

KEY THEMES IN ORGANIZATIONAL COMMUNICATION



GREGORY S. LARSON & REBECCA GILL

# Organizations and Identity



"In this accessible and thought-provoking book, Larson and Gill pull together a number of threads in research on organizational identification, including ways identity is a problem for organizations and members and how 'local' concerns relate to wider social trends. They also point to avenues for further exploration, while integrating knowledge from other disciplines."

George Cheney, University of Colorado

"Organizations are not only where we go to make money. They are also places where we make ourselves. Provocative and insightful, *Organizations and Identity* challenges us to consider the multiple ways that organizational life forms, shapes, and manages our identities. Larson and Gill provide the most comprehensive and accessible treatment of organizations and identity to date."

Steve May, University of North Carolina

The question "who am I?" represents one of the key challenges of contemporary life in a globalized world. For most of us, organizations play a key role in answering that question.

In this book, Gregory Larson and Rebecca Gill explain how identities are formed, managed, and regulated in our interactions with organizations, and why identity has become so relevant in modern life. Their examination includes frameworks for organizing and understanding identity scholarship, the nature of multiple identities and how these are managed, and the use of identity as a way to control workers.

*Organizations and Identity* introduces a discursive approach to the topic, highlighting what is unique and consequential about studying identity from a communication perspective. It is essential reading for students and scholars of organizational communication.

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*Gregory S. Larson and Rebecca Gill*

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# Organizations and Identity

## Key Themes in Organizational Communication

*Organizational Rhetoric*, Charles Conrad

*Organizational Discourse*, François Cooren

*Dissent in Organizations*, Jeffrey Kassing

*Organizational Socialization*, Michael Kramer

*Organizations and Identity*, Gregory S. Larson & Rebecca Gill

*Communicating Emotion at Work*, Vincent R. Waldron

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# 1

## *Introduction*

In contemporary society, the self is an increasingly fashionable object of both public fascination and scholarly interest. Popular television shows like *The Biggest Loser* or *The Bachelor* explore how to become a better, more fulfilled person while at the same time self-help and advice books sell millions of copies. From many different voices, we hear the self framed as a site of “work” – something that can be improved for personal and even social betterment. For scholars, the self has similarly been seen as an object for scrutiny. In social science disciplines ranging from psychology to sociology to geography to communication to organization studies, scholarship related to identity has boomed in the past thirty years. The popularity of identity research likely results from growing interest in asking foundational questions relevant to all humans: “Who am I?” and “How should I act?” (Alvesson, Ashcraft & Thomas 2008). To be sure, addressing these fundamental questions has long been the focus of art, religion, education, politics and scholarship, and yet in contemporary times, the importance of these questions has deepened as traditional anchors of identity, such as church, family and work have undergone radical transformations. With all these changes taking place in an increasingly globalized society, answering the question “Who am I?” becomes both more difficult and more complex. At the same time that organizations continue to play a significant role in answering this question for most people, organizations and the implications for identity that accompany them are themselves in flux.

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In this initial chapter, we seek to situate studies of identity in organizational communication and organization studies within a larger, ongoing story about the self and organizations. The intent is not to provide a comprehensive history of the theoretical development of the concept of the self (see Holstein & Gubrium 2000; Rose 1998), but rather to position conversations about identity in organization studies within a larger historical and cultural framework. Fundamentally, this chapter addresses this question: Why is understanding identity important for understanding contemporary organizations and organizing processes? Answering this question requires moving beyond studies of particular organizations to examine some broad trends and historical developments in society, work and organizations that all contribute to the salience of identity as a construct for explaining organizing and organizations.

### *Rise of the Individual Self*

The importance of identity in organization studies must be understood in the context of a world in which the individual is positioned as a key way of understanding, regulating and organizing society. In contemporary Western society, human beings are construed as individuals having unique selves. It is thus important in the beginning of our discussion to recognize the importance of individual identity in contemporary society as a recent social construction:

For it is only at this historical moment, and in a limited and localized geographical space, that human being is understood in terms of individuals who are selves, each equipped with an inner domain, a “psychology,” which is structured by the interaction between particular biographical experience and certain general laws or processes of the human animal. (Rose 1998, p. 23)

This conception of humans as individuals is shaped by both historical circumstance (i.e., changing political and economic systems) as well as political positioning by groups to shape knowledge (e.g.,

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growth of psychology as a discipline). Nikolas Rose (1998) argues that “the ways in which humans ‘give meaning to experience’ have their own history” (p. 25). In other words, it is not a natural “truth” that we conceive of the human being as an individual self, but rather it is a construction of both historical circumstance and political maneuvering. In particular, the rise of the individual in contemporary society is inextricably linked to the growth of psychology and related disciplines that have shaped our understanding along these lines.

### *Increased Possibilities for Narrating the Self in the Globalized World*

British sociologist Anthony Giddens (1991) asserted that the conditions of late modernity (i.e., that we live in a world characterized by information exchange, globalization and fluidity) are what make identity a complex and important contemporary issue. Throughout much of human history, the narratives available to frame an individual identity have been rather limited. Telling the story “who am I?” was constrained by the few variations of knowledge and experience deemed “legitimate” at the time. Imagine a Chinese peasant 200 years ago. The options available for this person to frame her story were limited by rather fixed societal discourses related to class, gender and cultural traditions. In many ways, much of the story of self was already written for that peasant and her identity was likely rather stable. Compare this to modern times in a globalized world where people have access to many stories, many lifestyles. Through communication technologies and modern media, one can see how other people live, how they act and how they present themselves to others. These windows into the lives of others provide many more possibilities for defining the self. This time in history, more than any other, provides multiple opportunities for forming narratives of the self.

As the influences on and opportunities for framing identity have increased, the construction of the self has become a focal point in Western culture. Rather than viewing identity as singular, fixed

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and coherent, the self is now more often conceived as multiple and, at times, even conflicted. Individuals must manage many “facets” of their selves – as an employee, team member, parent, spouse, citizen, volunteer, etc. (Tracy & Trethewey 2005). Sometimes all these facets fit together nicely, but at other times, they conflict and must be managed. For instance, contemporary families experience one key challenge in balancing work and family identities (Nippert-Eng 1996). For parents of young children, being both a “good parent” and a “good worker” often results in conflicts that must be negotiated, often on a daily basis. The management of multiple identities, as a discursive practice, thus becomes the primary identity challenge in modern society and in modern organizations (Cheney 1991; Kuhn & Nelson 2002; Larson & Pepper 2003).

With increased opportunities for narrating the self, people spend considerable time and energy forming, shaping and managing their identities – a process known as identity work (Alvesson et al. 2008; Sveningsson & Alvesson 2003). Identity work involves “forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising” who we are (Sveningsson & Alvesson 2003, p. 1165). As humans, we engage in this process all the time, sometimes conscious of it (active identity work) and, at other times, unaware of the ongoing process (passive identity work). Think, for instance, about two “texts” that most college students produce: a Facebook page and a resumé. Both are undoubtedly exercises in identity management, and yet they are also quite different. What you choose to reveal about yourself on Facebook often says more about how you want to appear to your friends. Alternatively, your resumé is probably quite different, likely recounting only your professional experiences and accomplishments. Both represent constructions of you, but differ based upon the audience. Both also demonstrate how we can do identity work in passive as well as active ways (Wieland 2010); you are more likely conscious of different things when you represent yourself in your resumé as opposed to on your Facebook page. This is just one example of how the construction of the self and the management of different aspects of identity becomes a key challenge in contemporary society.

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One way to view the centrality of identity in popular Western culture is to consider the modern consumer. To a significant extent, our economy is based on *identity consumption*. In a post-Fordist economy, one in which production has moved away from single products aimed at mass audiences to custom products aimed at increasingly smaller niche markets, the construction of self is also largely a consumer process. Choosing a particular product or brand over another, particularly for younger generations, is often as much of a statement about who you think you are (or are not) as it is about the particular need or utility of a certain item (Kendall, Gill & Cheney 2007). Advertisers undoubtedly encourage choices of products based upon lifestyle and identity. When, for example, did you last see an advertisement for Nike shoes that focused on the utility of the shoe rather than the image of the Nike athlete? Likewise, choosing an iPhone or a Galaxy likely says something about you and how you see yourself. Products not only have functions, but send and reflect messages about identity.

In addition to our personal lives, self-making has also become a focal point in work and organizations. As Tracy and Trethewey (2005) note, “identity is increasingly constituted by public, profit-driven, and institutionalized discourses” (p. 173) that generate pressure on people to become more organizationally profitable and efficient workers and managers. Management consultants, like Steven Covey (1989), offer strategies for shaping the self into something more successful. Covey recommends, for instance, that being proactive, managing oneself and taking time out for spiritual and fitness activities will help generate security, freedom and power. Our book therefore engages these ways in which the self is shaped by our overlapping and numerous interactions with organizations in our lives, particularly work organizations and as related to work more broadly.

*Organizations, Interests and the Shaping  
of Identities*

Although we have intimated that people have the ability to choose from many different possible identities, we would underscore that people are not completely free to choose any identity they want. The construction of the self is contested, as the choices for self-definition are invariably shaped and constrained by various interests. Many interests, some readily observable, others more difficult to see, have a stake in how we label, identify and position ourselves. In the past, these key interests included the family, the church and the state as providers of narratives for defining the self, and those narratives often overlapped. In contemporary times in the Western world, the family, the church and the state continue to exert considerable influence, but often those interests are less closely aligned. In addition, the modern corporation has arisen as a major force, perhaps the prevailing force, in shaping who we think we are.

Communication scholar Stanley Deetz (1992) argues that the modern corporation has become the dominant institution in Western society. In describing the “corporate colonization of the life world,” Deetz argues that multinational corporations exert considerable influence on many aspects of daily life. Our food is often produced by large corporations and bought at corporate grocery stores. Our time is structured around the corporate work week. Our news and entertainment comes from outlets owned by multinational corporations. Our education system is designed to teach the skills necessary to make people good workers. For Deetz and others, the rise of the modern corporation is concerning because these institutions have considerable influence on our lives, yet they are largely closed to public scrutiny. Deetz argues that the interests of the corporation subtly subsume other interests, and eventually come to be seen as normal and natural. For example, it has become commonplace for public universities to talk about students as consumers, mimicking the language of market capitalism without careful reflection about how this may change the

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relationships between teachers and students (see McMillan & Cheney 1996).

For research on identity, the rise of the modern corporation and the corporate colonization of the life world suggest that we must pay close attention to those interests and institutions that have a stake in shaping identities and how individuals both consent and resist. Modern corporations, in particular, suggest narratives for identity formation that often dominate other narratives, and so it is corporations and other work narratives that become key shapers of identities. On the other hand, people are not simply beholden to the interests of corporations and they also resist and alter these narratives. This contested nature of identity in the modern world provides another compelling reason to study identity. As a result, some identity researchers, primarily from the critical tradition, have focused on explaining how some identities are regulated and resisted. The contested nature of identity is a theme throughout the remainder of this book, particularly in Chapter 5.

### *Diversity: Telling Alternative Stories*

A final factor influencing the salience of identity research in organizational communication and organization studies over the past three decades is growing attention to diversity. With the rise of globalization and the increase in diversity in the workplace, some organization scholars have begun to question basic assumptions about how we make sense of organizational life and whose experiences are represented in organizational research and theory. Traditionally in organization studies, much of our understanding of organizations comes from the perspective of white, middle class males (Ashcraft & Allen 2003). Although that perspective deserves consideration, it is also the case that other perspectives deserve scholarly and practical attention, particularly because they help us to challenge, diversify and enhance our theoretical knowledge, as Allen (1996) demonstrated in her re-framing of socialization processes from a lens of feminist standpoint theory. Difference matters in the construction and communication of



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social identities, as well as in the development of scholarship that helps us to better understand the world around us (Allen 2011).

In organization studies, feminist scholars led the way in exploring the ways in which different aspects of social identity shape the experiences of women in the workplace. Broadly speaking, feminist scholars call attention to the ways in which social constructions of gender, as a central organizing facet of social identity, produce and interpret the experiences of organizational life for women and men, where organizations, in turn, shape and organize constructions and performances of gender (Acker 1990; Ashcraft 2013; Bruni, Gherardi & Poggio 2004; Buzzanell 1994). Rather than seeing organizational life as gender neutral, they explore how (hegemonic) masculinity is normalized into organizational practice and how this “others” women (and men who do not meet a particular masculine norm) in many organizational contexts. For example, Alexandra Murphy (1998) studied the experiences of flight attendants as they trained and worked at a major airline. The airline required women to maintain a certain weight and dress in organizationally approved ways. Murphy’s research showed how masculinized managerial discourses related to the ways women looked, acted and dressed, but were also resisted by flight attendants. Gender, as key aspect of identity, emerges from feminist research as consequential for understanding the experiences and practices of organizational life.

Although scholarship on gender represents the most developed line of study related to organizations and diversity, feminist scholars have called for increased attention to other facets of diversity and sameness, such as those related to race, class, ethnicity, age, ability, religion and sexuality, which may all feature, to varying degrees, in organizational contexts and sense-making. Here, scholars continue to theorize the ways in which such differences may intersect – an idea known as “intersectionality.” Intersectionality refers to “an analysis claiming that systems of race, economic class, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, nation and age form mutually constructing features of social organization” (Collins 1998, p. 278). For example, Patricia Parker (2005) argues that most of our research on leadership comes from the perspective of white,