

Maintaining the Organizational Core: Organizational Identity Dynamics as a Question of Path Dependence and Identity Work.

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1. Abstract

Much attention is directed to understanding how organizational identities “unfreeze” from a state of inertia realizing sustainable innovation and crafty adaptation. In this paper I will argue that the rather unpopular processes of “freezing” of organizational identities are central for grasping the properties of organizational identity as well as for revealing the sources and trajectories of change.

The aim and contribution of this paper is to provide an explanation of the continuous maintenance of an organizational identity as the organizational core. The central argument of this text acknowledges that processes of change can only be understood if mechanisms of persistence are taken into account.

The paper identifies a research gap concerning the explanation of inertia and persistence of organizational identity. By identifying mechanisms of persistence and processes that maintain identity, path dependence provides an approach that is capable of pointing out the possibilities for incremental change and path breaking developments. Central to the argument is the analytical distinction between creating, disrupting and maintaining forms of identity work that reveal the processes involved.

Path dependence describes a process in which positive feedback mechanisms and irreversibilities lead to a lock-in state (David 2007; Sydow et al. 2009). One alternative is selected out of many options, is reinforced in the process and is continuously reproduced due to certain mechanisms within the organization. These mechanisms include investment effects, as well as effects of learning, complementarities, power and legitimacy.

2. Identity is Paradox: Inertia and Change

Regardless whether caused by internal or by external forces all organizations face the effects of entropy – the decay of social order (Oliver 1992). An environment that is supposed to be ever changing is pushing organizations to develop adaptive capabilities. In this perspective constant change becomes ordinary and predictable whereas persistence is an oddity and inertia appears as incapability to adapt. Persistence, the ugly twin of change, tends to be overshadowed by more fashionable questions about innovation and novelty. Yet especially in turbulent and shifting technological and socio-economic environments the question has to be asked why some organizations remain “frozen” and by what means they are even capable of persisting and maintaining their core structures.

A fundamental paradox emerges when existing studies on adaptation and persistence in the context of organizational identity research are considered. Organizational identity appears to be either an ongoing process of disruption and (re-)creation or a process of endurance and continuous maintenance. For both perspectives empirical findings and conceptual arguments can be found that support either one of the contradictory positions.

(a) Persistence as fundamental property: A major contribution in support of the first position states that persistence as endurance of claims is a defining criterion for organizational identity (Albert/ Whetten 1985). However, since persistence is part of the definition of identity, the source of this persistence is not sufficiently revealed. In many studies organizational identity is often seen as fundamentally contradictory to efforts of organizational change, since: “... organizational identity is likely to provide an inertial barrier hindering planned organizational change.” (Reger et al. 1994: 569; see Stimpert et al. 1998; Fiol 2001; Jacobs et al. 2008).

Identity inertia exists due to the fact that change of collectively held meanings requires considerable effort (Stimpert et al. 1998; Nag et al. 2007). Adaptive capabilities of organizations appear to be bound by the established constructs of what the organization is (Bouchikhi/ Kimberly 2003). The evolution and subsequent rigidity of self-definitions is the source of success and failure to adapt at the same time. Thus, organizational identity provides a key source for organizational inertia (Hannan et al. 2006). For example, this can be observed empirically with the persistent structural and strategic configurations of ASEAN family business groups (Carney/ Gedajlovic 2002) as well as with Intel’s lock-in of core strategies and competence development (Burgelman 2002, 2008). A similar example is presented by the rigidity of strategy making due to the self-understanding of the automotive manufacturer Scania (Brunninge 2005). In a study of two banks Fox-Wolfgramm et al. (1998) reported different change patterns in the face of institutional pressures. Although many conditions varied organizational identity presented an initial barrier to organizational change and shaped following change trajectories and adaptation success in both cases. The authors found patterns of identity resistance to be fundamental deterrents to organizational

change. Yet this resistance still allows for a plasticity of identity which describes incremental or bound change processes within the established solutions.

Being restrained by the effects of organizational identity, organizational change is guided, complicated and in some cases impeded by organizational self-definitions. Identity has been portrayed as a key source of inertia for the organization or as a “primary constraint on its adaptive capacity” (Bouchikhi/ Kimberly 2003: 20). Eventually, inertia of identity leads to substantial stagnation (Fiol 2001, 2002). Organizational identity constitutes a major source of structural inertia as a basis for a general blueprint of the organization (Hannan/ Freeman 1977, 1984; Hannan et al. 1996; Hannan et al. 2006). Accordingly, identity itself can be understood as a long-term, irreversible commitment of the organization (Whetten 2006; King/ Whetten 2008). Once established it is difficult to change.

Furthermore, the observation of organizational identity inertia often involves negative assessments: “Identity can be a source of competitive disadvantage because it is dependent on the past and can be more difficult to change than some other resources. In this situation, identity can be a source of inertia in thought and action that can be problematic when the environment changes.” (Barney et al. 1998: 116; see Hannan/ Freeman 1993; Ashforth/ Mael 1996) Yet, it has also been suggested that a continuous maintenance of organizational identity may be considered “desirable” (Ashforth/ Mael 1996) and is indeed necessary as the persistence of the organizational core provides a source of orientation and integration in situations of considerable ambiguity (Albert/ Whetten 1985; Whetten 2006; Fiol 2001; Seidl 2005).

(b) Adaptive Instability and Constant Reproduction: In contrast to the first position just raised, a number of authors consider organizational identity subject to ongoing processes of continuous reconstruction and continuous redefinition. A number of empirical studies have shown such effects (Gioia et al. 2000; Hatch/ Schultz 2002; Corley/ Gioia 2004; Chreim 2005; Maguire/ Hardy 2005). In the confrontation with its image, organizational identity is characterized by an adaptive instability and cannot be considered enduring but rather as having continuity (Gioia et al. 2000). With this shift in perspective on organizational identity, the theoretical conception of identity as being enduring and rigid by definition seems less self-evident. As a result of adaptive instability, continuity of organizational identity must be permanently reproduced internally and in respect to external relations (Gioia et al. 2000). The processes of generating continuity are constantly threatened by alternative constructions and alternative interpretations of the organizational identity (Chreim 2005; Nag et al. 2007).

Perspectives on identity as enduring and identity as subject to continuous change of organizational identities constitute a paradox in the organizational identity literature – in short: “... identity is both a dynamic process that unfolds over time and a source of stability for those who depend upon it” (Hatch/ Schultz 2004: 5). The idea of enduring identities on the one hand and continuous reproduction on the other seem to each correspond with what has been termed the social actor view and the social constructivist approaches to organizational iden-

tity (Ravasi/ Schultz 2006): "... both perspectives may be correct in their own right, their advocates may have respectively underestimated the generative potential of institutional claims and the resilience of shared understandings under environmental pressures." (Ravasi/ Schultz 2006: 453) Still, observed from either perspective, the opposing position fundamentally questions the other. How can something be adaptively instable and yet must be enduring in order to provide its primary functions of integration and orientation?

The outlined paradox calls for an alternative approach that can mediate between the two positions. Whereas the adaptive instability property of organizational identity has been shown by revealing the interconnection of self-definition and other-definition, one key question remains unanswered: How can a continuous and persistent reconstruction of organizational identity emerge?

The empirical focus on continual reconstitution and malleability of identity in the face of external forces has directed attention away from instances of stability, resistance and persistence. Yet, patterns of change or persistence cannot be understood as random events (Chreim 2005). Especially the permanently pending threat by alternatives to an existing identity demands a consideration of mechanisms that continuously produce stability, resistance and persistence. This idea is supported by findings from Fox-Wolfgramm et al. (1998) who highlighted that change processes occur in specific change trajectories that are shaped by established organizational identities.

Albert and Whetten (1985) coined the enduring characteristic as a defining property of organizational identity. Considering the critique voiced the empirical problem of persistence can be addressed if the term "enduring" is understood as something that is constructed in a process. Thus organizational identity is continuously reproduced and in this sense *becomes* enduring. Being enduring equals continuous reproduction that resist pressures to change or to adapt. The enduring property is built up through identity dynamics and it can be reversed by specific identity processes. In order to relate the enduring property of identities to continuous reproduction processes, it is key to understand how continual reproduction can turn from fluid and flexible to rigid and inert.

In the following sections it will be argued that specific mechanisms of reproduction become observable through activities of identity work and that the construction of identity is indeed both dynamic and stable. This however is not treated as being a case of an absolute yes or no answer but is understood as the particular outcome of a self-referential process by the organization itself. The key to solving the paradox is not to ask whether or not endurance or flexibility is the answer, but under what particular circumstances and through what processes initial flexibility turns into subsequent inertia. Before the central research problem can be addressed, the concept of organizational identity is be defined in order to deduct fundamental relations.

3. Organizational Identity Conceptions

There are several different approaches to organizational identity (Brown 2001; Rometsch/ Sydow 2006; Whetten 2006; Cornelissen et al. 2007; Vogel/ Hansen 2010).

In a seminal definition, organizational identity is conceptualized as characteristic of the organization as a social actor (Whetten 2006; King/ Whetten 2008). According to this view organizational identity becomes empirically observable as central, enduring, and distinctive claims that constitute the collective answers of organizational members to the question: "Who are we as an organization?" (Albert/ Whetten 1985). This has been termed the social actor approach to organizational identity (Whetten 2006; King et al. 2009). A further position that can be termed social constructivist (Ravasi/ Schultz 2006) states that organizational identity is observable in forms of identity as an ongoing process of re-evaluation (Gioia/ Thomas 1996; Gioia et al. 2000; Chreim 2005). Identity is subject to a continuous process of construction and reconstruction. In part, a question of stability and change of identity is a question of the respective definitions and understandings of the term organizational identity.

Enriching the debate, another position can be considered which generally states that organizations are social systems (see Thompson 1967; Scott/ Davis 2007). In some specific social system approaches organizational identity is understood to be a self-descriptive text that accounts for the organization as an entity in a self-referential process (Luhmann 2000; Seidl 2005). In a very general interpretation of this approach organizational identity can be viewed as a self-description text of the organization as an entity that fulfils an integrative and an operative function for the organization as a whole (Seidl 2005). The following argument will be developed with the help of a rather broad interpretation of this social system concept. The application of the conceptual distinctions to existing findings provides a basis for answering the question about persistence of organizational identities.

As a self-descriptive text, organizational identity is a simplified, rather blunt account of the complex organizational processes and structures (see Ashforth/ Mael 1996; Whetten 2006). Like a map simplifies a territory according to significant properties and relations, the organizational identity is an abstract representation of the complexity of the whole organization (Seidl 2005). Just as a map, identity provides orientation, which is based on a contingent reduction of complexity.

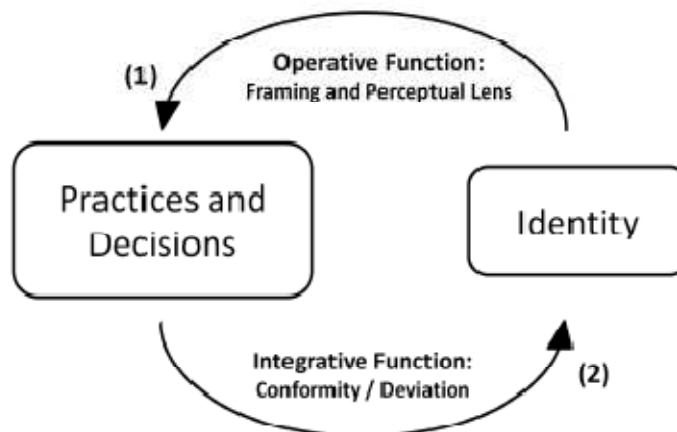
Organizational identity fulfils an *operative function* in a self-referential process (Seidl 2005). It does so by serving as a perceptual lens for practices and decisions (Ashforth/ Mael 1996; Seidl 2005). Based on the organizational identity, structures and events within the organization and the environment are identified as relevant, labeled, interpreted and acted upon accordingly (Fiol/ Huff 1992; Reger et al. 1994; see also Weick 1995). In this respect, organizational identity allows activities such as practices and decisions to relate themselves to identity, rather

than serve as an explicit premise (Seidl 2005). Second, in addition to the function as a perceptual lens, the operative function of organizational identity can be understood as a framing mechanism for organizational activities (Cornelissen et al. 2007; Jacobs et al. 2008). On the one hand, this frame enables the development and realization of decisions, strategies and practices (Albert/ Whetten 1985; Dutton/ Dukerich 1991; Barney/ Stewart 2000; Nag et al. 2007); on the other, organizational identity as a frame defines what is “in-character” and what is not (Whetten 2006). Identity provides a general guideline for organizational practices and decisions, allowing for the observation of non-conformity and for deviations to be countered (see Luhmann 2000). In this latter understanding as a frame, organizational identity serves as a universal premise for organizational decisions and practices (see March/ Simon 1976; Luhmann 2000).

Alongside the operative function, organizational identity fulfils an *integrative function* (Seidl 2005). With the help of identity as a self-description text the organization refers to itself as a whole and the different parts of the organization as related to each other. This is achieved by establishing and maintaining a sense of unity for the organization as a whole.

Most practices and decisions in an organization are not directly related to organizational identity (Seidl 2005; Whetten 2006). However, the integrative and operative functions of identity allow particular practices and decisions to relate to the organization as a whole (see also Ashforth/ Mael 1996; Stimpert et al. 1998; Barney et al. 1998; Corley 2004; Nag et al. 2007). By referring to identity elements, the conduct of practices and decisions can be ensured. In accordance with David Seidl (2005), it can be argued that the basis for the viability of identity elements is the matching of practices and decisions with organizational identity elements.

Figure 1: Feedback Process (of Self-Reference)



Organizational identity is constructed in an ongoing process of recursive observations and activities based on feedback processes of operation and integration. The association between practices, decisions and identity as a description of practices underlying identity viability is circular and can trigger a feedback effect. This relation is depicted in Figure 1. Here, arrow 1 describes the operative function: organizational identity is used as a frame and as a perceptual lens that provide orientation for organizational practices and decisions. Similarly, arrow 2 describes the integrative function: organizational practices conform to or deviate from the description of the organization as an entity.

The potential viability feedback effect of an identity element develops as follows: By providing a frame and/or a perceptual lens, an element of organizational identity gives rise to practices and decisions that relate to the identity element (arrow 1). Practices that relate to an identity element confirm this element in its function of providing integration of the different parts and activities (arrow 2). In turn, being confirmed in its integrative function, the element becomes more attractive as a frame and lens for other activities, so that more practices and decisions relate to the identity element. This again further confirms the integrative function ... and so on.

Viability is threatened if organizational identity and activities, e.g. a particular practice, conflict (Seidl 2005). A non-conform, deviating practice can fundamentally question a particular identity element because it discredits the ability of the element to properly represent the organization as a whole (see Ashforth/ Mael 1996). In short, identity elements are only viable as long as they fulfill their integrative and operative function by providing orientation for organizational practices and decisions as well as in turn creating a sense of unity for the organization (see Seidl 2005). It is necessary to counter such deviations and solve conflicts by means of maintaining activities. Repair and search routines keep the organization from dissolving itself into entropy (see Elsbach/ Kramer 1996; Nag et al. 2007; Jacobs et al. 2008).

4. Identity is Work: Creating, Disrupting, Maintaining

To fully understand identity dynamics the underlying processes have to be revealed. Facing internal conflicts and environmental pressures the dynamics of organizational identity can be categorized according to three basic responses to such shifts and changes (see Ravasi/ Schultz 2006: 433). This includes (a) the manipulation of external perceptions as well as (b) adaptation and (c) the persistence of internal coherence of organizational identity.

Manipulating, adapting and persisting responses entail specific organizational activities. Accordingly an equally specific categorization of the respective activities is necessary. In order to structure neo-institutionalist research approaches, Lawrence and Suddaby (2006) proposed the concept of institutional work. The authors differentiate between creating, disrupting and maintaining forms. The notion of work draws attention to the actual processes and empirically observa-

ble activities within an organization. In this paper work denotes individual or collective intentional activities inseparably linked with unintended consequences of these activities.

In organizational identity research the concept of identity work has already been introduced in an analogical reference to personal identity work (Sveningsson/ Alvesson 2003; Maguire/ Hardy 2005; Ibarra/ Barbulescu 2010). Also, identity work was introduced in the field of social movement theory as a concept to account for individual or collective activities that are directed towards individual or collective self-concepts (Snow/ Anderson 1987; Snow/ McAdam 2000). The notion of identity work emphasizes the process character of identity as compared to other approaches that focus on rather static descriptions (Sveningsson/ Alvesson 2003; Maguire/ Hardy 2005). Although much can be learned from these different viewpoints, identity work in this paper must be approached separately, on a collective, organizational level since organizational identity is distinct from personal identities (Gioia 1998).

In this paper, the term organizational identity work denotes empirically observable personal or collective activities within an organization, which are directed towards the creation, disruption or maintenance of organizational identity. In addition, ceremonial forms of identity work can be included since they describe organizational activities aimed at manipulating external perceptions of the organization as a whole. This categorization as well as the respective basic responses raised above are used to outline the cornerstones of the approach that this paper presents (see Table 1).

Table 1: Responses and Forms of Identity Work

Responses	Forms of Identity Work
(a) Manipulation of External Perceptions	Ceremonial Identity Work
(b) Adaptation	Creating and Disrupting Identity Work
(c) Persistence of Internal Coherence	Maintaining Identity Work

(a) Manipulation of External Perceptions – Ceremonial Identity Work: The manipulation of external perceptions is aimed at the legitimacy and reputation of the organization (see King/ Whetten 2008) by signaling compliance and socially desirable traits to external observers. A potential mismatch of external perceptions and expectations constitutes a potential threat to organizational survival (Albert/ Whetten 1985; Brown 2001; Hatch/ Schultz 2002; Cornelissen et al. 2007). Accordingly, organizations take action in order to avoid problems of mismatch. Such activities have been labeled image management (Dutton/ Dukerich

1991) or impression management (Gioia et al. 2000; Hatch/ Schultz 2002; see Goffman 1969).

Using projected images, the organization reactively or pro-actively undertakes activities to decouple the actual identity from an openly displayed image or it at least selectively communicates socially desirable traits. All these actions meant to manipulate external perceptions constitute forms of ceremonial identity work. Examples provided in the existing literature of ceremonial identity work can be found in the reactive projection of socially desirable aspects of the Shell oil corporation (Gioia et al. 2000) as well as the ceremonial identity work to manipulate the external perception of organizations as legitimate representatives of a certain social category of organizations (Maguire/ Hardy 2005).

(b) Adaptation - Creating and Disrupting Identity Work: A second basic option to cope with external perceptions as well as to deal with internal conflicts is to adapt organizational identity. The research on adaptive activities has highlighted the mismatch between organizational identity and the environment as the key source of an inherent dynamic between external and internal forces. Image and identity intervene, since external evaluations are essential for organizational self-definitions. This results in an *adaptive instability* of organizational identity (Gioia et al. 2000). A mismatch between the environment (image or reputation) triggers actual adaptation activities aimed to align identity with external expectations. These pro-active and reactive activities of identity adaptation describe creating or disrupting forms of identity work. This is the case, e.g., as organizations mold their identity by means of identity work to fit common, legitimate categories (Maguire/ Hardy 2005).

In many cases, organizational identity forms a barrier to change (see below). "To induce change, the organization must be destabilized and convinced that there is a necessity for a different way of seeing and being." (Gioia et al. 2000: 75). Accordingly, activities such as the introduction of an "ambiguity-by-design" (Gioia/ Chittipeddi 1991; Corley/ Gioia 2004) or a "void of meaning" (Ravasi/ Schultz 2006) of organizational identity constitute powerful acts of disruption. The promotion of an "envisioned identity" (Gioia/ Chittipeddi 1991; Gioia/ Thomas 1996) for alternative guiding principles constitutes an equally powerful activity of creation. A state of identity ambiguity requires members to engage in creative acts of constructing and reconstructing identity (Ravasi/ Schultz 2006). In this line of argument, "sensemaking" as an action of (re-)evaluation as well as (re-)construction has been identified. This has been distinguished from "sensegiving" as managerial activities of presentation and promotion (Ravasi/ Schultz 2006).

(c) Persistence of Internal Coherence - Maintaining Identity Work: A third option of reacting to external perceptions and internal conflicts is to undertake activities to maintain existing structures. Since organizations face entropy by default, measures must be implemented to constantly repair damages to consistency and to maintain existing structures. Besides the adaptive instability, organizational identity also includes a strong motive for self-consistency that often overrules motives for adaptation and enhancement (Ashforth/ Mael 1996). As a

frame organizational identity serves as a barrier for alternative, deviating activities, decisions and practices. Any hindering of planned organizational change (Reger et al. 1994) must involve activities. Consistency has to be actively maintained in the face of defects and challenges.

Activities that are aimed at restoring an established identity and that seek to repair or integrate inconsistencies can be considered maintaining forms of identity work – e.g. this is a necessary default activity to stabilize the organization in a case of a conflict between practices and identity. Nag et al. (2007) show how threats to organizational identity trigger specific attempts to preserve it which creates deterrents to organizational change. Jacobs et al. (2008) describe the introduction of new practices threatening organizational identity. The conflict of identity and practices triggers search and adjustment processes in order to realign the two.

Maintenance of identity is provided by repair-programs of the organization that involve members carrying out maintaining identity work. Any deviation that touches the core of an organization's self-definition is likely to be encountered by massive reactions of rejection and sanctioning. In the case of external threats to organizational identity, Elsbach/ Kramer (1996) have revealed the active engagement of organizational members to restore positive connotations and avert damage.

In summary, any response concerning organizational identity involves work, more specifically as argued above, it involves identity work. The categorization of activities into ceremonial, creating, disrupting and maintaining forms allows for a comprehensive, analytical, as well as empirical tool to describe processes of change and persistence of organizational identities. However, all these forms are empirically interwoven and connected. One example is provided by the adaptation processes of new organizational characteristics that include translation and editing activities at the level of organizational identity (Sahlin-Andersson 1996; Sahlin/ Wedlin 2008; see Reger et al. 1994; Jacobs et al. 2008). Novel external concepts are aligned with existing identity in order to (partially) maintain the latter. These processes of translation include acts of creation, disruption and maintenance at the same time (Sahlin-Andersson 1996; Sahlin/ Wedlin 2008). This often constitutes incremental, bound change as some aspects and realizations of identity can be easily modified but others persist. A similar combination of creation, disruption and maintenance can be observed if change is induced by a creative reconstruction of self-consistency, since earlier traits of the organization are re-evaluated and strategically used as a basis for organizational change (see Ravasi/ Schultz 2006). Similarly, this also applies to the creation of new meanings to existing labels while existing meanings are disrupted (Gioia et al. 2000; Corley/ Gioia 2004).

For the remaining argumentation it is necessary to point out that manipulation, and thus, ceremonial identity work is considered different from adaptation and maintenance. Manipulation as decoupling of identity and image can be treated as an additional phenomenon primarily directed to external audiences. To clarify

the research question on change and persistence, the focus lies on maintaining and adaptation, omitting ceremonial displays of adaptation and maintenance that cover up the exact opposite in actual organizational activities.

5. Identity is Path Dependent: Explaining Persistence

The key question of this paper still remains: How does flexibility turn into inertia? To solve this problem, the path dependence approach is introduced in the following. Besides some general considerations of development paths (King/Whetten 2008; King et al. 2009) the identity research and the path dependence approach have not been connected yet. In the following it will be shown how the self-referential feedback along with reproduction mechanisms lead to a lock-in state and path dependence of organizational identity. This is then connected to the processes and activities involved in identity dynamics that were termed patterns of identity work above.

The path dependence concept has been applied to organizations in order to describe the mechanisms of organizational persistence and change (see Schreyögg et al. 2003; Sydow et al. 2005, 2009; also Beyer 2006). Building on the early foundations of the path dependence approach that deal with technological standards (David 1985; Arthur 1989), a variety of organizational path dependence studies have been conducted. This includes organizational path dependence concerning structures, knowledge, processes and strategies as well as the usage of technologies (see Kogut/ Zander 1992; David 1994; Helfat 1994; Teece et al. 1997; Coombs/ Hull 1998; Burgelman 2002, 2008; Karim/ Mitchell 2000; Koch 2008; Dobusch 2008; Schüßler 2009).

(a.) Path Dependence of Organizational Identity

In contrast to *past* dependence, whereby decisions and structures inherited from the past merely influence later decisions and structures, the state of *path* dependence must comprise a systematic effect that prevents the organization from realizing an alternative to activities in question.

Certain decisions made and structures introduced in the past generate irreversibilities, which systematically foreclose certain decisions and structures in the present and in the future (David 2007). The systematic effect must be generated by mechanisms of reproduction that entail self-reinforcing feedback dynamics in particular periods of the process (see Arthur 1994; Foray 1997; Sydow et al. 2009). Several mechanisms of reproduction have been named (Beyer 2005, 2006, 2010; also Kirchner 2008, 2010). In the early debate on this concept, reproduction mechanisms were identified as being rooted in investment effects, learning effects, and complementarities (Arthur 1989; David 1985). With the application of path dependence to institutions and organizations, mechanisms of power and legitimacy completed the picture (Thelen 1999, 2003; Pierson 2000; Mahoney 2000; Schreyögg et al. 2003; Sydow et al. 2005; Djelic/ Quack 2007).

In a state of path dependence, organizational change as the realization of an alternative to an existing solution is hampered, allowing change to occur only incrementally, if at all. Even in dramatically changing environments, organizations seem “frozen” in their core characteristics, which may have matched early institutional or market constraints. This has been reported for ASEAN family business groups (Carney/ Gedajlovic 2002) as well as for Intel’s lock-in of core strategies and competence development (Burgelman 2002, 2008). In both examples organizational self-definitions as “family business” or “organization with specific core production competences” kept the organizations from realizing alternatives. In another case study it was found that two banks follow specific, bound change trajectories that are shaped and limited by prevailing organizational identities (Fox-Wolfgramm et al. 1998). In strategic change processes at the automobile manufacturer Scania organizational self-understandings shaped change patterns and maintenance activities (Brunninge 2005).

The ability of organizations to relate current practices and decisions to organizational history is the basis for organizations to provide and maintain their functions (see Luhmann 2000; Ortmann/ Salzman 2002). By default an organization is *past* dependent and not necessarily *path* dependent since current practices and decisions relate to earlier states of the organization.

Path dependence, however, has to be based on feedback, irreversibilities and mechanisms for a systematic reproduction (Sydow et al. 2009; Beyer 2010; Kirchner 2010). In order to apply the path dependence concept to organizational identity the elements and processes involved as well as the mechanisms that shape the path must be revealed. As identity shapes activities and activities again shape organizational identity, a potential for lock-in and path dependence exists. The recursive nature has been described above with the cycle of integrative and operative function. The *feedback* of organizational self-reference entails possibilities for a substantial reinforcement of identity elements.

Positive feedback is inflicted by the ability of the organizational identity to give orientation and to describe the organization as an entity. Identity is confirmed through positive feedback (see above). “For example, the firm that defines itself as a distinct consumer products company will seek to build organizational processes and to accumulate the resources and skills that complement this identity. To the extent that the firm is successful in developing these processes and skills, it further reinforces its identity as a distinctive consumer products company.” (Stimpert et al. 1998: 88; see Ashforth/ Mael 1996) This feedback is only a precondition, which on its own can merely act as an inertial force of corresponding structures.

While the primary feedback process of operative and integrative functions revolves around and effects different organizational dimensions and layers, the respective mechanisms generate the effects of self-reinforcement and maintenance necessary for path dependence and a lock-in state. Lock-in and path dependence of organizational identity can only occur in combination with the ef-

fects of irreversibilities and reproduction mechanisms that maintain the selected solution.

(b.) Mechanisms of Reproduction

Analytically, reproduction mechanisms can be distinguished as: investment effects, learning effects, as well as effects of complementarities, power, and legitimacy. General descriptions of identity inertia can be connected with the path dependence argument along the named reproduction mechanisms. In the following the potential for lock-in of organizational identity is shown for each mechanism and sources of irreversibilities are revealed.

Investment Effects: Since organizational identity shapes practices and decisions an economic lock-in (Ortmann/ Salzman 2002) can occur as the result of investment decisions that are consistent with identity. For example this can quickly lead to a particular path of organizational competence development (see Teece et al. 1997) if only those competences are developed that complement the existing identity. Establishing a particular identity element by making it a commonly shared, distinctive, central and continuous property also requires considerable efforts and resources. Thus, accumulated material and cognitive switching costs of changing an established identity element can prove very high (Whetten 2006: 226; Stimpert et al. 1998: 92). In the end this will encourage further self-reinforcing investment decisions that complement and further confirm the existing organizational identity.

Learning Effects: Path dependence due to effects of local learning (see Kogut/ Zander 1992; Coombs/ Hull 1998) can be inflicted because identity serves as a frame for organizational learning and as a perceptual lens that conditions the attention of organizational members. Being a frame and a general premise identity broadly defines alternatives that are “in character” and appropriate to pursue. Accordingly, out of a variety of possible learning trajectories, only a limited set appears available. Early decisions foreclose later learning progress. This situation constitutes a cognitive lock-in (Ortmann/ Salzman 2002). Identity influences the set of choices that are open and the evaluation of their meaning and potential (Nag et al. 2007: 824; see Ashforth/ Mael 1996; Stimpert et al. 1998; Glynn 2000). In the event that decisions and practices relate to identity, they are implemented and carried out accordingly. In turn, organizational identity describes the organization as a whole and allows for the coordination of activities on the level of an entity as well as for the complex parts to relate to each other. In time, this will narrow down the actual strategic choices available as structures and competences correspond only with the established identity. This will foster further activities that are related to organizational identity.

Complementarities: Elements within organizational identity are subject to complementarity if they are connected in an interwoven identity matrix. One possible constellation is a matrix of a hierarchy of nested identity elements (Whetten 2006) where less central identity elements are constructed to complement more central ones. According to this connection: “... organization’s early organizing

choices, especially those involving higher-order social categories and their long-term, path defining effects.” (King/ Whetten 2008: 197) Replacing a particular identity element will prove difficult given the interconnections with other elements and structures. Accordingly, only elements that fit the complex matrix will be incorporated and further developed to preserve the effects of complementarities.

Power: A study by Nag et al. (2007) reveals that the maintenance of power relations in particular creates deterrents to change. In giving rise to decisions and practices and in accounting for the entity, organizational identity constitutes a crucial device in the power games of groups and individuals within the organization. Forms of micro-politics, such as the expert and gatekeeper status as well as hierarchical power, are especially important (Crozier/ Friedberg 1979). Once a status quo is reached it becomes hard to induce change (Hannan/ Freeman 1984; Mahoney 2000). Through personal interpretation and assessment of organizational structures as well as of events in the environment, individuals can affect and shape organizational identity (Fiol 1991; Gioia/ Chittipeddi 1991; Hatch/ Schultz 2002; Ravasi/ Schultz 2006). The power to define and shape elements of the organizational identity defines the conduct and activities as well as re-defines the basis for power at the same time, which then again defines power chances for groups and individuals. Shaped by the configuration of power within the organization, organizational identity is likely to follow a particular path.

Legitimacy: Finally, path dependence can be triggered by the shared belief of appropriateness or moral correctness (see Mahoney 2000) and the intra-organizational effects of legitimacy. Applied to organizational identity this reproduction mechanism implies the effects of taken-for-granted claims (Albert/ Whetten 1985) or organizational culture. Organizational culture is distinct from organizational identity, yet is likely to influence the reproduction of identity (see Corley et al. 2006; Fiol et al. 1998; Hatch/ Schultz 1997, 2002; Ravasi/ Schultz 2006; Jacobs et al. 2008). Legitimacy is granted to those elements of organizational identity that are commonly considered appropriate and correct within an organization and have thus “withstood the test of time” (Whetten 2006: 224). The result is a circular, self-reinforcing definition of identity maintenance, as continuity of organizational identity leads to internal legitimacy and internal legitimacy leads to continuity of identity.

(c.) Lock-In and Maintaining Identity

In the course of the feedback processes, combined with the effects of reproduction mechanisms, the organizational evolution will increase the gap between established solutions and other alternatives. As decisions and practices feed back into identity construction, this relation is potentially self-reinforcing. Since identity claims involve irreversible commitments (Whetten 2006) organizational members can find themselves in an identity trap (Bouchikhi/ Kimberly 2003) because they are collectively “locked into outmoded strategies and behaviors” (Ashforth/ Mael 1996: 51).

Early states of organizational identity lead to specific organizational activities that confirm the identity and thus potentially tip its development into one of many possible directions. As decisions and practices affect subsequent decisions and practices, this ultimately leads to a specific formulation of organizational identity and the development of a corresponding set of organizational structures and processes. In this situation, organizational identity is *locked in* and path dependent, allowing only bound change, if any at all.

In a state of lock-in, alternatives to a selected solution are effectively repelled. Maintaining identity work is necessary in order to counter deviations, conflicts, defects and challenges to an existing organizational identity.¹ Self-reinforcing dynamics alone are not sufficient for a lock-in because they might only describe escalations that can be reversed just as easily. The mechanisms mentioned have to produce systematic structural effects and resources for maintenance to be rendered effective.

Identity persistence or the enduring property is the result of maintaining identity work. In a state of path dependence, maintaining work is rooted in the structural effects of reproduction mechanisms. By drawing resources from the mechanisms and referring to them, maintaining identity work can successfully encounter deviations and repel challenges to the established identity.

(d.) Path Dependent Identity Change

A number of studies of institutions and organizations have shown that path dependence does not simply account for an uneventful state of hyper stability (Streeck/ Thelen 2005; Sydow et al. 2009). Rather, path dependence provides an approach that indicates foremost possibilities of incremental change trajectories.

The different forms of identity change under the circumstances of path dependence can be described by a variation of disrupting, creating, maintaining activities that dominate certain situations or exert only marginal effects. The specific composition of identity work forms shapes processes and dynamics (see Table 2).

A (hypothetical) situation of *strong path dependence* is characterized by strong effects of maintaining identity work whereas creating and disrupting activities are absent. To the (more realistic) extent that disrupting and creating forms of identity work are present alongside strong maintaining activities, this constitutes

¹ For example the mechanism of legitimacy refers to the taken-for-grantedness of claims raised in the literature (Albert/ Whetten 1985). This state has to be actively maintained by a substantial, continuous sanctioning. It is not the state of unquestioned, repeated conduct of institutionalized beliefs as suggested by neo-institutionalist approaches (Tolbert/ Zucker 1996) that keeps it from changing. It is the effect of fierce reactions that follow a violation. The ethno-methodological *breaching experiments* (Garfinkel 1984) show reactions to frictions in the unquestioned aspects of the life world. These fierce reactions serve as sanctioning mechanisms and if successful maintain the established status. Accordingly, the status of institutionalization of claims can be evaluated by the extent to which it can successfully trigger an effective sanctioning of deviations and thus to maintain it.

an *incremental path dependent trajectory*. In empirical reality, change and development dynamics under conditions of path dependence corresponds to such incremental, bound change most of the time. For example, studies on translation activities (Sahlin/ Wedlin 2008) show that new structures are introduced by integration, which is a specific interaction of creation, disruption and maintenance. Also, the observation of labels remaining stable while underlying meanings are modified indicate incremental change trajectories. Some identity aspects are maintained while others are adapted (Gioia et al. 2000; Corley/ Gioia 2004).

Being caught on a path of organizational identity development is not eternal doom. Apart from incremental change trajectories, studies on path creation (Garud/ Karnøe 2001) have shown that path dependence always allows for mindful deviations from locked-in solutions. Concerning organizational identity, path creating and disruptive path breaking activities are brought about by respective forms of identity work. As argued above, strong maintaining activities keep an established solution from being replaced by alternatives. However, by creating new meanings for existing labels and disrupting old ones, identity can be modified step by step. This eventually can crack a path dependent reproduction of certain identity labels. Such incremental change can trigger cascades of subsequent changes. In turn this can cause a radical, path breaking identity transition to a new pattern (see Hannan et al. 2003; Jacobs et al. 2008). Path destruction can be observed when an existing solution is discontinued without being replaced by a succeeding solution. In radical change processes of path creation, destruction and path breaking, maintaining forces are systematically undermined and canceled out.²

Table 2: Path Dependent Identity Change and Effects of Identity Work Patterns

	Creating	Disrupting	Maintaining
Strong Path Dependence	None	None	Strong
Incremental Path Dependence	Weak	Weak	Strong
Path Breaking	Strong	Strong	Weak
Path Destruction	None	Strong	None
Path Creation	Strong	None	Weak

² In the context of social movement and neo-institutionalist research examples of path creation and destruction as activities of collective mobilization can be found (see Rao/ Singh 2001; Schneiberg/ Lounsbury 2008).

With the proposed concept of path dependence and identity work patterns it is possible to reveal conditions of change and opportunities for actors to successfully intervene, by identifying the repeated effects of processes and mechanisms that cause a persistent lock-in reproduction of organizational identity. In a state of path dependence, a mindful creation and according deviations as a form of disrupting and creating identity work can only be successful if mechanisms of reproduction are taken into account and if they are successfully undermined. Yet, a given state of organizational identity path dependence is always contingent on the existing environmental conditions. This is because identity is essentially a construct based on relational processes between the organization and its environment (Gioia et al. 2000). While forms of ceremonial identity work are employed to buffer the organizational core from outside influences substantial exogenous shocks can still act as central path breaking influence (Kirchner 2010).

In empirical terms organizational identity can often be characterized as a multiple identity (Gioia 1998). Multiplicity emerges as organizations usually dwell in several organizational fields at the same time or employ different logics simultaneously. Accordingly, multiple identities themselves can be at the root of change as the different identities provide dormant resources for the organization. This allows for successful change when the general orientation is shifted from one identity aspect to another (see Crouch/ Farrell 2004). Since multiple identities provide multiple developmental trajectories alternative identity realizations that are not fully exploited yet can be understood as *dormant organizational identities*.

6. Conclusion

This article has introduced a distinction of creating, disrupting and maintaining identity work to differentiate several activities that underlie identity dynamics. It was argued that the paradox of change and inertia provided by the opposing findings of current identity research could be solved by looking for an answer as to how flexibility turns into inertia. For this purpose the path dependence approach was introduced and applied to the organizational identity research.

It was revealed that feedback processes between identity and practices as well as decisions foster persistence and inertia of organizational identity. Building on the terminology used by Seidl (2005), this is described as the feedback of the integrative and operative functions of organizational identity. A lock-in of organizational identity evolution can occur if feedback processes accompany irreversibilities and reproduction mechanisms. These reproduction mechanisms include investment effects, learning effects, as well as effects of complementarities, power, and legitimacy.

Path dependence of organizational identity provides an explanation for the fact that some organizations fail to react appropriately to environmental pressures for change. Organizational members may find themselves in an organizational identity trap (Bouchikhi/ Kimberly 2003) since they are indeed collectively locked

in (Ashforth/ Mael 1996). Based on the understanding of the state of lock-in as a process of maintaining organizational identity, this paper builds a connection to maintenance forms of identity work as well as to reactions to identity threats.

In a lock-in situation, forms of maintaining identity work dominate creating and disrupting activities. In this situation maintaining identity work gains its power from the effects of the reproduction mechanisms. Potential for change under conditions of path dependence always exists, yet any success of incremental change trajectories or path breaking activities depends on the (weakened) power of maintaining forms of identity work.

7. References

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