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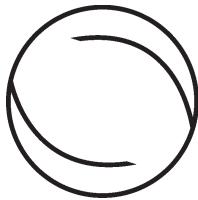
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Abstract

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In this article we examine the process of organizational identity formation in emerging industries. We argue that organizational identity is best understood in terms of the relationship between temporal difference (i.e. the performance of a stable identity over time) and spatial difference (i.e. by locating organizational identity in relation to other firms, both similar and different). It is the relationship between these two forms of difference that enables the construction of a legitimate sense of organizational identity. Our discussion is illustrated using empirical material from a study of the emerging industry of business coaching in Australia.

Keywords: organizational identity, business coaching, emerging industries, industry formation

Introduction

In his essay on 17th century cryptographer John Wilkins, Borges (2000/1964) alerts us to a ‘certain Chinese encyclopaedia’ called the *Celestial empire of benevolent knowledge*. In this encyclopaedia,

‘it is written that the animals are divided into: (a) belonging to the emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, (h) included in the present classification, (i) frenzied, (j) innumerable, (k) drawn with a very fine camelhair brush, (l) et cetera, (m) having just broken the water pitcher, (n) that from a long way off look like flies’. (p. 103)

In terms of any contemporary understanding of animals, John Wilkins’ distinctions appear quite odd – irrational even. As Foucault (1982) argues, each of the strange categories, taken alone, makes sense but it is the way that they are linked together that appears illogical because they do not conform to the ‘grid of identities, similitudes, analogies’ (p. xix) through which we conventionally establish order. That is not to say that such sets of distinctions might not make sense in another culture and in another time. Indeed, the whole point here is that particular orders are taken as ‘rational’ because they have been naturalized in particular spatio-temporal contexts.

Just as the animals in the encyclopaedia were arranged, organizations operate according to an established order of things; otherwise the identity that they

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espouse would not make sense. Where no such order is established, such as in emerging industries, they must construct one for themselves – they ‘must learn new roles without having old models, and they must establish ties in an environment that does not acknowledge their existence’ (Aldrich and Fiol 1994: 648). In this article we examine the way that organizations, through their leaders, work to construct a legitimate identity in such states of ‘non-existence’. We argue that organizational identity is best understood in terms of the relationship between temporal difference (i.e. the performance of a stable identity over time) and spatial difference (i.e. by locating organizational identity in relation to other firms, both similar and different). It is the relationship between these two forms of difference, we argue, that enables the construction of a legitimate sense of organizational identity. In making this argument, the article brings together those theories of organizational identity that see it as both dynamic (e.g. Gioia et al. 2000) and temporal (e.g. Clegg et al. 2005) with those that construe identity in terms of inter-organizational and intra-industry comparison (e.g. Porac et al. 1995; DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

To illustrate this process of organizational ‘identity work’ we turn to an empirical study of the business coaching industry in Australia. Business coaching is an embryonic industry – as a newcomer to the world of business it lacks any firmly established order with which to define itself and individual firms lack well-established industry-based role models. In practice, the emergent order is not unlike the Chinese encyclopaedia. We uncovered coaches whose definition of their organizational selves included (a) executive coaches, (b) therapists who use Buddhist philosophy, (c) just a web site, (d) facilitators, (e) entrepreneurs with franchising systems, (f) mixed forms, (g) public speakers, (h) emotional therapists, (i) institutionalized schools, (j) global corporations, (k) business planners, (l) and many more, (m) with money back guarantees. Despite these differences, they also share the view that ‘business coaching’ does exist, as an industry in its own right, albeit tentatively. We are interested in how organizations account for, and can construct, their own identity in such contexts of dis-order.

The article starts by reviewing the literature on organization identity in relation to debates over whether it is stable and enduring, or dynamic and multiple. From there we examine relational approaches to organizational identity in terms of the way that firms are defined in relation to one another. To locate our concerns with organizational identity in practice we then turn to the case of business coaching in Australia to illustrate and develop our discussion. We begin by explaining the methodology we employed in our study and then discuss how the firms that we researched worked to define their identities. In the discussion section we draw on the findings to illustrate how organizations work to construct their identities among a complex set of temporal and spatial differences. We conclude with a discussion of how these differences enable the construction of a legitimate sense of organizational identity.

Conceptualizing Organizational Identity

From the outset (Albert and Whetten 1985; Foreman and Whetten 2002; special issue *Academy of Management Review* 2000), discussions of organizational

identity have been framed by certain questions of whether identity is central, distinctive and enduring (e.g. Albert and Whetten 1985; Elsbach and Kramer 1996; Scott and Lane 2000); whether it is shifting, precarious, dynamic and unstable (e.g. Gioia et al. 2000; Harrison 2000), or whether it has multiple facets such that there is no singular unity (e.g. Brickson 2000; Pratt and Foreman 2000). The desire for organizations to see themselves as having an enduring essence, it has been argued, is a means of avoiding 'psychic pain and discomfort, [to] allay or prevent anxiety, resolve conflicts, and generally support and increase self-esteem' (Brown and Starkey 2000: 104). Under these circumstances when 'organizational members perceive that their organization's identity is threatened, they [will] try to protect both personal and external perceptions' (Elsbach and Kramer 1996).

While the desire for order and stability might support the maintenance of stable characterizations of organizational identity, it cannot stop the possible existence of and conflict between the pluralities of organizational identity that might be constructed when the question 'who are we?' elicits different responses from actors ostensibly in the same industry (Pratt and Foreman 2000). Thus, Gioia et al. (2000) argue that the concept of identity is not static but dynamic. They go on to show that identity, being closely linked to image, is open to frequent revision and redefinition (p. 64). Identity becomes an inter-subjective reality constituted through agreement and sharing of meaning among organizational members. However, rather than being something that can be settled a priori it may well be that these are essentially empirical issues. Indeed, important empirical work has been done in the field of image and identity relations (e.g. Dutton and Dukerich 1991; Gioia and Thomas; 1996; Hatch and Schultz 2002) that suggests that industry specific image management practices are used as a metaphorical mirror through which individual firms can develop an identity that is legitimate within that industry.

Identities emerge out of interaction, negotiation and shared processes of sensemaking, according to Weick (1995). Seidl (2000) calls this 'reflective identity' since interpretation of the identity potentially changes over time as provisionally negotiated orders. The means through which such interpretations occur will be contextualized within, and influenced by, the organization's environment, such that interactions with outsiders, as well as with insiders, contribute to the formation of identities (Gioia et al. 2000: 65). Such an approach avoids the danger of making a particular organizational identity appear to be essential, to be the 'true self' of an organization, and instead it seeks to examine how 'identity is achieved through performances' (Czarniawska-Joerges 1996: 158).

The focus on identity as performance extends the theorization of identity as a process of 'becoming' (Chia 1996; Tsoukas and Chia 2002), which suggests that, rather than being ontologically secure, identity emerges from the process of organizing. Such a process both defies stasis as well as attests to the unpredictable and emergent character of identity, even when management is about action that attempts to arrest or fix identity change (Clegg et al. 2005). From this perspective, identity is enacted and played out through interactions with other multiple identities, through different definitions enacted in various 'situated actions' (cf. Mills 1940). To develop a sense of stable identity the process of becoming that occurs in situated action must be fixed and directed, suggesting

that the process of identity formation works in-between those forces that seek to define stable identity and those that work to defy the possibility of such firm and enduring definitions.

The argument that identity is accomplished when processes are interrupted and brought to a stopping point, however temporary (see Chia 1996), suggests that identities form round dialectics of being and becoming (Chia 1996; Tsoukas and Chia 2002; Clegg et al. 2005), which are always in flux. Emerging industries are an especially salient environment in which to study organizational identity because relatively nascent institutionalization makes the process of identity formation of particular organizations particularly visible. In this context, organizational identity can be considered in terms of the 'identity work' that managers use to establish a sense of identity for their organizations.

Organizational Identity and Industry Relations

The construction of organizational identity occurs in the wider context of the industry in which an organization is located. Here identity is considered in relation to the common sense of competition that informs firms' definitions of their reference group of rivals and non-rivals (Porac et al. 1995). Thus, it is in reference to others that organizations define their own identity position vis-à-vis their own putatively unique characteristics and those characteristics that they have in common with other firms in their industry. In this view, an industry is defined by identifying the knowledge structures shared among key stakeholders (Rosa et al. 1996) that provide the inter-organizational dimension of identity against which individual firms can define themselves. These knowledge structures are developed through relational networks (White 2000) that provide the context for the achievement of individual organizational identities. In emerging industries such a process is particularly salient because at the beginning of their life cycle organizational fields provide high levels of diversity in terms of the available forms and approaches to organizing, while they tend to become more homogeneous once they are established (DiMaggio and Powell 1983).

The industry boundaries within which organizational identities are located can be regarded as social constructions such that 'market structures are constraints only because managers believe they exist. Rather than being an exogenous force acting *on* managerial minds, market structure is an endogenous product of managerial minds' (Porac et al. 1995: 224). To this we add that, in a more micro sense, individual organizational identities are also social constructions that are constrained by the market structure with which managers collectively produce and individually identify. Hence, neither industries nor organizations are given 'objects' but rather products of how their various constituents (including managers, employees, clients, partners, regulatory bodies and the media) conceive and enact them as being. Identity is thus located in the 'belief systems' of companies that allow them to define boundaries and maintain their identities (Porac et al. 1995). As Porac et al. (1995) argue, 'belief systems' characterize how organizational members understand their competitors,

their internal capacities, market development and future demand, the boundaries of their environment and their role within the larger value chain. Importantly, these belief systems are shared assumptions that are socially constructed: they do not exist objectively *in reality* but are culturally, socially and cognitively developed assumptions *about reality*.

Where an industry is defined by the ways that firms identify comparable sets of other firms considered to be rivals in the same industry (Porac and Rosa 1996), the identity of individual organizations can be expected to involve an attempt to establish a unique position (identity) within that industry, while at the same time being similar enough to other firms in the industry so as to still be able to define themselves in relation to it. The development and maturation of an industry is a process by which the industry moves from conditions of unstable, incomplete and disjointed conceptual systems to conditions of coherent inter-member sensemaking (Rosa et al. 1996). In such a process, identity can never be thought of as being accomplished at one point in time. It is the ongoing interaction between multiple identities that creates the dynamic and dialectic struggle between being and becoming. To illustrate how organizations, through their managers, engage in such processes of identity formation, we now turn to an empirical analysis of data drawn from the business coaching industry in Australia. This will serve to demonstrate how a group of managers attempted, discursively, to secure a sense of organizational identity in an ambiguously defined industry environment.

Studying Business Coaching

Our discussion of organizational identity in this article draws on, and is illustrated by, findings from an empirical study of the industry of business coaching in Australia. This is a growth industry that provides learning interventions for corporate and other clients. These interventions usually consist of one-to-one and group activities designed to assist clients in developing priorities, business objectives and plans. The research started by identifying the organizations comprising the business coaching industry. We comprehensively searched the World Wide Web for companies in Australia that used the descriptor 'business coaching' to define their activities. We conducted a telephone survey of these firms to establish their basic characteristics: date of foundation, number of staff, location, products and services offered, and target market. We also asked each firm who they believed were their major competitors. On the basis that industry boundaries can be defined in terms of those whom individual firms define as their competitors (Porac and Rosa 1996), each competitor identified was added to the sample. A total of 53 firms were surveyed. For the purposes of qualitative data gathering 11 representative firms were selected from this group based on the distribution of size and age of the firms.

We interviewed the principals of the coaching firms in order to understand the 'belief systems' (Porac et al. 1995) they used to define organization-alidenity – given their primacy in strategy formation, they were the people who

best understood their own organizations and their sense of competition and inter-firm rivalry (see Porac and Rosa 1996). We sought to understand how they account for and construct identity interacting with others and framed by common belief systems. In so doing, we did not seek to privilege the beliefs of the people interviewed over other constituents, but rather to focus our attention on this particular group. The interviews were conducted either in person or over the telephone and followed a semi-structured format – each interview lasted for between 45 and 75 minutes and they were audio-recorded. The main areas of focus for the interviews were the characteristics of the founder/principal of the firms, the history and description of the firm, the position of the firm within the industry and the future strategy of the firm.

Following the interviews the tape recordings were transcribed. The transcripts were coded with the aim of discerning the organizational identity categories that emerged in the business coaches' self-reports (see Strauss and Corbin 1990) in terms of how the person interviewed positioned their firm either in relation to its unique position/proposition or in terms of its relationship with its competitors (Porac et al. 1995). Our analysis focussed its unit of analysis on the utterance rather than the person – that is, on the ways that the different people, in and through their talk, used and defined particular categories in order to discursively enact their own sense of identity. We perused the transcripts to isolate those instances of talk where the person was actively describing the identity of their own firms. Each of these instances was highlighted and then coded according the main construct that they were using to describe themselves. The constructs identified across all of the interviews were then compared and cross-referenced in order to identify common patterns. On this basis the core constructs of self-categorization that the coaches collectively deployed were identified. By comparing these dimensions across the different people interviewed, we were able to discover the main features of the identity discourse used by the coaches.

Identity Work

While the analytical approach that we used was based on grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967; Strauss and Corbin 1990) we did not use it to generate an internally consistent theory (cf. Strauss and Corbin 1990). Instead our claims are less positivistic and more constructivist (Charmaz 2002). Using the methods described above, and following Foucault (1972), we were thus able to isolate the taken-for-granted ways that the business coaches made sense of their experience in relation to their sense of identity. What emerged from this was an appreciation of the 'reflexive categories, principles of classification, normative rules, [and] institutionalized types' (Foucault, 1972: 22) that discursively construct the identity of business coaches. It is such discursive frameworks, as instantiated in the interviews, that we take to be constitutive of the business coaches' sense of identity (see Putnam et al. 1996; Keenoy et al. 1997), and to be the means through which their experience might be ordered and made sense of (Grant et al. 2004; Weick 1995).

By providing an account of their actions, those interviewed were also 'creating' themselves (Albrow 1997) through a 'reflexive interaction with the research engagement' (Linstead and Thomas 2002: 17) whereby they told the story of their firm so as reflexively to co-construct their own sense of organizational identity (Gudmundsdottir 1996). Further, they engaged in a sensemaking of their past, as well as wishful thinking about the future. One of the most salient features of how the coaches described themselves, however, was a sense of insecurity in relation to how others (especially potential clients) understood their identity. One participant responded when asked if consulting firms were competitors: 'A little and I think that's only because the people at the market don't know the difference . . . we've got to clarify the perceptions of what kind of coaching we do' (John). When asked to define business coaching another coach, Nathan, said: 'there's a lot of misunderstanding in these areas between the common expression of life coaching, or executive coaching, business coaching, mentoring, consulting, [and] training'. Mary suggested the same sense of a lack of common understanding and requirement for consensus when she said that 'The public are a little bit confused. So I think that if more of a uniform acceptance of coaching is achieved, that would help people in accepting it'.

We also found that the lack of a clear industry identity influenced the way that the coaches considered the identity of their organizations. One coach, Leslie, said: 'Initially we called ourselves Business Planners, but very quickly we realized we were coaching people through the process, because we did not come in as a trainer, that was the no-no . . . It could be anything else but not training'. Some saw the sense of nascent and ambiguity in relation to business coaching as problematic. As Nathan explained, 'We've got a new service industry that's very fragmented . . . lots of people running their own organizations in niches'. This fragmentation was seen by another coach, Kate, as being related to a lack of common standards and barriers to entry in the market; 'anybody can call themselves a coach', she told us.

Given the lack of an established sense of industry identity, the coaches commonly defined what they did and who they were in relation to their difference from more established industries – most commonly consulting, therapy or training. Within this, the difference between consultants and coaches was a recurring theme. Toni suggested that 'Coaches and consultants are very different . . . I have no interest in being a consultant . . . I think people have heard of coaches now, but I don't think they have a good awareness yet of what they are doing' (Toni). More extremely, John said that 'nobody [i.e. potential clients] knows what coaching is . . . their expectation is that you are a solution provider, it is very early that you have to work to change that' (John). For Bob, however, this distinction was muddied by what he saw as problems caused by consultants using the term 'coaching': 'there is a challenge to get a full clear understanding of what coaching actually is compared with consulting. There are a lot of management consultants out there who are adopting the term coach, but quite frankly, couldn't articulate what the distinction is between coaching and consulting'. While these comments suggest an important discursive move to individuate coaching from the more general notion of consulting, Toni also suggested a more reflexive awareness of the differentiation: 'But it's semantic.

We're consultants, I mean, that's what we do. So it's semantical (sic), but it is our point of differentiation' (Toni). Such differences were often expressed in terms of quite crude and oppositional ways, for example by George who simply said that while consultants approach a business 'from the outside', business coaches look from the 'inside'.

The Self and the Other of Organizational Identity

In general terms, coaching might be regarded as a form of management consulting in that coaches are specialists who are employed by organizations to realign elements of an organizational system (Clark and Salaman 1996). As we have begun to see, however, in terms of how the coaches account for their own identity, they do not see themselves as belonging to the category of 'consultant'. Indeed they are differentiated from consulting on account of the forms of identity that the coaches seek to establish for themselves – that is, where the coaches see consultants as the 'other' against which they defend their own identity position. Although beyond the scope of the research here, it is noteworthy that business coaches do not seek any formal connection with the consulting industry – choosing instead to form their own industry associations such as the International Coaching Federation (ICF) and the Worldwide Association of Business Coaches (WABC).

As indicated above, the coaches note some confusion among their clients about the differentiation between consulting and coaching, a distinction that is the very stuff of their identity. In analysing the dimensions of self-categorization that the coaches deployed in their talk, we found that five main discursive constructs were used to identify and individuate business coaching. As summarized in the table below, these constructs were each developed in terms of a self–other relation that sought primarily to define coaching in opposition to consulting. Indeed, if managers construct and reconstruct their identities through an engagement with the 'other' (Thomas and Linstead 2002), then the discursive identity work of business coaches focussed on projecting their own notion of organizational self through that of the imagined other of the consultant. This was a means of constructing their own precarious identity in relation to one that they regarded as being more established. As we will see, in order to become (or at least develop a sense of being) legitimate players in a poorly defined market, the coaches had to employ discursive categories associated with this imagined other in order to construct a sense of self.

Facilitator vs. Expert

Business coaches do not see themselves as bringing expert knowledge about particular business or industries but rather see their strengths as working with others to facilitate their achievement. As Kyle suggested: 'Consulting is very much where an expert has been brought in to solve a problem or provide advice as a basis of their technical expertise . . . with coaching . . . I help the coachee

Table 1. Self–Other Categories Used by Coaches to Construct Identity

The projected self of the business coach		The imagined other of the consultant
Facilitator	← →	Expert
Process orientation	← →	'Answer' orientation
Business AND personal focus	← →	Business OR personal focus
Embraces emotional side of business	← →	Avoids emotional side of business
Customized and flexible	← →	Standardized and rigid

(sic) come up with his or her own solutions'. The idea of supporting the client's own problem solving was seen by George as a matter of being able to 'guide them into alternate ways, let them see it . . . Give them support . . . get them motivated into going in a positive direction'.

The coaches saw their uniqueness in terms of not only enabling the person and business being coached to achieve business results in ways that would not have otherwise occurred, but also being able to do this without explicitly telling them what to do. Thus, we were told that 'coaching is about observation and encouragement . . . it can seem to take a little bit longer to take the time to coach and draw out strengths and abilities in people rather than to say, this is the way we do it' (Nathan). This attention to coaching as a form of 'helping' was re-iterated by Leslie who said that 'Coaching . . . facilitate[s] the process of helping them do what ever it is they do better by them doing a self-discovery process . . . it has never been about introducing new material, new ideas, rather facilitating the ideas already there in the organization'.

When asked to explain the reasoning behind adopting the facilitator role as opposed to the expert role, responses suggested that facilitation was designed to ensure more sustainable change that enhanced the capabilities of the person being coached rather than making the client reliant on the coach's expertise. It was thus said that coaching would: 'Give us a much more lasting change rather than someone coming in and saying, well here's a set of tips and techniques and here's how you can do it differently' (Nathan). Coaching was said to involve 'learning [which] is much more richer than show and tell' (William) such that 'we try to access their own wisdom' (Alan).

In sum, this suggested that business coaches tend to classify themselves as 'facilitators' or 'helpers' who work with clients to help them define and achieve their goals, as opposed to being 'experts', a notion conflated with their imagined other of the 'consultant' as a solution provider.

Process Orientation vs. 'Answer' Orientation

In describing the nature of her work as a coach, Toni suggested that her role was one of 'broadening their horizons from . . . how they look at their business, look at themselves, look at how they're positioned within the business, and opening up their whole view of what the future could possibly hold' (Toni). Such future orientation was also reflected in Mary's comment that 'we basically work with

someone to establish a goal with a strong purpose, a meaningful purpose, otherwise there's no going further, and once this is established, we work together on a plan and on taking some action'. As part of this idea that coaching is about helping clients through a process of self-discovery and achievement, Mary contrasted her identity with that of the expert consultant who provides their clients with the 'answer'. She said 'Consulting is where someone comes into your business and basically tells you what you need to do and then they leave, and then it's up to you whether you do it or not . . . a coach comes in and assumes that you have the answers and will work with you to take the necessary action that you want to take' (Mary).

It is this idea that Mary called 'working with you' that emphasized the identity of business coaching as being 'process' rather than 'answer' oriented. As Kyle put it, coaching is about 'helping someone to understand in more detail where they are now by way of strengths and weaknesses and where they want to get to, and to help them remove the blockages in the way of getting there' (Kyle). Of the eleven people interviewed, only one had a view that opposed the role of the coach as a facilitator and process driver. In this case, he suggested: 'We're not consultative in our approach, we are very direct in our approach and very much advise people what their options are, and say, this is where we believe you should go' (Toni).

The analysis of the interviews tends to confirm the common orientation around coaching as a facilitative process designed to improve business results. More generally, when describing the nature of their work, the coaches identified with how they provide a process to help people solve their own problems.

Business AND Personal Focus vs. Business OR Personal Focus

While notions of facilitation and process were central to the coaches' projection of their self-identity, this was tempered by clear statements that their work was primarily designed to achieve tangible business results of various kinds. 'I am about organization and efficiency', said Kate, 'I am not a life coach which is more spiritual, you know, intangible' (Kate). Other outcomes that were seen as 'business' oriented were enumerated by Leslie as: 'money, being an organization, improved quality control, improved efficiency, improved staff development, meeting programs, better focus, better morale, profit, lower cost'. Notably, however, this business focus was augmented by Leslie in relation to other less tangible outcomes: 'the majority of our feedback will talk about relationships, the way people work together rather than dollars'.

The combination of the assumed duality between quantitative business results and qualitative organizational outcomes was also suggested by Nathan who put forward that: 'handling hard issues in a hard business way isn't working in today's corporate world and so there is an understanding and acceptance . . . [of] . . . what you'd call softer issues'. What is notable in Nathan's comments is that his attention is not turned away from what he calls the 'hard issues', but rather that he expressed a need to find new ways of addressing such issues. This again was contrasted with consultants, who coaches often refer to as being too 'hard nosed' in their approach. As John put it: 'Coaching is a much

more friendly word [than consulting] . . . it is a two way street'. Within this 'two-way street' coaches position themselves as drawing new and more productive relationships between the person and their business goals. For Nathan, 'true business coaching puts the context of how you perform as an individual within a business environment . . . so that you can start to look at the business as a whole, and look at the strengths of that business . . . to make it perform better'.

Notably, not all coaches believed that coaching was necessarily achieving business results for clients. As William suggested: 'the business coaches understand business, but don't know much about behaviour' (William). Despite such reservations, however, in terms of the imagined identity of the coaches, what the interviews did confirm was a common discernment that business coaches *should* be focussed on business results.

Embracing the Emotional Side of Business vs. Avoiding the Emotional Side of Business

Even though the coaches privileged the achievement of quantitative business outcomes, the means through which they were achieved also privileged the relationship between what they described as 'emotion' and work. Most commonly this was done using the term 'emotional intelligence'. As well as suggesting that the focus 'helping people grow their emotional intelligence skills', is an odd conflation of rational and emotional terminology, Nathan also described coaching as 'emotion process re-engineering'.

Emotional intelligence surfaced frequently in our conversations with coaches – all but four of them mentioned it: coaching, said Nathan, is 'an achievement of outcomes, specific outcomes, measurable outcomes with an organization through the development of the emotional intelligence of the people within the company . . . that is tied to very specific business outcomes'. Again, we can see the focus on relating emotionality to business and suggesting that a focus on the emotions is directly related to business success. Alan put it this way: 'it is my core belief that you just can't work cognitively with someone that you often have to work at a deeper level'. More generally there appeared to be a shared sense of identification among the coaches with a marrying of what they saw as the traditional commercial focus of business with their understanding of a newer concern with the relationship between emotional and rational processes – a relationship they believed could be developed in order to yield benefits for their clients.

Being Customized and Flexible vs. Being Standardized and Rigid

The four identity characteristics discussed above appeared relatively consistently across the people interviewed. There was a fifth category, however, over which there was less consistency – whether standards should be developed and enforced across the industry. In seeking to determine why his firm was different from other business coaching enterprises, John said 'We're streets away from a lot of other people when it comes to our intellectual property and the

way that we do stick to those programs, and those agendas that are set'. As well as this stated need for standardization, John's approach was also concerned with a type of flexible standardization. He said that: 'Yes it's flexible depending on the participant . . . but there are certain agendas that we still have to touch on. That's all been standardized. Without being too rigid'.

Nathan expressed a similar concern with 'off the shelf' coaching processes. 'I don't want someone being reliant on a particular set of methods . . . that's not going to help at all. The whole aspect is to help people find their own voice'. Mary expressed similar concerns when she said 'sometimes people [in business] get a bit too excited that they have to go down this path and there is only one path . . . to business success. And there is not, there are a lot of different ways'.

Despite a commitment to flexibility, it was also evident that in order to grow many firms believe that some forms of standardization and replicability are needed. For example, when asked where she saw her business being in five years' time, one respondent suggested that her organization needed to develop 'a more regimented process . . . a more structured approach, a more modularized approach' (Toni). On a more general level, Alan argued for the need for industry standards. 'People [i.e. clients] will look for the qualification and look for the accreditation', he said. In contrast, others, such as Bob, argued that 'we don't want to turn out coaching clones – we want . . . each individual to find their own coaching strength'. Kyle summed it up as follows: 'I have struggled with some things with standards and accreditation and I don't have a universal answer for that'.

Discussion: Organizational Identity Work

As the examples above illustrate, while the business coaches felt that others understood their identity inadequately, they themselves were able to articulate quite clearly who they were, what they were doing and where they saw themselves going. Further, the sense of identity that each of them projected on to their organizations through their talk had many similarities and consistencies with the other business coaches. The coaches' talk in the interviews can be understood as an attempt to construct and justify a sense of organizational and industry identity in the context of a commercial environment where that identity was still very much ambiguous and poorly understood. It is in this way that the coaches attempted discursively to construct a sense of identity that reduced this level of ambiguity. In this section we seek to theorize this process in relation to the interplay between temporal and spatial dimensions of identity. Specifically, we regard spatial differences of identity in terms of how organizations draw on their differences and similarities with other organizations to position themselves, and we regard temporal differences in relation to the way they construct identity in terms of the interplay of sameness/difference of their own organizational identity over time. What we theorize is that it is in relation to the entwined and plural nature of these spatial and temporal differences that identity is emergent as a putatively stable order.

As we described earlier, theory dealing with organizational identity has long been focussed on identity as a temporal construct – that is, the debates have focussed on identity as an enduring essence that identifies an organization (cf. Albert and Whetten 1985). Conversely, although not always using the term ‘identity’ per se, discussions of institutional isomorphism have focussed attention on identity as a spatial concept – that is, the emphasis is on how organizations come to define themselves in terms of other organizations (DiMaggio and Powell, 1983). In relation to an emerging industry such as business coaching, each of these processes was simultaneously at play; that is, the coaches sought to discursively construct their identity as temporally fixed, yet they did this by defining themselves spatially in terms of being both the same and different from others.

As we saw, the talk used by the coaches to define the identities of their firms rested heavily on a negative definition – they persistently defined themselves in terms of what they were not (i.e. consultants) rather than in terms of what they were. Further, their need to perform this identity in relation to the ambiguities of a poorly defined industry and an ill-understood set of service definitions echoed an ongoing struggle to articulate their own identity. Hence, in the face of the vagaries and possible multiplicities of their identities, they tried to secure particular meanings through their own talk (Linstead and Thomas 2002). It is in this way that their identity can be regarded as being a response to difference; specifically, a response to both difference as spacing and difference as temporalization.

To further unpack organizational identity in relation to temporal and spatial forms of difference, we follow Derrida (1973) in suggesting that a spatial notion of difference is one that signifies non-identicality – in organizational terms, this means that an organization can be considered to have an identity because it is different from other organizations. On the other hand, a temporal notion of difference sees identity in the sense that an organization is identical to itself across different points in time. Following this logic, identity is positioned as being neither exclusively spatial (distinctive) nor temporalized (enduring) but rather as being located within a contextual play of differences where the words used to define identity refer to each other. The system thus constructed discursively constitutes identity such that relations of equivalence between an organization and its context can be established at different points in time, and relations of difference can be established between one organization and others at any given point of time. Notably, however, these differences, rather than being ontologically secure, are best regarded as an effect of discourse in that ‘they have not fallen from the sky ready made’ (Derrida 1973: 141). In the case of the empirical materials considered in this article, an effect of the discourse of the business coaches as it is manifested in the way they mobilize difference in their talk, is the talking-into-being of these differences.

If we apply this line of thinking to organizational identity, we can surmise that an organization’s identity is also formed in the play of such differences such that, rather than existing spatially and/or temporally, identity is both ‘space’s becoming-temporal’ and ‘time’s becoming-spatial’ (Derrida 1973: 136). In the case of the business coaches, the spatial difference emerged from an attempt to define themselves collectively as different from consultants and individually as different

from each other (even when the differences they construed were empirically rather similar). Thus, what we saw in their talk was an example of their assertion of the constancy of their uniqueness as a projected self in relation to the difference from their imagined other. These assertions were discursive endeavours on which they exerted considerable energy, having constructed, as we saw, well-developed semantic categories of difference with which to assert their identity. That these differences were similar to those described by the other coaches did not prevent them from asserting their own identity. In such a nested set of differences the business coaches shared a sense of what the enterprise of 'business coaching' entails and who they were as an organization. The result was a sense of identity, yet one that lacked any definite uniqueness.

Coaches sought, at least minimally, to differentiate themselves so as to make a claim to uniqueness – much of which was done through their self-description in terms of personal or collective (organizational) pronouns. The challenge they each faced was deemed similar enough to other coaches to be recognized as a part of the emerging industry; simultaneously, they needed to constitute a sufficient sense of uniqueness so as to justify their position as a distinct player in the field of business coaches (see Freeman et al. 1983). As Aldrich and Fiol (1994: 664) argue, 'a single venture's uniqueness during initial stages of an industry's development must be counterbalanced with the collective efforts of all players in the emerging industry to portray the new activity as familiar and trustworthy, if they are to survive as a group'. In our example, a play of sameness and difference with other coaches and with non-coaches formed the basis of the identity work that the managers engaged in.

In terms of temporal difference, identity work can be understood as a story telling exercise. In these stories, coaches weave together past experience, common sense information and more specific knowledge that shapes their identity in a process of retrospective–prospective accounting (Garfinkel 1967) in such a way that their sense of identity can be located in the research process (Linstead and Thomas 2002). Through their interviews, the ambiguities of the language of identity work that they deployed allowed the coaches to enact their becoming (Chia 1996) and discursively 'freeze' it (at least temporarily or putatively) into a stable position such that others might recognize it. The driving force behind their identity work was not only 'the question who they were' but equally important 'who they wanted to become' as a projected-self and 'how they are becoming' (Thomas and Linstead 2002). Such temporality can be understood in relation to how identities are 'constructed in terms of the conjunction of past and future, as an explanation of previous events in a way that positions the constructor of the account advantageously for future episodes' (Linstead and Thomas 2002: 15). In the case of the coaches this was enhanced by the spatial difference against the imagined other of consulting, which they interwove with the temporal difference of what they wished to become (the projected-self of business coaching). It is in this way that their organizational identity is neither 'inherently dynamic' (Gioia et al. 2000) nor enduring (Albert and Whetten 1985); it existed as a process of actively seeking to achieve endurance in a context of paradox, inconsistency, emergence (Linstead and Thomas 2002), dynamism and ambiguity – something especially evident in emerging industries.

In their talk, the coaches emplotted and thematized events in the world such that attempts were made to establish organizational identity in time and space. The combination of the spatializing and temporalizing forms of difference that go into this identity work attests that identity is something that is enacted, performed and (re)negotiated in an ongoing fashion. This is not to say that identity is, or is not, a matter of stability or changeability, but rather that it is through identity discourse that sameness and differences constitute identity performances. What our analysis suggests is that the crystallization of multiple identities into a nuanced projection of organizational-self can be employed to make sense of past, future and other. Identity is thus not based on uniqueness (Albert and Whetten 1985) but on relations of difference as they are discursively enacted. Using the coaches as an illustration, we see identity formed from a negotiation process based on both similarities and differences, as well as on a desire and attempt to fix identity which never quite achieves the fixity desired.

Conclusion: Legitimate Identities

Haunted by ontological insecurity, the coaches sought to create a stable identity (Collinson 2003) and to 'legitimize their positions and construct their identities through discourse' (Thomas and Linstead 2002: 89), using spatial and temporal strategies and resources to do so. Stakeholders enacted the performance of identity not for its own sake, but in order to facilitate legitimacy formation as the endorsement and support of their organization's actions and goals. Such legitimacy can be regarded as 'a generalized perception or assumption that the actions of an entity are desirable, proper, or appropriate within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions' (Suchman 1995: 574). Despite the fact that identity is something that can be regarded as conflictual, multiple and negotiated, the discursive identity work that the coaches performed presented a secure identity as a 'staging post to the future' (Linstead and Thomas 2002: 16) that worked to both reduce and hide conflict and negate the plurality. So, while organizations might desire a sense of stable identity, this is only the case *because* of the potential for multiplicity of both self and other. Thus, identity plurality and identity stability can be seen not as alternative 'perspectives' through which to consider identity, but rather as mutually constitutive discursive conditions in the balance of which identity tentatively emerges. Multiplicity and change were pre-conditions for the identity legitimization work done by the business coaches.

Legitimacy is an important resource for organizations to establish themselves (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978; Elsbach and Sutton 1992) in dynamic scenarios with unclear 'cultural norms, symbols, beliefs, and rituals' (Suchman 1995: 571; Aldrich and Fiol 1994). Further, the creation of legitimacy in new industries is linked to the entrepreneurs' capacity to utilize symbolic language and behaviour as well as their ability to communicate internally consistent stories about what they do and why they do it the way they do (Aldrich and Fiol 1994). Attempts to define identity can be regarded as processes of resisting the ambiguity of the multiple by attempting to discursively constitute the character of the organization. This construction of identity is nested within contes-

tations over the definitions of industry as well as organizational boundaries. Organizational identity is thus a strategic performance (rather than an ontological absolute) because it is legitimated with the particular intention of developing discursive norms and structures that will enable the market to be both created and exploited. Organizational identity is located within temporal and spatial differences rather than typified by particular intrinsic characteristics.

While we believe that our discussion has important implications for the understanding of organizational identity, as discussed above, we also recognize that it has some limitations. Our empirical examples drew from principals of firms and did not analyse other stakeholders or organizational members. Thus while our conclusions are worthy in relation to the discursive actions of principals in performing identity, further empirical studies are needed that shed light on the relational construction of identities and their fragmentation by focussing on accounts from different people. Such studies might examine the extent to which language unifies, codifies and orders events powerfully, transforming becoming into temporarily stable being and vice versa. Such an analysis would include the language of artefacts and other sign systems, as well as the spoken text of discourse. Further, artefacts such as printed marketing material, web sites, and the way coaches dress and the props they deploy require analysis to understand the important part culture plays in expressing and creating identity (Hatch and Schultz 2002).

Business coaches, as members of an embryonic industry, seem to have little more intrinsic coherence than John Wilkins' encyclopaedia entry that we cited at the beginning of the article. As an industry, business coaching is ill-defined, contradictory and ambiguous. Indeed, it is this apparent lack of an established order within which coaches work that enables them to try to construct their organizational identities. By this account, organizational identity is not an essence or a substance fleshed out by characteristics; rather, organizational identity is enacted and embedded in a field of differences. These differences represent the condition as well as the impossibility of defining identity.

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