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Extended Abstract

Identity remains a key lens for organisational scholars, yet little consensus has been reached about precisely how organisational identity is formed. This article follows a process of identity formation through organisational 'spin-out' of a former local authority run public service across a three-year period. The study fulfills a call to better understand how new organisational identity emerges over time (e.g Alvesson & Robertson, 2016; Carlsen, 2006; Corley, 2004; Whetten, 2006).

Identity formation has received significant attention at the organisational level but less so in terms of how individuals make sense of and rationalise who they are amongst the ambiguity of change in organisations and society (Brown, 2022). As Cain, Frazer and Kilaberia remark whilst 'change is frequent in organizations, the importance of workers' identities is underappreciated in studies of change' (2019: 375). I take a process based theoretical framework for this work, exploring two research questions: *How does a new organisational identity emerge? How do individuals make sense of multiple organisational identities over time?* To do this the 'lived experience' of those involved in a journey of 'mutualisation' is studied and presented as a chronological account of 'critical' events in the evolution of a 'new' organisation.

Whilst identities provide stability as organisations shift and change (Ashforth et al., 2008; Waring and Bishop, 2011), they also provide the basis on which to construct or contest something new, often making change seem incongruent with one's sense of self (Ashforth et al., 2008). Through the use of ethnographic methods, the case considers how 'mutualisation' sought to empower public sector workers to release their 'entrepreneurial vigour', creating two initially contrasting identities. The scene is set with the initial messages of the Chair of Trustees and the senior management team who were tasked with re-

orientating the focus of significant stakeholder groups on new ways of working. Ernst and Jensen (2019) suggest identity construction progresses through the everyday strategising moves of organisational members in an alternating and mutually constituting relationship with the outside world. Attention is drawn in the case to a basis on which senior organisational members influenced new organisational identity from the outset of major change in order to transition to a mutual structure.

Two theoretical contributions are made on organisational identity formation based on practices observed in the case: *assimilation* and *repositioning*. A*ssimilation I define* as the process individuals undertake to align their own identity and their concept of organisational identity towards that which is being broadcast by senior leaders. The word broadcast being appropriate given the use of public communications to 'set' a new identity into being. *Repositioning* I define as the process where individuals retain existing identities but slowly strong attributes emerge from new organisational identity and become positioned over former identities. The former identities remain in the conscious to be recalled but lose prominence over time. Drawing upon the processes of assimilation and re-positioning an explanation is offered about how individual identity and organisational identity arise through iterative formation in tandem with an organisations evolution.

The findings illustrate how in the early formation stages of a new organisational identity key individuals called upon their own past experiences to invent something new, furthering arguments around history as a source of new organizational identity creation (Oertel & Thommes, 2018). However, through this process 'old and 'new' identities played out alongside each other until the 'new' organisational identity gained salience. I argue that old identities are not completely relinquished through processes of organisational evolution but rather for an individual are repositioned against new identities. Old identities lose

prominence over time as facets of new identity are reinforced. Re-positioning of existing identities then occurs when new identity attributes are introduced. This paper contributes to our understanding of how individuals negotiate a changing organisational identity and in relation to their understandings about their organisations history, whilst oscillating through sensemaking frames in response to a new trajectory for their organisation. This contribution responds to Miscenko and Day's (2015: 7) recommendation that research should focus on deepening understanding of interaction between different work-related identities adopting dynamic perspectives on multiple identities. In this case study a commercial and public service identity exist separately before being merged into a new organisational identity, a duality that is enacted or 'performed' into being as identities are accomplished. The concept of repositioning builds on existing understanding that competing identities reside within an individual's self-concept (Brown & Toyoki, 2013; Wright et al., 2012). The former identities remain in the conscious to be recalled but hold a lesser degree of prominence over time.

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