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Identity as Narrative:
Overcoming Identity Gaps
during Work Role Transitions

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**Identity as narrative:
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ABSTRACT

Self-narratives, defined as accounts of the relationship among self-relevant events over time, play a critical role in helping people adapt, revise and reconstruct identities during work role transitions. Role transitions pose two challenges to a person's sense of self: they create gaps between past and future work identities, and between identities claimed and identities granted in social interactions. Drawing from the literature on narrative and narration, we identify elements of narrative form and the narrating process that may help overcome these challenges by generating coherence, legitimacy and audience engagement. These, in turn, create feelings of consistency and authenticity and increase the likelihood that claimed identities are granted. With repeated interaction and revision, a more compelling narrative develops, one that helps the narrator incorporate new identity elements into a revised self-concept and gain full membership in the new work group.

The practices and strategies by which people build and revise their identities in the workplace are at the heart of a burgeoning stream of research (Bartel & Dutton, 2001; Elsbach, 2003; Ibarra, 1999; Kreiner, Hollensbe & Sheep, 2006; Pratt, 2000; Pratt, Rockmann & Kaufmann, 2006). This stream of work highlights the importance of rhetorical strategies such as accounts, anecdotes and stories for identity work, defined as the sum of practices in which individuals engage to sustain a coherent sense of self (Kreiner et al., 2006; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Among rhetorical strategies for identity work, telling a “good story” helps people create meaning (Gergen, 1994), and increases the likelihood that the desired identity will be granted by the target audience (Ashforth, 2001). While the organizational literature notes that people use personal narratives to stabilize and counteract strains in work identity (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) and to lay claim to central components of work identities (Van Maanen, 1998), we do not have a clear understanding of what makes narratives effective identity tools or the social processes by which they produce desired identity outcomes.

A concept of identity as narrative, we argue, is critical for our understanding of the dynamics of identity change during work role transitions, or passages into new organizational, occupational or professional roles. Work role transitions pose substantial identity challenges for the person undertaking the transition (Becker & Carper, 1956; Hall, 1976; Louis, 1980; Strauss, 1977). Newcomers to a work role or professional community are not automatically endowed with its corresponding identity but rather must earn that identity by spending time in the role and developing a “culturally appropriate self” (Kunda, 1992; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Sutton, 1991; Van Maanen, 1998). This is the case, for instance, for individuals with a technical or functional background moving into managerial positions, novices in professional service firms assuming their full professional responsibilities, or people embarking on radical career changes. The

magnitude of the task is amplified in cases of career transition and change (Ibarra, 1999, 2007) or when the work role transition deviates from frequently observed or socially acceptable trajectories (Ashforth, 2001). As non-linear, discontinuous or boundaryless careers become more common (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Cappelli, 1999), understanding how people manage the challenge to their sense of self during work role transitions is therefore an important and timely concern.

This paper argues that people rely on self-narratives to overcome the challenges to their sense of self that are part and parcel of the transition process. A self-narrative, defined as an “account of the relationship among self-relevant events over time” (Gergen, 1994: 187), is identity expressed in story form. Self-narratives bridge the discontinuities – the identity gaps – that occur during role transition between past and future or desired identities, and between identities claimed and granted in social interaction. First, the person undertaking the role transition privately questions his or her professional self-concept (Beyer & Hannah, 2002), since old and new professional identities might collide and be hard to reconcile (Ibarra, 2003). We argue that a good self-narrative depicts a career as a series of unfolding events that make sense sequentially. This helps reconcile competing identities by making possible, reasonable and explicit the linkages between them or the reasons for the rejection of any one of them. Second, the identities people publicly claim may not always be granted in social interactions with the members of the new work role or professional community (Bartel & Dutton, 2001). The self-narrative embeds the individual story in the socially accepted discourse, facilitating the identity’s granting. Finally, the process of telling one’s story to others creates for the storyteller the conditions for identity validation.

We offer an explicit narrative lens to identity construction processes, distinct from the more widespread social categorization perspective. We take conversations to be the locus of identity construction, and the stories told the means by which identity is realized (Weigart, 1988). Although scholars have mentioned the importance of narratives for identity construction in organizations, our paper is the first to offer a conceptual model of the elements of narrative form and narrating process that make self-narratives effective. Second, we highlight the interpersonal dimension of adaptation to new work roles. With few exceptions (e.g., Bartel & Dutton, 2001; Van Maanen, 1998), research has overlooked the interpersonal-level strategies and practices used by newcomers to manage their identity at entry into new work roles. Yet newcomers tell stories not only to make sense of their transition, but also to gain acceptance from existing role members. This suggests that, in order to understand the effectiveness of self-narratives for identity ends, we have to pay equal attention to the dynamics of reception by significant others at whom the narrative is addressed. Finally, our conceptualization of what renders narratives effective can be applied to more broadly in the organizational theory field to understand how people mobilize resources. Scholars of resource mobilization in entrepreneurship (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001) and collective action (Quinn & Worline, forthcoming) have recently been interested in the role of narratives, but have so far lacked a tool for studying them; our paper aims to address this need.

The paper is organized into three sections. In the first section, we develop the idea of identity gaps during work role transition, and identify the three identity outcomes on which we base our emergent model: consistency and authenticity of the self and identity granting. Building on narrative theory and research, in the second section, we identify three critical processes by which self-narratives potentially affect these identity outcomes – generating coherence,

legitimacy and audience engagement – and the elements of narrative form and the narrating process that are instrumental in these critical processes. The third part of our paper explores the evolution of coherence, legitimacy and audience engagement as a function of repeated storytelling and interaction, and discusses moderating factors including multiplicity of personal stories and availability of a “ready-made” or institutionalized narrative. We conclude by highlighting the contribution of a narrative perspective for future research and theorizing on forms and functions of identity work.

IDENTITY GAPS IN WORK ROLE TRANSITIONS

Although identities – meanings attached to oneself by self and others (Gecas, 1982) – are mutable and fluid (Cooley, 1956; Mead, 1934; Baumeister, 1998), an equally important feature of the self is some degree of continuity across time and situations (Albert, 1977; Baumeister, 1998; Breakwell, 1983; James, 1950). A long tradition of research affirms that people find work role transition challenging precisely because it poses challenges to the continuity of identity (Louis, 1980; Hall, 1968, 1971; Schein, 1978). As they move into new roles, individuals experiment with provisional selves that serve as trials for possible new professional identities (Ibarra, 1999), and customize identities through enriching, patching or splinting when work-identity integrity is violated (Pratt et al., 2006). However, work role transitions are not purely and simply occasions for forming new identities. They also require reconciling new identities with old ones, and receiving social approval for doing so. We refer to these two discontinuities as identity gaps.

Like other “autobiographical occasions” (Zussman, 1996), such as high-school reunions or professional conferences, work role transitions provoke searching questions regarding one’s achievements, weaknesses, motives and excuses (Vinitzky-Seroussi & Zussman, 1996; Vinitzky-

Seroussi, 1998), and by exposing one's identity claims to the scrutiny of an audience that has the power to grant or deny the claimed identity (Goffman, 1959). For work role newcomers, two identity gaps loom large. The first identity gap concerns the individual's ability to link the past and the future into a harmonious, continuous sense of self. If professionals are unable to "synch up" their present work experience with past experiences, they may be less able to adjust to new work settings because they cannot draw on their past as a resource for present sense-making (Beyer & Hannah, 2002). The second identity gap involves being accepted into the new role by the veteran role members. Without an account persuasive enough to demonstrate to others, for example, that one has the attitudes and knowledge befitting an organizational insider (Bartel & Dutton, 2001), newcomers may not gain full acceptance in the position they seek.

The gap between past and future work identities mainly affects individuals' sense of self at the personal level (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). In contrast, the gap between identity claimed and identity granted has consequences for the collective level of self-representation (Brewer & Gardner, 1996), and for external acceptance of the individual by the social group. The identity gaps increase in magnitude as the work role transition is more radical, for instance when a humanities academic switches to a finance career (Ibarra, 2003).

Identity outcomes

Identity gaps become apparent, open and close in social interaction. Successful interactions confirm, establish or reinforce identity (Baumeister, 1998; Cooley, 1956; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934). Overcoming identity gaps results in three identity outcomes. At the personal level, it results in feelings of consistency and authenticity of the self. At the collective level, it results in identity claimed being granted.

The first of these identity outcomes is consistency. By consistency, we mean self-integrity or unity (Allport, 1937; Festinger, 1957). Social interactions have the potential to repair the gap between past and future identities by providing information that confirms people's self-conceptions (Swann, 1983; Swann, Griffin, Predmore & Gaines, 1987). By linking past and future work role identities, people avoid the "painful or at least psychologically uncomfortable state" that is inconsistency of self (Zajonc, 1960). Consistency is a prerequisite of both psychological well-being (Lewin, 1951) and stability in social relationships (McCall & Simmons, 1978). Individuals who describe themselves quite consistently in different roles or situations show higher levels of well-being than do individuals who have more fragmented self-concepts (Block, 1961; Donahue, Robins, Roberts & John, 1993; Sheldon, Ryan, Rawsthorne & Ilardi, 1997). As summarized by Markus and Nurius (1986: 958), "Affect derives from conflicts or discrepancies within the self-concept: to the extent that individuals can or cannot achieve particular self-conceptions or identities, they feel either positively or negatively about themselves."

A sense of authenticity is the second identity outcome. An authentic self-concept has been defined as one's "true" or "real" self (May, 1983; Rogers, 1959) or as the perception of one's behavior as self-determined (Sheldon et al., 1997).¹ Failure to link old and new selves leaves people feeling inauthentic and devoid of an enduring sense of self (Ibarra, 1999, 2007). Emotive dissonance results from discrepancies between what people "really" feel and the images they feel they have to convey as role occupants (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1989) or in transition to new roles (Ibarra, 1999). Unlike consistency, authenticity encompasses a longer-span time

¹ While self-consistency and authenticity are related, they are not the same thing: people might judge their behavior as authentic across situations, yet think of themselves as lacking a unifying thread to link those situations (Cross, Gore & Morris, 2003).

component. It arises after repeated episodes of feeling consistent and having one's identity granted in interactions while adopting new identities and changing the old ones ever so slightly.

Finally, the third identity outcome is the granting of the claimed work role identity. The candidate or new entrant must make claims to a new identity, often in a work role very different from what he or she held in the past, and the other parties to social interactions decide whether to grant the identity claimed or not. If the account of the work role transition is persuasive, the identity put forward in the interaction is more likely to be granted by the other party to the interaction (Scott & Lyman, 1968). More tangibly, identity granting in work role transitions entails obtaining the job for which one is applying, being accepted as a full-fledged member of a profession, and overcoming the identity of a "temporary worker" in favor of that of an organizational insider (Bartel & Dutton, 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1991; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006). Highlighting the continuity of the self across work roles will therefore increase the likelihood of identity granting and the success of the work role transition.

Rhetorical strategies for overcoming identity gaps

People manage identity gaps using a variety of rhetorical strategies and tactics, such as accounts, justifications, disclaimers and other pieces of a "vocabulary of motives" that can adequately express the identity problem the individual is facing in a way that is acceptable to others (Scott & Lyman, 1986; Mills, 1940). Such verbal efforts to restore or assure meaningful interaction in the face of problematic situations (Stokes & Hewitt, 1976) also serve to maintain, alter, and revise people's sense of who they are in the workplace (Ashforth, 2001; Kreiner et al., 2006; Pratt et al., 2006; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Van Maanen, 1998; Weick, 1995).

A growing body of work on role transition highlights the sense-making and reconstructive properties of one particular form of rhetorical strategy: the self-narrative (Ibarra,

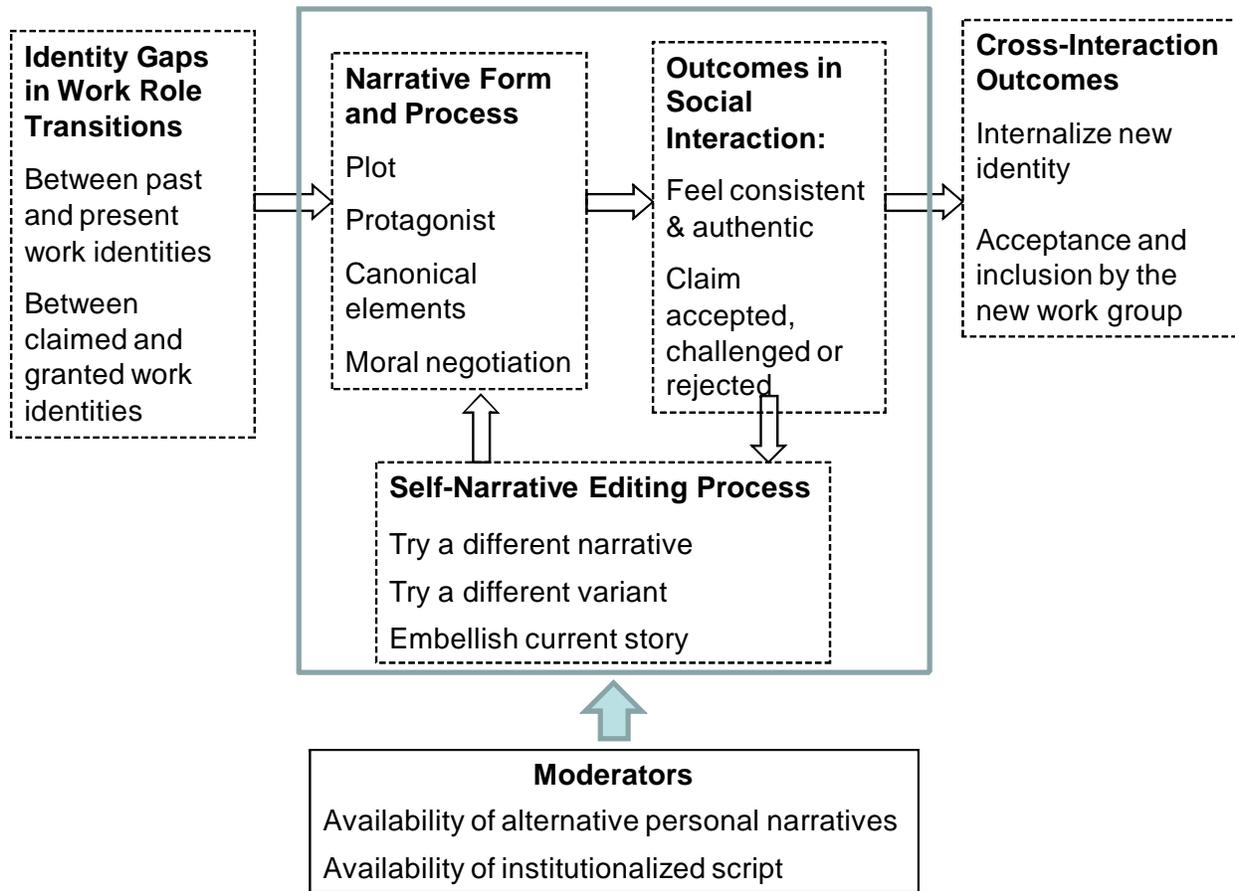
2003; Ebaugh, 1988; Kunda, Barley & Evans, 2002; Lave & Wenger, 1991). Personal narratives infuse adult lives with a sense of unity and purpose (Bruner, 2004; Erikson, 1959; McAdams, 1993), and sustain a sense of predictable understanding in the world (Bruner, 1990). From telling a story about the self, there emerges a sense of self (Ricoeur, 1988). This happens because narratives configure the diverse events and actions of one's life into a meaningful whole, bringing to light the temporal dimension of human life (Polkinghorne, 1988, 1991; Sarbin, 1986). The life stories that CEOs tell – Hewlett and Packard's beginnings-in-a-garage story or Bill Gates' dropping-out story – are examples of configuring past actions into a whole that explains and illuminates present decisions. In other words, narratives infuse lives with shape, temporal direction, and meaning (Gergen, 1994).

Narratives are an effective strategy especially when identities are questioned, such as in role transitions. The higher the degree of novelty experienced by individuals in the new role, the more “upending” the experience of the transition (Schein, 1968), requiring re-evaluation of the assumptions held about oneself and reconstruction of meaning. Self-narratives will therefore be increasingly important for identity outcomes when the identity gaps loom larger.

The following section argues that self-narratives overcome identity gaps by offering coherence, legitimacy and audience engagement, and outlines the elements of narrative form and the narrating process that yield these outcomes: plot, protagonist, canonical elements, and negotiated moral. Subsequently, we explore how variation in the number or variants of personal narratives, as well as the extent to which an institutionalized narrative script is available, moderate the proposed identity processes. Figure 1 summarizes our proposed model.

FIGURE 1

Role of Self-Narratives for Identity Outcomes in Work Role Transitions



SELF-NARRATIVES: FORM AND PROCESS

Not every self-referential rhetorical device is a narrative. Based on prior work on the importance of stories in organizational contexts (Weick, 1995; Pentland, 1999), we focus on three features that together make up a self-narrative: the plot, the self as the protagonist, and the moral. First, the story has a plot – a three-part structure consisting of a beginning, middle and end. The “first act” typically poses the dilemma, the middle concerns the protagonist’s journey, and endings resolve the tension build-up (e.g., Campbell, 1956). Second, in the self-narrative, “I” is the protagonist of the story. Third, the moral of the self-narrative creates meaning about the

protagonist, in this case the self. It casts light on how the narrator understands him- or herself, how the audience should understand him or her, and sets the standards against which actions can be judged (Linde, 1993; Pentland, 1999: 713).

Self-narratives overcome identity gaps by generating coherence, legitimacy and audience engagement. First, the self-narrative imparts coherence. This is achieved through plot and protagonist. A self-narrative is the product of a careful process of structuring one's life events into a plot and depicting key actions of the protagonist. For instance, when former Smith Barney CEO Sallow Krawcheck recalls how her time as a high-school outcast prepared her for the challenges of her professional life, by saying: "There was nothing they could do to me at Salomon Brothers in the '80s that was worse than the seventh grade" (cited in Guber, 2007: 57), she retrospectively selects certain events and actions from the past to create a life story. What distinguishes a good story is that events hang together coherently from one episode to the next, so that the turns of events are plausibly accounted for, and the protagonist acts consistently and deliberately throughout the plot (Linde, 1993).

Second, self-narratives are effective because they convey legitimacy – they embed the particular story of one individual in the larger cultural discourse (Phillips, Lawrence & Hardy, 2004). In the example above, anyone listening to the story can identify with the outcast teenager. This is achieved by adopting elements of plot and language – what we call canonical elements – from the cultural repertoire of the audience (e.g., Lave & Wenger, 1991). Third, the narrating process contributes to a self-narrative's effectiveness by generating audience engagement. How the story is told, received and negotiated in the social interaction is instrumental for the audience's acceptance and validation of the account (Scott & Lyman, 1968).

The following sections outline the specific mechanisms by which self-narratives and the narrating process contribute to identity outcomes.

Establishing coherence

Plot. A good story rests on a goal-directed sequence of events in which the past is related to the present, and from that connection, one can extrapolate to the future (Gergen, 1994; Weick, 1995). Ricoeur referred to the process by which narratives configure temporal events into a whole by directing them toward a conclusion as “emplotment” (1984). Through emplotment, idiosyncratic actions become meaningful by virtue of their place relative to the overarching frame imposed by the plot (Polkinghorne, 1991). The plot of the self-narrative lends it purpose, sense, and reason; it answers the question “why” by invoking a series of events that together explain how one arrived from “there and then” to the “here and now”.

The typical narrative is easily recognized by its four-part structure: a beginning, a low point, a climax and an ending. The “first act” of the classic story poses the dilemma, typically a tension that needs to be resolved. For instance, here is how a psychiatrist starts off the story of how he became a Buddhist monk:

“I was in a long-term personal relationship that worked. I had a great reputation and was comfortable financially. But that wasn’t enough. I projected myself into the future: more books, a bigger reputation, a nicer house. So what? None of that fulfilled my longing for spirituality.” (Ibarra, 2003: 5).

The middle of the story concerns the protagonist’s journey. As in all great epics, mid-way through, the hero spends a period of time lost, wandering in the wilderness (Campbell, 1956). There is a low point, after which the second act typically ends with a turning point, climax or catalytic event. Turning points serve to highlight the switch from continuity to discontinuity; they represent a point of no return, after which the protagonist can no longer see or do things the same way. This can be seen, for instance, in the case of the burnt-out consultant who returns

home after taking time off doing voluntary work, realizes that there is no going back to the same old job, and resigns. Finally, in the third act, the protagonist reaches some kind of resolution – either succeeding (often after learning and revising the goal along the way) or failing. The consultant might take a position in the not-for-profit world, start his or her own consultancy firm, or embark on a laborious process of self-discovery. Endings resolve the tension build-up.

Continuity of the self is built into the fabric of the narrative, with its reliance on the principle of narrative order: the order of clauses in the story is taken to match the order of events (Linde, 1993: 106-107). Individuals who have personal stories with well-structured plots are more likely to perceive themselves as consistent and authentic, and more likely to achieve their identity aims in social interaction. People are accustomed to articulating their self-concept over time and across social situations using the syntax of the autobiographical form (MacIntyre, 1981; Giddens, 1991; Rogoff, 1990). This is partly because the narrative form lends itself readily to accounts of evolution and change. Self-narratives allow storytellers to claim their unique and consistent self while remaining open to the transformational opportunities that life brings their way (Sparrowe, 2005). As Ricoeur argued, “emplotment” is a sign of the self, not the same across situations, but consistent across them (Simms, 2003).

Furthermore, as audiences, we are sensitive to the articulation of a good story. We expect the storyteller to respect the unity of time and place, to develop the premise into a series of trials and errors, create suspense, and surprise us with a clear denouement (Eliashberg, Hui & Zhang, 2007). Good plots captures an audience’s attention (Green & Brock, 2000), a necessary prerequisite for accepting the purported claim. In work role transitions, a “before” and “after” plot helps establish the continuity after a period of hesitation and tentative steps; turning points

are essential as they reframe personal doubts as a meaningful part of the personal odyssey (Ibarra, 2007; Ibarra & Lineback, 2005).

Protagonist. As in any story, the self-narrative's protagonist is important because he or she provides the thread that ties the meaning of the events together (Rimmon-Kenan, 1983; Pentland, 1999). The protagonist, in fact, fulfils a double role. On the one hand, he or she sustains the continuity of the self throughout the story; on the other hand, he or she accounts for the causes and explanations of discontinuities.

Sustaining continuity. Social linguists have argued that the protagonist's character is one of the most powerful ways in which continuity is constructed in self-narratives (Linde, 1993). Continuity implies that although the situation has changed, the fundamental essence of the protagonist remains the same; for example, in certain key ways, the person I was yesterday is the person I am today and will be the person I am tomorrow. People highlight continuity of character in settings such as high-school reunions, where justifying the changes in one's physical appearance, professional accomplishments, and personal situation relative to expectations held ten or twenty years previously often takes the form of invoking one's "true self," or variants of "It's still the same old me" (Vinitzky-Seroussi, 1998).

Similarly, when giving accounts of their work role transitions, newcomers often highlight the commonalities between past and present and invoke the "true self" underlying their choices. For example, a technician who recently changed jobs points out: "I'm always the first one to jump into something new. At [former company], I was always the first one to jump in" (Beyer & Hannah, 2002: 646). With this statement, he traces a link between past and present that renders the present less distinct from the past – and his story more powerful. In general, people hold widespread cultural beliefs about how lives evolve and what the proper sequence and reasons for

making choices are. In Western cultures, perhaps the most accepted reason for choosing a profession is the person's character, personality traits, or history (Linde, 1993). So people commonly justify career moves by saying, "I was always good at it" or "I always wanted to do this".

Accounting for discontinuities. Self-narratives account for continuity as well as change. A key role of narratives is to identify the "intentional state that mitigates or at least makes comprehensible a deviation from the norm" (Bruner, 1990: 50), answering the question "Why did you do that?" when the evidence is unexpected or counter-intuitive. For instance, to understand why scientists take a liking to the business world and decide to become entrepreneurs requires an account that dissolves the surprise element by transforming it into the outcome of a rational decision. Scientists turned entrepreneurs might have discovered their commercial knack and decided to follow it, or perhaps they were working in universities that traditionally encouraged links between academia and industry. In both these accounts, the narrator has to establish that the protagonist of the story exercised adequate agency (Linde, 1993; Van Maanen, 1998).

A decisive protagonist positively influences the effectiveness of the transition self-narrative. An action-oriented protagonist embodies the ideal of self as the agent of change, in control of life occurrences and unabated by obstacles and constraints. Showing repeated agency in one's self-narrative is one of the ways of creating a consistent sense of self, and, as mentioned before, establishing one's potential for agency leads to better evaluations of self-authenticity (Cross et al., 2003). In studies of persuasiveness of movie scripts, protagonists who change and grow throughout the movie are assessed more favorably by the public (Eliashberg et al., 2007).

Consider the following story of someone who became a photocopier technician. The story is by no means common, yet it fulfills the criteria of an effective account of a work role transition:

“She left home at 16, taking her younger brothers with her, and did some logging with an old Indian and a horse: she felled and trimmed the trees, hooked the horse to a log and sent it down the trail... After that, she got a job as a laborer in a sawmill and worked her way up to millwright... Then, the mill shut down. She apprenticed as an electrician and worked her way up to journeyman before the construction industry around Laramie collapsed. She wanted to stay in Laramie since that’s where her husband’s job was, and happened to see an ad for the Company down at the employment office.” (Orr, personal communications, reported in Zabusky & Barley, 1996: 194).

The plot carries the audience through a series of radical changes up to the current job, providing the necessary turning points and explanations and offering a good account of causality. The story would be substantially less effective if it did not take note of the woman’s decisions to start her work life early, engage in a series of progressively more technical jobs, and balance work and family life. Dovetailing relevant details is a powerful instrument for constructing both consistency and authenticity.

The capacity for agency of protagonists is also important for identity granting purposes because it helps the audience approve of the storyteller’s actions and identify with him or her. It is acceptable, even desirable, for people to justify their work role transitions by their desire to learn a new skill or develop a new aspect of their personality (Linde, 1993). A succession of jobs that takes the storyteller from less meaningful to more meaningful work, for example, is easily accepted by the audience because the possibility of progressive change is a powerful motivator of actions in our society (Gergen, 1994). In his ethnography of the socialization process of junior police officers, Van Maanen found that recruits’ stories made “formidable instruments of identity” through the promise of action and the possibilities for discretion and choice (Van Maanen, 1998: 7). The more agency the rookie police officer displayed in his self-narrative, the more appreciated the story by his intended audience, the veteran police officers. In a culture

where being out “doing the rounds” is the most meaningful form of work, being able to tell one’s story in powerful actionable terms increases one’s chances of being seen as one of the group.

Creating legitimacy

Good self-narratives build legitimacy. Legitimacy is achieved by incorporating into the story canonical elements, defined as textual devices (such as storylines, elements of plot or attributes of time, place, characters or context) that are drawn from collective narratives (Gergen, 1994; Somers, 1994). Relying on standard, commonly accepted storylines such as quests and progressive or regressive narratives is an example of achieving alignment with the socially legitimate form (Campbell, 1956; Gergen, 1994). A common storyline among self-narratives is rags-to-riches – the story of struggle and success despite a difficult socio-economic background. Horatio Alger’s popular novels illustrate the reach of the rags-to-riches plot in the American culture. This storyline is found, for instance, in entrepreneurs’ self-narratives, perhaps coupled with a version of the American dream, joining the archetypes of the adventurer and the entrepreneur (Czarniawska-Joerges & Wolff, 1991).

Incorporating into one’s self-narrative canonical elements from the aspired community diminishes the identity gaps felt by the individual. Evidence comes from a solid body of research on religious conversion and induction into self-help groups (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner & Cain, 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Irvine, 2000; Snow & Machalek, 1984). In two classic examples of how this works, note how recovering alcoholics learn to tell their story “the AA way” by including canonical elements of plot such as “hitting bottom”, while newcomers to Codependents Anonymous adopt references to dysfunctional families as a constant fixture of their life stories (Holland et al., 2001; Irvine, 2000). In both cases, telling one’s story in resonant

ways catalyzes the support of the community, which, in turn, helps diminish the feelings of inconsistency or lack of authenticity felt by newcomers upon arrival.

In social interaction, canonical elements of plot make the story more credible and appealing because they make it easier for audiences to understand and accept the point of the story. Stories told in familiar plots are more convincing than stories constructed according to unknown cultural rules (Cruikshank, 1997). An ability to address audiences with the right narrative form, therefore, may be crucial to getting the message across.

Generating audience engagement

The effectiveness of a narrative depends on the audience's engagement. Engagement is not simply a product of the form and content of the story, but also a result of the storytelling process in which the storyteller and the audience negotiate its meaning. Narrative theorists argue that the main point negotiated is the moral, or the meaning, of the story (Bruner, 1990; Linde, 1993).

Since a story always invites "reconstruction" of what might have happened (Bruner, 1990), it is up to the narrator to highlight those intentions and actions of the hero that trigger the appropriate reading of the possibilities in the audience's mind. The storyteller uses the moral, or the point, of the narrative to indicate how certain acts are to be interpreted. The moral shows the audience how to evaluate the story and what the implications of the story are, and it allows the narrator to observe, reflect and correct the self being created (Linde, 1993). The narrator thus takes a position and reflectively distances him- or herself from the protagonist when presenting the moral of the story. For instance, when saying: "If it hadn't been for this turn of events, I would never have thought of applying for this job", the narrator is able to draw conclusions and paint a coherent, big picture that the protagonist never has access to at any point in the story. The

moral, therefore, allows the self-narrative to cover more ground and accomplish more from an identity construction perspective than other forms of rhetorical identity work. This happens in two ways.

On the one hand, since people rely on others' reactions to confirm their self-conceptions (Goffman, 1959; James, 1950; Mead, 1934), achieving agreement on the moral lends weight to the self claimed in the interaction, for instance a brave, consistent, competent, or creative person. When communicators experience their message as creating a shared reality with the audience, they see the message as more reliable and valid (Echterhoff, Higgins & Groll, 2005; Festinger, 1950; Higgins, 1992, 1999). Furthermore, through repetition and negotiation, stories foster inner deliberation and clarity. They help speakers identify their own preferences, demonstrate their appreciation of competing preferences, and advance unfamiliar views (Polletta & Lee, 2006; Weick & Browning, 1986).

On the other hand, involving the audience in interpreting the story ensures their buy-in (Linde, 1993). Identities conveyed through narratives are not just offered for acceptance or rejection: the audience joins in the telling of a story by advancing corroborating points, compromising on old stances, and finding middle-ground positions (Polletta & Lee, 2006). The stories thus elaborated are more efficient at identity granting than those where the audience stand as passive listeners. The distance between narrator and protagonist inherent in the self-narrative permits the narrator to make judgments on the protagonist that will be agreeable to the audience. For example, the story might present a protagonist who drifts in life and fails to take actions when needed. A laboratory scientist in search of a new occupation closer to her heart might present her life as a series of accidents and happen-stances, culminating in her current employment in a position she never really chose but which just happened to be available when

she needed a job. Although the protagonist is indicted through this story, the narrator at least is redeemed in the social interaction by knowledge of right and wrong, and by accusing the protagonist of being wrong: “I did not decide earlier to follow what I really liked, although I should have”. It follows that the speaker will be negatively judged only if the audience does not agree with the moral, or the meaning, the narrator gave her story (Linde, 1993). Accommodating the audience’s reactions in the self-narrative allows the account to become more credible and more legitimate (Scott & Lyman, 1968).

EDITING PROCESSES AND NARRATIVE REPERTOIRES

While the previous sections focused on what may occur in any given social exchange, self narratives are shaped by a series of encounters and the feedback they provide. Telling a story generates feedback. A person may or may not feel authentic, and the identity claim may be accepted, rejected or challenged. People use this feedback to revise, edit or otherwise alter their narrative self-presentation, by embellishing or consolidating a successful part of the narrative, and modifying or even scrapping a less successful part. Audiences correct stories told by newcomers in ways that guide the stories toward a more canonical moral. In the process known as “scaffolding”, veteran members of communities build on the appropriate parts of novices’ stories while ignoring the inappropriate story parts (Holland et al., 2001). If a newcomer to Codependents Anonymous searches for the origin of her “co-dependency problem” in recent events of her life, for example, the audience will intervene and suggest that the likely cause is probably something that happened during her childhood (Irvine, 2000). These editing processes, in turn, are moderated by a person’s repertory of personal stories and by the availability of institutionalized narratives.

Individual's repertoire of self-narratives

Most people have not one but many, co-existing stories (Linde, 1993). Which one gets told in any given circumstance is likely to impact its effectiveness in accomplishing identity outcomes. Multiple stories are necessary for the flexible presentation of self according to the ongoing interaction (Bateson, 2004; Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1959). There is no single version of truth underlying a self-narrative, but rather “an unlimited number of other narratives that can be constructed in response to it or perceived as related to it” (Smith, 1981: 217).

People undergoing a period of transition and development are likely to have more and more varied versions of their story (McAdams, 1993) as they are, by definition, seeking a narrative thread to link past and future. Consistency and authenticity are questioned, and feelings of being lost and without an anchor are common (Ebaugh, 1988; Bateson, 2004). At the same time, “trial stories” about the person one is seeking to become allow individuals to create new possibilities of self for their future work roles and careers (Ibarra, 2003, 2007).

Narrative theorists distinguish between different narratives and variations on a single or consistent narrative (Linde, 1993). For example, people may select different episodes of their lives to make the same point, or make different points to flesh out a consistent character profile. These variations on a theme help the individual customize the performance and the message of each to a specific audience (Ashforth, 2001; Ibarra & Lineback, 2005; Linde, 1993). Business school academics, for instance, may offer competing self-narratives that emphasize differently the importance of teaching, research and consulting work, depending on whether they address an audience of students, scholars or corporate clients (Brown, 2006: 739). Vastly different variants of the self-narrative, however, may not be sustainable in multiple interactions because recipients may cross-check and react negatively if they discover wide inconsistencies. Although individuals

may attempt to manage the messages they send to different audience members, their efforts are limited by interest in sustaining convictions of their own integrity, both in the eyes of others and in their own eyes (Vinitzky-Seroussi & Zussman, 1996).

Availability of institutionalized narratives

Institutionalized narratives are accepted stories of how one becomes part of the community. The existence of institutionalized narratives about transitioning into the community has a significant impact on how effective any individual transition story will be. According to Ashforth (2001), some transition narratives are more readily available as institutionalized scripts than others; in the context of career transitions, for example, the engineer who becomes a manager follows a well-trodden narrative path. Similarly, Kunda et al. (2002) found that technical workers making the transition from salaried employment to contract work told stories with a common script:

“The narrative begins with the lament of an expert for whom the tension between the ideal of technical rationality and the political reality of organizational life has become a source of simmering discontent. Then, an employer’s action or an unanticipated event that undermines job security leads the expert to act on his or her discontent. Aided by serendipitous encounters with the world of contracting, the expert finally chooses to escape the world of full-time employment into the world of contingent work, which promises a way of life more consistent with the expert’s worldview.” (pp. 240-241)

Scholars suggest that people tell stories about who they are and how they became that way by reference to existing, related social narratives (Callero, 2003). For instance, the story of how a person became an entrepreneur is a more powerful instrument for identity work if it resembles stereotypical anecdotes of the American dream (Czarniawska-Joerges & Wolff, 1991). This is because we interpret facts or events happening to us only relative to the larger cultural context in which meanings are created and transmitted (Bruner, 1990: 61). Similarly, at the collective level, individual action is intelligible to others only if the ontological and public

narratives in which people embed their story are easily recognizable (Somers, 1994). This suggests, then, that at both personal and collective levels, aligning one's story to the collectively-acceptable version increases the legitimacy of the work role transition, and diminishes the perceived identity gaps.

Work role transitions are especially difficult when institutionalized narratives are not available. Managers who become unemployed, for example, are portrayed as “falling from grace”, partly because the only narrative customarily available to managers is one of meritocracy, self-belief and diligence (Newman, 1999). In contrast, blue collar workers who have been made redundant have a ready-made narrative at their disposal, one that takes the burden of the account away from the individual and places it on the company for which he worked, the US government, or the international markets (Newman, 1999). A socially accepted narrative reaffirms personal self-conceptions and enhances the strength of one's story in front of others. Ousted executives, therefore, are urged to regain heroic stature by finding plausible motives that exclude assuming responsibility for the downfall (Sonnenfeld & Ward, 2007).

Cross-interaction identity outcomes

Compelling narratives are the product of hindsight and substantial editing (Weick, 1995). As people learn more about new work roles, and meet more people associated with them, they not only learn to tell more appropriate stories about what makes them plausible candidates (Ibarra, 2003), but they also gain more opportunities to practice telling their stories. Across multiple interactions, people begin to internalize a new identity and to penetrate the informal inclusion boundaries of the new work groups.

Identity-construction is not just a process of exploring possibilities but also one in which people select, edit and discard the possibilities they have considered (Ibarra, 1999; Yost &

Strube, 1992). Narrative allows self-reflection by creating distance between the narrator and the protagonist of the narrative: “consequently, the narrator can observe, reflect, adjust the amount of distance, and correct the self that is being created. The very act of narrating creates the occasion for self-regard and editing.” (Linde, 1993: 105). Stories that can be justified as representative of the self are more likely to be internalized than those that clearly contradict private self-beliefs (Schlenker & Trudeau, 1990). Since identities invoked across numerous social interactions become more salient (Stryker & Serpe, 1982), telling and retelling a convincing narrative gradually help the person incorporate new identities into a revised self-concept.

Others’ reactions shape the evolution of identity in two primary ways: by validating (or, failing to endorse) the new identity, and by providing feedback about how to improve or shape the identity narrative. Decisions about what story elements to retain hinge on whether the narrative secures validation of the person as a full-fledged role occupant. Practicing one’s story with different audiences also increases the likelihood of exchange with others who share similar experiences; the discovery of common elements, in turn, helps the focal person elaborate or fine-tune his or her story, which explains why change narratives often adhere to a universal script. As newcomers begin to share the assumptions and values that define a new occupation, gatekeepers may offer inclusion and passage through informal boundaries (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Acting on positive feedback produces gradual changes in identity because people replicate the behaviors that win them approval (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). With practice, and exposure to others who tell their own stories, a more compelling narrative develops, one that helps the narrator resolve discontinuities, incorporate new identity elements into a revised self-concept, and claim the new identity successfully in social situations.

DISCUSSION

Work role transitions are rife with potential for identity gaps, both with regard to a person's own sense of self and its negotiation in social interaction. Narratives, stories of an individual's life that bring coherence, legitimacy and audience engagement to the proposed account, are powerful tools for overcoming these gaps and reconstructing one's self. The model proposed here describes how coherence, legitimacy and audience engagement are established through plot, protagonist, canonical elements and negotiation of the moral, and how they help a person attain important identity work outcomes: consistency and authenticity of the self-concept at the personal level, and identity granting at the inter-personal level. We propose that existing repertoires of individual and institutionalized narratives may enhance or dent the effectiveness of proposed self-narration processes and outcomes. Our model is an initial move to explaining some of the hitherto unexamined dynamics of identity change as work role transitions unfold.

Our arguments are consistent with the perspective that identity is a project to be worked on (Czarniawska, 1997; Harre, 1983), and contribute to the emerging interest in the role of rhetorical strategies for identity work. Narratives have been shown to be crucial for creating meaning and negotiating identities at various levels of organizational analysis (e.g., Ashforth, 2001; Barry & Elmes, 1997; Czarniawska, 1997; Gabriel, 2004; Van Maanen, 1998; Weick, 1995). For instance, recent findings demonstrate how narratives help entrepreneurs acquire the financial resources they need (Martens, Jennings & Jennings, 2007). However, how self-narratives should be conceptualized, what makes them effective, and the conditions under which they matter for identity outcomes have not yet been explored. Our perspective showcases the specific rhetorical ingredients that make self-narratives effective tools for identity work, and proposes the mechanisms that relate these ingredients and identity outcomes. In addition, we

argue that in order to understand the effectiveness of self-narratives, we need to not only examine the sense-making process experienced by the individual undergoing the transition, but also develop a deeper understanding of the dynamics of reception by significant others at whom the narrative is addressed.

The model proposed here contributes to current thinking on identity construction by identifying specific mechanisms through which the self is revised, reinvented or restored in social interactions. How inter-personal interactions are managed in creating and sustaining one's identity in organizational contexts has been underspecified (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). In particular, we know little about the challenges to the sense of self that result from the gaps between present and past identities and between claimed and granted identities. Following Bartel and Dutton (2001), we propose that narratives help people to interpersonally restore the continuity of their selves, because identities are established and granted in the context of, and during the telling of, the role transition narrative. Our proposed model suggests a set of specific identity outcomes that result when the continuity of the self is restored, and the specific ways in which self-narratives contribute to achieving these identity outcomes.

The view of identity we embrace in this paper leads to different predictions from those of the categorization-based views of identity (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004). Researchers in the categorization tradition argue that individuals engage in cognitive tactics to maintain positive perceptions of their identities (Turner, 1987; Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Such tactics typically include a reordering or prioritization of identities: "Individuals have multiple, loosely coupled identities, and inherent conflicts between their demands are typically not resolved by cognitively integrating the identities, but by ordering, separating, or buffering them" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989: 35). For example, when responding to personal identity threats, people

attempt to enhance their self-worth by highlighting positive dimensions of their identities (Steele, 1988) such as advantageous intergroup differences (Tajfel & Turner, 1979). In contrast, a narrative view of identity helps integrate identities, not by cognitively assimilating them but by juxtaposing them in a coherent and legitimate way. So, while cognitive strategies *reduce* identity gaps by affecting the perception of the gap, self-narratives *bridge* identity gaps by proposing unsuspected connections across the gap. Narratives are thus better means of turning identities into resources and employing them for personal or collective level action (Quinn & Worline, forthcoming).

This work has implications for research on identity challenges on a broader basis. In this paper, we looked at two identity gaps associated with work role transitions. However, identity gaps might also appear between simultaneous roles that require boundary crossing (Ashforth, Kreiner & Fugate, 2000), between how people perceive themselves and how they would like to be seen (Higgins, 1987, 1989), and between perceptions of how others see them and how they would like to be seen by others (Roberts, 2005). Properties of the narrative form and the narrating process that we outlined in this paper are also likely to play a role for overcoming these other kinds of identity gaps. Similarly, identity challenges associated with “dirty work” (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark & Fugate, 2007; Kreiner, Ashforth & Sluss, 2006) can be served by the perspective of identity as narrative. For instance, Snow and Anderson (1987) found that the homeless resort to “fictive story telling” in an effort to sustain positive self-understanding. However, because fictive storytelling is not sustained by a larger community, it is unlikely to be accepted as legitimate, although it might still serve to privately booster the individual. Our model suggests that forms of identity work relying on variations on plot,

protagonist, canonical elements and audience engagement could, instead, be more effective for creating and sustaining positive self-conceptions in adverse conditions.

Our proposed theory also has implications for outcomes of interest to organizational behavior scholars, such as socialization, commitment and retention. This paper brings to the fore the local, “tribal” dimension of socialization (Ashforth, Sluss & Harrison, 2007). It is likely, for instance, that the self-narratives people exchange with others in the workplace will moderate their socialization outcomes, including commitment to the organization. Social structures depend on how identities interact (Stets & Burke, 2000): when people interacting mutually verify their identities, their commitment to one another increases and they begin to view themselves as a group (Burke & Stets, 1999). The reverse also seems to happen: when identities are not sustained in the interaction, existing relationships dissolve (Cast, Stets & Burke, 1999). For instance, in Roy’s classic account from life on the shop floor, people repeatedly told personal stories to keep the monotony of work at bay, to help acclimatize the newcomers, and to reinforce friendly interactions near the machine (1996 (1960)). Yet, when one worker’s story was challenged, the harmonious atmosphere in the group shattered and could only be restored through a series of small, gradual adjustments in the pattern and quality of interactions. That such a difficult process was needed to recover from the loss of a story suggests the importance of identity narratives to sustaining patterned interactions in tight-knit social spheres.

Several potentially fruitful avenues for further research on identity’s dynamism emerge from the view of identity as narrative developed here. Over time, the process of narrating the self changes the self. As discussed earlier, stories are not just indicative, but also constitutive, of the social world (Pentland, 1999). Psychoanalysis patients, for example, reconstruct the narratives of their lives in order to enable identity changes (Schafer, 1992), and similarly, scholars have

argued that the main business of conversion organizations is the reconstruction of identity through the process of reconstructing life stories (Holland et al., 2001; Irvine, 2000; Snow & Machalek, 1984). Further research could contribute to our understanding of what personal, interpersonal and contextual factors impact the evolution of self-narratives over time. The process is likely to involve jettisoning some aspects of the past, redefining others, and putting together yet others in ways that would have previously been inconceivable. In what order, and under the influence of what factors, this happens are rich areas for future exploration. Further research is also needed to understand when narrative variety produces feelings of inconsistency or inauthenticity, and when, instead, creating variety is a prerequisite for crafting an authentic, yet different or changed self. Together, these questions would take us further in our understanding of the narrative level of self (McAdams, 1996).

Finally, future empirical work might also explore how the effectiveness of self-narratives is contingent on the type of work role transition, and on the cultural contexts in which the transitions occur. For instance, it may be the case that different content and process elements matter differently when the transitions are “upward”, into managerial roles or higher-status occupations, than “downward”, into lower-status occupations or unemployment. Agency of self might not be a very useful element for self-narratives of downward transitions, whereas it is a very valuable tool for upward transitions; the existence of institutionalized narratives of the transition might have the opposite effect. Another contingency worth examining is the cultural context in which the transition is taking place. This is especially important for the contribution to effectiveness of such elements as agency and consistency of self. As some of our evidence indicated, agency and consistency of self are particularly valuable elements in the Western

culture, but they are not as crucial in East Asian cultures (Cross et al., 2003). Similarly, the effectiveness of the negotiating process might be culturally-dependent.

As Nicholson and West note (1989:181), “If work histories are lifetime journeys, then careers are the tales that are told about them.” Just as people construct work identities by telling their story, they also reinvent themselves by telling new stories about what is happening to them, reinterpreting past events in the light of these new experiences and weaving past and present into a coherent story about who they are becoming.

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