any point in time is tempered by the need to be relevant to one's immediate context.

The tension inherent in the Cells 2 and 3 (D-E) diagonal form of the identity paradox can be stated as follows: An organization's identity must be both stable over time and unique at any point in time. From an optimal distinctiveness perspective, this tension can be expressed as a) stability over time is constrained by the competitive need to be different from similar others at any point in time, and b) differentiation from similar others at a point in time is tempered by the need to be recognized as a particular (essentially the same) organization over time.

One of the advantages of considering diagonal forms of the identity paradox is that they suggest cross-dimensional solutions. In the case of the R-A diagonal, an organization's ability to readily adopt the defining attributes of newly acquired categories would likely counter-balance or offset the difficulty of shifting from one social category to another. For example, with reference to the aforementioned case of a community college evolving into a research university, the speed with which the organization could move from one social category to another would to a large extent depend on how quickly it could adopt the prototype of each new category and the shed the distinguishing features of its old category. Similarly, the D-E diagonal suggests that spatiotemporal continuity can be a significant source of comparative distinction. One way organizations attempt to differentiate themselves is by highlighting the continuity and

26

consistency of their positively distinguishing features. For example, "What distinguishes us from other banks is our enduring commitment to (an important organizational value)."

This representation of the CED definition highlights its logical affinity with the concept of distinctive competencies in the business strategy literature (Barney, 1991, 2001; Kraatz & Zajac, 2001). Theory posits that organizational competencies that are valuable, rare, and inimitable have the potential to generate a sustainable competitive advantage. Using the language of Figure 2, we can restate this theory of competitive advantage as follows: only institutionalized (central and enduring—Cell 2) organizational policies, procedures, and practices can be a source of competitive distinctiveness (central and distinctive—Cell 4).

While our analysis has strengthened the CED definition's theoretical rationale it has also made it clear that the definition encompasses only half of the proposed conceptual domain. This observation suggests that the CED definition should be expanded to include spatiotemporal adaptability (A) and social recognizability (R)—CREAD. We see several advantages to expanding the CED definition in this manner. First, the definition of organizational identity would parallel the proposed four-cell, theoretical domain of the concept and, hence, the rationale for the definition would be more apparent. Second, the definition would better inform research on the subject by highlighting the need for two dimensional representations, as noted earlier. By implication, it would signal the need for "both/and" not "either/or" characterizations of the definitional elements. Third, it might allow for sub-conversations to evolve around different combinations of the four cells/definitional elements. For example, subsets of organizational identity scholarship might focus on social comparison tensions (CRD), temporal comparison tensions (CEA), as well as the two diagonal tensions (CED and CRA).

Implications for Moving Forward

There are several features of the formulation of organizational identity outlined in this paper that suggest possibilities to advance organizational identity scholarship. With reference to our first objective—bolster the argument for organizational identity as a defined concept, compared with it being simply a lens or perspective—the proposed conception of organizational identity focuses on the expectations that all social actors must be readily identifiable (recognizable). It further posits that the proposed two-dimensional formulation of the identity paradox constitutes a set of specifications for "proper identification." Viewed in this manner, and consistent with individual identity theory, an organization's identifying features signify what/who it is and what/who it isn't.

The proposed conception appears to pass the test of "face validity," in that it encompasses various identity-creation and identity-management activities that have been documented by scholars (e.g., Corley & Gioia, 2004; Czarniawska & Wolff, 1998; Deephouse, 1999; Foreman & Parent, 2008; Glynn, 2000). For example, it has been observed that organizations must adapt to changing environment conditions while at the same time maintaining continuity with their past and congruence with contemporary institutional expectations pertaining to their population (Fox-Wolfgramm et al, 1998; Glynn, 2000). Furthermore, research has shown that organizations may need to have some degree of flexibility in their identities across different physical places or settings, in order to be relevant to and effective in those settings (Czarniawska & Wolff, 1998; Foreman & Parent, 2008).

This framework also highlights the potential for organizational identity to serve as an integrative concept in organizational studies, bridging: a) multiple levels of analysis, e.g., individual and organizational level identity and identification; b) multiple paradigms, including

economic (difference) and sociological (similarity) perspectives, and both old and new institutional theory, and c) multiple methods, e.g., comparative and historical analysis.

With respect to our second objective—articulate a clearer and more fully developed connection between individual identity and organizational identity—the proposed conception clearly specifies its conceptual links with the individual identity literature. In particular, it justifies the practice of cross-level concept borrowing on the grounds that individual and organizational actors have comparable identity requirements. Said differently, following the rationale set forth by Morgeson and Hoffman (1999), it focuses on cross-level functional similarities rather than on cross-level structural (ontological) differences. When framed in this manner, formulating organizational identity as an analogue of individual identity strengthens the veracity and legitimacy of the organizational-level analogue.

One of the advantages of framing organizational identity as an analogue of individual identity is that the individual identity literature can be used as a guide for addressing thorny issues encountered in the formulation and application of the organizational identity concept. For example, it provides some useful guidance for distinguishing between organizational actors and organizational actions. Some scholars have suggested that individual identity is reflected in a person's unique pattern of life-shaping decisions—a unique set of choices across time and space (Mischel & Morf, 2003; see also Weick, 1995). At the organizational level, this suggests that those seeking to understand the intentional perspective that distinguishes one organizational actor from another should examine the fork-in-the-road choices in the organization's history.

In addition, the proposal suggests ways in which organizational identity theory can inform individual identity theory. As noted earlier, the study of individual and organizational identity has strongly favored a social comparative, self-other perspective. Given that

organizations have no inherent identifying features and what we understand about the life-shaping consequences of the "founder's imprint," it makes sense that organizational identity scholarship should lead out in emphasizing the self-self, temporal comparative perspective. It is anticipated that this line of investigation might turn up important implications for how individual identity is conceptualized and studied.

Finally, with respect to our third objective—specify a distinctive, defensible conceptual domain for the concept of organizational identity and align the definition of organizational identity with that domain—the conception of organizational identity outlined in this paper addresses the long-standing debates over the CED definition and suggests a more comprehensive and logically defensible formulation. In particular, it addresses the widespread criticism of the enduringness criterion by making the continuity *vs.* adaptability debate a non-issue. What the two dimensional formulation makes clear is that either/or characterizations of the enduringness property miss the fact that it is half of the temporal identity tension design requirement. In addition, the expanded conception of organizational identity adds balance to the emphasis on distinctiveness in the CED definition. The additional focus on similarity is particularly important for the organizational version of identity because organizations are, after all, social artifacts whose utility is linked to their ability to be recognized as a particular *type* of artifact.

The proposal also suggests opportunities for moving beyond previous debates regarding what is the definition and meaning of organizational identity to how it can be used as an analytical tool within the field of organizational studies. For example, this conception of organizational identity highlights the need for a better understanding of how organizations satisfy these competing design requirements, and how the need for this balance effects their choices among alternatives that would move the organization towards one of the four corners in the

model—i.e., straining the boundaries of an optimally distinctive identity. Also, as we see in the literature on distinctive competencies, general agreement on the meaning of a concept stimulates interest in searching out its antecedents and consequences. In other words, it encourages a shift in focus from theorizing *about* a concept to theorizing *with* it, by means of incorporating it into testable propositions—either as the antecedent condition or the consequence of other conditions.

Conclusion

We have proposed that the so-called identity paradox, often expressed as the requirement or principle of optimal distinctiveness, is a core, distinguishing characteristic of the concept of identity. That is, what distinguishes identity-based explanations of human behavior is the notion that people act in accordance with their subjective self-view, which is widely characterized as the rights and responsibilities associated with their distinctive social space—characterized as the joint answer to two self-defining questions: Who am I similar to? How am I different from all others? Our contribution to the conventional treatment of optimal distinctiveness is to add a temporal component—a self-self basis of comparison. One of the advantages of the proposed framework is that inasmuch as it was derived from the individual identity literature it can inform the study of identity across levels of analysis.

By implication, the proposed two dimensional treatment of organizational identity posits that the similarity-difference paradox as well as the self-other (social) and self-self (temporal) bases of comparison jointly specify a distinctive conceptual domain. Said differently, we have argued that what distinguishes organizational identity from related constructs, like organizational culture, is that it encompasses two tensions, characterized herein as: "What is compared" (what is similar; what is different) and "Who is compared" (self-self/temporal; self-other/social). More broadly, by framing the two dimensional treatment of optimal distinctiveness as a set of design

31

requirements for a "functional" organizational identity we have provided a defensible rationale for the proposed definition.

This framework has important implications for the Albert and Whetten CED definition of organizational identity. In particular, it characterizes the definition as a diagonal form of the optimal distinctiveness tension and it suggests the addition of two new definitional elements (Recognizability and Adaptability). Importantly, this proposed expansion of the definition addresses the persistent concern that it was out of step with observed changes in organizations' identifying features, and their meanings, over time. It is hoped that this expanded definition will help consolidate past efforts to theorize *about* organizational identity by tethering the definition of organizational identity to a specified conceptual domain. An anticipated benefit of a widely shared definition is that it will encourage a shift in focus towards theorizing *with* organizational identity, in that, following the example of research on distinctive competencies, scholars interested in the concept of organizational identity will undertake a systematic search for its antecedents and consequences.

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Figure 1: The Identity Paradox: A Similarity-Difference Framework of Organizational Identity

Object of Comparison

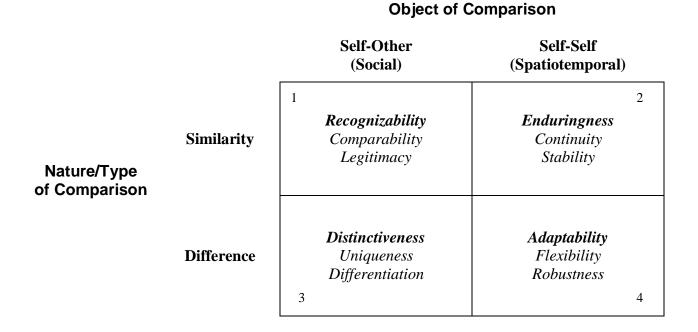|	Self-Other (Social)	Self-Self (Spatiotemporal)
Similarity	1 ***Recognizability*** *Comparability* *Legitimacy*	***Enduringness*** *Continuity* *Stability* 2
Difference	***Distinctiveness*** *Uniqueness* *Differentiation* 3	***Adaptability*** *Flexibility* *Robustness* 4

Nature/Type of Comparison

Figure 2: A Two Dimensional Representation of Organizational Identity

Object of Comparison

Nature/Type of Comparison

	Self-Other (Social)	Self-Self (Spatiotemporal)
Similarity	1 **R** *Recognizable* *Legitimate*	**E** *Enduring* *Continuous* 2
	C	
Difference	*Distinctive* *Unique* **D** 3	*Adaptable* *Robust* **A** 4

41