A Social Actor Conception of Organizational Identity and Its Implications for the Study of Organizational Reputation

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The objective of this article is to clarify the conceptual domains of organizational identity, image, and reputation. To initiate this theory development process, we present a "social actor" conception of organizational identity. Identity-congruent definitions of image and reputation are then specified and an integrated model proposed. With the aid of this model, a structural flaw in the organizational reputation literature is identified and suitable remedies proposed. In addition, the authors explore the implications of invoking identity and identification in explanations and justifications of organizational reputation.

This article is an exercise in theory development, involving concepts central to business and society scholarship. The primary objective of this exercise is to enhance the clarity of scholarly thought pertaining to identity, image, and reputation. In the process, three important theory development activities will be illustrated: developing complementary conceptions of related constructs, using graphical models to specify the relationships between related constructs, and differentiating between the search for explanations versus justifications as complementary theory development projects. These theory development activities are

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components of a general approach to theorizing described by Whetten (1989, 2002b).

The first section of this article presents a "social actor" conception of organizational identity. This conception of organizational identity will then be used as the conceptual plumb line for constructing a model of identity, image, and reputation, referred to as "organizational self-management." After the relationships among identity, image, and reputation have been specified, identity-congruent definitions of image and reputation will be proposed.

The second section examines current scholarship on organizational reputation from the perspective of organizational identity. In particular, this analysis will direct attention to a structural flaw bifurcating the organizational reputation literature, stemming from incomplete and incompatible conceptions of organizational identity.

The third, and final, section invokes the distinction between justifications and explanations in conceptual models. Scholars interested in explanations focus on cause-effect relationships involving antecedents of a core construct. In contrast, scholars exploring justifications focus on means-ends linkages pertaining to important outcomes or consequences of a core construct. This distinction is used to highlight fundamental differences in the manner in which identity and identification are used in conceptions of organizational reputation.

IDENTITY, IMAGE, AND REPUTATION: ELEMENTS OF A SELF-MANAGEMENT MODEL

This section proposes a set of compatible conceptions for organizational identity, organizational image, and organizational reputation. Because organizational identity is the common reference point for subsequent definitions of image and reputation, our conception of identity is presented first and in more detail.

A Social Actor Conception of Organizational Identity

The widely accepted definition of organizational identity proposed by Albert and Whetten (1985) serves as a useful starting point. They defined organizational identity as that which is most central, enduring, and distinctive about an organization. More broadly, they suggested that the prototypical organizational identity question is, "Who are we, as an organization?" Over the years, the ambiguity inherent in the phenomenological referent for the subject "we" has lead to the emergence of two fundamentally different conceptions of organizational identity: identity in organizations versus identity of organizations (Whetten, 2002a; Whetten & Godfrey, 1998).

At the heart of these competing conceptions of organizational identity is the distinction between identity-as-shared perceptions among members versus identity-as-institutionalized claims available to members. On the identity in organizations side of the ontological fault line, organizations are viewed as social aggregates—collectivities or groups of individuals. Hence, organizational identity is conceptualized as shared beliefs concerning the identity of an organization (Hogg & Terry, 2001). This perspective opens up important questions about how participants view the organization as well as which individuals matter in defining or interpreting the identity of an organization. In contrast, scholars advocating an identity of organizations conception view organizations as social actors—authorized to engage in social intercourse as a collectivity and possessing rights and responsibilities as if the collectivity were a single individual (Coleman, 1974; Czarniawska, 1997; Meyer, Boli, & Thomas, 1987).

Scott (2003), commenting on these competing conceptions of organizations, argued for the view of organizations as chartered social actors:

> We will fail to perceive the importance of organizations for our lives if we view them only as contexts—as arrangements influencing the activities of individual actors. Organizations must also be viewed as actors in their own right, as "collective social actors." They can take actions, utilize resources, enter into contracts, and own property. (p. 7)

In line with this view, Whetten (2002a) called for a conception of organizational identity that is unique to identity and uniquely organizational. Specifically, he argued that conceptions of organizational identity (compared with group identity) should account for organizations' unique status as social actors. Adopting this perspective has the benefit of allowing us to invoke the principle of functional equivalence as grounds for proposing conceptions of identity anchored in the identity requirements of social actors—individuals and organizations alike.

The most basic requirement of a social actor conception of identity is that it must include an explicit self-referent. The importance of an explicit conceptual link between identity and self is reflected in James's (1892) early distinction between the "I" (self) and the "me" (self-concept) and Mead's (1934) elaboration of this distinction into a comprehensive theory of identity formation. So central is identity to our understanding of the self that it is often equated with an individual's self-concept or self-definition. We will follow Baumeister's (1986) convention of equating identity with "self-definition" and identities with "elements of the self-definition." For example, a person's identity might consist of the following identities: professor, female, minority, married, ski instructor, attractive, intelligent, optimistic, and ethical.

In regard to the argument that identity can be viewed as a social actor's self-definition, Czarniawska (1997) reminded us that the self, regardless of its individual or organizational referent, is an unobservable attribution—a useful contrivance. She argued that the individual self and the organizational self are both reflections of modern society's need for systemic accountability of actions, associated with either an individual or collective actor. This is reflected in the social convention in modern societies of holding organizational members accountable to their organizations and organizations accountable to the state. In Czarniawska's words, the social requirement of accountability is the same for individuals and organizations: "Only the rules of the accounting seem to be different" (pp. 45-46).

Identity scholars tend to prefer functional definitions: Identity is what identity does. For our purposes, inasmuch as all social actors possess certain fundamental identity requirements, identities are conceived of as the categorical self-descriptors used by social actors to satisfy their identity requirements. The most basic requirement of identity articulation for purposes of social intercourse and social accountability is to distinguish the self from the other both in general and in specific comparisons. Tajfel (1972) referred to this as the human need to find one's "own place in society" (p. 293). The self-other distinction locates the organizational identity scholarship enterprise at the interface between a "focal" organization and its social environment, constituted as direct and indirect relationships with other organizations and institutions.

There are two identity requirements that are commonly included in conceptions of both individual identity (Baumeister, 1986) and organizational identity (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). These are continuity and distinctiveness. Identity is thus conceived of as those things that enable social actors to satisfy their inherent needs to be the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow and to be unique actors or entities.

The need for continuity suggests that organizational identity anchors the stability end of the stability-flexibility dimension, often used to characterize organizational elements and activities. In this sense, organizational identity works like a constitution—an organization's self-definition embodies a core theory of the entity (Whetten, 2000). In a constitution-like manner, an organization's self-definition satisfies its members' inherent needs for (a) a "court of last resort" in matters pertaining to their membership rights and responsibilities and (b) a set of authorized "ultimate whys" for planning, explaining, and justifying collective action. It follows that although there are provisions for change in these charters, they are, by design, extremely difficult to satisfy.

Brewer's (1991) "principle of optimal distinctiveness" expands our understanding of the distinctiveness functional requirement. Brewer argued that the self-definitions of individuals reflect two fundamental human needs: a need for assimilation (How are we similar to others?) and a need for uniqueness (How are we different from others?). Brewer further argued that these dual requirements work together to prevent dysfunctional self-definitions, defined as the loss of self-reference or the loss of other-focus. These arguments suggest that the natural domain of organizational identity is the study of how organizations define themselves in terms of what they share in common with certain other organizations and how they are different from all other organizations.

At this point in our discussion, it is important to account for a key ontological difference between individuals and organizations. It is widely acknowledged in organizational scholarship that organizations are both authorized social actors *and* social artifacts—that is, social tools fashioned by founders for specific purposes (Aldrich, 1999; Scott, 2003). This means that in matters of identity, organizations do not possess the equivalent of individuals' inherent (Baumeister, 1986, uses the term *assigned*) characteristics that predate the identity articulation process (such as gender, ethnicity, physical characteristics, family status, and birth order). Hence, we can say that whereas the identity of individuals is socially constructed, organizations themselves are social constructions.

One implication of this observation is that organizational identity is appropriately conceived of as a set of categorical identity claims (who or what we claim to be, categorically) in reference to a specified set of institutionally standardized social categories. A second implication is that for the functional equivalence argument to hold, conceptions of organizational identity must account for the acquisition of the functional equivalent of individuals' assigned, or inherent, characteristics as part of the organizational identity formation process. The literature on institutional theories of organizations provides important insights concerning the origin and nature of organizational identity claims.

Central to the contemporary application of institutional theory to the study of organizations is the proposition that organizations are created from available social institutions (Friedland & Alford, 1991; Meyer & Rowan, 1977; Zucker, 1988). Social institutions can be thought of as social forms and associated social norms (Czarniawska, 1997). From Stinchcomb's (1965) landmark examination of the context-dependent nature of organizational foundings to contemporary studies of the emergence of new forms (Aldrich, 1999; Lounsbury & Ventresca, 2002), organizational sociologists assume that founders assemble their organizations-as-social tools according to widely known and socially accepted organizing recipes (Aldrich, 1999). The ingredients specified by these recipes are referred to as organizing routines, organizing logics, and more generally, as organizational forms (Scott, 2000).

In identity terms, the selection of organizational forms makes up a self-categorization process whereby the organization's memberships in identity categories or groups are declared. Examples of organizational forms/identity categories include church versus business organizational purpose, public versus private ownership, local versus global domain, and transportation versus utilities industry. The sum of these choices constitutes the founders' answer to the question "What type of organization/social actor are we forming?" Consistent with the notion of functional equivalence, this suggests that we can draw a rough parallel between founders' selections of organizational forms and the inherent characteristics of individuals, in that we can treat these both as category-based identity claims embedded in socially authorized conventions about what are appropriate and meaningful identities.

There is a second way in which institutional theory informs the social actor conception of organizational identity. According to institutional theory, organizations are not just formed from social institutions; in addition, as they grow and mature, they become institutions in their own right. In his classic work on this topic, Selznick (1957) offered the following observations: "In what is perhaps the most significant meaning, 'to institutionalize' is to infuse with value beyond the technical requirement of the task at hand" (p. 17); "as institutionalization progresses, the enterprise takes on a special character and this means that it becomes peculiarly competent to do a particular kind of work" (p. 139). Scott (2000), commenting on Selznick's proposal, added, "By taking on a distinctive set of values, the organization acquires a character structure, an identity" (p. 24).

These dual elements of institutional theory parallel analogous components of an individual's self-definition identified by Brewer and Gardner (1996). These are the social self and the personal self. They argued that the study of individual identity has steadily shifted away from an exclusive focus on the personal self, defined as the unique qualities of individuals (e.g., personality, intelligence, traits, acquired skills, and interests). This move parallels the shift advocated in this article: to treat self-definition resolutely as embedded and categorical claims making. Considering which are the relevant and available categories and which are the salient and possible authorities to which claims can be made raises important research issues at the interface between organizations and social institutions (Whetten, 2002a).

Brewer and Gardner (1996) further suggested that contemporary studies of the social self have specified two components: the collective self (e.g., shared demographic characteristics, e.g., ethnicity, gender, etc.) and the relational self (e.g., role-related interpersonal ties). The collective self has become the domain of social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel, 1982), and the relational self is conceptually aligned with a sociological version of identity theory focusing on role requirements (Stryker, 1968). Consistent with the dominant view among identity scholars that group identification is the nexus of individual social identity formation, Brewer and Gardner (1996) noted that the social self emerges from common bonds associated with memberships in interacting groups and from common identities (e.g., demographic characteristics) shared with fellow members of nominal groups.

In summary, social actors require identities—a functional self-concept is an essential requirement for effective social intercourse and social accountability. An organization's self-definition specifies how the organization is both similar to and different from other organizations. Organizational forms selected by founders and subsequent leaders specify the organization's shared identity claims—characteristics common to organizations of a particular type. In addition, the institutionalization process within organizations is centered in an organization's inherent need for uniqueness.

Identity-Congruent Conceptions of Organizational Image and Reputation

Equipped with a social actor conception of organization identity, we are now prepared to sort through the bewildering array of proposals concerning the relationships among identity, image, and reputation. At the broadest level, some authors have used these concepts as if they are synonymous (Williams & Barrett, 2000), whereas others have implied that they are independent but closely related (Bromley, 2000; Schultz, Hatch, & Larsen, 2000; Whetten, 1997). More specifically, scholars have argued that (a) reputation is a combination of identity and image (Davies, Chun, Vinhas da Silva, & Roper, 2001; Wartick, 2002 [this issue]); (b) identity leads to image, which leads to reputation (Dutton et al., 1994); (c) image is the equivalent of what some define as reputation (Wartick, 2002); and (d) identity is the equivalent of what some refer to as image (Wartick, 2002).

The lack of conceptual clarity characteristic of these multiconstruct propositions is indicative of the lack of consensus concerning the meaning of each construct. We will highlight briefly the variety of definitions of organizational image and then later examine the case of organizational reputation in detail.

There are three principal definitions of organizational image: (a) what members think outsiders think about their organization (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Dutton et al., 1994), (b) what outsiders think about an organization (Berg, 1985), and (c) what members present or project about their organization to influence how others think about the organization (Bernstein, 1984; Bromley, 2000; Whetten, Lewis, & Mischel, 1992). Given how central the concept of image is to our understanding of identity and reputation and given how likely it is that the various definitions of image could be confused with extant conceptions of the other two, the lack of consensus concerning the definition of image seriously impairs scholarship involving any combination of these subjects.

As shown in Figure 1, the self-other distinction, central to the meaning of identity, is a particularly useful conceptual tool for clarifying the conceptual relationships between identity, image, and reputation and for proposing identity-compatible definitions of image and reputation.

Broadly speaking, identity, image, and reputation are fundamental components of the self-management project—the effectiveness of which is central to the success of organizations as social actors. Within this framework, image and reputation are treated as components of a symmetrical communications process between the organization (self) and relevant stakeholders (other). This two-way communications interchange is used as a regulative device to maintain an acceptable level of congruence between organizational activities and organizational identity claims. Hence, when the components of the self-management process operate as modeled, coherence within organizations is fostered and predictability-based trust among stakeholders is engendered (Barney & Hansen, 1994).

Within the self-management process, organizational image is conceived of as identity-congruent messages invoked by organizational agents in their communications with outsiders. In the individual identity literature, this process is referred to as self-presentation (Baumeister, 1998; Mead, 1934). Reputation, as the reciprocal of image, is treated as feedback from others rconcerning the credibility of an organization's self-definition. Baumeister (1998) described a similar feedback loop as an essential component of individual self-regulation. Speaking of this process, he said, "It is not merely an idle curiosity, however, but part of a process of changing the self to bring it up to meet [specified] standards" (p. 717). To further develop the identity-based conceptions of image and reputation portrayed in Figure 1, we propose the following formal definitions.

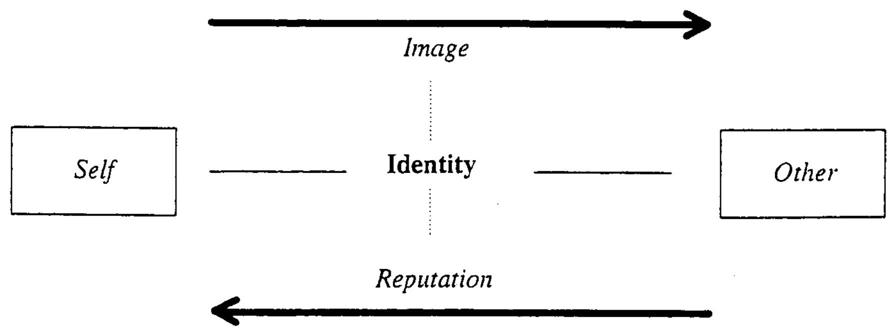

Figure 1: The Self-Management Project Consisting of Identity, Image, and Reputation

Organizational image is what organizational agents want their external stakeholders to understand is most central, enduring, and distinctive about their organization. This definition of image is consistent with related conceptions of "projected image" in the literature. For example, Whetten et al. (1992) defined organizational image as what organizational elites would like outsiders to think of the organization; Hatch and Schultz (2002) referred to image as the expressed identity that leaves impressions on others; and Gioia, Schultz, and Corley (2000) suggested that top management is "concerned with projecting an image of the organization that is based (ideally) on identity" (p. 66). One of the common features of these conceptions of image is that they view self-presentation as a fairly transparent process—one in which organizational agents do their best to faithfully represent to outsiders what they consider to be the organization's most central, enduring, and distinctive characteristics.

Organizational reputation is a particular type of feedback, received by an organization from its stakeholders, concerning the credibility of the organization's identity claims. The first part of this definition draws our attention to two fundamental differences between the concepts of organizational identity and organizational reputation. Czarniawska (1997) proposed that autobiography is the appropriate literary genre for "organizational identity narratives" because they are self-narratives that claim to be factual. Building on this analogy, whereas organizational identity claims are autobiographical, organizational reputation assessments are biographical. Furthermore, whereas the factual nature of organizational identities is taken for granted by organizational members, organization reputation assessments rendered by outsiders are clearly viewed by members as judgments based on limited information. The second half of this definition sets the stage for the identity claims-based examination of organizational reputation scholarship that follows. Our analysis will proceed from the supposition that the study of organizational reputation should be conceptually tethered to an organization's core characteristics—in particular, to those that satisfy its identity needs for continuity and distinctiveness. It is our position that this practice would remediate a great deal of the conceptual confusion currently observed in the organizational reputation literature. In line with the background theme of this essay, a secondary purpose of this analysis is to reinforce the merits of systematic theorizing.

AN ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY VIEW OF ORGANIZATIONAL REPUTATION

When viewing the organizational reputation literature through the conceptual lens of organizational identity, it is hard to overlook the prevalence of inconsistent, incomplete, and incompatible treatments of identity. One example of the need for a more systematic conception of the relationship between reputation and identity centers on the inconsistent use of organizational identity in general versus specific conceptions of organizational reputation.

Broad treatments of reputation generally emphasize the advantages of a transparent, or authentic, connection between reputation and identity (Schultz et al., 2000). This view is reflected in the following excerpt from Fombrun's (1996) book, *Reputation*, in a section titled "Not Excellence—Identity":

> Identity constrains what actions a company takes, how it makes decisions, how it treats its employees, how it reacts to crises. Managers and employees tend to act in ways consistent with the company's identity. Identity is therefore the backbone of reputation. (p. 111)

In contrast, more fine-grained conceptions of organizational reputation are typically silent on the nature of the organizational referent.

Three definitions of organizational reputation, prominent in the business and society literature, illustrate this point. We have highlighted the elements of each definition that imply a connection with organizational identity. First, Fombrun (2002:9) defined corporate reputation as "a collective representation of a company's *past actions and future prospects* [italics added] that describes how key resource providers interpret a company's initiatives and assess its *ability to deliver valued outcomes* [italics added]" (p. 9). Second, Waddock (2000) proposed,

> Reputation is essentially the external assessment of a company or any other organization held by external stakeholders. Reputation includes several dimensions, including an organization's perceived *capacity to meet those*

> *stakeholders expectations* [italics added], the rational attachments that a stakeholder forms with an organization, and the overall "net image" that stakeholders have of the organization. (p. 323)

Finally, Sandberg (2002:3) stated,

> Corporate reputation is the consensus of *perceptions about how a firm will behave in any given situation* [italics added], based on what people know about it, including financial performance. . . . But corporate reputation is not about likeability; it's about the *predictability of behavior and the likelihood that a company will meet expectations* [italics added]. (p. 3)

These examples illustrate several reasons for consistently incorporating explicit references to organizational identity in both general and specific conceptions of organizational reputation.

First, terms such as *prospects*, *outcomes*, *expectations*, and *predictability* in these definitions connote a "high-stakes" organizational assessment. It follows that all parties involved in these assessments would benefit from linking both the conception and measurement of organizational reputation to the most predictive characteristics of an organization—its identity claims.

Second, phrases such as "perceptions about how a firm will behave in specific situations" highlight the feedback function of organizational reputation in the self-management process. This vital role serves as a natural conceptual bridge between matters pertaining to reputation management and contemporary themes in organizational identity scholarship. For example, a serious discrepancy between what an organization professes to be its self-definition and how key stakeholders perceive the organization will actually behave in specific situations is consistent with the concept of an organizational identity crisis (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Whetten, 2002a).

Third, it provides a defensible argument for dispelling the myth that the concept of organizational reputation is mere scholarly camouflage for contrived organizational communication campaigns, designed to maximize ratings in popularity polls. Ongoing debates in the business and society literature concerning the merits of an instrumental versus normative conception of subjects such as reputation management and corporate social responsibility make this observation particularly salient (Freeman & Gilbert, 1988; Jones & Wicks, 1999; Whetten, Rands, & Godfrey, 2002).

When we broaden our point of focus beyond definitions of organizational reputation, the organizational identity conceptual lens draws attention to a fundamental structural flaw in the organizational reputation literature. One of the important features of the conceptualization of organizational identity proposed in this article is that organizational identity claims must specify which of its core characteristics an organization shares in common with similar others and which of these characteristics differentiate the organization from all others. Hence, it is not surprising that normative "theories of the firm" argue that busienss organizations must be both similar to and different from related businesses. By being different, they face less competition, and by being similar, they are considered legitimate (Deephouse, 1999).

It is interesting that the particular structural flaw inhibiting the development of a comprehensive view of organizational reputation is not reflected in the absence of one or the other of these identity requirements in the reputation literature. Much worse, what we observe is that an emphasis on uniqueness dominates the theoretical treatments of reputation, whereas an emphasis on similarity dominates large-scale data collection projects. This structural bifurcation inhibits a much-needed dialogue among organizational reputation scholars engaged in different facets of the scholarly enterprise.

The emphasis on uniqueness in conceptual treatises on organizational reputation is most evident in the identity-related explanations of corporate social performance and corporate reputation, as exemplified by the resource-based view of the firm (Barney, 1986). According to this orientation, the key to sustainable competitive advantage is the possession of value-producing, intangible resources and capabilities that are rare, valuable, nonsubstitutable, and inimitable. These unique capabilities are considered to be manifestations of an organization's unique history or network of relationships (Oliver, 1997). Intangible resources and capabilities, including intellectual capital, organizational culture, and organizational reputation, are frequently cited as prototypical organizational competencies (Barney, 1986; Fombrun, Gardberg, & Barnett, 2000).

In identity terms, this view of reputation suggests that its organizational referent is the elements of an organization's self-definition that are deemed to be central and distinctive. The more that an organization's unique source of competitive advantage is a manifestation of its core identity claims, the more likely it is that this intangible resource or capability can be legitimately characterized as an organization-specific asset.

In contrast, measures of organizational reputation tend to focus on shared identity claims—what might be considered central and similar. In the language of organizational identity, large-scale reputation studies focus on the socially constructed meaning of a particular social identity

	Conceptions of Reputation	**Measures of Reputation**
"Similar to" Identity Requirement	*Institutional Theory (Legitimacy)*	Large Scale Reputation Surveys
"Different from" Identity Requirement	Resource-Based View (Unique Organizational Competency)	*Corporate Identity Studies*

Figure 2: Comparing Identity Requirements and Conceptions Versus Measures of Organizational Reputation

category—what is expected of organizations of a certain type (e.g., the social responsibilities of U.S. corporations). For example, since 1999, Harris Interactive has conducted an annual reputation study of major U.S. firms. In 2001, it asked 10,035 people to nominate their two best and worst companies. From this nomination process, it identified the 60 most visible firms and then asked 21,630 people to rate these companies on 20 attributes, covering what it considers to be the six key dimensions of corporate reputation. These are products and services, vision and leadership, workplace environment, social performance, financial performance, and emotional appeal (see harrisinteractive.com).

As shown in Figure 2, the social actor conception of organizational identity suggests ways to fashion the missing pieces of a comprehensive, coherent approach to the study of organizational reputation in the form of research opportunities for the sparsely populated cells of "Similar to X Conceptions" and "Different from X Measures."

Conceptions of "similar to." As noted earlier, the study of what organizations share in common is naturally aligned with a theoretical tradition, prominent in the sociological study of organizations, called institutional theories of organizations (Scott, 2000). The core interest of organizational scholars using institutional theory is to understand how collective rationality and contending logics drive change among organizations, including a focus on mechanisms of isomorphism, or structural similarity, among organizations. The explanation of choice within institutional theory focuses on category-based correctness—legitimacy of organizational structures, strategies, and operations that must be viewed as right and proper (Suchman, 1995).

A broad implication of the institutional theory perspective is that the study of reputation should be more closely aligned with scholarship on organizational legitimacy. Deephouse and Carter (2002) provided a helpful guide for those interested in examining this interface. They argued that legitimacy is based on compliance with an established set of social norms, whereas reputation involves a relative comparison among a set of firms on the basis of any organizationally relevant metric. Using data from a sample of banks, they demonstrated that isomorphism (similarity) enhances legitimacy but has mixed effects on reputation and that financial performance has a greater impact on reputation than it does on legitimacy.

A specific implication of Deephouse and Carter's (2002) analysis is that reputation scholarship could examine a new set of research questions more in line with the isomorphic interests of institutional theory. For example, it would be interesting to know how much or how little variation in organizational reputation ratings is explained by industry, age, organizational form, or population density effects.

Measures of "different from." This is the natural domain of corporate identity scholarship and management practice. Systematic comparisons between organizational identity and corporate identity have recently been compiled by Hatch and Schultz (2000) and Moingeon and Soenen (2002). For our purposes, the relevant distinction is that corporate identity focuses on only one of the twin identity requirements—differentiation among organizations. According to Olins (1995), corporate identity addresses organizations' need for differentiation by focusing on four things: "who you are, what you do, how you do it and where you want to go" (p. 3).

Given the highly applied focus of the corporate identity scholarly enterprise, research typically consists of "identity audits" (Balmer & Soenen, 1999; van Riel & Balmer, 1997). These audits require very broad access to organizational records and personnel, and they primarily involve qualitative methods of investigation. For example, interviewers attempting to understand an organization's identity claims might use a laddering technique (a set of nested "why" questions) to uncover the foundational organizational values used by organizational members to justify their decisions and actions. Alternatively, investigators might begin with an in-depth analysis of the organization's mission and strategy. Another approach infers identity claims from the organizational referents specified in questions concerning member identification. After an organization's unique identity claims have been identified, then the next step in the audit process is to collect data from key stakeholders concerning the efficacy of the organization's identity claims. The resulting gap analysis becomes the basis for remedial action planning within the organization.

This research process appears to be suitable for reputation scholarship focusing on unique identity claims. In particular, it would be useful to explore ways of adapting this intensive, qualitative approach to identity

Identity (Causes)	→	**REPUTATION**	→	**Identification** (Effects)
	Explanation		*Justification*	

Figure 3: Explanations and Justifications of Organizational Reputation

claims specification and identity-congruence assessment to a format more amenable to large-scale data collection efforts. This would add an important new dimension to the assessment of corporate reputation. The rising popularity of corporate identity consultants suggests that organizations are interested in receiving feedback benchmarked against their core claims of distinction.

On a related note, research on this subject would enrich our understanding of the identity-related implications of what Martin, Feldman, Hatch, and Sitkin (1983) dubbed the "uniqueness paradox." They found that organizational stories, conveying shared beliefs among organizational members concerning the alleged uniqueness of certain organizational features, were, generally speaking, unsupported but highly functional myths. (If the vast majority of businesses claim to be customer friendly, then this hardly qualifies as a valid claim of distinction for any single business.) Further investigation of this subject matter would inform our understanding with regard to the appropriate application of the principle of optimal distinctiveness to the study of organizational identity. Specifically, it would be informative to replicate this study substituting unique identity claims for unique organizational stories.

EXPLANATIONS VERSUS JUSTIFICATIONS OF ORGANIZATIONAL REPUTATION

To this point we have used the organizational identity conceptual lens to identify pockets of conceptual confusion in the organizational reputation literature, stemming from inconsistent references to identity and incomplete applications of identity. We now turn our attention, in this final section, to the potential for confusion arising from the inadvertent misuse of identity and identification in multivariate conceptions of organizational reputation. Specifically, we will draw attention to the distinction between the use of organizational identity as a "cause" of organizational reputation and organizational members' identification as an "effect" of organizational reputation.

Whetten (2002b) suggested that the rudimentary elements of multivariate conceptualizations are propositions espousing "explanations of" a construct (what accounts for it) and/or "justifications for" a construct (why it matters). Explanations focus on the antecedents of a phenomena; justifications focus on the effects or consequences of a phenomena. The objective of explanations is enhanced understanding, whereas the objective of justifications is increased legitimacy. This distinction is closely related to Cossette and Audet's (1992) comparison between two fundamentally different types of theoretical propositions. A cause-effect proposition takes the form of "Concept A is important because it provides a partial explanation of concept B." In contrast, a means-end proposition takes the form of "Concept B is important because it justifies concept A."

As shown in Figure 3, it is common practice for scholars to posit conceptual links between organizational reputation and organizational identity and identification. Our purpose in drawing attention to this tripartite relationship is to offer the following caution: Because the concepts of organizational identity and individual identification are so closely related, it is easy to overlook fundamental differences in their respective relationships with organizational reputation/corporate social performance. Following are two examples of these differences.

First, the relationships between identity and reputation and identification and reputation differ in function. As depicted in Figure 3, the process of identification figures prominently in the justifications offered for why scholars should study and managers should nurture organizational reputation (Pratt, 1998). For example, authors attempting to link organizational reputation with firm performance tend to invoke some form of identification-based stakeholder loyalty (including members' commitment) as a causal link (Elsbach & Glynn, 1996; Fombrun, 1996; Fombrun et al., 2000). In contrast, scholars interested in predicting differences in reputations among firms (e.g., in the computer industry or in Denver) tend to propose organizational identity-based explanations. That is, they argue that what accounts for an organization's reputation emanates from its core identity (Fombrun, 1996). As noted earlier, this observation reflects the natural conceptual affinity between the concept of identity and the theoretical perspective underpinning most explanations of organizational reputation, the resource-based view of competitive strategy (Barney & Stewart, 2000).

Second, the relationships between organizational identity and organizational reputation and between individual identification and organizational reputation differ in kind. A comparison of the highlighted qualifiers in this proposition informs us that identity and reputation operate at the same level of analysis, but identification and reputation do not.

Conceptualizing across levels of analysis is not necessarily something to avoid. In fact, it has been argued that a comprehensive explanation of organizational phenomena must, necessarily, include concepts from multiple levels of analysis (Kozlowski & Klein, 2000). However, the inadvertent or uninformed practice of constructing multilevel explanations in organizational studies can reduce, not enhance, conceptual clarity (Whetten, 2002b).

Following is an illustration of how this might occur in research involving identification and reputation. On one hand, it appears that these concepts are very similar. For example, they are both (a) evaluations (what is expected vs. what is experienced cognitive comparisons) that are (b) linked to an organization's identity claims and that are (c) rendered by key internal and external organizational stakeholders (Fombrun, 2002; Foreman & Whetten, 2002). However, a more careful examination reveals very little commonality in the assumptions and properties constituting these constructs. Specifically, whereas reputation is best conceived of as a property of the focal organization, identification is properly viewed as a property of individuals. Although it is not uncommon for scholars to report that a certain group of stakeholders (e.g., organizational members) report a high level of identification with a particular organization (Pratt, 2000), these aggregated data remain a property of the individual respondents. Another significant difference between these concepts is that identification connotes a process of internalization by respondents that is foreign to the concept of reputation.

Thus we see that the practice of explicitly denoting propositions involving organizational reputation as either explanations or justifications helps scholars avoid the inappropriate use of related constructs. This is especially relevant for frameworks involving identity and identification because the widespread use of the "identity-as-shared perceptions" conception of organizational identity makes it difficult to conceptually or empirically distinguish between the identity of an organization and members' identification with that identity (Whetten, 2002a). Fortunately, because the social actor conception of organizational identity clearly specifies the respective self-referents of organizational identity, organizational reputation, and member identification, it significantly reduces the likelihood of this conceptual error.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

In the the beginning, this article was introduced as an exercise in theory development, with the objective of enhancing the clarity of three related concepts: organizational identity, image, and reputation. To that end, we have attempted to demonstrate the value of models, even simple ones, as theory development tools. For example, graphical models help scholars distinguish between two very different but complementary theory development activities: the search for explanations and the search for justifications. Substantively, this article advanced four core propositions.

First and foremost, for organizational identity to serve as a useful explanation for image and reputation, we need a conception of organizational identity that is unique to identity and uniquely organizational. The view of organizational identity proposed herein was developed with these twin uniqueness criteria in mind. It specifies that organizations are unique among collectivities as social actors, and it argues that the domain of organizational identity claims is the self-definitional requirements of social intercourse among organizations. Viewed from this perspective, the definitional elements proposed by Albert and Whetten (1985) (central, enduring, and distinctive) are, essentially, functional requirements of an effective collective social actor's self-definition. Using their language, organizational identity consists of those self-descriptors/identity claims used by an organization for purposes of specifying what is most central to the organization that is also most enduring (continuous) and/or most distinctive about the organization.

Second, according to the self-management model, conceptions of organizational image and organizational reputation should proceed from the premise that effective social actors must maintain suitable alignment between their identity claims, their projected images, and their acquired reputation. The principle value of identity as a point of reference in both the study and the management of image and reputation is that it provides a single, compelling answer to a variety of related vexing organizational questions such as, "What should our image be?" "What feedback from our constituents is of most value to us?" and "What aren't we willing to change in response to demands from our stakeholders?" Whereas various decision aids have been proposed for addressing each of these questions, the most straightforward responses all begin with the reflexive question, "What do we consider to be most core, enduring, and distinctive about this organization?"

Third, past failures to explicitly link scholarship on organizational reputation to organizational identity has produced a serious structural flaw in the reputation literature. Specifically, the current inconsistency between reputation theory and reputation data is the result of two incomplete applications of an identity-based view of organization-environment relations: first, the tendency to embed identity in broad conceptions of organizational reputation but to leave it out of specific definitions and measures.

We have proposed the self-management model as an antidote—believing that its emphasis on identity congruence will bring much needed consistency to organizational reputation scholarship. Second, the failure to incorporate both the "similar to" and "different from" requirements of organizational self-definitions into reputation theory and research. In this regard, it is important to keep in mind that just as the principle of optimal distinctiveness mitigates against lopsided self-concepts, it also fosters a balanced approach to the study of identity-related topics.

Fourth, it is commonplace for conceptions of organizational reputation to include organizational identity and/or organizational identification. It is important that applications of identity and identification in this manner take into account the inherent differences in their properties as well as their corresponding suitability as explanations versus justifications.

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