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Networks and identity: positioning the self and others across organizational and network boundaries

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Abstract
This chapter argues that studies that embrace some notion of networks, supply chains and markets in exploring identity can enhance the wider identity field in organization studies. Our review shows that boundary spanners engage in identity work from a particular position of liminality where the tensions of identity become amplified. Hence, in their identity work, boundaries oscillate as they seek to define who counts as 'the other'; and different identity levels are juxtaposed and particular characteristics activated to legitimize their role. The picture emerges of incoherence and irresolution in identity work as central to interactions across organizational boundaries. Nevertheless, the literature also regards the construction of identity as critical to effective performance in inter-organizational relationships and to how the employing organization is positioned in a variety of networks. This identity work is, therefore, fundamental to opportunities and constraints available to the organization. Important and consequential questions about the role of identity in power and agency are thus emerging.

Keywords
identity work, boundary spanners, inter-organizational relationships, networks, supply chains

Introduction

Brown (2015: 24, emphasis added) reminds us that researchers into identities and identity work in organizations 'have focused on the strategies and tactics of identity work associated with different groups of people *in* particular organizations'. Recent reviews of the literature reinforce the emphasis upon identities *within* organizations. For example, Atewologun et al., (2017: 275) explicitly exclude studies 'with identities construed primarily outside organizations' to focus on identities relating to the performance of 'a role or a job, in relation to others, within the organizational structure' (ibid: 276). Similarly, Miscenko and Day (2016: 218) consider 'individual work identity in the context of so-called traditional work' which they characterise by elements such as a 'predefined compensation scheme and work schedule, hierarchical organizational structure, and clearly defined job positions...'. The dominant intra-organizational focus has produced rich understanding of identities and identity work within organizations. Yet this field of scholarship has generated a more limited understanding of these phenomena amongst those whose work spans organizational boundaries and who are as embedded in inter-organizational networks as they are in the more formalised structures and positions of the bounded organization.

A discussion of identity in organizations that embraces some notions of extra-organizational linkages and networks builds on and contributes to extant scholarship in several ways. First, considerable attention has rightly been given to identity work in particularly demanding organizational situations, yet the tensions of everyday work and the difficulties in navigating these might be expected to be amplified for boundary-spanners operating in contexts that lack the formal structure and definition found within the organization. Second, in order for identity studies to contribute to a broader social understanding, 'there is a need for research that explores identity talk of organizational actors who build and maintain relationships across institutional, social, and cultural boundaries' (Ybema et al., 2012: 57). As Brown (2015: 31) notes, 'there is much we still do not know about how contexts – particularly organizational and national cultural settings – affect individuals' identities and identity work'. This is frustrating since 'there is broader recognition that individuals have multiple work identifications, some of which are embedded or nested (e.g. job, department, organization), and others of which cross-cut these boundaries…' (Brown 2017: 300). It is the implications of just such 'cross-cutting' that we explore in this chapter, mainly for individual identities but also for how identity construction processes can affect the organizations and network contexts in which they are often embedded.

So what do we mean by boundaries, networks and boundary-spanners in the arena of identity studies? At the firm level, two organizations that interact can be considered to form a dyad, whereas three or more form an inter-organizational network (Provan et al., 2007). The nodes in a network may be individuals or organized groups such as family enterprises or business firms, and the relationships and exchanges between nodes make up networks. Organizations are typically represented by individual actors such as managers, professionals or senior executives operating in boundary spanning roles with some responsibilities for the management of specific relations (Langan-Fox & Cooper, 2014). Moreover, individuals referred to as 'boundary spanners' are active in the development of inter-organizational networks that come about through their social interactions (Tushman & Scanlan, 1981). Long (2001) notes the significance of 'identity–constructing processes' that are inherent in the pursuit of livelihoods in networks. For Long, this pursuit entails the building of relationships with others whose life worlds and statuses (and, we might add, organizational culture and ethos) may differ markedly. Thus, in addition to managing exchanges in the marketplace, individuals must be skilled in managing their relationships and meeting their obligations of identity and status.

The chapter needs to be delimited: we review work that has taken a broadly social constructionist approach to identity in a 'business-to-business' (B2B) context. Identity is defined as 'the meanings that individuals attach reflexively to themselves, and [which are] developed and sustained through processes of social interaction' (Brown, 2015: 23). A social constructionist approach regards identity as fluid and contestable; as a sense of the self that we continuously make and refashion. Hence, we can think of 'identity work' as the construction of this sense of self, and its differentiation from 'the other', through the discourses and practices we deploy in social exchanges (Ybema e al., 2009). We start by exploring the identity work of individual managers as boundary spanners in inter-organizational relationships (IORs) and extending this to supply chains and industrial networks. We do not ignore consumers completely in the sense that they are often effectively the end user of a supply chain and thus an important other; and similarly we attend to those actors at the other notional ‘end’ of the chain, such as local producers and other intermediaries. We include work in traditional commercial settings as well as that in organizational fields such as non-profit collaborations, co-operatives and other movements. After presenting key areas of research, we provide an overview of methods and guiding theories used by scholars working in inter- rather than intra-organizational contexts. Finally, we summarise the key points of the review and suggest future directions for research as well as areas in which scholars of identity in IORs might converse more fully with those studying identity within organizations.

Liminal identities and boundary-spanning

One organizational context where some of the identity-related challenges of working in boundary spanning or cross-cutting roles have been acknowledged at a more conceptual level is that of liminality (see Söderlund & Borg, 2018 for a discussion of the literature on ‘liminality as position’). Here we highlight identity-related research where inter-organizational contexts and networks are addressed.

The extra-organizational environment, where there are few clear-cut guarantees of role and status, exposes managers to potential vulnerability that, according to Flores and Solomon (1998: 220), pertains in particular to people’s sense of self: ‘Whatever other vulnerabilities may be at stake (one’s job, substantial amounts of money, the success of the business) it is the self that is in some danger’. There is, then, a particular uncertainty and insecurity of self that comes with the in-between position of the boundary spanner. Ellis and Ybema (2010: 299) demonstrate the challenges for the enactment of identity, focusing on a number of different supply chains, including in the automotive sector. They argue that this position involves the crossing of social boundaries, and means that the other is no longer at a 'safe' distance, so that it is all the more important and, ironically, all the more complicated at the same time, to hold on to a distinct and secure idea of one's self through defining 'otherness'. Their boundary position in-between firms requires IOR managers to navigate between multiple and sometimes contradictory demands, and asks them to build relationships with various others across us/them-divides while simultaneously maintaining and 'marketing' their professional or organizational identities (Ellis & Ybema 2010). Distinction drawing and self-enhancement are as much part of IOR-related discourse as is the building of boundary-crossing relationships and linked supply chains. Ellis and Ybema (2010: 299) conclude that 'boundary work in IORs is thus at once inclusive and exclusive' as 'liminal identity talk… positions the speaker as oscillating between "in" and "out", "same" and "other", and between an inclusive and exclusive "us"'.

In the ambiguous and dynamic context of IORs, parties build and break relationships on the basis of their conceptions of who others are and what they believe these others can contribute to their goals (Beech & Huxham, 2003). Claims from (or about) liminars of 'same-ness' or 'other-ness' in relation to colleagues, clients or competitors, position organizational members and establish, legitimate and/or challenge relationships of power and status (Ybema et al., 2009). Drawing 'external' stakeholders into a personal or business-like relationship implies an increased exposure to these actors' opinions and judgements; and may simultaneously pose a potential threat to people's organizational and/or managerial identities. Boundary setting and crossing thus plays a role in structuring the world(s) of IORs and establishes some of the network 'realities' into which managers act. In a further example of this structuring, Ryan (2018: 19) embraces notions of liminality and networks, albeit on quite a small scale, as she suggests that ‘the boundary spanner will become a liminal state spanner as they seek guides and make efforts to create an ally network’. She thus extends the work of Ellis and Ybema (2010) by showing how the ‘liminal experiences of IOR managers are not a natural consequence of their boundary spanning activities, but are crafted by the IOR manager... where interaction offers an opportunity/challenge/trigger to this’ (Ryan, 2018: 22). Such interactions may present occasions to actively develop a new or revised identity position through seeking counterparts in external relationships to guide liminal experiences.

Identities in B2B marketing contexts

Ellis (2016) adopts the notion of ‘identities in networks’ (after Huemer et al., 2009) to set the scene for how identities have been conceptualised by some scholars in the field of B2B marketing. The term is used to describe the development of a particular firm’s ‘position and identity’ (ibid: 56) in those inter-organizational configurations within which the firm is, or seeks to become, embedded. The notion of an embedded ‘position’ is important since position is determined by how that firm’s identity is constructed in interactions and is viewed by other network actors (Gadde et al., 2003). Position, in turn, is viewed by network theorists as a key strategic resource that both enables and constrains the firm’s possible actions (Håkansson & Ford, 2002). For example, an individual or organizational actor’s identity can convey legitimacy and authority by showing that they/it adhere/s to the shared norms, values and definitions that exist specific to that network. Schepis et al., (2014) illustrate the relevance of identity to strategic possibilities in a study that shows how endorsement of the ‘network theories’ (Hakansson & Johanson, 1993) circulating in one industrial network allowed two sets of actors, to construct their identities in line with their strategic aims. Schepis et al., (2014) considered a mining network comprising Indigenous SMEs and Australian firms, in which they argued that the indigenous enterprises needed to prove their legitimacy and show that they could assume network norms, whilst also helping shape them. Indigenous business managers drew on two contrasting sets of repertoires: one of 'connection' to the Indigenous community; and the other of 'distance' from that community and affiliation with Western business values and practices. Schepis et al., (2014: 8) demonstrate the criticality of identity work to network positioning and argue that this allows actors to 'simultaneously restructure immediate relationships and the wider web of dependencies in the … network', enhancing or restricting strategic options.

It is clear that there are multiple levels of identity; in the above example the cultural identities of indigenous and Western communities operate alongside personal work identities. The construction of multiple notional identities is further theorised by Ellis (2016) who identifies three levels: national, organizational and individual. These are inter-related areas of identity that effectively range from the macro to the micro level of social actor. Thus, individual (managerial) identities are nested within both organizational and national identities, whilst the organizational (company) identity is nested within the nationally constructed identity. Based on a study of Indian import/export managers, Ellis et al. (2012) examine how managers evoke different levels of identity in the same segment of talk. Managers are able to position themselves, and their firms within the network, as practitioners and organizations with particular attributes, even without explicit reference to their own (nested) roles. For instance, a 'past and present practices' interpretative repertoire tends to construct a changing national identity for India, and thereby Indian firms and managers. Further, the use of an 'India versus China' repertoire reveals a powerful instance of discursive 'othering' on a national level as China is regularly compared to India and found wanting (Ellis et al. 2012: 411). Thus, Ellis et al. (2012) show how Indian managers on one hand use their linguistic toolkits to mould identities in their own terms, while on the other hand they appear unable to perceive IORs in terms other than those suggested by the various knowledge systems circulating in the Indian business context. The study reveals, therefore, something of the tensions experienced by managers through the juxtaposition of different aspects of identity levels.

Discursive struggles over identities are often highlighted in the literature about identities in organizations. In studies of identity amongst those operating in IORs, the need to construct and communicate a particular competence that facilitates effective accomplishment of the boundary spanning role is evident. Ellis and Hopkinson (2010) examine the subjective and sometimes paradoxical ways in which networks are discursively theorised by their participants. Marketing and purchasing managers deploy a range of ‘communication’-based interpretative repertoires to simultaneously (re)produce theories about what effective relationship management involves and to display their effectiveness in this role. Their deployment enables the accomplishment of the self as a practical manager of business relationships and signals their engagement with the more formal discourses of marketing that circulate within the network.

Dean et al., (2017) highlight the need to communicate a particular identity to achieve professional/personal legitimacy. Participants representing nano-technology vendors construct the self as ‘scientist seller or buyer’ within sales interactions for their innovative products. These vendors appear to regard B2B marketing as quite separate from, and indeed less respectable than, a natural sciences discourse. In this way, sellers give sense not only to buyers but to themselves as well (cf. Snell, 2002). The positioning as ‘scientists’ induces a sense of belonging within an elite group carrying out business activities within the network by discursively othering non-scientists and what are perceived as non-scientific discourses (Dean et al., 2017).

Jain et al.'s (2009) also examine scientists' role identity amongst individual scientists who had been involved in some form of commercialisation activity as they interacted with the university's technology transfer office. As such, they became participants of a commercial network since they were establishing interfaces with other actors, including professional contacts, within the university and beyond. By allowing others to provide the entrepreneurism required for the commercialization process, they were able to 'focus on maintaining and nurturing their academic identity' (Jain et al. 2009: 930). The selection and activation of particular characteristics within identities are thus important aspects of interaction and network positioning.

Identities in inter-organizational collaborations

Research into inter-organizational collaborations has provided much discussion of identity construction, particularly in the area of organizational identification. A wide variety of collaborative relationships are listed by Zhang and Huxham (2009: 186) including 'international partnerships, networks, strategic alliances, and joint ventures', as they confirm that 'ways of thinking and working' conducive to building international collaboration have generally been studied only in *intra*-organizational contexts.

Zhang and Huxham's (2009) study of a joint-venture between construction sector organizations show how individuals' identifications are (re)constructed, and how this impacts on the nature of trust in the relationship. This allows Zhang and Huxham to build on the work of Vaara et al. (2003), on identity construction between business partners in the 'developed' world, by exploring relationships between organizations in both developed and developing countries. In this process, they note the significance of individuals' claims of selfcategorization that can be extended to the collective identities they construct in relation to the collaboration. In multi-sector collaborations, identities are likely to be continually shifting while sometimes becoming crystallized. It is therefore unsurprising that Beech and Huxham (2003: 47-48) paint a picture of 'a complex, interwoven, and tangled melee' of 'cycles of identity formation' in this sort of inter-organizational network context. Through a study of a collaborative setting centred on health promotion, they show how the actions of participants are at least partly determined by the identities that those participants assign to themselves and others, and illustrate the ways in which identities are to an extent determined by actions. They argue that processes of identity formation will affect almost every aspect of 'productive collaborative practice' (Beech & Huxham, 2003: 28).

The process of identity formation is expanded by Ybema et al. (2012), who find that boundary spanners must constantly seek context-specific identities to align with or distinguish themselves from the collaboration as required. This can entail considerable identity work and shifts between multiple identities in order to cope with the fragmented context experienced by participants. For instance, Maguire and Hardy (2005: 14) show how individuals may identify, 'counter-identify' and 'dis-identify' with a cross-sector collaboration as they move between their roles as collaborative partners and organizational representatives. They point out that, 'in identifying with an organization, members not only create a sense of self, but they also construct the organization's identity'. Reflecting the theme of the current chapter, the authors note how 'different aspects of [individuals'] identities were foregrounded as they related to various "others" within and across organizational boundaries' (Maguire & Hardy, 2005: 35).

Similarly, Kornberger and Brown (2007) note the use of ‘ethics’ as a discursive resource in identity work undertaken by members of a non-profit institution that was established to facilitate cross-sector knowledge exchange. They argue that this might be regarded as a defensive manoeuvre in the face of the pressures encountered in boundary spanners’ day-to-day experience of the difficulties of managing confidential information and retaining client trust. At the same time, ethics was utilised in individuals’ authoring of organizational identities, allowing members to consolidate organizational processes of recruitment and service delivery with identities and business strategies. After Ybema et al., (2012), Kourti (2017: 93) asserts that individual partners in inter-organizational collaborations seek ‘identities that will fit the space they experience’, including collaborative, organizational, professional, and personal identities. She suggests that tensions between the various identities that are created as a result of partners’ interactions need not necessarily be resolved in order for the collaboration to succeed. Such studies thus indicate that incoherence and irresolution in identity work appear to be part of the rich set of processes of interacting across organizational boundaries.

Identities and agency in global supply chains

In an emerging stream of research, scholars have considered questions of agency and voice in international supply routes. This approach draws on extensive and longstanding debate in organizational studies about the role of control and the possibilities of resistance in identity work (see, for example Covaleski et al., 1998; Alvesson and Willmot, 2002). Applied to inter-organizational contexts, these concepts have allowed for a growing understanding of identities in relation to power and ethics.

Ellis et al. (2005: 130) study marketing management practices within the farm supply industry and are therefore able to unpack IORs in the dynamic market conditions that characterise so much of global commodity supply. They 'deconstruct market(ing) discourses' to show how the self, the focal case company, the supply chain and the market 'are interwoven and interlaced within participants' language'. The network in which the focal firm is embedded is characterised by participants as a 'supply chain' that appears to 'provide coherence and linkages between the different parties involved. It offers both a degree of stability for the participants but it also provides a source of tension, with uncertainty over the construction of the chain, nature of the links and the fear of dissolution' (2005: 139). Ellis et al.'s (2005) study confirms the vulnerability of identities of actors such as marketing managers and farmers in dynamic market contexts. Rather than the organisation, the market effectively describes forms of change that dissolve any settled identity (O'Neill, 1998). In considering this vulnerability, Ellis and Higgins (2006: 387) argue that 'a more subtle understanding of social constructions of managerial identities and the other within the language of supply chain ethics may facilitate moves towards fair international trade'. They note that actors who are central to the network are able to manipulate information throughout the network; and that this ability often lies with the retailer or manufacturer, but rarely with the primary supplier. If this marginalised 'other' is to be heard, we must consider how discourse can give voice to (or silence) any attempts at a just dialogue with central network actors.

Hopkinson and Aman (2017) highlight lack of voice in a critical perspective on 'bottom-of-the-pyramid' (BOP) marketing, focusing especially on struggles over meaning, and the creation of identities for participants. Their empirical material relates to so-called 'women entrepreneurs' who, without being employed by the company, distribute Unilever consumer goods in rural India. They shed light on the working of discourse in power relations between MNCs, like Unilever, and local participants. Corporate literature emphasises the production of an empowered identity for the women. The Unilever website quotes a single mother, 'Today everyone knows me. I am someone now', thereby giving the impression that the system has 'literally created an identity... bound up with self-esteem and empowerment' (p. 313). Hopkinson and Aman (2017: 314) question who defines the possibilities of that identity and the empowerment that is brought by an identity embedded in a network that reflects the dependence of the women on the MNC due to the social benefits 'conferred or indeed obligated by the relationship' (ibid).

Several scholars have expanded on the theme of identities within supply routes by considering networks that include 'intermediaries' who might have considerable power in defining the identities of others but who are not always directly involved in exchange. The position of 'cultural intermediaries' can be significant in legitimation struggles as these actors emerge in managers' discourse as nodes through which a flow of specialist knowledge about products and markets must occur in order for the supply network to 'work'. For example, Smith Maguire (2010) explains that marketing practitioners in the wine sector oscillate between the boundaries of the various relations that support market exchange in the notional supply chain for wine as they negotiate between their roles as symbolic producers and taste-leading consumers in the context of their own reflexive identity projects. Relatedly, Parsons (2010) explores ways in which exchanges in the world of antique trading offer dealers resources, such as discursive repertoires of taste and aesthetics, and of morality and care, for the creation and expression of their identities. Similarly, Hopkinson and Cronin (2015) explore the influence of 'celebrities', specifically celebrity chefs, as intermediaries defining what is to be considered as sustainable in markets. Whilst these chefs leverage specific, ‘heroic’ identities, they incite malcontent amongst consumers, at least to the extent that organizations and institutions respond. Hopkinson and Cronin (2015) show how the intermediary can reshape the network and, in their case, greatly influence what fish is to be consumed in an affluent Western market as well as how and where (in the waters of less affluent countries) it is to be caught.

The entanglement of identities in networks lies at the centre of Hopkinson’s (2017) work and complicates our understanding of how, and by whom, those identities are constituted. Adopting a view of markets as ‘broad, large and flexible combinations of human actors and material entities’ (after Cochoy et al., 2016), she shows how the identities of farmers, lobby groups and retailers were leveraged in a way that meant new members to the dairy beef market were enrolled by highlighting an intersection of interests. For example, Hopkinson (2017) unpacks the positioning of farmers in the veal industry (via media ‘pen portraits’ that establish a degree of re-connection and provenance) in the UK to show how status may be conferred on certain network actors.

This emergent stream of research, that expands our purview of commercial networks beyond those directly involved in exchange, provides insights that allow us to develop an understanding of the linkages between the micro (individual identity), meso (organizational identity) and macro (position in a global network). By examining inter-organisational contexts we are able to see how boundary spanners concurrently navigate the efforts of others to shape worker identity and their own attempts to resist (Alvesson and Willmot, 2002) across multiple levels. This opens up the political processes in identity work that navigates multiple levels since its successful accomplishment is an important aspect in gaining a central position that enables influence on the terms of trade that link economies and (distant) lives together.

Identities in networks in other social contexts

Several studies have examined the role of identity for those seeking to enter particular business networks and, in so doing, reveal the role of networks in entrepreneurial identity work. Phillips (2013: 794) offers a reading of 'ecopreneurial' self-narratives that shows how individuals seek to achieve a relatively coherent sense of self-identity by negotiating between conflicting discourses and social groups that relate to the environment and enterprise. Ecopreneurs' narratives set up binaries of self and other, including business as usual versus business as visionary, green warriors versus pragmatists, and entrepreneurs against non-entrepreneurs; with other actors, whether individual or groups, typically being characterised as 'villains'. De Clercq and Voronov (2009) focus on the need for new entrepreneurs to be endowed with legitimacy that results from the collective sense making of other 'field' participants, in this case other entrepreneurs in the wine sector, such that the newcomer receives the social categorisation of 'entrepreneur'. Viewing a field (after Bourdieu, 1993) as a space where actors are embedded, and given the presence of multiple stakeholders in such a field who have diverging interests, such as wine critics and consumers, newcomers may have to vary their strategies for managing meaning within the network.

The national level of network identity noted by Ellis (2016) may also be drawn on by social actors. For instance, Ailon-Souday and Kunda (2003: 1073) claim that national identity forms 'a symbolic resource that is actively and creatively reconstructed by organizational members to serve social struggles which are triggered by globalization'. In this way, members representing an Israeli firm could express detachment from their US merger partners by mobilizing their national identity which ‘was revealed as a potent and widely used symbol that secured the local organizational boundary’ (Ailon-Souday and Kunda 2003:1080). In this way the collaborative partners were characterized as either ‘Americans’ or displaying elements of Israeli culture, thereby somewhat undermining notions of a supposedly borderless world, or arguably network, of global work. Ybema et al., (2012: 48) explore an aid organization’s relationships with their ‘Southern’ partners and show how identity work might be used to minimise boundaries. They note that individuals attempt to depolarise differences between themselves and their partners in their identity talk. For what appear to be ideological and strategic reasons, they ‘smooth out, trivialise or upend differences’ by (i) adopting a ‘thin’ notion of cultural identity, (ii) building their selves as ‘strange’, (iii) ‘levelling out’ hierarchical differences, and (iv) constructing an inclusive ‘we’ in talk of personal relationships.

Finally, Wells et al., (2018) remind us that networks and boundaries are not just based on relations amongst organizations, as they look at the discursive identity construction practices of consumer co-operative members. In the co-operative context, ‘tensions are evident between the hegemonic discourse of neoliberal managerialism and that of democratic collective ownership’ (ibid: 14). They identify a series of interpretive repertoires drawn on in members’ accounts that can be categorised into two groups: one that reflects a sense of connection or attachment and one of disconnection or division, i.e. community and boundaries respectively. Wells et al. (2018) show how a community enterprise can exist and operate within boundaries between various network stakeholders, which serve to demarcate its membership; and how such tensions, at an individual level, may be negotiated. This means that much of the identity work undertaken by co-operative members is shown to be ‘aimed at securing a socially viable identity positioning’ in the context of paradoxical tensions (Ghadiri et al., 2015: 597). These boundary constructing processes are also reflected by Saunders (2008) who observes how, as activists commit to organizations with an encompassing collective identity, and thereby develop a strong sense of solidarity with other activists similarly committed to that organization, the resultant solidarity can lead to the construction of a 'we-them' dichotomy between organizations within the same movement or network.

Approaches to analysing identities in networks

As well as noting why the study of identity in networks is interesting and socially important, our chapter shows how this wider perspective often entails particular forms of thinking. Thus, we also describe briefly some of the different ways of conceptualizing and analyzing data used by scholars writing about identities and networks and related contexts.

Like Zhang and Huxham (2009), the studies we have drawn on in this chapter tend to focus on identity construction at the level of individuals. As we note above, this is because the collaborative relationship between organizations is enacted through the interaction of certain individuals across the boundaries of IORs. Rather than the use of Social Identity Theory (SIT) found in prior studies, which assumes the stability and crystallization of identities (e.g. Salk and Shenkar, 2001), Zhang and Huxham (2009) favour a 'process' approach influenced by social constructionism which views identity as fluid (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) and identity construction as a dynamic discursive process.

Relatedly, it is common to embrace a discursive approach to analysis which, unlike research undertaken under the umbrella of SIT, focuses 'primarily on the constructive effects of conversations in which participants describe themselves…' (Hardy et al., 2005: 62). Ellis and Ybema (2010) also advocate employing a discourse analytical view in analyzing social life in the ambiguous and dynamic context of IORs where actors are engaged in the construction of a ‘tellable’ marketing story which ‘narrates boundaries, relations, agency and identities’ (Simakova & Neyland, 2008: 96). An accompanying sensemaking perspective is prevalent, where discourse analysis is utilised to ‘unpack’ the linguistic constructions of network actors and to appreciate how this talk may help to perform market relations (Ellis et al., 2012) as participants make sense of their world(s). Such practices can be explored through the identification of ‘interpretative repertoires’ in participants’ discourse (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), where these are defined as broadly discernible clusters of terms, descriptions and figures of speech that are socially shared linguistic resources that individuals draw on to construct and project versions of reality.

Reflecting the nested interplay between different notional levels of identity noted earlier, some network scholars have illustrated how interpretative repertoires function to, variously, assert a positive national identity, stress a sense of connection to or distance from a particular organization or community, or legitimize the self. For instance, as Ellis and Hopkinson (2010: 414) point out, an ability to draw upon, deploy and communicate certain types of knowledge (or theories) ‘legitimizes one as…, for example, a credible sales manager. Thus the production and display of particular forms of knowledge is at once a sensemaking act and an act through which identity is claimed’. Similarly, Hopkinson and Aman (2017: 306) view identity as not essentialist, and interests as not authentic; rather these are discursively constituted (cf. Lok & Willmott, 2014). This allows them to explore the production of meaning, and the construction of identity, in discourse that ‘evades complete fixation and yet makes available particular subject positions… through which lives are experienced’.

Hopkinson (2015) uses media data to trace contests amongst ‘antenarratives’ (Boje 2001). Use of such data, rather than data generated specifically in the context of the research, allows her to explore how powerful actors define what may be and may not be told here and now in a public arena. She examines how certain actors assert a claim to speak and have an ability to gain an audience, whilst the inclusion and exclusion of particular ‘others’ shapes networks. Hopkinson (2015) develops the metaphor of graffiti to conceptualize how certain narrators (or ‘graffers’) define the dominant story and how others seek to reshape or uproot that story. Hopkinson (2015: 313) argues that researchers should seek to trace the negotiation of meaning in narrative processes as this will help us ‘to study organizations as participants in sensemaking in broader society and overcome a tendency to see, or at least treat, the organization in isolation’.

Other studies that draw on SIT have begun to relate identities to networks. For example, Stoyanov (2018) shows how Bulgarian migrant entrepreneurs can become embedded in a diaspora network. His study is arguably more about ‘networking’ than the processes that we have discussed thus far and is set more firmly within the social identity tradition. Nevertheless, Stoyanov (2018:376) reveals a dynamic embedding process illustrating the ‘reflective nature of identity regulation between insiders and outsiders, as informed by the diaspora structure’, thus providing a further example of how identities matter in networks. Salk and Shenkar (2001:162) examine identities in a limited form of network as they explore an international joint venture (IJV). As they put it, ‘IJVs engage at least three organizations – the IJV and parent firms – that serve as potential sources of identity’. They argue that the role of national origins and other identities in sensemaking deserves close attention in such inter-organizational networks. Although they take a traditional social identity theory approach, which is not necessarily one that we would adopt, they thereby recognise the significance of both individual and organizational levels of analysis when considering identities in this network.

In a much-cited paper, Foreman and Whetten (2002) survey members of rural co-operatives, in a sample containing both farmers and non-farmers, and organizations providing a range of support for and involvement in co-ops in what we would term a network. They argue that ‘members are likely to identify not only with their local organization, but also with its encompassing organizational form’ (2002: 622). They suggest that ‘the legitimacy of an organizational form [in this case a cooperative] is partly a function of the degree to which that form’s key identifying characteristics are congruent with its surrounding institutional environment…’ (ibid). Whilst arguably an outlier within this chapter in terms of methodological approach, Foreman and Whetten’s (2002) study does expand extant understanding to encompass multiple identity organizations, with co-ops embodying elements of both ‘business’ and ‘family’ identities (cf. Wells et al., 2018). Thus, the types of approaches above have facilitated an increasingly nuanced understanding of identities, boundaries and networks in organization studies.

Summary of extant work on networks and identities

As we have previously observed, ‘it seems likely that we will find intense boundary work and identity work … performed at the notional boundaries of organizations and marketplaces’ (Ellis et al., 2010: 230). This chapter has attempted to capture prior studies of this identity work predominantly in the context of the networks that are manifest in the relationships between various organizations, both commercial and non-profit.

We believe studies that embrace some notion of networks, supply chains and markets in exploring identity can both enhance and converse with the wider identity field in organization studies. We have highlighted work that addresses diverse types of network contexts encountered by boundary spanners. The review has shown that boundary spanners do, indeed, engage in identity work, but that they do so from a particular position of liminality where the tensions of identity become amplified, allowing for the examination of the often vulnerable self. Hence, in their identity work, boundaries oscillate as they seek to define who counts as 'the other', identities are revised according to the counterparts they are interacting with, different identity levels are juxtaposed and particular characteristics activated to legitimize their role in cooperation. The picture emerges of incoherence and irresolution in identity work as central to interactions across organizational boundaries. Despite the many tensions in identity work, that are accentuated for boundary spanners, the literature also regards the construction of identity as critical to effective performance in IORs and to how the employing organization is positioned in the network. This identity work is, therefore, fundamental to opportunities and constraints available to the organization.

The literature is increasingly recognizing constraints on the production of self-identity and the role of others in the network in defining who one is. This is especially evident in work that has examined organizational fields that span the global North/South; and we have argued that the study of identity work in such contexts provides a basis to understand the linkages between individual, organizational and global relations. Additionally, recent work points to actors who have particular potency in shaping the identity of network actors despite not, themselves, being directly involved in commercial exchange. Important and consequential questions about power and agency, and the role of identity within those questions, are thus emerging from the studies we have reviewed.

As well as noting why the study of identity in networks is important, we have outlined some of the different ways of thinking about identities and networks, particularly discursive and narrative approaches. These have been applied to a host of network contexts, including sectors such as agri-food and automotive supply chains, the mining industry, nano-technology, construction, non-profit institutions, health sector collaborations and IJVs. At the national level, studies have encompassed developed and developing countries/regions including Australia, Israel, India and Africa. At the organizational level, the identities of indigenous SMEs, MNCs, retailers, environmental enterprises and co-operatives have all been explored. Finally, at the individual level, previous studies have highlighted the identity work of marketing and purchasing managers, sales people, entrepreneurs, knowledge workers, farmers, cultural intermediaries, rural women and scientists.

A research agenda for networks and identities

We share Brown's (2015: 33) view that the notion of identity work can do much to bridge levels of analysis in organization studies research. His call for more studies that 'investigate the relationships between identities and their interactions between individuals, dyads, groups, organizations, professions and communities' resonates with our own network-orientated perspective on identity. The work summarised in the current chapter suggests that more research is required, building on extant studies and exploring new areas related to identities and networks.

In advocating further work in this area, we believe that better understanding of identities constructed across organizational boundaries may contribute also to a fuller understanding of identities in other work contexts. Several studies indicate that the nature of contemporary work will accentuate the number of different boundaries encountered by individuals. Ibarra and Obodaru (2016: 59), for example, point to the increasing salience of identity work for a modern workforce that needs to embrace a global outlook and work across a variety of boundaries. Petriglieri et al. (2018: 3) employ a 'systems psychodynamic' approach to explore how independent workers 'manage emotions associated with precarious and personalised word identities'. Drawing on Van Maanen and Schein (1979), their study sheds light on alternative understandings of independent work that leaves individuals with no 'inclusion boundary'.

A study of the expanding field of similarly precarious knowledge workers shows how these individuals contract services to a variety of employers and exist 'in the in-between' (Fenwick, 2007: 521). Fenwick further, in a description that resonates with our understanding of identity work in IORs, explains how these workers 'created networks and submersed themselves in these networks, but did not dissolve in them: their sense of identity in both their knowledge and their modus operandi was linked to a source of values and personal purpose located outside the organization' (ibid). We therefore believe that the tensions of identity that this review makes evident within IORs promote these contexts as a fertile ground to develop insights with implications for identity scholarship more generally.

Finally, the discombobulating implications of 'temporary organizations' may merit further exploration at both the individual and organizational identity levels. Under such network conditions, where three or more organizations interact for a fixed period, identity work is occurring within a situation of 'institutionalized termination' (Lundin & Söderholm 1995: 445). Thus Van Marrewijk et al., (2016: 1748) suggest that a temporary organization, such as a large-scale construction project, may constitute 'a context where order and permanence are not self-evident, particularly when collaborating actors design an unusual and diffuse hierarchy'. This network context may build tensions via struggles over emerging roles which affect the sense of self of boundary-spanning participants.

These concluding observations suggest that greater acknowledgement of the boundaries encountered and constructed by individual workers, managers and other actors in IORs and networks should facilitate valuable insights into issues of structure and agency within identity work (cf. Ybema et al., 2009) both in and indeed in-between organizations.

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