Making Use of Organizational Identity:

Icons as symbolic identity proxies

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        Organizational identities serve important functions for an organization's members as a collective. Although the functions that organizational identities serve are critical to the organization's overall ability to understand and direct itself, identities can be hard to articulate, hard to externalize and hard to share. However, using symbols to represent the organization's identity can facilitate making claims about the organization's identity and making decisions through "identity-referencing discourse" (Whetten, 2006). Moreover, organizational identity can have a stronger influence when symbols are used as its proxy, because symbolic proxies make it easier for members collectively to articulate, externalize and share identity beliefs and claims. This paper identifies key functions of organizational identity and explains the difficulties inherent in making claims and having conversations directly about the organizational identity *per se*. I introduce the construct of an organizational icon, a human personification used to represent what members believe defines the organization. I propose that the organizational icon not only facilitates basic functions of organizational identity but also adds to the overall usability of organizational identity. To illustrate the ideas and their implications, the paper draws on practices and consequences of using an organizational icon as an identity proxy at the (pseudonymous) Heartland Corporation.

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"The issue of identity is a profoundly consequential one, and at the same time

so difficult that it is at best avoided" (Albert & Whetten, 1985, p. 265).

Organizational identities can be surprisingly useful. Organizational identities -- the organization members' collective beliefs about what defines their organization – serve organizations and their members in a variety of ways. Organizational identities provide clarity about who the organization is, provide explanations for why the organization is this way (Albert & Whetten, 1985), provide direction for how organizations should behave, explain and justify (retrospectively or prospectively) organizational actions (Whetten, 2003), and facilitate strategic decision making (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Dutton & Penner, 1993; Fiol, 1991). Organizational identities offer their members a collective meaning (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991) and organizational identities help to align organizational subgroups, functions, and stakeholders around a shared definition of who the organization is and what distinguishes it from other organizations (Glynn, 2000; Scott & Lane, 2000).

At the same time that organizational identity can be powerful for organization members to use, organizational identity can also be difficult for organizational members collectively to access. It can be very difficult for organization members to "get a handle on" their collective beliefs about what defines them as an organization, because organizational identity beliefs can seem too abstract, too "internal", and too difficult to share. Therefore, questions about organizational identity and conversations about organizational identity surface most often when

an organization is under pressure, when it is threatened, when it faces a serious decision (Albert & Whetten, 1985), or when other external or internal organizational events create "identity ambiguity" (Corley & Gioia, 2004) that members collectively feel they must resolve. At these times, the potential usefulness of a shared understanding of what defines the organization makes it worth members' efforts to articulate their beliefs in identity claims and to engage in what are often difficult conversations about why, how, and when organizational identity should influence their interpretation of a situation and their choices of action. If organizational identity is difficult to use when questions of identity have been piqued by dramatic organizational circumstances, then it is no surprise that organizational identity is even more difficult to use on an everyday basis. If we understood how to make organizational identity easier to use, we could take advantage of what it provides for organizations not only at times of crisis but also at times when demands for collective self-understanding are less dramatic. And, if there were ways to keep organizational identity more accessible for members, organizational identity could be invoked more frequently and be more useful overall.

Only recently has it occurred to scholars that if organizational identity could be made consistently salient, a constant awareness of organizational identity might increase organizational effectiveness (Ind, 2001). Recognizing the potential usefulness of an "always on" organizational identity, practitioners have encouraged organizations to engage in "corporate branding" (Hatch & Schultz, 2004; Schultz, Antorini & Csaba, 2006). Corporate branding, broadly speaking, is the process of designing and implementing organizational systems that focus members collectively on the corporation' s defining attributes (or identity) so that shared beliefs about "who we are as an organization" create alignment and focus across an organization that enhance the organization's ability to execute. "Corporate branding is a process by which an organization

continually asks itself the Universal identity questions that can propel it forwards as a competitive and innovative organization" (Schultz, Antorini & Csaba, 2006, p. 10). Corporate branding is essentially a set of organizational practices for explicitly invoking and employing identity beliefs throughout the organization space on a constant basis.

One way to increase the salience of organizational identity is to pepper the organizational context with organizational identity triggers or reminders -- symbols, artifacts, and processes -- to remind organizational members of what collectively defines the organization. Intentionally and unintentionally, organizations can surround themselves with reminders of the attributes that define them and that are important to them. These symbols and processes, including the architecture of an organization's headquarters, external communications (such as annual reports, Vinal-Yavbetz & Rafaeli, 2006), corporate logos (Baruch, 2006), products (Cappetta & Gioia, 2006), CEOs (Glynn, 2004) and more, can be used symbolically to remind and reinforce collective beliefs about what defines an organization. These artifacts, when considered as expressions or demonstrations of an organizational identity, can take on the authority or power to act "as" the organization identity for the members as a group and serve temporarily as identity proxies. For example, an organizational task force deciding on the design for a new corporate headquarters might compare and analyze three different architects' models, using these visual renderings to focus a larger conversation about "what really defines this organization?" and "how can this organizational identity be expressed physically in our design choice?".

While making an organizational identity consistently salient seems like a useful tactic, the tactic is predicated on the assumption that organization members are consistently *able* to make use of their organization's identity. Organization members need to be able to surface, articulate, communicate and negotiate their shared beliefs about what defines their organization

in order to make use of it deliberately. This paper draws on the case study of one organization, the Heartland Corporation, that used a shared symbol to represent their collective beliefs about the organization's identity. Using this symbol not only made their organizational identity more consistently salient, it also made it easier for them to use. The symbol was their organizational icon, Carrie King. Carrie King was a "made to measure" human character whose personality attributes and personal biography as the fictive founder of Heartland symbolically embodied their collective beliefs about what defined them as an organization.

The story of how and why Heartland developed a fictitious founder is described elsewhere (Harquail, forthcoming). Here, I use Heartland's experience with their icon Carrie as a jumping off point for considering the ways that symbolic proxies for organizational identity, such as an organizational icon, can help members make use of their organizational identity. I address some basic functions that organizational identities provide for members as a collective and I speculate on how using symbolic proxies might expand the usefulness or functionality of organizational identity beliefs.

The Basic Functions of Organizational Identity

Defining organizational identity. There are many definitions of organizational identity currently in use (Corley, Harquail, Pratt, Glynn, Fiol, & Hatch, 2006; Ravasi & van Rekom, 2003). This paper takes as its starting position that organizational identity is a self referential, collective phenomenon that is the result of social construction processes. Organizational identity is composed of members' beliefs about what they think defines their organization's central, continuous, and distinguishing attributes. These beliefs reside in the collective's consciousness and sub-consciousness (e.g., Corley, 2005; Hatch, 2005).

Organization members engage in the collective processes of "organizational identity creation" (Scott & Lane, 2000, p. 45). Organizational identity creation processes are conversations and "events through which organizational identity becomes specified" (Scott & Lane, 2000, p. 351) through organizational identity claims. Organizational identity claims are statements about who or what the organization "is" (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Organizational identity claims are often made during organizational identity-referencing discourse, discussions about how, when, and why an organization should act in a certain way because of its identity (Whetten, 2006). For there to be a collective organizational identity (hereafter simply 'organizational identity'), there must be conversations and behaviors through which beliefs about identity are made salient, communicated, elaborated, and shared.

After two decades of robust conversation about organizational identity, scholars and managers have a general sense of the functions that organizational identity fulfills for the organization members as a collective, but as yet these functions have not been summarized in one place. Here, I take the preliminary and albeit provisional step of outlining three important categories of organizational identity functions. I propose that organizational identity functions as a means of (1) Constructing the members collectively as a single unit with a collective "self", (2) Framing collective self-understanding and (3) Providing direction, coordination, and control. Just as individuals use their self-concept or identity to satisfy basic existence needs as well as social needs (Baumeister; 1986), organization members collectively use organizational identity to satisfy their shared need to define themselves as an entity, to establish collective meaning, and to construct a link between their self understanding and their collective behavior.

Constructing the members collectively as a single unit with a collective "self". A coherent, shared sense of "collective self" enables groups and collectives to act as a unit, impute

motives and objectives for this unit, and to consider this unit as having decision-making capacity and responsibility (Czarniawaska, 1997; Whetten & Mackey, 2002). But how can a group of many understand itself to be acting as one? For an aggregate or group to act as "an organization", they have to resolve this question, the so-called "collective actor problem" (Whetten & Mackey, 2002). By virtue of talking about "who we are" as though "we" were a single unit and not an aggregation of individual participants, a collective constructs its sense of being a unified actor. Discussing "who we are" establishes entitativity, the quality of a group being bonded into one unit (Cambell, 1958; Likel, et al., 1998). Entitativity is a fancy name for the profound ontological shift from a collection of individuals to a single unit. Once entitativity has been established, an organization can act as a collective.

Having constructed themselves as an entity, organization members need to establish a sense of organizational "selfhood". They need to make another ontological shift from being an entity to being an entity with a relatively coherent and continuous "self". This shift also has a fancy name, ipseity. Ipseity is a perceived and constructed ontological status that allows members to understanding their organization as the subject of "its own" inquiry, as an entity that can be self-reflexive. When organizations discuss "who we are" and "why we should act", they endow their collective self with the capacity to be self-reflexive and thus make it possible for their collective self as an entity to be moral, just, and accountable. An organization's entitativity and ipseity make self-direction and self-understanding possible, and this ontological status is created by the acts of identity claims and identity-referencing discourse.

Framing collective self understanding. Organizational identity provides members with a way to make sense of and navigate the ambiguous clutter of organizational life (Fiol & Huff, 1992; Weick, 1995). Organizational identity, as a shared belief, results from members

collectively sifting through organizational attributes to select attributes that are central, continuous and distinguishing from those that are not, so that they arrive at the specific subset of organizational attributes that define them. Then, this definition serves as a shared point of reference for the collective. Because attributes that define the organization are more important than attributes that do not, organizational identity establishes priorities within the organization about which issues, situations, actions, etc. are important and which are less so (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). Organizational identity also guides the collective towards situations, issues and perspectives that are identity-consonant, so that organizations avoid or even ignore altogether interpretations that are identity inconsistent.

Organizational identity claims also frame collective self-understanding by explaining and justifying organizational actions. Organizational identity allows members to attribute to the organization the capacity for value judgments and for justifications of what is appropriate or inappropriate action for the organization. Organizational identity claims provide "the ultimate whys" (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Whetten & Mackey, 2002) that are invoked in organizational discourse (retrospectively or prospectively) to link the defining characteristics of the organization with the organization's behaviors.

Providing direction, coordination, and control. Organizational identity can provide direction, coordination, and control for organizational actions because claims about what defines the organization tell members about the organization's distinctive features and capabilities. When organizations use identity as a guide to what they are able to do, organizational identity can help members locate solutions and opportunities, invoke standard processes and procedures, and establish success criteria (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991).

Organizational identity claims can be experienced as organizational imperatives (Whetten, 2006) that indicate how the organization is expected to act. Organizational identity claims are also used as 'directives' for organizational behavior because they suggest what the organization is and is not capable of doing, and thus provide structure to strategic decision making (Dutton & Penner, 1993). Identity not only frames and filters members' interpretations but also constrains their choices of possible action (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Fiol, 1991). In this way, organizational identity serves as "a normative vision (that) constrains what sort of action is possible to envision" (Kogut & Zander, 1996, p. 516). Referring to an organization's identity can provide a kind of normative control on organization members' collective points of view and choices of action. Organizational identity claims make consistency possible, when organization members adjust their interpretations or recalibrate their perspectives by referring back to the organization's defining attributes.

A less-frequently explored function of organizational identity is that it can orient and direct an organization towards issues and actions through which it can express its self-definition. This function is less about constraining or controlling action than it is about moving toward situations where the organization can experience mastery, authenticity and collective self-expression by acting in ways that demonstrate what defines it.

Organization members and organizational subgroups can align themselves with each other by organizing around a collective organizational self-definition. In this way, organizational identity claims help to coordinate different facets of the organization. Just as conflicting interpretations of the organizations identity can prevent subgroups of organization members from coming to a consensus about the right course of strategic action (Glynn, 2000), aligned

interpretations help each part of the organization understand its appropriate role in pursuing the organization's goals.

The Challenge of Using Organizational Identity in Everyday Practice

Picture a group of organization members, from all different parts of the organization, sitting together in a conference room in front of a flip chart. Imagine giving them the task of writing a statement that summarizes what they collectively believe are the central, continuous and distinguishing attributes that define "who their organization is". What do you think would happen? In all likelihood, and according to empirical reports (Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997; Glynn, 2000; Albert & Whetten, 1985), organization members will recognize that referring to organizational identity could be valuable but will struggle with actually generating, understanding and agreeing upon a set of shared organizational identity claims.

Despite organization members' confidence that their organization has an identity, and despite organization members' implicit faith in their organization's identity to help them make sense of themselves as an organization, members can be stymied by the challenge of actually talking about their organization's identity (Diamond, 1993; Harquail & King, 2003; Olivier & Roos, 2004). Organizational identity is a slippery phenomenon for organization members to capture, to communicate with each other, and to examine critically together. Organizational identities can be difficult to articulate, difficult to challenge or evaluate, and difficult to share, because organizational identity beliefs can be/feel too abstract, too complex, too difficult to anchor, and too subjective to articulate effectively or to address directly.

Scholars investigating situations where organizational identity claims have been evoked have focused most often on how identity is expressed, shared, and constructed through language, speech acts, words and conversation (Fiol, 1991, 2002; Hatch & Schultz, 1998; Rindova &

Schultz, 1998). In empirical studies, researchers have usually ascertained an organization's identity by aggregating the verbal statements about the organization's identity made by many individuals (Harquail & King, 2003; Olivier & Roos, 2004), by observing and analyzing group conversations (e.g., Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997; Glynn, 2000; Corley & Gioia, 2004), and/or by reading managerially-produced statements about the organization's identity (Corley & Gioia, 2004). And, empirical research has often emphasized the specific words used to define the organization, which creates additional problems when these words are labels, such as "non-profit" or "for profit," that are used to condense richer, more complex linguistic construals of organizational identity into simple categories (e.g., Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997; Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Much information about identity beliefs is lost, and some information is never captured.

There are many theoretical and empirical challenges related to the role of language in expressing and constructing organizational identity. (See Gioia, Corley & Schultz, 2000 for a discussion). The basic concern is that even though organizational identities can be created, expressed, and made manifest through collective organizational behavior, by strategic acts (e.g., Harquail & King, 2003; Whetten & Mackey, 2002), by physical signs and symbols (Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Schien, 1984; Stern, 1988), and by products (Cappetta & Gioia, 2006), the meaning of these other expressions is still interpreted, negotiated, and shared through language. This puts much weight on organization members' ability to articulate their shared beliefs and to conduct effective conversations about them. Beliefs about the attributes that compose the organization's identity need to be sought, evoked, put into words and shared, all before organization members can have a conversation about them or employ them explicitly in sensemaking or decision making.

Using Symbols to Facilitate Identity Claims and Conversations

Although using organizational identity can be difficult, challenges related to accessing organizational identity beliefs, articulating these beliefs and identity claims, and holding identity-referencing conversations can be eased when members take advantage of shared objects, practices, artifacts, and symbols as tools to represent collective beliefs about organizational identity. Simply defined, a symbol is something that stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, convention or accidental resemblance (Pratt & Rafaeli, 2001). Artifacts and symbols carry meaning from the "deep recesses of cultural understanding to the cultural surface" (Hatch & Schultz, 2001, p.387). The cultural artifacts and symbols within an organization can be used intentionally and unintentionally to express members' beliefs about the organization's identity (Dandridge, 1983; Hatch, 1993; Hatch & Schultz, 1997; Rindova & Fombrun, 1998).

It is surprising that more research has not been conducted specifically on the relationship between organizational symbols and the organization's identity, because it is well-known that organizations put much effort into representing their corporate (external) identity symbolically (e.g., Olins, 1989, 1995; Rindova & Fombrun, 1998) and it is understood that organization members draw on the organization's externally directed image-making efforts to construct their own individual and collective understandings of what defines their organization (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Elsbach & Glynn, 1996; Hatch & Schultz, 1997, 2000, 2001). Yet, research on organizational symbolism has rarely addressed how organization members collectively symbolize their self-definition. Cappetta & Gioia (2006) suggest that early research on artifacts and symbols suggested that artifacts would merely be superficial tools (Schien, 1984) for understanding identity. In contrast, argue Cappetta and

Gioia, artifacts "not only act at an obvious surface level but are less obvious although essential conduits for understanding the deeper processes that affect identity and image" (p.200).

Until quite recently the only available discussion of symbolic representation of organizational identity *per se* was a book chapter about the symbolism of a founder and a logo (Stern, 1988). This chapter focused on the relationship between the founder's qualities and the content of the organization's identity and did not address the processes or implications of working with a symbol of organizational identity itself. The publication of Rafaeli and Pratt's (2006) book, *Artifacts and Organizations,* has introduced research by Baruch, Cappetta & Gioia, and Harquail that addresses the role of logos, products and brands in constructing internal and external beliefs about what defines an organization.

This paper takes that research one step further, to consider how symbols can be used specifically and explicitly as representations of organizational identity. I focus on one particular kind of symbol, a personified human character that not only helped to construct beliefs about the organization's identity but also was used explicitly to represent their self-definition to themselves. By being invested with the attributes and values that were believed to define the organization and then being used to expressed them, the character became an "organizational icon". The term *icon* originates from the Greek word *eikon,* meaning "image" or "reflection". Icons are objects or persons that have acquired additional social meaning so that they stand for and refer back to a set of abstract concepts (Panofsky, 1939; Sternberg, 1999). By using this character as a proxy for their organizational identity, the organization made it easier to think about, articulate and discuss their identity together.

Introducing Heartland's Organizational Icon, Carrie King. On an executive retreat early in the company's third year, Heartland's executive team decided to invent for themselves a

brand icon - a character whose personality and biography would help to organize, distill and personify the brand identity of Heartland's products. They wrote a story about Carrie King, the woman who founded Heartland, describing who she was, what she valued, how she came to start Heartland, and what she wanted for Heartland's customers. Executives hoped that employees throughout the organization could refer to the brand icon when they made decisions affecting the brand. In this way, they could align decisions about the brand across different organizational functions and strengthen the relationship between the product, the brand identity, and the presentation of the brand to achieve consistency across product lines and across distribution points. The brand icon was intended for use within the organization, and never was used as a public face to represent the products to retail customers.

Carrie King is the fictional founder of the Heartland Corporation. Carrie is the thirty-something mother of two, born in a farming town in Missouri. As a teen, Carrie earned pocket money selling her homemade jams, pies and specialty breads at her family's produce market. As a young mother, Carrie started a small business selling similar "home-made" foods under the Heartland brand name. The business was so successful that she opened her own stand-alone store, the Heartland Gourmet Shop. Four years later, when her business had grown to 4 stores and 35 employees, she sold it to a group of investors who expanded the business to 600 stores nationwide within the first 10 years.

To communicate Carrie's story easily throughout the organization, a marketing director summarized what had been developed at the retreat. The resulting 10 page book described how Carrie started the business, how she learned to cook, how she met her husband, why she moved back from New York City to St. Louis, what she liked to eat and wear, and what values were important to her. The executive team worked to refine Carrie's story so that it captured,

elaborated upon and emphasized the attributes that they wanted for Heartland's brand identity. Later, Carrie's story was translated into a video that was shown at new employee orientation and at corporate events.

The booklet and the video were originally used as reference tools by product managers and creative staff. At marketing meetings, product development discussions, photo shoots, and when discussing retail presentation of products, the executives and marketing department employees referred to this document to help clarify and refine the brand attributes they were trying to express in the product, packaging, copy, and retail store appearance of Heartland brand products. In addition, Heartland decorated their physical building with "dramaturgical props" (Goffman, 1959; Pratt & Rafaeli, 2001). Dramaturgical props are images, objects, words, artifacts, and other symbols that manipulate aspects of a physical setting to create a particular impression. In this case the impression was that Carrie was present, symbolically, everywhere in the organization. For example, the entire wall behind the receptionists' desk at the corporate headquarters was covered with a photographic mural that depicted the farmhouse and fields where Heartland's original offices were purportedly located.

Carrie as a proxy for organizational identity. Carrie was understood to represent what defined Heartland and what it stood for. Each employee that I spoke with described Carrie as embodying the attributes that were important for defining the Heartland Corp. As one manager explained, "the values of the Carrie are almost verbatim from what anyone will tell you are the values of the organization." (MS) And, as the CEO put it quite succinctly, "Carrie IS Heartland".

The most prominent organizational behavior suggesting that Carrie was being used as a proxy for the organization's identity was that, instead of asking themselves the questions "who

are we as an organization, and how should be behave?", Heartland's members asked themselves

instead "what would Carrie do?". "What would Carrie do?" was asked consistently whenever

organization-wide issues were being considered. The idea that Carrie had come to represent

what defined the organization itself was borne out in the ways that organization members

appropriated Carrie and her story to explain their expectations of the organization and to explain

organization-wide decisions that were neither relevant to the brand nor particularly dramatic.

For example, Carrie was used to explain why the organization had their cafeteria sell "carry out"

dinners that employees could take home to feed their families, as well as why they had a dry

cleaner and a nail salon in their headquarters building.

> Carrie understands what it's like to be a working mother -- a working
>
> parent -- and she wants to make it as easy as possible for all of us to take care of
>
> day-to-day things too. And, Carrie knows that sometimes you just need a nice
>
> manicure and as a treat."(AH)

Having Carrie as an organizational icon gave Heartland a way to capture, cohere and

begin to surface the intrinsic and ineffable attributes that defined their organization, and gave

them something to talk about as they sought collectively to articulate and understand who they

were as an organization. Carrie and her story functioned as a tool for constructing meaning and

provided a "centering narrative" (Boyce, 1995) that enabled Heartland members to shape, revise

and enact their organizational identity.

How an Icon Makes Organizational Identity Easier to Use

Why would organization members use a symbol as a proxy for their organizations

identity rather than referring directly to the organizational identity itself? I argue that an

organizational symbol, specifically a human characterization such as an icon, makes it easier for

organization members to surface, put into words, and critically examine their collective beliefs

about themselves as a group. An organizational icon can help members recognize, clarify, and

articulate otherwise abstract organizational identity beliefs. The icon can help to externalize the

organization's identity, making it easier to examine beliefs and less threatening to discuss them.

And, an icon makes it easier to share beliefs about the organization across groups and across

time.

An organizational icon can help members recognize, clarify, and articulate

otherwise abstract organizational identity beliefs. Organizational identity "honors the

ineffable" (Albert, 1998, p.3), because members' collective beliefs about what defines their

organization elude easy capture and description. The attributes that are central, continuous, and

distinguishing of an organization can be difficult to access and to put into words. Thus it can be

quite difficult for members to articulate their beliefs through organizational identity claims.

Organizational identity beliefs elude easy description when they are habitually taken for

granted, held as tacit, or implied rather than regularly attended to and expressed. As Gioia (1998,

p. 282) notes, "Organizational identity tends to be tacit knowledge. For that reason it is

sometimes inaccessible." Organizational identity beliefs may remain tacit for long stretches of

time because the dramatic situations that call for beliefs to be made explicit are infrequent. As

Albert & Whetten (1985) explain, issues of organizational identity are salient mostly in times of

organizational crisis or profound change. During the regular course of organizational life and

outside of these dramatic situations, identity beliefs lie in abeyance, below the surface of

collective salience and attention. And, when organization members are "out of practice" at

uncovering and calling forth their identity beliefs or at making identity claims, these beliefs can

be come all the more difficult to accesses. However, because "symbols carry us beneath the

object of surface organizational life, into the underlying value structure and feelings inherently there" (Dandridge, 1983, p.71), symbols can help members excavate deeply held beliefs.

Organization members need common lexicon for describing their beliefs so that these beliefs can be shared. Sometimes it is just hard to find the right words, in the right combinations, to articulate deeply held beliefs adequately. Organization members may not have in their common lexicon a word that captures a belief adequately and so they make do with synonyms and combinations of words that approximate but may not fully express their underlying belief. In addition, "the complexity of organizational identity makes a simple statement of identity impossible" (Albert & Whetten, 1985). There are relationships between defining attributes that may be hard to represent verbally. For example, if the organization has a hybrid identity, how are these two different forms expressed in succinct, coherent identity claims? (Forman & Pratt, 2000) It is critical that organization members make there tacit knowledge explicit so that all their understanding can be shared (Nonaka, 1994). When identity beliefs are abstract, vague or complicated, organizational identities can be difficult make this knowledge explicit by turning it into effable claims.

When organizational members collectively agree on the terms that they use for particular identity attributes, the shared meaning of these words may still be abstract or unclear, and these words may incompletely or inexactly convey what the members intend. What exactly does it mean to be a moral company? Does it mean the same to us as it does to you? Finally, even with agreement on the terms, it may still be difficult to translate these abstract attributes into behaviors, norms, values, and decisions that are concrete and specific demonstrations of these identity attributes. The task of moving from abstract constructs or attributes to specific behaviors is difficult.

Translating abstract identity beliefs into a symbol, particularly a human character like Carrie, can help members with the work of "articulation". Technically, articulation is the process of taking an abstract idea and breaking out all of the steps needed to translate that idea into specific attributes, concrete practices and products (Strauss, 1988). Through articulation work, knowledgeable actors (i.e., artifact producers) embed institutionalized understanding into concrete artifacts and practices that are then used to help focus and direct collective action (Kaghan & Lounsbury, 2006). The icon was created through a process in which Heartland managers translated the abstract attributes that they believed defined Heartland into Carrie's personality. The specific mode of articulation work they relied on is personification. Personification is the process of translating abstract qualities into human attributes and attaching them to a particular character, so that the character can be used to represent these abstract qualities efficiently (Zinkhan, 1993). Therefore, personality attributes and life story episodes can create a common lexicon for talking about organizational identity. The idea that an organization's identity can be understood through the metaphor of human personality is not uncommon in organizations, and the strategy of characterizing an organization through personality variables has been used in empirical research on identity and reputation (Davies, Chun, da Silva, Vinhas & Roper, 2001; Olins, 1989).

Personifying their organizational identity beliefs in Carrie also served to simplify a complicated assortment of Heartland's defining attributes into a more coherent, dense set of attributes. Symbols can be used to condense a large amount of meaning into a smaller representation (Eoyang, 1983), and Heartland managers condensed and organized what Carrie could represent by knitting her defining attributes together through a narrative life story.

Through personification, the organization can be anthropomorphized. Another term for personification is "character mask"; creating Carrie allowed organization members to define their organization as having a human "character", with values, emotions, morals, and so on. Rather than basing the organization's beliefs, desires, and goals on those of the collective, these were given to the organization itself (Gillet, 1993). Translating organizational identity directly into human attributes reinforces the idea of ipseity, allowing the organization's "collective self" to be represented by a character with a "real" self -- Carrie.

Using Carrie to represent the organization's identity shifted the ontological status of the organizational identity from something people believed in to something that had an actual existence. Talking about Carrie, depicting her, and invoking her were all ways of turning organizational identity from something abstract to something more specific or material. Talking about Carrie served as a way to reify collective organizational identity beliefs. Carrie not only existed, she could be apprehended by the senses; she was tangible. Carrie was more readily comprehensible by the mind, more substantial, and more directly evident than the identity beliefs themselves. Carrie had been made tangible through the translation of her attributes and life story into a range of physical artifacts, through book about her life, through the video, and through all of the additional ways in which Carrie was expressed symbolically throughout the organization.

Some of Carrie's tangibility comes from the "objective" facts about her. The apparent factuality of these details, the way that they are presented as unbiased, objective, material fact it's about who Carrie is makes her tangible. Moreover, facts such as Carrie being female, American, a wife, a mother, with a background in botany, and so on are material facts that are not themselves mutable. They do not go away or change over time. While the interpretations of these facts or what they are thought to imply about Carrie might change, the facts themselves

remain. By remaining these facts offer something relatively concrete and objective for organization members to talk about.

Using the icon to represent organization's identity allowed members to take advantage of the icon's relative tangibility. Consider this explanation by a marketing manager:

> Have you seen the video? If you show the video to an associate (employee), it's like this transformation happens to them. … They just get it. And so suddenly, all these documents that talk about the brand vision and pages and pages of what we stand for, it's like "I get it. I see it. I know what I have to do." (MS)

Moreover, the act of using Carrie makes her come alive and be real in that moment. When organization members are actively talking about Carrie as though she were real and as though she had these this personality, this life story, these values, and so on, the conversation instantiates her at that moment in time. Instantiation leads to feelings of Carrie's tangibility (or at least verisimilitude). Also, when members are actively talking about Carrie, collective understanding is instantiated and members experience in this conversation a "state of collective mind" (Kagan & Lounsbury, 2006, p. 265). It is in this way that using Carrie is a proxy for the organization's identity helps individual members experience the collectivity, the shared-ness, of their understanding of the organization.

Proposition One: An organizational icon can help members recognize, clarify, and articulate otherwise abstract organizational identity beliefs.

By virtue of having worked through an articulation process that surfaced and put words and stories around their collective beliefs, the executives created a strong foundation for future

efforts to articulate the organizational identity. Instead of starting from a blank slate and asking the question "who are we", other organization members could consider the relationship between the organization's identity – as represented by Carrie-- and the issues facing them with much of this initial articulation work already done. With this foundation, organization members could focus on updating, considering the specific situation, and solving local issues, without reverting all the way back to the initial identity question. An already-articulated organizational identity, as represented by Carrie, jumpstarted other efforts to invoke the identity. Although it was once messy and difficult to articulate identity beliefs, having Carrie allowed members to pick up where the managers left off without redoing the excavation work. The organization already had a basic lexicon and a draft or their identity that could be edited and expanded to fit the current situation.

An icon helps members to externalize their organization's identity, making it easier for them to analyze, critique and modify their shared self-understanding. Organizational identity is a concept that is "about" the specific collective of people trying to come up with it. That is, organizational identity is a property of the collective, not something produced to be placed outside of the collective. In some ways, because organizational identity is about the collective, it ought to be easy for them to talk about. After all, who would know more about their shared beliefs than the collective itself? But, it can also difficult to talk about our collective selves, especially when the conversations address negative attributes, conflicts about the collective's attributes, or challenges to things that one or many members hold dear. This is why conversations about organizational identity during a crisis can be so weighty and emotionally laden (Albert & Whetten, 1985, p. 266).

Because "organizational identity is an unobservable subjective state" (Whetten, 2006, p. 221), it must be expressed or articulated through verbalized identity claims rather than by demonstrating or pointing to the attribute itself. Therefore identity claims are arguments rather than facts; claiming what defines an organization is "a political strategic act" (Albert & Whetten (1985, p. 268). Talking about organizational identity can be problematic because organizational identity is a subjective collective belief that is built in part and interpreted from individuals' subjective personal beliefs. When we consciously recognize that beliefs are subjective, these beliefs become vulnerable to challenges of credibility, partiality, instrumentality, and politicking. When a member articulates an identity claim, she may be seen by others as sharing her *opinion*, not so much a fact about what defines the organization.

In contrast, using the icon as a proxy for organizational identity facilitates a sense of objectivity (i.e., being rational, free of bias, based on facts rather than opinions). Claims about the icon can be considered, evaluated, or contested from a distance, from an external vantage point that provides what seems like a more objective perspective, since everyone is looking at and evaluating the same object. Representing organizational identity through an icon makes it look as though the beliefs are beyond the control of any one individual. In this way, using the icon as a proxy makes it easier to sustain the fiction that the collective's beliefs are not overly influenced by the views of one or some members.

The icon allows claims about the organization's identity to be externalized, put outside of the collective, and attached to Carrie. Attached to something unobservable, these claims could be more easily challenged because their reference -- the proof of what they claim – cannot easily be demonstrated or displayed. When the focus of an identity referencing conversation is the icon, the icon's attributes can be used to substantiate identity claims. For example, Carrie cares about

using organic and quality ingredients in her products, because she is a mother. Focusing on the icon rather than on the identity beliefs *per se* serves to change the perceived source and focus of identity claims (Glynn, 2004).

Changing the perceived focus of an identity conversation can be helpful in other ways. Sometimes organization members get annoyed at conversations about organizational identity, arguing that it is just collective "navel-gazing". Some people find it very frustrating to participate in conversations about "who we are as an organization" because it seems to focus too much on defining terms and not enough on considering appropriate action.

Organizational identity beliefs may be difficult to address directly because discussing an organizational identity can evoke strong emotions (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Glynn, 2000). Identity beliefs are deeply held, and when they are challenged people can perceive the challenges as threats to what they hold dear. They can respond defensively by getting distressed or angry. And, when individuals make identity claims that are challenged, these challenges can be experienced as personal attacks on that individual's credibility. Having a critical conversation about organizational identity has the potential to be very difficult emotionally.

Focusing on the icon when invoking issues of organizational identity can help to create a sense of emotional remove. The icon can serve as the object in object-mediated inquiry (Edwards, 1986; Barry, 1994), a form of inquiry that enables participants to communicate more effectively with each other about abstract or contentious issues. In object-mediated inquiry, people focus on and talk about an object that represents the issues rather than talking about the issues themselves (Burgi & Roos, 2003; Harquail & King, 2003). When objects are used as the focus of a difficult conversation, individuals are able to project onto the object some of the thoughts or qualities that they themselves hold, sending away from themselves any negative

attributes and attributions and attaching them to the object. This process helps to deflect individuals' anxiety about the topic of the discussion at hand because it helps people feel less self-conscious about what they say and less defensive in responding to what others say.

For individuals to resolve conflicts about the definition of their organization's identity they need an effective process for reconciling differences. Carrie as an icon facilitates "good fights" among managers (Eisenhardt, Kahwajy & Bourgeois, 1997) by keeping disagreements from getting too personal. At Heartland, when individuals disagreed on the direction the company was considering, they fought about "what Carrie ought to" rather than about what we (you and I) ought to do. Disagreements focused on the shared understanding of who Carrie was and what Carrie stood for rather than becoming head-on disagreements on what the organization stood for.

Perceptual and emotional distance from members' own organizational identity is created when their conversations focus on differentiating themselves from referent other organizations. Members use these other organizations as foils for clarifying their organizational identity, and can sometimes avoid being specific about themselves or getting contentious over details by paying more attention to the object against which they are distinguishing themselves. (See Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001 for a discussion of this process at the individual level). A symbol such as an icon can also serve as a foil, and using an icon as a foil can be particularly effective when the issue at hand is not about what distinguishes the organization from others but is instead about what is central and enduring -- "what is important about us that matters in this situation?"

Proposition Two: The icon helps to externalize the organization's identity, helping make identity claims seem objective and offering members perceptual and emotional distance that can reduce conflict and distress.

An icon helps members share organizational identity across the organization and over time. For organizational identity to be a useful framing tool across the organization, the specifics of the identity need to be shared widely at one time. The general problems of conveying and sharing the meaning behind the terms used in identity claims are somewhat mitigated when identity conversations occur within a shared cultural context. This shared cultural context supports a shared interpretation among individuals because culture provides additional data for fleshing out a fuller interpretation of identity claims (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). However, members from different parts of the organization may have different subcultures, experiences, perspectives, and subgroup interests that lead to differences in the ways these same claims are interpreted and understood (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Rafaeli & Pratt, 1997). To share meaning across subgroups, organizations need tools and processes for reconciling discrepancies in interpretation that might be created by differences in location, perspective, and expertise.

For organizational identity to be a useful framing tool over time, it must be easy to share with new members as well as with current and longer-term members. Beliefs about organizational identity can be difficult to share over time because the organizational situation may change over time. And, it can be difficult to recount or remember a full understanding that was developed at a previous time. Even when identity statements are written down, the meaning of the words when they were written and the meaning of the words when they are repeated at later time can be different in important ways (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000). Sometimes this difference can facilitate adaptation over time, but also it can make it more difficult to sustain normative control and direction over time. For an organizational identity to be effective across

an organization for more than a brief period, a reasonably constant shared understanding needs to be evoked and conveyed time after time.

An icon makes it easier to share beliefs about the organization's identity across the organization, because of the nature of symbols in general and the features of an icon in particular. In addition to symbols' ability to help articulate, simplify, enhance and externalize meaning, symbols can help to make information relatively more reliable, transferable and transformable.

Reliable. Carrie is expressed in several modes, many of them quite tangible. The physical or tangible nature of the icon, the fact that her story is expressed in words, videos, objects, and even the organization's branded products, made it easier for organization members to refer to shared expressions of Carrie. They could talk with each other about what they saw in the video, knowing that everyone had seen the same video, and they could literally point to lines in the book to share a thought. The many different articulations of Carrie and her story, the written book, video, and various physical objects, provided organization members with many different ways to access her shared meaning. If the book was unavailable, photos of Carrie's kitchen might serve to communicate an idea. Having several related yet different expressions of Carrie created "symbol redundancy" (Pratt & Rafaeli, 2001) that reinforced a system of messages about what Carrie stood for.

Transferable. An important challenge for sharing information in an organization composed of many local contexts is not so much a problem of having enough information, but rather a problem of how the way that one group sees a situation is represented to other groups (Carlile, 2004). How robust is the representation? Can a common understanding be created across sites and across time? Carrie's meaning was rather robust because her attributes were

expressed in her life story, written down in a book, captured through a video, and expressed through physical objects that remained relatively stable and unchanging. Therefore, Carrie as a symbol was portable across place and time. Each time the video was shown individuals across the organization saw the same expression or articulation of Carrie, her meaning, and her relationship to Heartland.

Because these tangible expressions of Carrie could be easily reproduced, communications about Carrie could be made quite reliable. For example, the video about Carrie's life story was shown throughout the Heartland Corporation, not only to the marketing department but also to the distribution department and the cafeteria workers. The video was also shown at new employee orientation, at their annual meeting and at occasional product launch meetings. At each of these times, members watching the video saw the same story about Carrie, the same description of her and the same explanation of why she mattered to Heartland.

The fact that these expressions of Carrie were repeatable meant that the meaning of Carrie as a symbol could be reinforced over time, because members could see the same expressions or articulation of Carrie again and again themselves. This permits individuals to remember Carrie, to have the meaning of Carrie reinforced in their minds, to call back up again the same emotions that they had perhaps the first time that they saw Carrie, and also to deepen their understanding of Carrie. Moreover, the fact that these expressions of Carrie were reliable meant that organization members could store information in these expressions of Carrie -- almost forgetting about some specific attributes or episodes -- until this information was needed. Reading the book again or viewing the video again could help them retrieve that information at a later time (Eoyang, 1983). And even though a symbol's meaning will be reinterpreted by those

that receive it, when a symbol moves beyond the culture that created it some of its original meaning is still embedded in and carried by that artifact (Hatch & Schultz, 2001).

Transformable. To discuss organizational identity and develop shared understanding that incorporates different viewpoints and new information, organizations need a way to represent different interests, facilitate negotiation, and allow members jointly to transform organizational identity beliefs. Carrie provided a concrete means for working out these challenges. First, an important feature of Carrie was that every organization member had a basic understanding of how to use her to communicate with other organization members. As a human character, Carrie was a familiar kind of object to interpret, respond to, and understand. Every organization member had some ability to understand another person's personality, to interpret their life story, and to anticipate how another person might respond to situations. The idea that Carrie was another person also made it possible for organization members to empathize with her and imagine their selves in her shoes (Gillett, 1993). Unlike reading a blueprint, for example, understanding another person does not require any special expertise or training. Members could use Carrie to represent new ideas as well as new interpretations about what defined the organization, to experiment with how these attributes could be expressed through organizational decisions and behaviors, and to consider the implications of proposed changes. And, with each use of Carrie, members got more skillful at using the tool and better at discussing issues of organizational identity.

Proposition Three: An icon makes it easier to share beliefs about the organization across groups and across time because it helps to make information relatively more reliable, transferable and transformable.

Additional Value of Using the Icon as a Proxy for Organizational Identity

As the organizational icon, Carrie has features that may make using her as a proxy for the organization's identity even more valuable. First among these is that representations of Carrie could be displayed visually. Each time organization members encounter a visual display of Carrie, the symbol triggers the set of cognitive meanings associated with her. Displaying Carrie helps to keep her and the organization's identity salient for individual members, and when these visual symbols are broadly displayed, Carrie and the organization's identity are salient throughout the organization. Another advantage of visual displays of the icon is that visual symbols are more likely to be perceived by organization members as part of their own immediate experience, rather than as part of a managerial perspective that is imposed upon them (Hatch & Schultz, 1997). To the degree that this is true, organization members may experience the organizational icon as something that is their *own* expression and thus as an even more organic and authentic expression of what defines them as an organization. Even though managers created Carrie, she is used by and belongs to everyone.

As an object that is an external representation, Carrie is something outside the group that can serve as a tool for reflecting back their collective self-definition. An icon is a self referential expression of what the organization is telling itself about itself, part of a symbolic process called auto-communication (Broms & Gahmberg, 1983). Auto-communication focuses, reinforces, and generates enthusiasm about the messages it represents, and thus may serve to reinforce organizational identity beliefs.

As a personification with a life story, an icon like Carrie is a symbol that invites elaboration. Carrie's meaning can be developed and somewhat "managed" by intentional efforts. It is easy to add chapters to her story that expand her personality, her experience, her perceived

expertise and her overall meaning. In addition to intentional elaboration, Carrie accrues

additional meaning just by being used. Symbolic elaboration happens unintentionally as a

symbol is used in different situations and becomes associated with what is experienced in those

situations. Symbols not only remind their users of original meanings but also generate new,

additional meanings and associations with each use. The additional meaning they accrue can

include both an increased quantity of information and a deeper quality of information. The

ability to elaborate upon the icon is important, because elaborating can update the icon's capacity

to facilitate conversations about novel information and situations (Carlile, 2004). Elaboration can

help maintain an alignment between the icon, what she represents, and the collective beliefs

about the organization.

How does symbolic elaboration square with the idea that symbols of organizational

identity can help sustain consistency? Because Carrie is "human", a little change or growth over

time is appropriate and maybe even expected. Organization members understand how people

change. Individuals' core selves, their personality and their values, remain relatively stable even

as specific expressions may change. Therefore, members could assume that even though Carrie

changed, this was due in part because she was growing or learning as a person and also in part to

their deeper knowledge of her.

Potential Downsides of Using an Icon as a Proxy for Organizational Identity

There are, of course, some potential downsides to using an icon such as Carrie as a proxy

for an organizational identity. Organizations can unintentionally misuse symbols and artifacts as

a result of misunderstanding or under-appreciating the many levels at which symbols work. One

important "artifact error" (Vinal-Yavetz & Rafaeli, 2006) occurs when organization members fail

to recognize the full complexity of an artifact's meanings. In these situations, organization

members may recognize the content of what the artifact represents, but fail to understand the number of ways that the symbol or artifact is being used collectively used. For example, at the Heartland Corporation, managers understood the content of the symbolism that Carrie represented, but they failed to recognize that Carrie served as a target for the personal identification of individual members. Thus, when a new CEO arrived who wanted to shift the product line away from the "homemade" attribute that was shared with Carrie and more towards an "international, luxury gourmet treat" theme, the CEO directed the building manager to remove the wall-sized photograph of Carrie's farmhouse from the corporate reception area. The CEO was quite surprised at the impact that removing just one representation of Carrie had on organization members, who began to share the concern that Carrie was being taken away from *them*. The CEO had failed to consider that employees would be distressed by this single change in Carrie's organizational presence.

Another concern is that the organization might get distracted by the icon and begin to ignore the organization itself. The icon may be so attractive or so much easier to use that the organization comes to focus its collective attention on the symbol of the organization's identity rather on the organization's defining attributes. If the organization focuses too much attention on the icon, the icon may become overly-elaborated or even fetishized. Elaborating upon the icon's functionality, aesthetics, and/or symbolism might help keep the icon attractive and well-articulated, but also it might keep organization members busy adjusting their symbol at the margins while important organizational changes receives inadequate attention. Members may get so caught up in using the icon that they forget to stay mindful that the icon is a proxy for something else, not the end in itself.

Over-attention to the organizational icon may facilitate organizational narcissism (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). When organization members focus on only internal influences or expressions of their identity, they can become detached from or inattentive to the way others –particularly external stakeholders -- see the organization (Hatch & Schultz, 2001; Brown & Starkey, 2000). Overuse or uncritical use of the organizational icon for decision-making may also lead to a kind of dysfunctional "strategic persistence" (Hayward & Rindova, 2004). Organization members may display overconfidence in the correctness and efficacy of their actions and interpretations of the icon, because these actions and interpretations are linked to prior success in using the icon.

Directions for Future Research

This preliminary effort to explore the ways in which symbols might serve as proxies for organizational identity and help members make use of organizational identity more explicitly suggests several future research directions. These future research directions include: (1) how different levels of an organization make use of organizational identity, (2) whether or how a salient organizational identity is useful on an everyday basis, (3) exploring the variety of symbols that could be used to represent organizational identity to consider how different features of a symbol affect its ability to be used as a proxy, and (4) the dynamics and processes of using symbols as organizational identity proxies.

The range of functions that organizational identity fulfills for the organization's members could be expanded and developed further. Considering what proxies provide for members as a collective begs the questions of what they might provide for members as individuals, and for the organization as an entity operating in an inter-organizational environment.

Future research could also consider the notion that an "always on" organizational identity is helpful or even desirable for an organization. Are organizations more effective when their

organizational identity stays salient, or is it better to have clarity about organizational identity but to be less self-conscious by allowing identity beliefs to remain below the surface of collective consciousness most of the time?

Scholars could also explore how different symbols are used to represent organizational identity.   Because this discussion has addressed the specific symbolic features of an organizational icon as a human personification, this discussion has considered only a limited range of representational possibilities. How do the specific features and type of a symbol influence its usefulness as an identity proxy? Consider for example that Carrie is a fictional character; how does her nature as a fiction rather than a real person influence her use and effectiveness as an identity proxy? Are real human founders or CEOs simply different symbolic proxies for organizational identity (e.g., Glynn, 2004; Rindova, Pollock, & Hayward, 2006), or are they somehow better? And, how might real, non-CEO human icons serve as identity proxies? Considering symbols other than personifications, how might symbols like logos, buildings, and products serve as organizational identity proxies? (How) can can they fulfill the basic functions of organizational identity and also make organizational identities easier to use?

A significant limitation in this discussion is that it focuses only on the internal processes related to organizational identity and does not consider the role of feedback from outside stakeholders about how they perceived the organization. A fuller treatment of the role of identity proxies would also address how symbols used internally by members are influenced by information about the organization that the collective receives from organizational outsiders. How would this information affect the internal symbol and its use?

A related limitation is that, while Carrie at Heartland addresses only the internal audience, other symbols that could serve as identity proxies, such as logos, products, celebrity

spokespeople and brand icons, address both internal and external audiences (cf., Elsbach & Glynn, 1996). How does the use of a symbol directed simultaneously at two or more audiences influence the articulation, expression and negotiation of shared identity beliefs? The question of how the role of a symbol as an identity proxy might be complicated when that symbol is used both internally and externally should be addressed in future research.

The usefulness of an icon as a proxy of the organization's identity rests on the authority and authenticity that the icon has as a representation of shared beliefs. There must be some attention paid to sustaining the relationship between the icon and the identity it is intended to represent. How members can collectively sustain this relationship without getting caught in the very difficulties the icon is intended to avoid is an important question for future research.

The idea that making use of organizational identity can be made easier when symbols are used as proxies has several implications for students of organizational identity. Most basic is the recognition that organizational identity can be represented by proxies—symbols, people, icons, logos—that facilitate the use of beliefs about what defines the organization. Identity is certainly influenced by direct reflection on "who we are" that is prompted by events created by managers, induced by unanticipated crises, and required for negotiation with a broader group of stakeholders. In addition to these influences, scholars should look not only for specific "identity generating events" (Scott & Lane, 2000) but also for identity generating and identity maintaining symbols, as well as other kinds of tools for accessing, articulating, sharing, and negotiating beliefs about organizational identity. If indeed organizational identity serves important functions for organizations, then investigating how organizations might facilitate these functions could prove quite interesting.

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