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## **Identities in *Organization Studies***

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### **Abstract**

Identities scholarship, in particular that focused on self-identities, has burgeoned in recent years. With dozens of papers on identities in organizations published in this journal by a substantial community, doubtless with more to come, now is an appropriate juncture to reflect on extant scholarship and its future prospects. I highlight three key strands of self-identities research in *Organization Studies* with particular reference to six articles collected in the associated *Perspectives* issue of this journal. In reviewing the contribution that work published in *Organization Studies* has made to debates on the nature of identities, how identities are implicated in organizational processes and outcomes, and the micro-politics of identities formation, I seek also to contribute to ongoing deliberations and to raise issues and questions for further research. I conclude with a call for increased efforts to integrate self-identities issues into the research agendas of sub-fields within organization theory.

### **Key Words**

Identity, self-identity, identity construction, identity work

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## **Identities in *Organization Studies***

The study of self-identities in organizations is no longer a relatively minor concern associated only with a specialist community, but an increasingly mainstream preoccupation of scholars with diverse interests. Testament to this are a range of substantial special issues on identities and identity construction in major journals that recently have been complemented by reviews papers cataloguing and commenting critically upon identity matters (e.g., Alvesson et al., 2008; Corlett et al., 2017; Miscenko & Day, 2016; Ybema et al., 2009). Researchers have embraced identity as a concept that facilitates cross-disciplinary and multi-level research, encourages nuanced, contextual analyses, and focuses squarely on people in processes of organizing. This said, it is also true that the study of identities and identity dynamics has also sometimes been problematized, doubts expressed regarding our understanding, and aspersions cast on the utility of identity-centred research agendas (Alvesson & Robertson, 2016; Knights & Clarke, 2017). What these often passionate debates symptomize is the robustness and vitality of a field of inquiry that continues to draw-in new advocates, open up novel avenues and questions for investigation and generate fresh understandings and original theory.

This *Perspectives* issue takes as starting points for discussion six key papers on identities in organizations that have appeared in *Organization Studies*: Driver (2013), Knights and Clarke (2014), Wright, Nyberg and Grant (2012), Weaver (2006), Thomas and Davies (2005) and Trethewey (1999). In this essay, I briefly introduce these works in the context of three core (often intimately interconnected and overlapping) streams of identities theorizing and research that feature prominently in this journal. First, there are studies that centre on identities as a valuable topic in and of itself, and which deal mainly or substantially with issues of identity conceptualization, construction and types. Second, there are papers predicated on an understanding that identity and ‘identity work is an intrinsic...aspect of processes of

organizing' (Brown & Toyoki, 2013, p.875), and which explore how identities have implications for 'organizational outcomes' (Wright et al., 2012, p.1452). This research focuses on how identities and the processes by which they are constructed have important corollaries and consequences. Third, there is a notable tendency for papers in this journal, especially those influenced by the work of Foucault, to foreground issues of agency and structure, and the micro-politics of identity construction. Consideration of these debates emphasizes the connections between sometimes apparently disparate work, and while it is probably too much to hope that this will lead to 'a more engaged conversation across metatheoretical lenses' (Alvesson et al. 2008, p.9), it may, perhaps, engender generative discussion.

The remainder of my essay is structured into four major sections. It first provides an introduction to the literature on identities and identity construction processes in organizations. This is followed by consideration of selected contributions published in *Organization Studies* that exemplify key themes in the identities literature. The six focal articles are available online in the associated *Perspectives* issue on identities in organizations. Third, I make a number of observations about the MOS (management and organization studies) literature on identities, and its future prospects before drawing some brief conclusions. In particular, I argue that there is a *prima facie* case for integrating identities issues into the research agendas of diverse fields within organization theory.

## **Identities in Organizations**

A consideration of identities in organizations must (arguably) commence with recognition 'that concern with identity issues have for nearly 3000 years been an aspect of systems of thought and religious philosophies...and that these ideas still have contemporary resonance' (Brown, 2015, p.22). Current scholarship draws eclectically on diverse strands of general philosophical

theorizing with its roots in Enlightenment thinkers such as Locke and Descartes, distinct psychological traditions whose ancestry can be traced back to James and Freud, and a sociologically (but also historically) informed canon whose key figures range from Marx, Marcuse and Foucault to Mead, Giddens and Heidegger. Little wonder, then, that while there is minimal consensus on most identity-related matters, few would disagree that the field of identity theory is 'huge' or that seeking to make sense of the identity literature is a formidable task (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p.1166).

While self- and collective identity has become 'a critical cornerstone' (Cerulo, 1997, p.385) across the social sciences, from sociology and political science to consumer marketing and social geography, *why* this has occurred is hotly disputed. Lasch's (1979) contention that it is symptomatic of a narcissistic, self-regarding and introspective modernity is one that has been widely supported. Other explanations for the increasing prominence of identities centre on the dissipation of the hold of traditional sources of authority and identification that characterize our liquidly modern world and which have made identity issues more salient (Bauman, 2000; cf. Bardon, Clegg & Josserand, 2012). Complementary debates centre on what is meant by terms such as 'self', 'identity' and 'person', with much theorising in MOS regarding identity 'as a dynamic, multi-layered set of meaningful elements deployed to orientate and position one's being-in-the-world' (Karreman & Alvesson 2001, p.64). Sometimes concern with identity in the form of meanings attributed to the self is refined into a set of questions such as 'who am I?' 'How should I relate to others?' and 'How should I lead my life?' and variants of them relating to, for example, past, possible, provisional, desired, feared, aspired to and alternative selves (e.g., Ibarra, 1999; Markus & Nurius, 1986; Obodaru, 2012). These identities are, of course, not always fully conscious or intentional creations, and are produced both in soliloquy (Athens, 1994) but also, importantly, in complex social interactions with others who

may agree but more likely seek to negotiate or even contest our preferred versions of who we are (Goffman, 1967).

Much of the identity literature pivots on key predicates that serve as the foundations for what are often seemingly intractable debates. For example: the supposition that people desire simultaneously to be unique and yet the same as others with whom they identify; the suggestion that while people crave a stable, coherent identity such constructions are illusory, and that identities are generally fluid, and sometimes only loosely or fleetingly held; arguments centred on structure/agency, and in particular that although people often say they are able to construct their selves as they see fit, both their desire for an autonomous self and the identities they work on are disciplined by practices of power; disputes relating to whether people are best regarded as having a singular, unitary (but potentially highly complex) identity or many distinct identities, including those which are social (e.g. gender, national), relational (those negotiated with others, such as co-workers and bosses), and personal (for example, individual preferences and aspirations); disagreements whether identities serve primarily 'internal' purposes (e.g. concerning self-esteem regulation) or external impression management functions; and disputes between those who suggest that people generally seek 'positive' identities and thus to represent themselves as happy, successful, autonomous moral and authentic, and those who contend that individuals often accept that these ideals are not fulfilled, that their identities may be stigmatized and/or that they are 'dirty' workers.

At least as much attention in MOS has been paid to processes of identity formation as identities, especially by those scholars who maintain that identities are never 'finished' but always in-progress, continually being 'worked on' by individuals in response to changing external stimuli and circumstances and personal preferences. Processes of identity construction have most often

been explored using the notion of ‘identity work’, i.e. ‘the range of activities individuals engage in to create, present, and sustain personal identities that are congruent with and supportive of the self-concept’ (Snow & Anderson, 1987, p.1348). Theorists and researchers have taken many (often intimately interconnected) approaches to its study. In broad terms, these are: *discursive*, which regard identities as constituted through situated practices of language use; *dramaturgical*, focused on identities as they are made through actions (performances of the self); *symbolic*, that emphasize how identities are construed through the adoption, display and manipulation of object symbols; *socio-cognitive*, which deal with identities as fabricated through cognitive mechanisms and/or through sensemaking; and *psychodynamic* and more broadly psychoanalytic, in which identities are the result of unconscious (e.g. ego defensive) processes (Brown, 2017). Much scholarship has focused on the different ‘resources’, variously referred to as ‘cultural toolkits’ (Swidler, 1986) or ‘cultural frames’ (Callero, 2003) that fuel individual’s identity work, the distinctive strategies and tactics which guide such activities, the many organizational, industry and professional contexts in which it is conducted, the different aims and purposes that direct it, and the temporal frames within which it occurs (McAdams, 1993; Ricoeur, 1984).

Dozens of papers in *Organization Studies* touch on issues of identity and their construction, and many of these are concerned specifically with them. Researchers and theorists alike have taken pleasure in a concept, ‘identity’, which ‘neither imprisons...nor detaches...persons from their social and symbolic universes’ (Davis, 1991, p.105). Similarly, they have delighted in the metaphor of ‘identity work’ and the experience of agency (Brown, 2015, 2017) that it foregrounds in ways that facilitate exploration of how micro-processes may have macro-consequences. What follows is a necessarily concise account of three principal themes in the

identities literature as they have featured in this journal, taking the six papers chosen for this *Perspectives* issue as the points of origin for discussion.

### **Conceptual Issues: the nature of identities and identity work**

One stream of scholarship maintains that ‘identity’ is an intrinsically interesting topic that merits study by organization and management researchers in order to explore and expand the many nested and interlinked debates that centre on it. While no single contribution spans the entire gamut, the two papers chosen for this *Perspectives* issue that, in very different ways illustrate concern specifically with identity issues, are Driver (2013) and Knights and Clarke (2014). Driver (2013, p.410) employs Lacan’s theory of lack in human subjectivity to analyse how ‘A sense that something is fundamentally missing in us and from our lives’ leads to necessarily doomed attempts to turn the individual into a definable object ‘that knows who it is and what it wants’. Predicated on the assumption that identity deserves to be studied ‘as a topic’ (p.336), Knights and Clarke (2014) take a discursive approach to identify three identity options available to academics in the face of insecurity. These papers are symptomatic of the considerable attention that has been devoted by scholars in *Organization Studies* to conceptual issues with identities, how they are constructed through processes of identity work, and the kinds of identities that people fabricate.

While most attention has focused on identities rather than selves, when this distinction has been problematized scholars have tended to draw on broader debates in the social sciences to suggest that the ‘self’ ‘is more existentially significant’ (Alvesson & Robertson, 2016, p.10), most usually an experiencing self-consciousness (Giddens, 1991); an identity, by contrast, is a context-specific, often more consciously created and ‘reflexively understood version of one’s self’ (Alvesson & Robertson, 2016, p.10). Much research on identities (cf. Kuhn, 2006) takes



as its point of origin the ‘reflexive modernization’ thesis (i.e. that traditional identity certainties associated with class, family, markets and society generally have diminished forcing people to accept responsibilities which engender anxieties that are combatted through the formulation of identity-narratives (Beck, 1992; Giddens, 1991). Organizational participants face multiple insecurities – existential, social, economic and psychological – which mean that ‘Lives are by definition precarious’ (Butler, 2009, p.25) and identities ‘imperilled, menaced and fragile’ (Brown & Coupland, 2015, p.1316; Collinson, 2003). Identities, then, are most often regarded as temporary ‘fixes’ concocted by individuals to impose a degree of coherence in the face of assorted vulnerabilities; they are situational, sociologically and psychologically complex, rarely consistent and generally fluid (Karreman & Alvesson, 2001).

Eschewing the idea that there is an ‘essence or substance that sums up what identity is about’ (Karreman & Alvesson, 2001, p.62), overwhelmingly, researchers have focused on identities predicated on the assumption that they are socially constructed through situated practices of language use (e.g., Kuhn, 2006; Boussebaa & Brown, 2017)<sup>i</sup>. While it is well recognized that identities are formed through soliloquy and in relation to others through dialogical processes most attention has been devoted to the resulting identity narratives - featuring ‘an edited past, a preferred present and a desired future’ (Wright, et. al., 2012, p.1471) - through which people impose a degree of coherence on their existence (Essers & Benschop, 2007; Somers 1994). Much scholarship attends to the discursive resources people draw on in their identity work, such as roles (Järventie-Thesleff, & Tienari, 2016) and cultural stereotypes i.e. ‘generalizations reflecting simplistic conceptions of national cultures’ (Koveshnikov, Vaara & Ehrnrooth, 2016, p.1356). More rarely, but no less fascinatingly, attention has been paid to identities as (at least partially) non-linguistic constructions, for example as bodily performances and as involving other symbolic resources (Patriotta & Spedale, 2009). A noteworthy alternate approach to the

study of identities, which complements Driver's (2013) use of Lacan, is that which adopts a psychodynamic perspective drawing on Freud and his followers. This assumes that 'conflicting elements coexist within the self' and examines the 'intra-psychic aspects' of identities, in particular ego-defenses such as fantasy and projection (Petriglieri and Stein, 2012).

Often studies seek to identify various types, kinds, forms or strategies of (mostly contextually specific) identity work (e.g., Brown & Toyoki, 2013; Croft et al, 2015; Huber & Brown, 2017; Petriglieri and Stein, 2012). Srinivas (2013) offers an especially interesting analysis of the strategies employed by an Indian subaltern in a highly stratified society. In their study of two Finland-based MNCs operating in Russia, Koveshnikov et al. (2016) illustrate how managers engaged in stereotypical-talk, reactive talk, and self-reflexive talk. Essers and Benschop (2007) identified three work strategies employed by female entrepreneurs of Moroccan or Turkish origin in the Netherlands: to 'adhere to conventional images of femininity'; 'to denounce femininity and/or ethnicity'; and 'to resist the masculine connotation of entrepreneurship by disconnecting it from masculinity', and how the women situationally shifted their identities, constructing their selves at the intersections between gender, ethnic and entrepreneurial identities through 'hard identity work' (Essers & Benschop, 2007, p.49, p.65). Ellis and Ybema (2010) show how marketing managers in a market network engaged in identity bricolage using four 'interpretive repertoires' centred on organizations, markets, relationships and marketing management expertise, seeking continuously 'to "manage" and make sense of their liminal positions through a process of "tensile discursive positioning", continually shifting their identifications' (p.298).

A strikingly diverse range of individuals, organizations and occupational groups from around the world have been the target for studies of identities in *Organization Studies*, ranging from

middle class Japanese housewives (Leung et al., 2014) and Italian religious communities (Giorgi & Palmisano, 2017) to Finnish fathers (Eräranta & Moisander, 2011) and public sector workers in the UK (Thomas & Davies, 2005). This said, most interest has centred on predictably conventional groups, notably managers and other professionals working in law firms (Brown & Lewis, 2012; Kuhn, 2006), marketing and advertising practices (Alvesson, 1994; Ellis & Ybema, 2010), healthcare (Doolin, 2012; Croft et al, 2015; Currie et al., 2010), education (Boussebaa & Brown, 2017; Knights & Clarke, 2014) and MNOs (Koveshnikov, et al., 2016; Srinivas, 2013). While the balance of papers published strongly favours concern with managerial, occupational and professional identities, nevertheless attention has from time-to-time been focused on gender (Brown & Coupland, 2017; Eräranta & Moisander, 2011; Griffin, Harding & Learmonth, 2017; Trethewey, 1999), and more occasionally ethnic (Essers & Benschop, 2007) and moral (Weaver, 2006) identities, sometimes in complex and interrelated ways.

One strategy authors have used to make sense of often seemingly bewildering complexity in local settings has been to establish context-specific typologies of identities (e.g., Gabriel et al., 2010). Wright et al., (2012), for instance, categorize the identity positions of sustainability managers they studied into ‘the green change agent’, ‘the rational manager’ and ‘the committed activist’. In their study of UK-based academics, Knights and Clarke (2014) identified three types of academic identity options: imposters, aspirants and existentialists. Gabriel’s (1995) study of the unmanaged organization led him to identify narratives in which individuals cast themselves as heroes, heroic survivors, victims and as love objects. Another approach authors have adopted is to centre their analysis on a particular, supposedly generic type of identity, such as the ‘wanted’ but also sometimes ‘destructive’ identities of leaders (Petriglieri & Stein, 2012), the ‘hybrid’ identities of nurse managers (Croft et al. 2015), the ‘enterprising’ selves of

those who engage in personal branding (Vallas & Cummins, 2015), and the ‘aspirational’ identities of paratroopers (Thornborrow & Brown, 2009). Such efforts to identify generally available/construed identity types mirror broader efforts within MOS which have led to studies of, *inter alia*, alternative (Obodaru, 2012), portable (Petriglieri, Petriglieri & Wood, 2017) and provisional (Ibarra, 1999) selves.

## **Identities in Organizational Processes and Outcomes**

It has not infrequently been observed that if ‘interest in identity issues is to be anything more than a temporary vogue then it is by implicating identity significantly in a range of organizational processes and outcomes’ (Coupland & Brown, 2012, p.2). Such sentiments are complemented by claims that ‘...we cannot understand processes of organising unless we understand identity’ (Phillips and Hardy, 2002, p.52). The two papers chosen for this *Perspectives* issue that explore how identities and identity work are involved in processes of organizing are Wright et al. (2012) and Weaver (2006). In line with a substantial corpus examining how identities are key to understanding institutional change, Wright et al., (2012) analyse how the identity work of Australian sustainability managers and consultants functioned to spread knowledge about climate change and influence others and thus had the potential to alter and challenge, not merely support, existing discourses. With the ethics of organizations and individual corporate decision-makers increasingly being questioned, Weaver (2006) argues that organizations can normalize/routinize moral or immoral/improper behaviour of employees by embedding ‘collectively shared scripts and schemas’ (p.350) (bolstered by reward structures and reinforced by leader, peer and group behaviour) that shape employees moral identities. These papers are two of many in *Organization Studies* that have cast light on the ways identities are implicated in, for example, processes of organizational and more broadly political and social change, leadership, and professional and managerial conduct generally.

Building on Seo and Creed (2002), Creed et al (2010), and Lok (2010) one major strand of scholarship examines how identity work can lead to change in discourses, organizations and societies (Wright et al., 2012; Giorgi & Palmisano, 2017; Leung et al., 2014). These studies often illustrate how conflicting but for individuals equally compelling identity prescriptions lead people to construct identities that broker identity tensions in ways that promote new (or reinforce existing) institutional forms. Wright et al., (2012) show that ‘...identity work is central to the micro-political enactment of business responses to climate change’ and that ‘for some, the climate crisis provides an impetus for personal reinvention as a moral agent of change’ (p.1451). Drawing on a study of four religious communities in Italy whose members defined themselves simultaneously as both mystics and as Roman Catholics, Giorgi and Palmisano (2017) found that people engaged in identity work that allowed them to achieve ‘a temporary identity truce’ (p.797) in ways which supported their distinctive institutions. Leung et al (2014) provide a fascinating account of how, iterative processes of identity work function in relation to collective action, learning and sensemaking. They show how middle-class Japanese women, via the medium of the Seikatsu Club, redefined themselves ‘from a restricted, private role as family caretaker to a more active public role in Japanese society, with political, economic and social facets’ (p.428).

Another key theme in *Organization Studies* papers has been how identities and identity work figure in leadership, leading and leader development programmes (Croft et al., 2015; Driver, 2013; Gagnon & Collinson, 2014; Petriglieri & Stein, 2012). Those working from a psychodynamic or more general psychoanalytic tradition have taken a particular interest in leaders. Petriglieri and Stein (2012) provide insight on how although leaders are unlikely to work effectively with those they feel embody their unwanted selves yet they feel compelled to remain in proximity to them so that they can ‘compare themselves favourably with the

recipients of their projections, and thus deny their unwanted selves lodged in these others. This can result in 'toxic environments' (p.1223) such as occurred within the dysfunctional Gucci family. Driver (2013), drawing on Lacan, analyses how leadership identities 'invariably fail as they are undermined by unconscious desire and the reiteration of lack of being' (p.418). Gagnon and Collinson (2014) show how leadership development programmes use a variety of techniques, such as mandated self-reflection (where people are obligated to assess their strengths and weaknesses and align themselves with the espoused model of appropriate leadership) and confessions of lapses to elders, to enforce control, and how participants engage in identity work in response to such measures. In a relatively rare exploration of emotions in identity work Croft et al. (2015) examine how nurse managers mitigated (to an extent) identity conflicts they experienced associated with their identifying both as nurses and leaders through processes of emotional attachment and detachment.

Another line of inquiry focuses on the role of identities in professional and more broadly managerial conduct at work (Alvesson, 1994; Brocklehurst, 2001; Currie et al., 2010; Kamoche et al., 2014; Kuhn, 2006; Weaver, 2006). One finding is that there is a notable tendency for individuals in organizations to constitute their selves as epic heroes in which they self-define as moral agents battling against adversity for a noble cause (Gabriel 2000; McAdams, 1993; Watson 2009; Wright et al., 2012). It has been argued that identity issues are integral to our understanding of how professionals present themselves as 'authoritative' (Alvesson, 1994), how employees are able to flex and transition between roles and projects (Järventie-Thesleff, & Tienari, 2016), and how people negotiate role transitions (Currie et al., 2010). Weaver's (2006) sophisticated theorising provides tremendous insight on how organizations may initiate virtuous circles of virtue creation or vicious circles leading to moral muteness perhaps even 'the demoralization of the self' (p.351). Other theorists have focused on knowledge sharing

and how the way ‘individuals construct their identity has important implications for the creation, utilization and appropriation of knowledge’ in organizational contexts (Kamoche et al, 2014, p.1374). This explains, for example, why ‘Exhortations to share knowledge often falter’ (p.1384) i.e. because people ‘define themselves through the knowledge they create’ (p.1375) and may feel threatened or vulnerable in the face of calls to share it.

In addition to these established streams of theorizing a range of other work casts light on some aspects of organizing or contributes to discourses on institutions and participants in them. For those interested in organizational theory, individual selves are at stake in the formation of collective identities (Karreman & Alvesson, 2001) and the construction of people’s identities through talk is a means also of affirming and contesting the legitimacy of organizations (Brown & Toyoki, 2013). For scholars whose concerns are with more tractable empirical issues, identities are evidently at stake in everything from the negotiation of HQ-subsidary relations (Koveshnikov, et al., 2016) to the regulation of humour in collectivities (Huber & Brown, 2017). Some, such as Essers and Benschop (2007) highlight the importance of an understanding of identities to particular specialist areas, in their case entrepreneurship, in which identity matters are ‘largely under-exposed’ (p.49). Others are concerned that our understanding of identities feeds not just theory development but managerial and more broadly employee practices. Cuganesan (2017) recommends that ‘both senior managers and employees must focus on enabling others to live with identity paradoxes’ (p.508), while Eräranta and Moisander (2011) implore us to recognize that ‘prevalent psychological regimes of truth about fathers and fathering do not necessarily render enactable the sorts of identities that enable both men and women to achieve a better work/life balance’ (p.509).

## **The Micro-Politics of Identities**

The third major stream of theorising in *Organization Studies* considered here concerns how identities are enmeshed in relations of power, the micro-politics of identity formation, and issues of structure and agency. The two exemplary papers, chosen for this *Perspectives* issue because of their insightful commentary on these topics, are Thomas and Davies (2005) and Trethewey (1999). Thomas and Davies (2005) study of managerial identities in the context of New Public Management (NPM) initiatives draws on Foucault, and especially Foucauldian feminist theorists such as Weedon (1987) and Butler (1990) to argue that resistance has been studied largely in terms of overt actions and antagonisms, whereas it occurs also at the level of subjectivities. Trethewey (1999), again using a Foucauldian feminist lens, analyses ‘how organizational and gendered discourses are...written upon women’s bodies in ways that...constrain women’s professional identities’ (p.423). The concerns raised by these papers, notably how identities and identity work are implicated in ‘political processes and power constellations’ (Koveshnikov et al., p.1354), the extent to which individuals are able to exercise agency, the constraints within which identities are created, and the sometimes explicit attempts at identity regulation made by organizations, have been subject to much critical scrutiny in this journal.

A range of work either implicitly or explicitly assumes that individuals have considerable agency in matters of identity. Sometimes, as with Wright et al (2012), the decision to take a ‘more agential view of identity work’ (p.1455) has been made with deliberate intent in order to pursue a specific line of reasoning or argumentation. In the main, however, analyses which suggest that people are relatively unfettered, and able to construct identities more-or-less of their choosing, are offered in papers which do not engage directly with issues of power and control. For example, Kamoche et al (2014, p.1375) imply that there are few restraints on how



organizational actors ‘define themselves through the knowledge they create’. Similarly, Giorgi and Palmisano (2017) seem to suggest that the members of the religious communities they researched were largely unproblematically able to broker tensions between conflicting institutional logics, and that generally ‘individuals can exercise flexibility in their everyday use of logics to achieve their goals’ (p.814).

Other studies take a contrary stance and emphasize the extent to which identities are the effects of relations of power which operate variously to seduce, insinuate, insist restrict or even coerce, both people’s identity options and their choices (e.g., Brocklehurst, 2001; Huber & Brown, 2017). Trethewey’s (1999) impressive analysis shows how women’s professional identities are constrained (made docile) but also sometimes enabled by professional and gendered discourses which impose ‘disciplinary regimes of femininity’ (p.424). Certainly, women are able, indeed to maintain a professional identity they *must* learn actively to navigate normative requirements and emit ‘proper messages’ (p.437), (e.g. so as not to appear excessively sexual, or too weak or threatening); but, she argues, ‘the female body is always a potential professional liability’ (p.445), with discipline enforced by women as well as men: ‘The “female” gaze is an equally powerful normalizing force’ (p.445). Complementing Trethewey’s study of women professionals are those that show men’s identity options are also sometimes greatly restricted. Eräranta and Moisander (2011), for instance, demonstrate how Finnish fathers are subject to regimes of truth regarding what it means to be a good father that impose acutely on them.

For the most part, researchers, especially those with a particular interest in structure/agency issues, tend to represent identities as neither merely chosen nor simply allocated, but as the generally intricate, mostly somewhat confused and unpredictable results of identity work occurring within frameworks of power (Clegg, 1989). Amidst this theorizing nevertheless two

broad strands of work are discernible. One cluster of identity researchers, though they credit organizational actors with a degree of agency, choose to emphasize in their analyses the extent to which individuals are produced by discourses and organizational processes. Thornborrow and Brown (2009) contend that the identities desired by men in the British Parachute Regiment were ‘manufactured’ through institutional processes of surveillance, normalization and technologies of the self. For Essers and Benschop (2007), women’s scope for agency is imposed upon by patriarchal systems, religious structures, moral regulations, and cultural archetypes such as the ‘white male entrepreneur’ which most often lead women to construct ‘conformist selves’. In Vallas and Cummins (2015) analysis, building on du Gay (1996), ‘employees feel compelled to remake themselves in ways that willingly embrace the demands of the marketplace’ and to adopt ‘new, more flexible and “responsibilized” conceptions of themselves’ (p.297). So captivating are such discourses that it is ‘difficult for prospective employees to escape’ (p.313)

While equally acknowledging of the complexities at stake in identities formation, some authors emphasize (more) equally both individual’s scope for agency and the structures which impose upon such activities (Boussebaa & Brown, 2017; Doolin, 2002). Kuhn’s (2006) study of two law firms suggests that while some locales provide arrays of discursive resources that ‘tend to “tilt” toward structure, there are others that lend themselves to agency. Luckmann (2008) is clear that ‘...personal identities are actively “constructed”’ (p.286) and that people are able to exercise some control over how they draw on a ‘historical social structure’ and its associated stock of knowledge. Even prisoners, it seems, have scope to exercise agency, to work on preferred (if often perhaps fantasized) versions of who they are and want to be (Brown & Toyoki, 2013). A particularly well cited empirical piece countering in particular Foucauldian theorising that has (arguably) over-emphasized the extent to which disciplinary technologies

function in the service of management discourses to ‘colonize worker subjectivities’ (p.686) is that by Thomas and Davies (2005). Contending that ‘workers’ understandings of their self-identities provides an arena for resistance’ (p.686) they offer ‘a more fluid and generative understanding of power and agency’ (p.687) in which people are able to exploit gaps, loosenesses and contradictions in discourses in a continuous ‘simultaneous process of resistance, reproduction and reinscription’ (p.699). In their analysis, people are able to take advantage of the ‘tactical polyvalence of discourses’ (Sawicki, 1994) to ‘negotiate the complexity of “being”’ (p.700).

## **Looking Forward**

There is widespread confidence regarding scholarship centred on identities in and around organizations to expand our knowledge and explore how it can assist efforts to understand and to theorize processes of organizing. Sanguinity regarding the future of identities studies in MOS has not (at least not yet) translated into consensus on how best to take forward debates on identities, which approaches are likely to prove most generative, what questions are most pressing, or the topics that are least justifiably under-explored. Certainly, there is no shortage of interesting and less studied groups to research, such as those with mental health issues (Elraz, 2017), or newly considered resources for identity work, such as sexuality (Van Laer, 2017) and cosmopolitanism (Skovgaard-Smith & Poulfelt, 2017). Each identities scholar, it appears, has their own favoured concept, approach, perspective, theory, critique or agenda and associated issues, questions, gripes, critiques and recommendations.

Atewologun et. al. (2017, p.274), for instance, opine that theory development and constructive dialogue in the identities field is being hindered by a ‘lack of construct clarity’ and that it would be more likely to benefit from synergies between different designs and theoretical perspectives

‘if there is shared meaning which results from clear concept definitions’. What, then, are the prospects for synthesis between different approaches to identity and how desirable might this be? Brown’s (2017) analysis of the literature emphasizes the complementarities between distinctive approaches, and suggests that these constitute a distinctive ‘perspective’ which emphasizes that identities are ‘worked on’ by embedded social actors. Corlett et al. (2017) in what appears on balance to be an optimistic assessment of the field and ‘the potential for cross-fertilization within and across different levels and theoretical traditions’ (p.270), nevertheless note that there are limits and dangers to this: to strive excessively for a communal identities discourse may foster shared understandings, but also it ‘might mean *losing* the generative potential of engaging with that which remains elusive and problematic, and renders encounters with the diversity of identity scholarship endlessly fascinating’ (p.270). While we may be upbeat about the prospects of increasingly engaged debates in principle, it is noteworthy that with the exception of some ethnographies and in-depth case studies (e.g. Casey, 1995; Kunda, 1992), most scholars have as yet adopted a single, often somewhat narrow approach to the study of identities, in part at least because of ‘entrenched ideological assumptions’ (Brown, 2017, p.306).

There is also widespread recognition of the need for further theory building and empirical research on identities and identity construction issues in organizational contexts (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), and some have articulated more deep-seated concerns<sup>ii</sup>. It is commonly observed that identities literatures are increasingly isolated from each other and that the field is ‘considerably fragmented’ (Cote & Levine, 2003, p.11). It has been observed that identity is often been used as a ‘descriptive category’ when it would better be employed as an ‘analytical tool’ (Brown, 2015, p.333). Some have questioned whether ‘”Identity’ has run out of steam’ (du Gay, 2007, p.1) while others complain that making sensible sense of the literatures on

identity is 'impossible' (Howard, 2000, p.387). Knights and Clarke (2017) regard the MOS literature on identities with apparent disdain, describing it as suffering from 'a contemporary amnesia and myopia' (p.338), and issue the warning that fixating on issues of self-fulfilment and identity construction 'risk leading us to an ever-increasing vicious spiral of concern with ourselves' (p.345).

A vast range of what might loosely be termed 'conceptual issues' relating to identities research are only just beginning to receive attention. A substantial number complain that identity studies are unjustifiably 'disembodied' and that there is a need 'to bring back the material into the equation' (Bardon, et al., 2012, p.353). Knights and Clarke (2017), for example, insist that there has been 'a neglect of the body or embodied notions of identity', including 'our embodied engagement with others' (p.346), and join with Harquail and Wilcox King in imploring 'scholars in all traditions of Organizational Identity research to bring the full body of the organization member back into consideration' (2010, p.1631). Winkler (2016) argues that one of the many aspects of identity construction about which we know little is the role of emotions, and develops a research programme for problematizing, broadening and deepening our understanding of how emotions are performed and talked about in identity work. Other theorists have argued that 'identity' is only one of several starting points for the analysis of people in organizations, and some authors suggest other concepts such as 'person'/'personhood' or 'subjectivity' offer equally or more interesting opportunities to investigate historical, political, economic and legal etc. aspects of our humanity (cf. Foucault, 1972; Weber, 1930).

Although it has been suggested that identities research may stimulate 'significant theoretical and practical advances in the study of almost every aspect of organizational life' (Haslam &

Reicher, 2006, p.135) and that ‘an identity frame offers great theoretical promise’ (Alvesson et. al., 2008, p.7) yet there are siren warnings that identity studies may nevertheless become ‘introspective and detached from broader debates’ (Coupland & Brown, 2012, p.2). To an extent, this may be because identities scholars have sometimes been overly narrow in defining what interests them; though it is also evidently the case that scholars in many other fields within MOS have not (yet) embraced identity as a concept of interest with generative potential. This is a missed opportunity that merits attention. There are still surprisingly few papers that recognize identity is an issue central to understanding processes of e.g. social communication, negotiation, entrepreneurial behaviour, leading and following, decision-making, and strategizing. Even those literatures for which identity is a core concern, such as sensemaking, are more readily content to treat it as a predicate than to explore its rich possibilities. Key questions have not yet been systemically addressed, and consequently how the macro performances of groups, organizations, industries and professions are connected to the micro identities processes associated with their participants is still largely a mystery.

Similarly, concerns have been articulated regarding the requirement for a critical orientation to be better integrated into identity scholarship. Bardon et al. (2012), for instance, aver that there is a need ‘to reintroduce the critical into the research agenda on post-structuralist identity studies’ (p.352) and to ensure that analyses of identities take adequate account of the socio-material conditions within which they are produced. To an extent, at least, recent critically-informed scholarship has sought to address these concerns (e.g., Bristow, Robinson & Olivier-Ratle, 2017; Harding, Ford & Lee, 2017). Indeed, while Bardon et. al. level their criticism at post-structuralist research, it is noticeable that it is what might be regarded as ‘mainstream’ studies published often in US journals that shies away from issues of power, reflexivity,

emancipation and agency/structure debates. It is, for example, unclear how provisional, portable, and alternative selves are meant to be understood in the context of relations of power.

## **Conclusions**

The literature on identity and identification has, reputedly, experienced a growth rate in publications of over 600% in the last 20 years (Miscenko & Day, 2016). Yet, while ‘of the moment’, as Alvesson et al (2008, p.11) remind us, ‘there is nothing natural or self-evident about concern with who we are; preoccupation with identity is a cultural, historical formation... [of which]...the surge of identity scholarship is part’. It is entirely possible that contemporary discourses centred on identities and selves may come to an end (Taylor, 1989, p.1111). That said, for the moment, at least, researchers are increasingly turning their attention to identities and the processes of their construction. For scholars whose concerns range from improving organizational effectiveness to enhancing understanding of complex relationships and/or unpicking relations of power, control and resistance, ‘identity’ continues to prove a beguiling concept. As organizations ‘become less normalized, less hierarchical and less tightly governed by surveillance’ (Clegg & Baumeler, 2010, p.1727), so for a key community identities ‘have become more interesting’ (Coupland & Brown, 2012, p.1). Should researchers more generally take up the challenges posed by the concept of identity and its cognates and build theory in relation to them then the future sustainability of identities discourses in MOS will be more assured and organizational theory enriched.

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## Notes

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<sup>i</sup> Driver's (2013) analysis, based on the work of Lacan, is especially interesting in that (arguably) in contrast to most theorising, it presupposes the existence of a psychological subject and also contests the view that identities can ever adequately be articulated linguistically.

<sup>ii</sup> While not seeking 'to deny the significance of identity themes' Alvesson and Robertson (2016) maintain that "slippery" terms such as identity can exercise a colonializing effect and limit our thinking and perspectives on organizing' (p.8). '...we believe that it is vital to avoid turning "everything" into identity' (p.16).