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Full paper submission for **Track 8: Identity**

**Title:** Identities as organizational practices: the case of informal lunchroom meetings

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**Summary:**

Identity has been widely acknowledged as playing a central role in various organizational processes, yet there is still a need to better understand the dynamics and functions of identity work in modern organizations. The present paper is centered within this concern, and examines identity as intersubjective by nature and as a member's phenomenon. We do so by conducting a video-based investigation of an informal lunchroom meeting at a place of work, and analyze how divergent identities of a manager gets evoked and negotiated in constructing diverse alliances among colleagues. Our aims are to: 1) reveal the intersubjective, multimodal and embodied nature of identity work; 2) demonstrate identity work as organizational practices, used in order to accomplish specific actions; and 3) pose a question on the view on identity as a layered/leveled phenomenon.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Identity is “a powerful, motivating force in organizations today” (Oliver 2015). As such, it has gained increasing attention within organization studies during the last decades (Alvesson, Ashcraft & Thomas 2008; Ravasi & Canato 2013), as seen in for instance special issues in *Human Relations* (2009: “Constructing identity in organizations”) and *Scandinavian Journal of Management* (2012: “Identities in Organizations: processes and outcomes”). While identity has been widely acknowledged for being central for organizations’ value creation (Oliver 2015) and for understanding organizational processes (Brown 2015), there is still a need to better understand the dynamics of identity (Alvesson & Willmott 2002). Identity dynamics relates to different organizational functions and tasks, such as controlling (Alvesson & Willmott 2002), building employee relationships (DeRue & Ashford 2010) and reproducing and translating institutional logics (Lok 2010), and the present paper places itself within this concern. Specifically, it examines how divergent identities come in contact with each other, and how they are interactively negotiated by means of organizational practices. We do so by conducting a video-based investigation of the multimodal, embodied and interactive nature of managerial identity work during an informal, lunchroom meeting at an organization. The paper’s aim is to uncover the intersubjective and multimodal nature of identity work, to demonstrate identity work as organizational practices that people use in order to accomplish specific actions (topic management, organizational alliances), and finally, to question the existing discourse of layered/leveled organizational identities.

## 2. IDENTITY AS ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICE

In today’s organizations, identity is no longer a stable asset, but it is a resource and practice for achieving various organizational goals. One such perspective is seen in the layered view of identity. In this view, a distinction in different levels of identity is used ranging from the individual, and the collective to the organizational level (Oliver 2015). Concerning the individual level, the focus is on how the individual’s activities construct a concise picture of oneself, while collective identity relates to a level that is influenced by and influences groups (e.g. organizations). When it comes to the organizational level, both top-down (the organizational identity exists irrespective of individual members) and bottom-up (individual members shape the organizational identity) approaches are seen, which are frequently integrated in the organizational process (Oliver 2015, pp. 225-336). These divisions allow a reflection on how various identity levels differ from and impact one another in order “to create, maintain and change organizational identity” and consequently impact the organizational image (Hatch & Schultz 2002, p. 989). Yet, the question about how to best understand the individually grounded, dynamic and processual nature of identity as an organizational practice across various levels remains.

Identity as a layered phenomenon is deemed a challenge by others, who have proposed an alternative perspective of identity as ongoing dynamic constructions. These scholars advocate for a more constitutive and discursively grounded view on identity (Clarke, Brown & Hailey 2009; Costas & Fleming 2009). Consequently, there rises a larger focus on identities as being accomplished or “worked on” (Coupland & Brown 2012, p. 1) by the involved organizational members. The term “identity work”, which was originally coined by Snow & Anderson (1987) to uncover individuals’ solo work on identity, has now been proposed to describe the ongoing identity constructions in organizations in an attempt to bridge between different levels of analysis (Brown 2015; LeBaron, Glenn & Thompson 2009). Accordingly, managerial identity is no longer understood as an individual asset, but a co-constructed outcome and practice and a complex

interplay between a self-reflexive process and interaction with others (Clarke, Brown & Hailey 2009; Down & Reveley 2009; Wajcman 2004; Watson 2008). What underlies these studies is a view of the non-coherent, dynamic and individually grounded nature of managerial identities.

This perspective correlates to the conceptualization of identity work as an ongoing organizational practice, and thus corresponds to the recent turns to practice in the social sciences in general (Schatzki, Cetina & Savigny 2001) and various managerial and strategy related disciplines in specific (Nicolini 2013). The growing attention to, and increase in, practice-based studies within organization, management and strategy studies (Golsorkhi et al. 2015) has been described as “a reaction to a previous marginalization of the study of ‘work itself’” (Nicolini 2009, p. 1391). A focus on actual work practices necessitates empirically based micro-analyses of authentic organizational phenomena, and such analyses have provided significant insights into the local, intersubjective and turn-by-turn accomplishment of organizational, managerial and strategic work (Asmuß & Oshima 2012; Nielsen 2009; Svennevig 2008). The current paper - while being aware of the potential risk of “micro-isolationism” (Seidl & Whittington 2014) which is the lack of effort by micro-analytical studies to try to relate local findings to a larger organizational context and/or social and organizational phenomena, - responds to an emerging call for revisiting organizational phenomena as practices and investigate identity as locally accomplished recurrent organizational practices. In other words, we take the position that identity is not a state. Even individual identities cannot be performed by individuals alone, but instead worked on and accomplished as individuals communicate with others.

In response to this processual and level-bridging view on identity, there has also come a greater awareness on the researcher’s role for understanding the phenomenon at hand. Based on an assumption that the field of organizational identity for many years has been pre-occupied with how to conceptualize organizational identity, a number of scholars point to the need for critical reflection and a higher degree of transparency in regards to research methods to study organizational identity (Ravasi & Canato 2013) – especially when a reflexive accomplishment like identity “requires also that researchers be appropriately reflexive in their analyses” (Coupland & Brown 2012, p. 3, but see also Ybema et al. 2009). One way to accomplish this is the use of observation method. A vast majority of studies on identity so far has been built on interview data. Down and Reveley (2009) point to this dominance of interviews for studying identity and stress its risk of studying interview texts alone without being able to place them in context. Building upon Goffman (1990; 1967), they claim that acknowledging the situatedness of interaction is essential for understanding the situational influences on identity construction. Accordingly, they propose direct observational studies of those individuals the researcher wants to study (Down and Reveley 2009, p. 398). Using a complementary observational method will allow a study to highlight the context sensitivity of managerial actions (see also McInnes & Corlett 2012; Ybema, Vroemisse & van Marrewijk 2012).

In regards to the recent, abovementioned move of using observations in studying organizational identity, one field of specific relevance is that of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis (EMCA). Identity has been studied by ethnomethodologists and conversation analysts for many years both in everyday and institutional settings (Antaki & Widdicombe 1998a; Heritage & Clayman 2010; LeBaron, Glenn & Thompson 2009). What underlines these studies is the fact that identity is more than a product or a process, but it serves a purpose and “is *used* in talk: something that is part and parcel of the routines of everyday life, brought off in the fine detail of everyday interaction” (Antaki & Widdicombe 1998b, p.1). As such, a great number of EMCA studies looked into how various social actions are accomplished through the evoking and negotiation of identities under a range of categories such as nationality (Nishizaka 1995; Mori 2003; Stephen & Housley 2002), gender (Hopper 2002; Kitzinger & Rickford 2007), family (Raudaskoski 2010), professional expertise (Ekström & Lundell 2011; Torras 2005), specific community (Cade 2012; Rautajoki

2009), and at times two persons exhibiting their belongingness, i.e. couple (De Stefani 2013; Mandelbaum 1987), just to name a few. These studies demonstrated not only people's strategic use of identities, but their competence in employing various verbal, vocal and embodied resources in doing so.

Naturally, many EMCA studies have also approached organizational issues by way of revealing the organizational members' moment-by-moment identity work, especially by studying one recurrent activity at work: meetings. For instance, meeting participants may mark their utterances with individual pronoun ("I") to highlight their official roles – thus not to distance their individual identities from the organization, but quite contrary, to embed their identities within the formal organization (Fasulo & Zuccheromaglio 2002). Another study on business meeting participants explored the role of laughter at the time of complaining (Vöge 2010). The study points out that organizational seniority and superiority is not a given but must be displayed, negotiated and achieved, and evoking laughter can play a significant role in such identity work - and overall, human relations at work. Similarly, Djordjilovic (2012) argues that teams within an organization need to be "activated" through talk, nodding, and body and gaze orientation. Her analysis shows that meeting members draw upon their individual institutional roles for supporting each other and thus for team displays. What these studies commonly indicate is a fuzzy, or even non-existing, border between different levels of identity within organization. Rather, participants freely, but in a very sophisticated way, draw upon various "levels" of identities in organizing relevant organizational actions and activities.

The current paper, also placing itself within an EMCA tradition, aims to pursue this line of identity work: identity as intersubjective by nature and as a member's phenomenon. While many have focused on such identity work during formal meetings, we investigate informal meetings, namely lunchroom meetings at work. Here, participants do a number of different things such as eating lunch, socializing, doing being at work, doing not being at work, and doing taking a break from work, and in so doing, they orient to and make relevant a number of different identities. At the same time, lunchroom interaction is not as informal or unexpected as other informal occasions such as chatting with colleagues you run into on the corridor or at a copy machine. In that sense, lunchroom gatherings can have some shared features with a definition of meeting proposed by Boden (1994): "a planned gathering, ..., in which the participants have some perceived (if not guaranteed) role, have some forewarning (either longstanding or quite improvisational) of the event, which has itself some purpose or 'reason', a time, place, and, in some general sense, an organizational function" (p. 84). As such, we find this non-default organizational setting complex, diverse, and at times ambiguous, thus a valuable place for studying the emergence of identities by means of organizational practices.

### **3. DATA AND METHOD**

Our data come from a medium-sized U.S. design company that has just – at the time of data collection – gone through a merger with another, bigger company. This change has affected the employees, who frequently complain about the many changes that have taken place. After successful contact with the company, the first author started recording interactions in a room that the employees (i.e. user experience designers and researchers) informally, regularly and voluntarily get together for lunch (as opposed to another, more official lunchroom equipped with a kitchen). The data was collected over 14 days, where the researcher set up the camera in the room right before lunchtime and left as the employees started entering the room. There was only one camera available for recording, and at times it failed to capture faces of certain participants and/or certain

angles of a participant. However, the participants often adjusted the position and angle of the camera themselves to maximize the visibility of their behaviour, and in general, the recordings sufficiently captured the participants' verbal, vocal and nonverbal practices. Because not everyone showed up every day, the amount of participants varied day by day, ranging from two to nine participants. The segment of focus in the current paper is taken from the ninth day of recording, where one of the managers, Manuel, made an unusual appearance at the lunchroom.

Our analysis focuses on how various identities of the manager get evoked and negotiated in constructing diverse alliances among the members through the use of multimodal resources, and we adopt the method of ethnomethodology and conversation analysis in analyzing this multimodal interaction (Heath 1997; Jarmon 1996; Mondada 2007; Stivers & Sidnell 2005; Streeck, Goodwin & LeBaron 2011). Ethnomethodology and Conversation Analysis (Sacks, Schegloff & Jefferson 1974; Sidnell 2010) provide a methodological apparatus specifically well-fitted to understanding the "foundations of organizing" (Samra-Fredericks & Bargiela-Chiappini 2008, p. 665) and micro aspects of organizational practices (Nicolini 2013), as they rely on authentic talk-in-interaction and uncover the intersubjective nature of social practices. In the field of organization studies, this method is often referred to as microethnographic approach (Gylfe et al. 2016; LeBaron 2008) that enables us to capture the various modalities of social practices as locally accomplished in time and space. By means of microethnography, it becomes possible to investigate the fine-grained verbal, embodied and material practices that constitute strategic and organizational work (Gylfe et al. 2016) in general and identity work (Brown 2015) in specific.

With our focus on the participants' use of multimodal practices, we focus on "the systematic practices used by participants in interaction to achieve courses of collaborative action with each other" (Goodwin 2000, p. 160). In light of this, we rely on a fundamental tool of conversation analysis, the "next-turn-proof-procedure":

throughout the course of a conversation or other bout of talk-in-interaction, speakers display in their sequentially 'next' turns an understanding of what the 'prior' turn was about. That understanding may turn out to be what the prior speaker intended, or it may not; whichever is the case, that itself is something which gets displayed in the next turn in the sequence. We describe this as a *next-turn-proof-procedure*, and it is the most basic tool used in CA to ensure that analyses explicate the orderly properties of talk as oriented to accomplishments of participants, rather than being based merely on the assumptions of the analyst [emphasis in original] (Hutchby & Wooffitt 2008, p. 13).

This point also draws attention to another crucial element of microanalytic investigation, transcribing, which "provides the researcher with a way of noticing, even discovering, particular events, and helps focus analytic attention on their socio-interactional organization" (Heath & Luff 1993, p. 309). All data were transcribed according to conversation analytic transcription conventions that were developed by Gail Jefferson (1989). In order to document material and embodied actions, we use the system developed by Goodwin (2000). These selected descriptions of visible actions are provided and set within double parentheses.



8 SUR: so did Manuel give you any scoops (.) so far?  
 ((SUR looks at MANU)) ((SUR looks at ETH)) ((SUR looks at MANU))  
 ((ERI looks at SUR)) ((ETH and MANU look at SUR))  
 ((MANU puts down his fork))  
 ((SUR suspends chewing, but is talking with food in his mouth))

9 (0.4) ((SUR resumes chewing, smiling; MANU chews overtly))

As soon as their conversation about a specific food trailer closes down (lines 1-6), Surya launches a new topic (line 8): because he and Bjorn came to lunch later than the others, he asks if Manuel had given any inside information to the rest of the group. He does so jokingly, also smiling right after his utterance (line 9), which might show his orientation to this question as a sensitive one due to the current company situation (i.e. the company had just gone through a big merger and the employees have been complaining about the many changes that have taken place). Also, in this situation, Manuel is the only one who represents the company management, and they all know that Manuel holds some information that the rest do not have access to. Surya's question evokes this organizational asymmetry between Manuel and the rest of the employees present.

As seen in Surya's gaze (line 8), Ethan appears to be the expected next speaker. But this question can also be inviting Manuel to share some sensitive information, and in fact, Surya also looks at Manuel while producing his utterance. How do Manuel and Ethan work with this topic shift and the evoked identity of Manuel?

Manuel lets pass the opportunity to immediately build on this identity work initiated by Surya, and he does so with a combination of multiple practices. First, he displays his unavailability as an imminent speaker by way of eating: Manuel had taken a bite right before Surya produces his utterance (line 7), and starts making overt chewing movements immediately upon Surya's question (line 9). Noticeably, however, Manuel also puts down his fork (line 9), indicating that he is to suspend eating. With these practices, he presents himself as preparing himself to speak but as not yet able to do so due to his current involvement with the bite of his food. In other words, while he does not interrupt or reject the possibility of this topic to potentially develop (and thus his own identity as the superior), he neither contributes to the topic progression nor the formation of division between Manuel and the rest of the group.

On the other hand, Ethan has not been eating but only playing with his drink, and then, he answers Surya's question.

10 ETH: °um°, (0.2) hhhh hehehehe not at a:ll  
 ((ETH shifts gaze from SUR to his drink; MANU looks toward ETH)) ((MANU looks back at SUR and says something?)) ((MANU wipes his mouth with napkin))  
 ((SUR bends backwards and back, smiling))

11 ( ): .hhh=

12 SUR: =↑hh hh ↓hhhh=  
 ((SUR bends backwards and back))



- 21 SUR: how long, (.) bu[t you've been here for long?  
 |  
 ((MANU looks up, as if he's about to speak))  
 ┌──┐  
 │ ((MANU swallows more food)) │  
 └──┘  
 ┌──┐  
 │ ((SUR suspends chewing, but is talking with food in his mouth)) │  
 └──┘
- 22 ETH: [um,
- 23 MANU: I've been here for twelve years.

Having seen that Manuel is slowly moving from not being available to being available as next speaker, Ethan now asks a question about Manuel, indicating that he holds some knowledge about Manuel (line 18). Ethan's move here further shifts the topic to a less delicate matter, an easier question for Manuel to answer topic-wise (instead of sharing company "scoops") and also format-wise (since this closed question allows him to easily confirm with the food in his mouth). But at the same time, this action now makes relevant an inquiry of Manuel's personal information, and in turn becomes a resource for Surya to further pursue this line of inquiry (which contributes to identifying Manuel as the new organizational member, thus a division between Manuel and the group). Note that Manuel's actions foreshow his imminent speakership: he swallows his food, and crosses his legs to further place himself away from the table (line 18), his utterance ends with a continued tone, indicating more to come (line 19), and he looks up as if he is about to continue his turn (line 21). However, he is still not yet done with his eating (chewing, lines 19-20), and Surya uses this room to build on Ethan's utterance to further make relevant this line of inquiry (line 21). His question not only pursues the current topic and indicates his limited knowledge about Manuel (thus a shorter collegiality), but also functions to publicly construct an alliance between himself and Ethan, thus an asymmetry between themselves and Manuel.

When Surya asks him the follow-up question, Manuel swallows again (line 21), and answers the question (line 23). Here, Surya's utterance was repaired from an open question to a closed one (line 21), thus Manuel could have simply answered with yes or no, which would have been a resource to indicate his occupation with food in his mouth. Instead, he produces a full statement in response, which indicates that he's now – compared to before – available as speaker, and that he is ready to contribute to the progression of the current topic.

Therefore, the identity that got evoked – Manuel as a relatively new organizational member – is now more clearly put forward along with the context that the group does not hold knowledge about Manuel. This identity work is pursued further when Manuel's answer is followed by Ethan's clarification question, as seen below.

- 24 ETH: oh. (0.3) here in Houston or just here?  
 |  
 ((ETH starts straightening/repositioning the straw))
- 25 (0.2) ((MANU swallows his food))
- 26 ETH: [°here in Texas.°
- 27 MANU: [here in Houstin. (.) no, here in Houstin.
- 28 (.)



## 5. DISCUSSION

The current study highlights the locally-grounded nature of identity work, and two points in relation to this nature were especially observable in our analysis. The first aspect is the multimodal nature of identity work. On a turn-by-turn basis, organizational members evoked, negotiated and settled identities, and they did so by making use of verbal, embodied and physical resources. The central lunchroom activity of eating was shown to become a resource for the organizational members when negotiating divergent identities: they made use of the eating related actions of taking a bite, chewing and swallowing in negotiating their willingness and ability to engage in a verbal identity building action. Acknowledging the locally-grounded, fine-grained multimodal nature of identity work is central for deepening our understanding of how identity work is accomplished and practiced in organizations. The second aspect is the intersubjective and sequential nature of identity work. Our study demonstrates that identity work is not a subjective matter placed in the individual organizational member, but that identities are intersubjective in nature. They are the ongoing accomplishments of various organizational members in jointly working to create mutual understanding. Capturing the intersubjectiveness of identity work highlights the fact that identity work is interdependent on, enabled and constrained by the local interactive moves of all the involved organizational members.

The current study goes beyond uncovering the local nature of identity work, as it also demonstrates identities as resources. Identity work is not only about creating identities, but it is also about accomplishing various social actions. For example, our analysis showed that identity work was closely related to topic progression. Different from formal meetings, where topic negotiation can be legitimized with reference to the agenda (Asmuß & Svennevig 2009), participants in lunchroom interactions do not have such resources for negotiating relevant topics. Instead here, the invoking of various identities (manager-employee, co-tellers, co-questioners, new/old employees) served as a major resource for the participants to ensure topic progression, and simultaneously, the work on topic progression enabled the emergence of various identities. In other words, organizational members oriented to identity work and topic work as being interdependent. In addition, identity work is also a resource for building various alliances. Our analysis demonstrated that divergent identities were not the cause of disagreements or disaffiliations, but they were the interactional stepping stones for structuring topic progression and for smoothly navigating within the overall activity of having lunch together while being at work. Building convergent identities with some of the present organizational members, while invoking divergent ones with others, was thus a resource for building various alliances that were closely related to and informed by the topics at hand. A resource and intersubjective view on identity work thus enables a deeper understanding of the complex and dynamic nature of who we are and what we seek to accomplish when being in organizations – and ultimately, reveals the micro-foundations of human relations at work.

On a final note, the current study questions the layeredness of identity work as proposed by divisions in organizational, collective and individual levels respectively. If identity work is a members' phenomenon that is based in the local, situated actions made by individual members (as shown in our analysis), then the distinction into different layers might not only be a distinction in terms of layer, but also a distinction in regards to whose concern we are dealing with. While the individual level concretely can be identified as a members' concern, whose concern are the collective and organizational levels? Are they also the members' affair, or the researcher's, or someone else's? Such questions call for a reflection on whose concern identity work is, and which perspective and phenomenon we are pursuing.

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