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Discursive practices of remedial organizational identity work: A study of the Norwegian Labor and Welfare Administration



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Summary This paper examines organizational identity work among members of publicly criticized and discredited organizations. It does so by exploring the Norwegian Labor and Welfare Administration (NAV), an organization that has been the object of considerable persistent public critique over the years since its foundation in 2006. Based on a discursive analysis of how members of NAV have interpreted the critique and constructed senses of organizational identity, the paper highlights four types of discursive practice: ‘accepting,’ ‘condemning,’ ‘distancing,’ and ‘positively calibrating.’ These practices demonstrate how the critique was incorporated into members’ organizational identity constructions in various ways and with various outcomes, and how members navigated and articulated ambivalent conceptions of the critique, the organization, and their role as organizational members. Based on the findings, implications for the role of discursive practice in remedial organizational identity work are discussed.

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Introduction

The concept of organizational identity has become central in management and organizational research. As part of this research, studies have focused on how negative external events, or identity threats, influence organizational identity constructions (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006) and the subsequent remedial identity work that is undertaken by members of the organization (Svenningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Studies have also paid increasing attention

to the discursive processes through which organizational identities are crafted and reproduced (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2003; Coupland & Brown, 2012) and through which organizations and their members attempt to restore threatened, stigmatized, or tainted organizational identities (Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, & Fugate, 2007; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006).

This paper aims to extend this research by examining how members of publicly criticized organizations (re)construct senses of organizational identity. It focuses on the discursive practices employed by members of the Norwegian Labor and Welfare Administration (NAV), an organization that has been the object of considerable public critique over the years since its foundation in 2006. Specifically, the paper identifies and discusses four types of discursive practice – ‘accepting,’

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‘condemning,’ ‘distancing,’ and ‘positively calibrating’ – that were central in members’ interpretation of the critique and their efforts to (re)construct organizational identity. These practices show not only how the critique was incorporated into their organizational identity constructions in various ways and with various outcomes, but also how members navigated and articulated ambivalent conceptions of the critique, the organization, and their role as organizational members.

Based on the findings, the paper makes two contributions to the literature on organizational identity. First, it provides an account of the role of discursive practice in remedial organizational identity work by showing how members of a publicly criticized organization wove together their interpretations of the critique and their senses of organizational identity. The discursive practices thus provided different frames in which members reconstructed their organizational identity in ways that were congruent with their interpretations of the critique. Second, it highlights the productive implications of public critique for organizational identity constructions. In fact, as well as playing a defensive or neutralizing role, the discursive practices illuminated positive and buoyant remedial organizational identity constructions related for example to hope, compassion, empathy, and adjustment.

The paper is organized as follows: It begins with a review of the theory of remedial organizational identity work. This is followed by an outline of the research context and the methods undertaken. In the following sections, the findings are presented and discussed in light of relevant theory. Finally, the paper concludes and outlines an agenda for future research.

Remedial organizational identity work

Organizational identity has become a well established term within management and organization studies; it is commonly defined as “what members perceive, feel and think about their organization” (Hatch & Schultz, 1997: 357). Organizational identity is distinct from personal identity – how members perceive and articulate themselves – although the two are often related in complex ways. As Alvesson and Empson (2008: 1) argue, “organizational identity is [...] more than simply an answer to the question, ‘Who are we?’ as an organization (Gioia & Thomas, 1996). It presents, potentially, a partial answer to the question ‘Who am I?’ as an individual.” Hence, from a social constructionist point of view, organizational identity resides in the processes whereby its members negotiate and provide meanings for their experiences of the organization (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Ybema et al., 2009).

Studies of organizational identity have shown that organizations may have a myriad of complementary and conflicting identities (Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997) and that identities can – and often do – change (Gioia et al., 2000). Recent studies have also underscored the ongoing and processual characteristics of organizational identity through an emphasis on ‘identity work’ (Kreiner, Ashforth, & Sluss, 2006; Svenningson & Alvesson, 2003). Although it was mainly conducted at the level of personal identity, this research has questioned identity – both personal and organizational – as something

that people or organizations have, and shown instead how identity is constituted, negotiated, reproduced, and threatened as organizational members try to make sense of themselves and their organization.

Negative events or experiences are likely to intensify members’ identity work and subsequently lead them to engage in ‘intensive remedial identity work’ (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). Such forms of identity work can be understood in contrast to more uncritical or routinized identity work, which is comparatively unself-conscious and unchallenged (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002: 626). As an example, Lutgen-Sandvik (2008) has shown how intensive remedial identity work among bullied individuals involves extensive use of stabilizing, sensemaking, reconciling, repairing, grieving, and restructuring throughout the various phases of the bullying process. Although the focus in these studies has been on personal identity, the concept of intensive remedial identity work is also useful for understanding and exploring *organizational* identity constructions.

Studies of identity threats have shown how, in the face of potential threats such as negative publicity, organizational change, or conflicts in or around the organization, members will attempt to more clearly articulate organizational identity (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). For example, Dutton and Dukerich (1991) show how specific actions to restore organizational identity are undertaken in organizations as a result of such threats (i.e., media or political pressure). Ravasi and Schultz (2006) have highlighted the role of organizational culture as a remedial resource as members make sense of what the organization is and give sense through actions aiming to change perceptions of the organization. Other studies, in turn, have shown how members may make *new* sense of organizational identity as a result of threats following organizational change (Fiol, 2002; Gioia & Thomas, 1996).

While the above-mentioned studies have focused on organizational identity work as the results of distinct and relatively isolated threats, studies of ‘dirty work’ have drawn attention to the *ongoing* remedial features of identity work (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Ashforth et al., 2007; Simpson, Slutskaia, Lewis, & Höpfl, 2012). Dirty work broadly comprises work that is considered socially, morally, or physically tainted, and includes occupational groups such as sex workers (Tyler, 2011), prison guards (Lemmergaard & Muhr, 2011), and, after the financial crisis, even investment bankers (Stanley & Mackenzie-Davey, 2012). In terms of identity work, Ashforth et al. (2007) have shown how ‘dirty workers’ engage in a variety of normalization tactics to remove or remedy senses of taint. These include mobilizing occupational ideologies (reframing, recalibrating, or refocusing the taint), creating social buffers through in-groups, confrontation of clients and public perceptions, and defensive tactics such as avoiding, gallows humor or accepting. Although this research concentrated on the interplay between individual and occupational identification, such normalization tactics are also likely to be central in how members of tainted organizations (re)construct senses of organizational identity.

An organization like NAV can be considered socially tainted because it engages in various aspects of social work. Many of its employees are ‘street level bureaucrats’ (Lipsky, 1980) who have to make difficult decisions, often with potentially devastating effects on specific individuals or

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