

Making sense of and giving sense to interorganizational collaboration:
A temporal perspective on identification and cooperative behavior

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Organizational identification describes the overlap between an individual's own identity and the identity of an organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). It is the outcome of a dual sensemaking process where individuals make sense of their own identity ("Who am I?") and the identity of an organization ("Who is this organization?") to subsequently conclude who they are in relationship to the organization (e.g., Gioia et al., 1994). This study aims to expand our understanding of how identification relates to cooperative behavior in the context of inter-organizational collaboration. As firms increasingly engage in collaborations, identity boundaries – those that deal with the unconscious mind – are becoming more porous (Santos & Eisenhardt, 2005; Lifshitz-Assaf, 2018;). Individuals need to make sense of "who they are" in relationship to external partners if that partnership is subject to continuous organizing. For example, in meta-organizations (Gulati et al. 2012) such as collaborative communities (Snow et al., 2011) or open innovation programs (Lifshitz-Assaf, 2018) individuals need to collaborate with multiple partners over an extended period. Think of Blade.org (Snow et al., 2011) – a community of more than 250 firms that has developed more than 60 new products – or the Cisco Hyperinnovation Living Labs that brings together multiple partners to find new business opportunities through extended and intense collaboration (Furr et al. 2016).

Individuals that cooperate in such meta-organizations come from different organizations and draw from different frames of reference, potentially hindering their willingness to cooperate. Building on Bednar et al. (2020), we conceptualize cooperative behavior in terms of "action tendencies" – i.e., an individuals' affectual and behavioral tendency to approach toward the collaboration or to withdraw from it. When individuals have *withdrawal action tendencies*, they are dissatisfied, do not put much effort into the collaboration, and might try to discontinue their participation in the collaboration. In contrast, when individuals have *approach action tendencies*, they are happy, are willing to put in effort, and are likely to stay part of the collaboration. We aim to shed light on how these collaborative actions tendencies are shaped by how individuals make sense of their own identity in light of their perceptions of the meta-organizations identity.

Prior work has already established that identification drives the willingness to engage in cooperative behavior (Bartel 2001; Dukerich et al., 2002). We can thus expect that individuals' identification with a meta-organization is positively associated with their collaborative action tendencies. Yet, we address two important gaps in our current understanding of this relationship. First, we shed light on the temporal structures in individuals' sensemaking processes of "who they

are” in relation to the meta-organization. We draw from Bednar et al.’s (2020) organizational identification trajectories that define “one’s current perception of how one’s identification has evolved and/or will evolve over time” (p. 207). This conceptualization combines *retrospective sensemaking* (e.g. Weick et al. 2005) – how my identity and the collective’s identity have evolved from the past to the present and how, as a result, their relationship has evolved – with *prospective sensemaking* (e.g. Gioia et al. 1994, Stigliani & Ravasi 2012) – the anticipation of how my identification will change from the present to the future. This temporal perspective is an important complement to a more static understanding of current levels of identification (Bednar et al., 2020). We thus address recent calls to integrate temporality into sensemaking research by asking: *How does retrospective and prospective identification interact with individuals’ current levels of identification in driving their collaborative action tendencies?*

Second, individuals’ sense of organizational identification does not develop in a vacuum but is subject to sensegiving (e.g. Gioia & Chittipeddi 1991, Matlis & Lawrence, 2007). “Sensegiving entails the imposition of certain premises and ideas onto others’ sensemaking processes” (Schildt et al. 2020 p. 243). In the context of inter-organizational collaboration, partners may nominate champions who create and promote a positive view of the partnership (ter Wal et al. 2017). Following Bednar et al. (2020), we refer to these individuals as identity stewards. In line with our temporal view, we need to expand our understanding of sensegiving as an antecedent to not only current levels of identification but to how one’s identification has evolved in the past and will evolve in the future. Similarly, identity stewards can draw from the past or the future in their sensegiving strategies (Vaara et al., 2016). We thus ask: *How do different temporal sensegiving strategies shape individuals’ dynamic perceptions of identification with a meta-organization?*

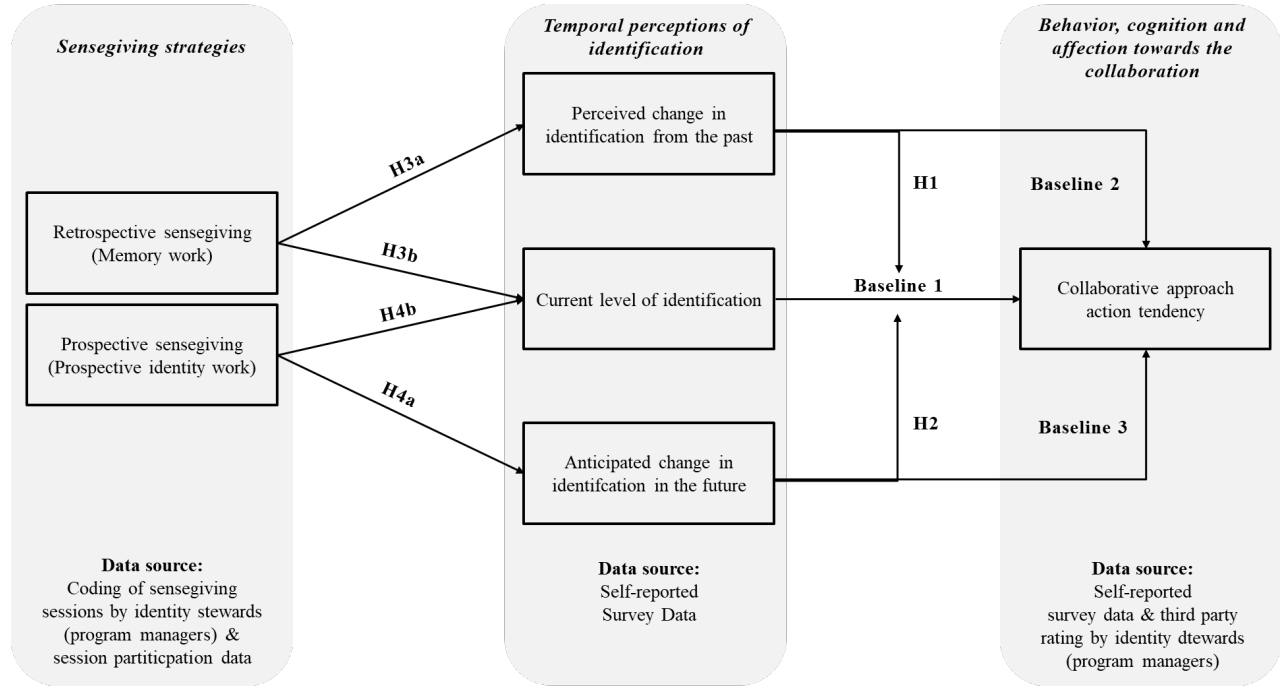
To address these questions, we conducted a longitudinal study of the members of the meta-organization “Open Energy”, comprising 10 global energy utilities and 15 clean-tech startups. We combined four survey waves of 74 individuals with observations, digital trace data, and in-depth interviews. We analyzed the data with panel regression models which we complemented with qualitative analyses.

Theoretical Background

Our theoretical background, which we only briefly review here, includes three sections that stipulate (1) a set of baselines that transfer what we already know from prior literature regarding identification and action tendencies to the context of inter-organizational collaboration, (2)

theorize the interactive effects of temporal perceptions of identification on collaborative action tendencies, and (3) theorize how temporal perceptions of identification are shaped by different temporal sensegiving strategies (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: A framework of sensegiving strategies, temporal perceptions of identification, and collaborative approach action tendencies



First, the baselines stipulate that current levels of identification shape collaborative action tendencies because of (1) positive emotions induced through in-group feelings and the association of desirable characteristics to that group, and (2) motivation to contribute to the success of the group which is associated with one's own success (e.g. Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Bartel, 2001; Dutton et al., 1994). Yet, two individuals with the same level of identification might have very different collaborative action tendencies, contingent on how they remember and/or anticipate changes in their identification (Bednar et al. 2020). We theorize that differences in these perceived dynamics in identification are also associated with collaborative action tendencies.

Baseline 1: Current levels of identification with a meta-organization are positively related to collaborative approach action tendency.

Baseline 2: An individual's perceived increase in identification with a meta-organization from the remembered past to the present is positively related to his/her collaborative approach action tendency.

Baseline 3: An individual's anticipated increase in identification with a meta-organization from the present to the future is positively related to his/her collaborative approach action tendency.

Second, we elaborate on how levels and dynamics of identification interact. While perceptions of increased alignment of identities from the past to the present – i.e., a backward-looking upward momentum – provide individuals with a feeling of confirmation, perceptions of decreasing alignment over a period of retrospection may cause individuals to question their own judgment and instill feelings of doubt. Similarly, the anticipation of future increases in identification indicates a prospective sensemaking process with a positive outlook that provides confidence and a feeling of durability. A negative prospection makes individuals doubt that durability and hampers their collaborative approach action tendencies. Thus:

H1: Perceived increases in identification with a meta-organization positively moderate the relationship between current levels of identification and collaborative approach action tendency.

H2: Anticipated increases in identification with a meta-organization positively moderate the relationship between current levels of identification and collaborative approach action tendency.

Third, identity stewards can utilize ‘memory work’ and ‘prospective sensegiving’ to develop a narrative about the organization’s past, and future highlighting positive and deemphasizing negative aspects. Those narratives shape dynamic perceptions of identification.

H3: Individual's exposure to memory work sensegiving is positively related to (a) a higher perceived increase in identification, and (b) higher current levels of identification with a meta-organization.

H4: Exposure to prospective sensegiving is positively related to (a) a higher anticipated increase in identification, and (b) higher current levels of identification with a meta-organization.

Methods

Research Context. We collected data in the context of “Open Energy” – a meta-organization that aims at exploring new technical solutions and business models geared toward the clean energy transition. It comprises of ~150 individual members that are themselves seconded by 10 global electric utilities and 15 startups. Members convened at four, one-week modules that occurred every two months, while activities between members continued throughout. Due to the spatial distribution of its members (spread across five continents) and the Covid-19 pandemic, collaborative activities took place in a virtual setting. The collaboration was organized by a team of program managers who had considerable leeway in organizing and facilitating collaborative

activities. These program managers can be seen as identity stewards who disseminate the identity of “Open Energy” to members, as illustrated here: *“I think a lot of the identity of Open Energy morphs with the program managers. They represent Open Energy and bring in their narrative.”*

Data. We administered four survey waves to participants with the following variables: (1) *Perceived change in identification from the past* was measured with a visually supported scale developed by Bednar et al. (2020) that asks how individuals perceived that their identification from the conclusion of the last module (precisely defined moment in the past that is the same for all participants) has changed to the conclusion of the current module (i.e., the present) on a 7-point Likert scale from ‘very strongly decreased’ to ‘very strongly increased’. (2) *Anticipated change in identification in the future* was measured with the same scale asking how individuals expect their identification to increase from now (i.e., the present) to the conclusion of the next module (i.e., clearly defined moment in the future that is the same for all participants). (3) *Current level of identification* was measured with a three-item scale adapted from Smidts et al., (2001) (exemplary item: “I feel a strong sense of belonging to Open Energy”). (4) *Collaborative approach action tendency* was measured with a six-item scale that we developed based on Bednar et al. (2020) (exemplary item: “I dedicate a lot of time and effort to make Open Energy a success”). To get an independent third-party rating, we also provided the program managers with a list of all members and asked them to rate how they perceived members’ approach action tendencies.

We combined the survey data with digital trace and observational data where we tracked individuals’ participation in sensegiving sessions. The sessions were coded by the program managers regarding whether they entailed memory work or prospective sensegiving. (5) *Exposure to memory work* was then constructed as the number of sessions that individuals participated in at a given module that were coded as memory work sessions. (6) *Exposure to prospective identity work* was analogously constructed as the number of attended sessions that were coded as prospective identity work sessions. Through our surveys and information collected by the program managers, we accounted for various control variables. The resulting sample includes 233 observations from 74 individuals. We analyzed the data with random-effects panel regression models, which we complemented with qualitative analyses of 19 interviews and notes of 120 hours of observations.

Results

Baselines. In support of baselines 1 and 2, we find that individuals' current levels of identification with the meta-organization ($b = 0.421$, $p\text{-value} < 0.001$) and perceived increase in identification from the past to the present ($b = 0.303$, $p\text{-value} < 0.001$) are positively associated with collaborative approach action tendency. Surprisingly, anticipated increases from the present to the future do not have a significant association with action tendency ($b = 0.011$; $p\text{-value} = 0.862$), thus failing to support baseline 3.

Dynamic perceptions of identification and collaborative approach action tendencies. In support of H1, perceived increases in identification from the past to the present significantly moderate the relationship between current levels of identification and collaborative approach action tendency ($b = 0.061$, $p\text{-value} = 0.069$). This implies that individuals that have a higher perceived increase in identification translate their current levels of identification more into cooperative behavior. Interestingly, failing to support H2, there is no significant interaction between anticipated identification increases and current levels of identification ($b = 0.035$; $p\text{-value} = 0.169$). Our interviews illustrate the importance of retrospection:

"Because in these moments, I am doing the retrospective. And then you understand that what's happened, that makes sense and that is because you went through it and you feel part of Open Energy. And you really need to keep that nurturing, you really need to keep the positive momentum because it helps you to you to keep up the engagement."

Complementing our quantitative results, qualitative insights suggest that anticipated increases in identification plays a less important role in shaping approach action tendencies:

"It is about solving today's problems, right? Less of a shared identity today [i.e., current levels] very much relates to the actual challenges of the individual in the present and that's what helps or helps not to tackle the important problems that are here today."

Shaping dynamic perceptions of identification with sensegiving. Exposure to memory work does not have a significant association with individuals' current level or identification ($b=0.085$, $p\text{-value} = 0.142$), failing to support H3b. However, in support of H4b, exposure to prospective identity work sessions is positively associated with individuals' current levels of identification ($b = 0.096$; $p\text{-value} = 0.039$). The following illustrates how prospective identity work shapes levels of identification:

"We had these sessions where they really talked about the purpose of Open Energy and the future of the energy transition. This helps you to form a shared understanding of the common identity of the Open Energy. So, it not only helped me understand what's happening in the industry. It also

kind of very subtly told me that look, all the individuals that are part of Open Energy have a similar outlook into the future.”

Regarding the dynamic perceptions of identification, exposure to memory work is positively associated with a perceived increase in identification from the past to the present ($b = 0.238$, $p\text{-value} = 0.002$), supporting H3a. At the same time, failing to support H4a, exposure to prospective identity work does not have a significant association with an anticipated increase in identification ($b=0.015$, $p\text{-value} = 0.798$). The following quote from a program manager illustrates the importance of memory work:

“So, we really wanted to show success cases from the past and we invited speakers that had two or three stories to tell to our current members that there are different types of processes or journeys that you can go through inside Open Energy”

Expected Contributions

First, in further developing our work, we hope to contribute to a better understanding of the dynamics of *sensemaking* in the context of organizational identification (e.g. Gioia et al. 1994, Stigliani & Ravasi 2012; Bednar et al. 2020). In support of a dynamic perspective, we uncover that in addition to current levels of identification, individuals’ perceptions of how their identification has evolved from the past to the present drive their action tendencies. Surprisingly, retrospective sensemaking of identity seems to be a more relevant driver of action tendencies than prospective sensemaking. In conjunction with our qualitative insights, our results suggest that the underlying mechanisms of a backward-looking upward momentum and nostalgia may serve well to explain heterogeneity in action tendencies for individuals with similar degrees of current levels of identification. We further extend a dynamic identification perspective by shedding light on the interplay of current levels of identification, remembered increases, and anticipated increases. Providing further support for a retrospective lens, we uncover that perceived increases from the past to the present help individuals leverage their current levels of identification and translate them more effectively into approach action tendencies. Interestingly, a forward-looking perspective seems less relevant for translating current levels of identification into approach action tendencies.

Second, we hope to develop new insights into a dynamic perspective of *sensegiving* in the context of organizational identification (e.g. Gioia et al., 1991; Schildt et al. 2020). We theorize and show that identity stewards can shape an individual’s identification perceptions through memory work and prospective sensegiving. We thus offer a nuanced view of how different sensegiving strategies can shape dynamic perceptions of identification: Memory work elevates

increases in identification from the past to the present as well as current levels of identification. Prospective identity work positively relates to levels of identification but does not contribute to perceived increases in identification in the future. Hence, in the context of sensegiving, both retrospective and prospective lenses are helpful for shaping individuals' perceptions of current levels of identification.

Third, we hope to also contribute to the literature on interorganizational collaboration by shedding light on how a dynamic identification perspective relates to collaborative behavior, cognition and affection. Moreover, we theorize and show that identity stewards can shape perceptions of identification and may thus be able to steer collaborative action tendencies.

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