
The Communicative Constitution of Collective Identity in Interorganizational Collaboration

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Matthew A. Koschmann¹

Abstract

This study reconceptualizes collective identity from a communication perspective using a constitutive model of communication as a theoretical framework. A longitudinal case study is used to explain the complications and inaction of a social services interorganizational collaboration as a lack of collective identity, also tracing the emergence of a new collective identity. Collective identity is theorized as an authoritative text that emerges through communicative practice and is drawn on for certain strategic ends. A communicative model of organizational constitution—based on the ‘Montreal School’ theory of coorientation—shows how textual representations of situated conversations can gain authority through abstraction and reification, providing a mechanism to organize and direct the voluntary actions of diverse stakeholders. Implications for theory and research are discussed.

Keywords

civil society sector, collaboration, collective identity, communicative constitution

¹University of Colorado Boulder, Boulder, CO, USA

Corresponding Author:

Matthew A. Koschmann, Department of Communication, University of Colorado Boulder, UCB 270, Hellems 96, Boulder, CO 80309, USA

Email: koschmann@colorado.edu

Interorganizational collaborations (IOCs) are a significant part of the civil society sector, especially for the provision of social services and community development. IOCs are distinct organizational forms composed of members who organize around focal problems/issues to leverage resources and accomplish objectives that could not be realized alone. Thus a fundamental issue for IOCs is the achievement of joint or collective action. Yet one of the biggest challenges facing IOCs is the sheer diversity that exists across partner organizations as they try to develop productive relationships toward some form of cooperation. The quality and effectiveness of IOCs depends on peoples' willingness to work together voluntarily, to share resources, and to take action in the absence of formal authority or market incentives. Conversely, the lack of voluntary cooperation leads to free-rider problems, deferred responsibility, minimal contributions, and overall inaction (Kramer, 2006). A key question for IOCs, then, is how to use alternative mechanisms to generate collective action among diverse members.

Previous literature that suggests the concept of *collective identity*, could be a valuable mechanism to induce action in IOCs (Cornelissen, Haslam, & Balmer, 2007; Hardy, Lawrence, & Grant, 2005). Collective identity refers to the "we-ness" of a group (Cerulo, 1997), or a collective's sense of itself—a communal property that cannot be reduced to any particular individual. Collective identities have the capacity to motivate activity in IOCs because they create the legitimacy (Human & Provan, 2000; Wry, Lounsbury, & Glynn, 2011) and social capital (Kramer, 2006) needed to enable action and support subsequent IOC efforts. Collective identities can also provide a rationale for action on par with moral obligations, similar to the financial incentives of markets or the authority relations of bureaucracies (Whetten, 2006). Yet IOCs are full of complications involving the coordination of members with competing values and interests, making the achievement of a collective identity extremely difficult.

Research on collective identity is often grounded in conventional notions of *organizational identity*, a well-established concept in the organizational and management literatures (see Glynn, 2008, for a review). Much of this work conceptualizes organizational identity as a cognitive construct (Scott & Lane, 2000), referring to the central, enduring, and distinctive qualities of an organization (Whetten, 2006). From a communication perspective, however, the study of collective identity in IOCs calls for a departure from traditional notions of organizational identity for several reasons. First, IOCs are not known for their enduring or fixed qualities, but rather their temporality, variability, and turnover. Researchers should recognize the fluidity of collective identity and its susceptibility to redefinition and revision by IOC members

(Cornelissen et al., 2007; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000); we should not necessarily focus on central and enduring properties of IOCs. Second, a growing number of scholars argue that identity should be conceptualized as a process that is produced and reproduced through communication, not a cognitively held belief in the minds of organizational members (Cheney & Tompkins, 1987; Hardy et al., 2005; Kuhn & Nelson, 2002; Scott, 2007). From this view, collective identity is made salient in communication; it is the outward manifestation of collective identity that makes a difference (Kramer, 2006). The unit of analysis should therefore be the collective construction, not individual cognitions.

The purpose of this study is to reconceptualize the notion of collective identity from a communication perspective, using a constitutive model of communication as a theoretical framework for explanation. Using interview and participant observation data from a longitudinal case study, I explain the complications and inaction of a social services IOC as a lack of collective identity, also tracing the emergence of a new collective identity and how this facilitated successful collaboration. Furthermore, I incorporate a constitutive model of organizational communication to theorize collective identity as an authoritative text emerging from processes of coorientation, abstraction, and reification.

Accordingly, this article makes a number of important contributions. First, it adds to our understanding of identity and organizing, which are the key themes in current organizational communication research (Rooney, McKenna, & Barker, 2011). By theorizing collective identity from a communication perspective, this study continues the tradition of the linguistic turn by challenging the psychologization of experience and the subjective-objective dualisms that are common in organizational research. Using communication theory to explain collective identity—versus using theories of identity to explain communication—also affirms the dialogic quality of experience (Deetz, 2003). Furthermore, previous research often examines *individual* identities in organizations, whereas the present study looks at the *collective* identity of an IOC. This shift is subtle but important because it highlights the communicative nature of organizational constitution and the ongoing struggle to create and sustain shared meanings. In addition, this study contributes to our understanding of voluntary collective action. A central problem for IOCs is generating the necessary authority to coordinate behavior, given that IOCs operate outside the reach of market or hierarchical mechanisms of control (Lawrence, Hardy, & Phillips, 2002). IOCs require voluntary collective action but rarely have the capacity to require the compliance of their members. A communicative model of organizational

constitution shows how textual representations of situated conversations can gain power through abstraction and reification (discussed below), thus providing authority to organize and direct the voluntary actions of diverse stakeholders. Finally, this study is useful for the way it extends the literature on the communicative constitution of organization (CCO) to the important context of IOCs. Collaboration across organizations magnifies issues of communicative constitution because IOCs lack many of the material artifacts (e.g., buildings, physical resources), structural constraints (e.g., hierarchies, chains of command), and legal formalities (e.g., employment contracts) that characterize “normal” organizations and enable their taken-for-granted existence. Instead, IOCs rely solely on the fragile social infrastructure of relationships and agreements between stakeholders. Therefore, this study shows the utility of communication theory for understanding IOCs, and demonstrates that IOCs are a valuable context for advancing theories of communicative constitution and collective identity.

Literature Review and Research Questions

Organizations, Identity, and Communication

The study of organizational identity has a long and diverse history (for reviews, see Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000; Glynn, 2008; Whetten, 2006). Some scholars maintain a distinction between organizational identity and collective identity (e.g., Whetten, 2006), but most of the literature treats collective and organizational identities as synonymous (e.g., Hardy et al., 2005; Pratt, 2003). Previous research is often based on Albert and Whetten's (1985) seminal article that defines organizational identity as the central, enduring, and distinctive qualities of an organization. More recent work, however, has questioned the central-enduring-distinctive definition, arguing that organizational identities are just as likely to be fluid, conflicting, and subject to ongoing alteration from organizational members (Gioia et al., 2000). Other research has challenged the cognitive and psychological conceptions of organizations' identities. Rather than assuming organizational identity is a set of beliefs held in members' minds, this approach highlights the role of language in the construction of collective identities. Collective identity is therefore produced, reproduced, and enacted through the symbolic and interpretive processes of communication (Fiol, 2002; Hardy et al., 2005; Kuhn & Nelson, 2002; Sillince, 2006).

Communication scholarship often focuses on personal identities in organizations and developing notions of self (Larson & Pepper, 2003; Tracy &

Trethewey, 2005; Wieland, 2010), social (Hogg & Reid, 2006; Scott, 2007), or place (e.g., Rooney et al., 2010) identity. A small but growing line of work has begun to focus more on collective identities: Aust (2004) demonstrates how the communication of values is an important component of organizational identity; Sillince (2006) explains how organizations use rhetoric about multiple identities to enhance a firm's competitive advantage; and Ran and Duimering (2007) investigate the cognitive-linguistic processes involved in organizational identity construction through language-based identity claims. Yet none of these studies examines the unique interorganizational context of collaboration, either conceptually or empirically (see Hardy et al., 2005, for a notable exception). Furthermore, Scott's (2007) review shows that research on communication and identity is devoted to applying identity theories (such as social identity theory) to communication phenomena. In contrast, I propose applying communication theory to explain collective identity, rather than using theories of identity to explain communication phenomena. Accordingly, a constitutive model of communication offers a useful framework to understand collective identity within the context of IOCs.

Communication as Constitutive

Because of the "linguistic turn" in the social sciences, the principle of constitution has served as a metamodel for the discipline of communication (Craig, 1999). A constitutive model sees communication as generative of organizational realities and the fundamental process by which we know and understand the social world. I briefly describe one such model, known as the *Montreal School* of organizational communication, highlighting key terms that are central to my analysis.

Montreal School theorizing. One of the most developed constitutive models of organizational communication comes from the Montreal School of James Taylor, François Cooren, and their colleagues at the Université de Montréal (Cooren, Kuhn, Cornelissen, & Clark, 2011). They depict communication as *coorientation*, a process whereby people align their actions in relation to common objectives (Taylor & Van Every, 2000). Cooriented communication has two separate *modalities*: conversation and text. The conversational modality involves the visible interactions between various people, the *site* where organization is experienced and accomplished (Cooren & Taylor, 1997). The textual modality, however, is the symbolic *surface* on which conversations develop. Conversations and texts form a self-organizing loop as they operate dialectically—texts are simultaneously the antecedents and consequences of conversations.

Intertextuality and distancing. Text-conversation dialectics involve a variety of *intertextual* struggles, as members vie to influence, change, or enable other texts (Keenoy & Oswick, 2004; Kuhn, 2008). In IOC's these struggles could involve members trying to shape the language of the mission statement to privilege the work of their home organizations or attempts to clarify definitions of key terms (e.g., homelessness) such that certain populations are included or excluded as clients. To "scale up" (Cooren & Fairhurst, 2009; Hardy, 2004) from localized interactions to distinct organizational forms, the intertextual outcomes of coorientation need to be extended through space and time, to become "distanced" to enlarge their effect beyond situated conversations. This process is referred to as *distancing*, a term borrowed from Ricoeur (1981, 1991) and his work on texts and hermeneutics. As conversations solidify into texts (such as the recording and circulating of meeting minutes), what is produced is no longer a loose connection of conversations, but instead a reified organizational abstraction taken to represent all the conversations this abstraction refers to (Taylor, Cooren, Giroux, & Robichaud, 1996). We then experience these abstract reifications—texts acting across space and time from a distance—as distinct organizational forms, such as IOC's. Abstraction and reification are fundamental aspects of communicative constitution and why Montreal School theorizing provides a valuable foundation from which to understand IOC's and collective identity.

Abstraction, reification, and authority. Unlike other approaches that focus on discourse in and of organizations, Montreal School theorizing is particularly concerned with the emergence of distinct organizational forms that transcend and eclipse their individual members (beyond the more nebulous self-regulating conventions of institutions). This emphasis on "entitativity" (Nicotera, 2011) comes from an interest in authority—how it is that social collectives induce meaningful action and coordinate the activities of their members. According to a Montreal School approach of communicative constitution, authority comes from abstraction and reification. As distancing continues and texts are further removed from their immediate circumstances, more and more ambiguity is introduced until all that remains is an abstract representation of the original interactions.

On the face of it, this process of abstraction is nothing new. It is impossible to fully represent every interaction in successive conversations or texts. We live by this kind of inference (Goffman, 1959), and the capacity to generalize in this way is the source of all human communication (Zijderveld, 1970). The important contribution of the Montreal School, however, is to demonstrate that this process of abstraction through distancing becomes a source of

authority for collective action. Through distancing, abstract representations tend to shed any trace of specific authorship. That is, the actions and intentions of particular individuals are omitted in subsequent interactions, and the resulting textual representations (abstractions) are the primary means by which we communicate with each other. It is this “vanishing” (Taylor & Van Every, 2011) of authorship that gives abstractions their authority. As the contributions of specific individuals get lost in the distancing of texts, more and more agency is attributed to the textual abstraction itself. Consequently, the textual abstraction becomes reified—taken as given—in ways that convey power. Authority is now attributed to the textual abstraction itself rather than any particular individual.

This theory is why the Montreal School is valuable for studying IOCs. As IOCs operate beyond the reach of market or hierarchical mechanisms of control (Lawrence et al., 2002), we need to explain how they can develop authority to coordinate voluntary collective action. The emergent authority of reified abstractions can provide this explanation. Authority is bolstered because abstractions can accommodate multiple interpretations, still maintaining a consistent appearance. In addition, this authority perpetuates because of the difficulty in confronting or questioning abstractions directly. Individual authors have vanished and the textual abstraction has become naturalized (reified) such that the authority it conveys is seen as reflecting the collective, not any one individual or constituency (Robichaud, Giroux, & Taylor, 2004; Taylor & Van Every, 2011). Any attempt to challenge the status quo must now be directed toward an ambiguous collective and not a specific person.

How, then, do these reified abstractions relate to collective identity? Montreal School theorizing has influenced several relevant lines of thinking, based on coorientation and text-conversation dialectics: Robichaud et al. (2004) introduce the concept of a “metaconversation” as a way to explain the continual generation of an organization’s identity; Cooren, Brummans, and Charrieras (2008) discuss how an organization’s particular mode of being is “made present” (presentified) through ongoing communication processes; Chaput, Brummans, and Cooren (2011) show how members negotiate a “common substance” (consubstantiality, *à la* Burke, 1969) during day-to-day interactions to form a shared identity; and Taylor and Van Every (2011) draw on Peirce’s (1940) conception of “thirdness” to explain how organizational identities are legitimated or invalidated. But it is Kuhn’s (2008) notion of an “authoritative text” that I believe provides the most useful augmentation of Montreal School thinking for the context of IOCs

and the study of collective identity. This is because the emerging authority of textual abstractions is central to Kuhn's analysis.

Authoritative texts and collective identity. In terms of communicative constitution, the process of coorientation culminates in the emergence of what Kuhn (2008) calls an *authoritative text*, an abstract textual representation of the collective that portrays its structure and direction, shows how activities are coordinated, and indicates relations of authority. By "text" Kuhn (2008) is referring to a "network of meanings" that comprises the linguistic elements of interaction, similar to what Fairclough (2005) calls the discursive aspect of social events. What makes texts authoritative, however, is that when they develop a "dominant reading" (Kuhn, 2008), they become imbued with shared qualities that a collective respects and is willing to coalesce around. Accordingly, authoritative texts can shape future conversations, direct members' attention, and discipline their actions. It is this notion of an authoritative text that provides a valuable connection to collective identity. An authoritative text is more than just a formal mission statement of an organization or a statement about its culture; it is a broader concept that emphasizes relations of power and legitimacy, clarifies roles and responsibilities, and provides an overall sense of what an organization is (Kuhn, 2008).

In summary, I suggest that collective identity in IOCs can be theorized as an authoritative text, an emergent abstraction of localized interactions that scale up to a collective property through communication processes of coorientation, abstraction, and reification. In the following study of a social services IOC, I demonstrate how the struggles and inaction of this IOC can be understood as a lack of collective identity. I also show how the emergence of a new collective identity (as an authoritative text) revived this IOC and influenced successful outcomes. Accordingly, this study was guided by the following research questions:

Research Question 1 (RQ1): How does the concept of collective identity help explain struggles and inaction in an IOC?

Research Question 2 (RQ2): How do situated conversational practices gain traction as authoritative elements in an emerging collective identity?

Research Question 3 (RQ3): How does abstraction diminish the influence of individual contributors while bolstering the authority of a collective identity?

Research Question 4 (RQ4): How does collective identity (conceptualized as an authoritative text) facilitate action in an IOC?

Method

Research Site

City Partners (pseudonym) is an interorganizational collaboration operating in a mid-sized metropolitan area of the Southwestern United States. They work to improve social outcomes related to health, education, and economic sustainability by coordinating public, private, and individual actions and resources. City Partners (CP) has 13 subcommittees devoted to specific issue areas (e.g., literacy, poverty, aging services, criminal recidivism), as well as a larger governing board that oversees the overall work of CP. They have a paid, full-time executive director and a small staff of two paid employees, but the majority of this IOC consists of members from partner organizations who volunteer to fill various roles.

Initially I entered this research site with the broad intention of studying organizational communication and collaboration. In the tradition of inductive, practice-based research (Craig & Tracy, 1995), I wanted to see what issues practitioners were dealing with and what specific topics would emerge to guide a more focused investigation. I attended public meetings and talked informally with CP members to learn more about the collaboration and develop a framework to guide my empirical investigation. Early on it was clear that CP was struggling with what I interpreted as issues of identity; therefore, I grounded my subsequent investigation in the literature related to identity, communication, and collaboration to formulate my research questions and inform my field observations and interviews.

Data Collection

Data for this study came from two primary sources: Field observations of CP meetings and in-depth interviews with a sampling of CP membership. I also used various CP documents (e.g., meeting minutes, flyers, and listserv emails) to supplement my observations and interviews as a measure of interpretive validity. In total, 70 hrs of field observations of 35 CP meetings were transcribed, resulting in 85 single-spaced pages of field note text. I did not have the permission to record these meetings myself, but many of the meetings were public and recorded for cable-access television. At closed meetings, CP staff used audio recording equipment to assist the note taking for meeting minutes, to which I did have access. In other situations detailed field notes and follow-up conversations enabled me to capture the essence of the interactions when no audio or video recording was available. This form of naturalistic inquiry (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010) enabled me to observe practical

accomplishments in everyday meetings and gain insights into the communicative constitution of CP and their collective identity. Interview data were collected through theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), including people from all 13 CP subcommittees, representatives from each CP planning body, and all members of the CP staff. I conducted 53 in-depth interviews with CP members: 34% ($n = 18$) of the interviewees were male; 66% ($n = 35$) of the interviewees were female. Interviews averaged 60 min in length and were recorded digitally for transcription and analysis, resulting in 663 pages of single-spaced text.

After 10 months of observations, interviews, and preliminary analysis I decided my research had achieved “theoretical saturation” (Bowen, 2008; Glaser & Strauss, 1967), meaning that additional data collection and analysis reached a point of diminishing returns, thus justifying my initial departure from the field. Recognizing this decision was somewhat arbitrary, I conducted several follow up interviews (via phone and email) after the initial submission of this manuscript to learn about recent CP developments and how they related to the themes discussed below, which also helped confirm that my decision of theoretical saturation was reasonable. I incorporated the additional interview data into subsequent revisions of this manuscript to strengthen the quality of my analysis.

These methods provided a measure of triangulation because comments from interview transcriptions could be compared with field note observations and CP documents, meaning that most of the data were evaluated in relation to at least one other data source. When triangulation was not possible (and even when it was), I took two other steps to strengthen the validity of this analysis. First, I completed a negative case analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) by going back to the data throughout the project to see if there were any instances that contradicted the developing results. Second, I performed a member validation test (Lindlof & Taylor, 2010) to see how CP members responded to the research findings. I emailed interviewees a copy of the preliminary results to solicit feedback, which helped clarify the final outcome of my analysis.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was often concurrent with data collection, so I describe my analytic procedures in this separate section only as a matter of clarity. I used thematic analysis to identify key themes in the data based on their forcefulness, recurrence, and repetition (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Owen, 1984). Although many empirical studies based on Montreal School theorizing use

conversational analysis, Taylor and Van Every's (2011) recent text highlights several studies (e.g., Blundell, 2007; Güney, 2006) that use more of a case-based approach that traces communicative constitution over time through extended observations and interviews, supplementing work focused solely on more narrow conversational episodes.

As the issue of collective identity became a focal point of investigation from my initial field observations and informal conversations, I sought to understand what CP members found problematic about whom they were and how notions of identity related to the actions and decisions in CP meetings. The field observations and interview transcript data were analyzed via the constant comparative technique and followed Strauss and Corbin's (1990) three-stage process for coding qualitative data (open, axial, and selective coding), resulting in the three themes presented in the results section: (1) Time of transition, struggle, and inaction; (2) seeds of constitution; and (3) emerging identity. I use these themes to present my results as a case study of collective identity in CP. I incorporate the language of communicative constitution to explain these results and demonstrate the utility of a communication approach to collective identity in IOC.

A Case Study of Collective Identity and Interorganizational Collaboration

Time of Transition, Struggle, and Inaction

City Partners (CP) began in 1981 as an unofficial relationship between four agencies: The school district; the city government; the county government; and the mental health board. This informal network continued for 15 yrs and grew to include twelve agencies, at which time the members formalized their partnership and hired an executive director. They chose Steve (all names are pseudonyms), a retired Air Force pilot and NATO attaché who held the executive director position for eleven and a half years. Steve brought a unique mix of organizational and diplomatic skills to the job, which was a second career for him after his retirement from the military. Steve was instrumental in forging many relationships among city agencies, nonprofit organizations, and private enterprises who worked on similar issues, such as childhood education or homelessness. These *issue area groups* became formal subcommittees of CP and composed much of their collaborative work.

When I began my field work with CP, Steve had recently retired and a new executive director named Juliana had been on the job for a few months. Steve's retirement signaled an important transition in CP. For many it was the

“end of an era.” Steve told me he was a little concerned that too many people saw CP as “him” and that his retirement would be difficult for the collaboration. From a communication perspective, Steve’s retirement can be understood as an event that occasioned a substantial change in the conversational dynamics of CP. Because of his attendance and involvement at virtually all CP meetings and his relationships with key members, Steve was an important component to the conversational modality of the coorientation process that constituted this IOC. Steve’s retirement forced CP to confront issues of collective identity because the taken-for-granted assumptions about “who we are” were disrupted by his departure. CP’s board saw the hiring of a new executive director as an opportunity to chart a new course as they evolved from a loose network of service providers to a more formal collaboration. The board hired Juliana after a lengthy search process, and her charge was to take CP “to the next level” through “increased collaboration and action.” Thus a new conversational dynamic had been introduced to shape the coorientation process that would constitute CP at this phase of their development, and the next several months would be a challenging time of struggle and inaction as they wrestled with their collective sense of self.

During the first months of my field work it was apparent that CP members were struggling to figure out “who they were.” Steve’s retirement as executive director seemed to create a minor identity crisis as CP tried to redefine itself after the departure of its longtime leader. As one member told me, “Steve was like the face of our collaboration. For many people he *was* CP, so now that he’s gone I guess we need to figure out who we are again” (Julie). There was a sense of identity loss and a need to reevaluate who they were and how their sense of collective identity would enable future decisions and actions.

These identity struggles were evident in several CP meetings, especially when members tried to advocate a particular course of action or explain the reasons for their decisions. Though space precludes a full reporting of these instances, I offer one example that illustrates what I interpreted as a struggle resulting from a lack of collective identity. This example involved the publication and distribution of a comprehensive immigration assessment report conducted by the Health and Human Services division of the county government, a CP member. During the time of my field work with CP, this immigration report was being vetted to several stakeholders to solicit feedback for the final document and to decide how best to present this information to policy makers and the general public. In this instance, CP members met to discuss the feedback they received during the vetting process and make a final decision about how to release the immigration report. Consider the following

episode from this meeting taken from my field notes and supplemented by meeting minutes taken by CP staff:

Sheryl: So this report should only be like a snapshot, a picture. . .don't provide any recommendations, it shouldn't tell anyone what to do.

Vinnie: But then we won't be able to get any targeted solutions from this aggregate data.

Raymie: We see the purpose of this report as mainly starting a conversation.

Andrew: Ok, but I think this report should be trying to make a point, not just start a conversation.

Vinnie: Yes, make a point.

Samuel: Whatever the case, I'd like to see more action-oriented conclusions in this report. . .we never get to the action.

Lots of crosstalk between several members

Blain: But our job is just to do research; it's up to other people to take action to do something about it. . .that's who we [CP] are.

Vinnie: I see this report through the lens of social equity education and, ah, workforce development; etc. not just a narrow lens that leads to silos.

Nancy: Yeah, but even if we see this as a neutral document, most people will not and there are issues in this report that are controversial, so, you know, we need to control the frame.

Richard: Immigration is a huge issue and this report needs to slap people in the face. But right now it doesn't do that.

Susan: So who is the audience for this report?

Raymie: Everyone. . .a broad audience.

Sarah: No, this can't be a broad document. We can't be all things to all people. . .that's always been our [CP] problem. This is for policy makers and the movers and shakers.

Blain: Yeah, but before we get too far we need to talk with all the key stakeholders about this report. . .um, that's our role.

This particular meeting resulted in a stalemate. Even though the expressed purpose of the meeting was to make a final recommendation about how to proceed with the (already delayed) immigration report, no decision was made, further delaying the release of the report. I spoke with one of the attendees after the meeting who told me that everyone always seemed to

be in agreement about the basic idea of the immigration report, but when it came time to make “real decisions” about implementing the report, people became less collaborative.

I suggest this example illustrates collaborative inaction resulting from a lack of collective identity (RQ1). Notice how many of the meeting participants were trying to justify their positions based their divergent notions of what CP was or was supposed to be. Yet they could not reach agreement because there was no shared understanding about the identity of CP or how their identity should guide decisions about the immigration report. Again, we can interpret this identity struggle from a constitutive communication perspective if we understand collective identity in terms of an authoritative text. In this example, the meeting participants have no authoritative influence to coordinate and manage their actions. As discussed above, IOCs are not subject to control through markets or hierarchical forms of control, so absent a collective identity there is no mechanism to induce action or encourage consent. Rather than appealing to a common understanding of whom CP was or should be, these members relied on competing notions of identity to justify their ideas, leading to stalemate and indecision. In addition, we can see the intertextual struggles as members vie to include their language and interpretations into the final version of the immigration report. Some members offered specific policy recommendations they wanted included in the final report; other members resisted these recommendations in favor of neutrality. At this point in my research, the future of CP was very much in doubt. There was no clear sense of collective identity, and there was no authoritative text to guide their actions and define their collaboration. Several people told me privately that the immigration report was a perfect example of what was wrong with CP—“No sense of who we are and no ability to get to action” (Cynthia). Other contentious and unproductive meetings continued to exhibit struggles with collective identity.

Seeds of Constitution

Toward the end of the year an important shift started happening with CP. I did not notice at the time, but looking back at the data I saw that seeds of collective identity constitution were taking root. The primary activity involved the creation of new CP annual awards named in honor of Steve, the former executive director. CP was planning an end-of-year celebration at City Hall and saw this as a good time to announce the awards. A subcommittee of CP leaders formed to create the awards and develop a list of nominations. Here is a key excerpt from the committee meeting, as recorded in my field notes and later clarified with the recorded meeting minutes:

Sylvia: So we're supposed to come up with some awards that are consistent with (CP's) mission, vision, and values.

Stanley: Ah, what are our mission, vision, and values?

Some laughter among the group

Sylvia: Here, look at this.

Sylvia distributes a handout from the CP board with information about creating the awards. Some initial silence as people read the handout, then discussion ensues with Pete's opening comment.

Pete: Um, I don't see any restrictions or criteria for who we can nominate. Is this just for CP members or anyone in the city we want to recognize?

Sylvia: Well, we still need to. . . .

Carrie: . . . We need to keep these awards open to everyone. That's what CP is supposed to be about so I don't see why we would limit this.

Pete: Yeah, but I think we have an obligation to recognize people who aren't willing to be part of our collaboration as members.

Jessica: That's good, these awards need to be for those who are committed to our mission. . . restricting this to just members.

Javier: But what is our mission? I mean, who we are is so broad I don't see how we can exclude anyone from these kinds of awards. And I thought that's what we were supposed to do, not take sides, you know, be a neutral supporter of work in this community.

Crosstalk in response to Javier's comment

Sylvia: Ok, I guess we need to stop and talk about who we are and what we are saying with these awards before we start nominating people.

Eddie: But we don't get to say who we are, the board has already done that. . . .

Nicolas: You know, not everyone agrees with the board, and they're still trying to figure out exactly who they are with all this new leadership stuff.

Jessica: So I guess we have an opportunity to shape who we are with these awards. If the board's going to drag its feet we can set the tone by giving awards to people who are doing what we want to see happening in this community.

Carrie: But do we even agree on what we want?

Crosstalk

Nicolas: Well, I think one of the awards should have something to do with collaboration.

Jessica: Do you mean like a group of collaborators or someone who is a collaboration leader?

Nicolas: I guess both would be good. How many awards can we give?

Sylvia: The board said we should come up with two to three awards.

After further discussion the committee agreed on three awards: Community leadership, collaboration, and bridge building. This decision was formalized into a *request for nominations* memo that was sent to all members of CP and posted on their website.

Notice several things in this example. First, the initial debate about the awards raised questions of identity. There was an implicit sense that these awards symbolized who CP was, what they valued, and who they wanted to become. Second, we see cooriented communication in the text-conversation dialectic between the award nomination handout and the members' discussion. That is, the award nomination handout resulted from situated conversations and in turn shaped subsequent conversations. Their coorientation led to consensus on three broad categories for the awards (community leadership, collaboration, and bridge building). Third, the conversational output of their discussion was textualized in the meeting minutes and award nomination memo. This textualization served as an input to subsequent conversations about the awards. Fourth, the textualized representation of their conversation became *distanced* as the nomination memo was distributed to CP members and posted online. People who read the nomination memo experienced an abstract representation of the meeting that helped reify the existence of CP and these characteristics of the collaboration. Finally, the awards for community leadership, collaboration, and bridge building (and their corresponding explanations) became authoritative elements that defined the emerging textual coorientation system. In turn, these authoritative elements reflexively imposed themselves back on the membership (e.g., when a member used these terms to explain what CP "was all about" in a public meeting or when the awards committee eliminated certain nominations because they did not align with one of the three criteria). It is this reflexive self-awareness that is evidence, I suggest, of an emerging collective identity (RQ2).

Later that month at the end-of-year celebration the award winners were announced. The implementation of these awards sent a message (i.e., reinforced the emerging authoritative text) that CP was about community

leadership, collaboration, and bridge building (RQ2). Several months later in an informal conversation with the executive director, Juliana, I asked her how things were going in CP from her perspective. She mentioned the awards as an example of “Making some progress toward a better sense of who we are and what we do, now that Steve has been gone for a while.” The ideas of community leadership, collaboration, and bridge building began to take a more definitive role in CP as they were repeated in meetings and documents and invoked to clarify who CP was. Thus an emerging authoritative text began to take shape that could coordinate members’ actions and provide a better sense of collective identity.

An Emerging Collective Identity

A final theme of my analysis involved another turning point in the identity struggles of CP, what I interpreted as more evidence of an emerging collective identity. Several years ago during Steve’s tenure as executive director, CP held a planning retreat to identify *cross-cutting* issues that affected all member organizations and could organize CP into a more formal collaboration. They identified housing, transportation, and mental health as key issues that cut across all organizations, and thus could unify the work of CP. Yet this idea of cross-cutting issues never gained traction in CP, and many members expressed privately that they did not agree with the process or the outcome of the retreat. As one member stated,

I was at the retreat and we had a good conversation, then we used some electronic voting equipment to help us narrow down the issues. At the end of the day the facilitator said, “Look, you identified the three issues that cut across all your work.” But a lot of us had a weird feeling about the whole thing, like something just happened to us that we didn’t agree to. But it was hard to figure out how to object because we were all part of the process, so I guess we just went along with it (Margaret).

As more pressing issues confronted the CP (e.g., hurricane Katrina relief and state budget cuts) this new cross-cutting strategy took a back seat and was rarely a part of CP conversations.

With the hiring of Juliana as the new executive director, the CP board revisited the idea of cross-cutting issues. After Juliana settled into the new position, she was charged with reviving the cross-cutting issues idea as a way to reorganize CP after Steve’s departure. In addition, Juliana and the board

began working with an outside consultant to develop a list of indicators to measure progress on the cross-cutting issues (housing, transportation, and mental health). Juliana gave several presentations about cross-cutting issues and indicators at various CP meetings and mentioned these ideas in various conversations with CP members. But it seemed clear that these ideas were not gaining much traction with CP. "Are we still doing that?" asked one member sarcastically at a meeting. "I thought we gave up on that," expressed another. "How are we going to actually quantify some of this stuff without missing something?" someone else asked. Juliana expressed frustration during an informal conversation with me after a meeting: "The board is really pushing this cross-cutting/indicators thing, but most people obviously aren't ready for it. For some reason they're skeptical of any move toward integration and measurement, like they will be left out or something."

Then an interesting development happened about a week later at a CP planning meeting. Juliana had given up on talking about cross-cutting issues and indicators directly, instead choosing to speak more broadly about the need for change and to identify a common set of objectives to organize their work. During her presentation at this meeting she casually introduced a metaphor that became the foundation for CP's emerging collective identity,

So maybe we could think of our [CP] work as sort of like keeping an eye on the dashboard of a car. You've got all these gauges. . . gas, temperature, mileage, whatever, that tell you how the car is doing. But someone has to keep an eye on everything and make sure everything is working together. Maybe that's our job (Juliana).

At the time this comment seemed insignificant—just another attempt to explain the work of CP. Yet in subsequent meetings and conversations I observed that people began referencing this "dashboard thing" that Juliana mentioned. Juliana picked up on this too and I noticed she started incorporating the dashboard metaphor more explicitly in her presentations and comments at meetings. She and others extended the metaphor by talking about "moving the needle" on key issues and making sure the "tank was full" and that "We aren't stuck on cruise control." Now at meetings it was common to hear people mention the "so-called dashboard idea" or "that dashboard thing we're using now," and the dashboard concept was showing up more and more in CP documents (e.g., PowerPoint slides, meeting minutes, memos; etc.). We can see how the dashboard metaphor was gaining distance from its original conversational circumstances through subsequent textual representations, illustrating the process of distancing that is a key aspect of communicative constitution.

A couple weeks later the CP leadership team decided that a formal subcommittee was needed to draft a new strategic plan for the collaboration. Someone mentioned that it could be called the “dashboard committee,” and CP began promoting “dashboard planning meetings” for members to be involved in the strategic planning process. What began as a casual metaphor at an inconspicuous meeting was now the formal title of an important planning committee and a shorthand reference for CP’s strategic planning. The dashboard committee worked for several months to identify 16 indicators of key issues (organized within four broader categories) that CP should monitor to provide an overview of the social health and well-being of the city. The result was CP’s official “community dashboard report,” which is updated annually and posted on the CP website as the central feature of their work.

In addition, when I talked to various CP members, there were many different explanations about how the dashboard metaphor developed and where it came from. Notice how Juliana’s individual authorship began to vanish in favor of the collective abstraction; it was no longer her idea, but CP’s idea. And it was not Juliana who pushed the idea; she provided an initial impetus, but the momentum (and ensuing authority) came from others appropriating the dashboard idea in subsequent conversations apart from Juliana (RQ3). I suggest that the idea of a “community dashboard” emerged as an authoritative text characterizing the collective identity of CP at this time in their history. It was this idea that redefined their sense of whom they were and provided a mechanism for action. After I concluded my field work with CP, I followed up with several interviewees about this notion of a community dashboard and their sense of collective identity. One member explained,

I was involved back when we were transitioning and trying to figure out who we were. That was a rough time. Seemed like we never got anything done and I always had a hard time explaining to people what we did. The dashboard idea was a big shift. . . definitely changed the way we did things. When I think of the dashboard, I kind of think that’s who we are, you know, that’s what we’re all about (Elizabeth).

Another member talked about his satisfaction with the dashboard idea in ways that also related to identity. “I’m very pleased with the whole dashboard thing,” he explained. “It seems like we have a better purpose for being, we’re no longer searching for who we are” (Jonathan).

Of course not everyone agreed with the dashboard idea. One longtime member organization even left CP over the change. “We didn’t like (the dashboard); we don’t think that’s what (CP) should be about,” explained the

executive director of this organization. Yet even this disagreement is framed in terms of identity, as she explained their decision based on whom they thought CP should be. In response to this organization's departure another member stated, "You never like to see people leave, but we can't be all things to all people. I think we knew some people wouldn't like (the dashboard), but eventually we had to figure out who were are and move forward" (Russell). Again, the notion of identity was raised to explain this situation and provided a sense of authority that was invoked to justify particular decisions.

The collective identity of "community dashboard" also served as a catalyst for action in CP (RQ4). Two examples stand out. First, in response to the economic crisis of 2008-09 and rising unemployment, CP was able to organize a key summit on workforce issues facing the city. As one member recalled,

These people had not been brought together for years, so this was a big accomplishment. A lot of good decisions and actions came out of that summit and CP was the main driver. I really think the dashboard idea played a big role in that (Andre).

He went on to say that "This is the type of 'action' we're talking about in CP, our ability to convene the key stakeholders and get things going." This statement also reinforced the idea of *convener* as a key aspect of the dashboard and as a centerpiece of their collective identity.

A second example involved the allocation of money the city received from the federal stimulus package. In follow up interviews, several people mentioned that CP played a big role in facilitating this complicated process. "City Partners already had their eye on the ball with the dashboard project, so they were kind of the credible voice to city and state officials to get the money where it needed to go," explained a member named Lucas. Another member said,

The stimulus thing was huge. That could have been real ugly, with so much money being thrown around and so much need. But [CP] took the lead on that and everyone kind of looked at them for direction. I remember the dashboard report playing a big role because they could show they knew what was going on in all these areas. Only [CP] could have done that (Rebecca).

The executive director, Juliana, told me that their work on the stimulus funding was a key moment that reinforced their role in the community and showed "What this dashboard thing is all about and how it can move us to

action.” This example also demonstrated that the notion of a *community dashboard* could provide the authority to organize collective action.

Again, the ideas of communicative constitution are instrumental in explaining and understanding the emergence of a collective identity in CP. I suggest that the collective identity of *community dashboard* can be understood as an authoritative text that characterized CP and offered an official conception of this IOC. The metaphor of a dashboard emerged from cooriented communication among CP members as various intertextual efforts vied to shape the official interpretation. In subsequent meetings and conversations the dashboard metaphor became a shorthand abstraction to depict the entire IOC and its activities. Through processes of distancing, the dashboard concept became a concise way to speak about CP as an entity and served to reinforce its existence. The dashboard text was authoritative in that it disciplined the actions of CP and shaped their ensuing text-conversation dialectics. For example, in the workforce summit discussed above, one attendee mentioned how the community dashboard was, “*Very present. . . in ways that seemed kind of powerful. . . and it was like the dashboard idea imposed itself on how we talked and made decisions*” (Celia, emphasis added).

As an authoritative text, the collective identity of *community dashboard* also defined the roles and responsibilities of the membership. This definition included the notion of *convener* that clarified the type of action CP is best able to take. In addition, the award categories of community leadership, collaboration, and bridge building became authoritative elements that further defined the identity and the function of CP in this community. Taken together, these ideas composed the authoritative text that constituted CP and its collective identity.

Discussion

In this article I reconceptualize collective identity from a communication perspective by theorizing collective identity as an authoritative text that emerges from the text-conversation dialectics of coorientation and is facilitated by communication processes of intertextuality and distancing. It is the abstraction and reification of the emerging textual representation that provides authority needed to induce collective action and successful collaboration. Previous organizational research often treats collective identity as a cognitive construct, focusing on the central, enduring, and distinctive character of a single organization. In contrast, my analysis looks at collective identity in an interorganizational context, and portrays collective identity as a communicative phenomenon that is subject to continual alteration

by organizational members. My argument is that conceptualizing collective identity as an authoritative text helps us better understand the communicative constitution of IOCs and their ability to induce action and coordinate the activities of diverse stakeholders.

The case of CP shows how this IOC experienced a resurgence of mutual activity and sustained collaboration after a difficult time of uncertainty and inaction. I suggest the concept of collective identity is an important aspect of this case and that a constitutive model of communication provides a valuable framework to analyze and explain how collective identity is developed and sustained in this IOC. The difficulties with CP resulted from their inability to facilitate the emergence of an authoritative textual representation of themselves, a collective sense of who they were. In the language of communicative constitution, this lack of collective self was a problem of distancing and abstraction; local interactions were not gaining distance from their original circumstances in ways that solidified an abstract depiction of a collective with a coordinated trajectory. In my field work, CP initially exhibited several competing subtexts, none of which gained traction as authoritative. During this time CP was held together more by stopgap influxes of money, previous commitments, and old alliances. They were very much in danger of disbanding (or radically scaling back their operations) because of the inability to coordinate with new members, attract new forms of capital, and act substantively within their problem domain. But the emergence of *community dashboard* as an authoritative text provided a collective identity that reconstituted this IOC and disciplined their work, thus enabling them to overcome the problems of distancing and abstraction. Furthermore, authoritative elements of convener, community leadership, collaboration, and bridge building (as indicated by the awards) helped clarify the roles and responsibilities of CP and solidify their collective sense of self. Accordingly, this study has important implications for theory and research.

Implications for Theory and Research

The primary contribution of this research is to reconceptualize collective identity in terms of communicative constitution. Rather than a cognitive construct that members project onto an existing entity, this study shows how collective identity emerges from communication processes that comprise organizational forms and are central to their existence. In the case of IOCs, collective identity is more than just a descriptive characteristic. Collective identity becomes a fundamental aspect of what IOCs are as well as forming their modes of being. Thus, issues of identity are intricately tied to notions

of organizational constitution. It is the continual enactment and negotiation of collective identity that makes an organization “present” (Cooren, 2006) for its members and outside constituents. The point is that identity is not in consciousness, nor is it in an “objective” text, but it is to be found in what we might think of as momentary communication practices and language use that can, in some circumstances, gain stability, as in the case of the community dashboard. This finding challenges Western traditions of seeing meaning as an extension of individual consciousness, rather than the result of communication between people. Future research should continue exploring this identity-constitution connection.

This study also helps advance theorizing of collective identity that moves away from the central-enduring-distinctive definition that is common in the organizational literature. My research shows that collective identity in IOCs should not necessarily be thought of as enduring or distinctive, but rather as a discursive resource that is shaped and reshaped through communicative practice and drawn on for certain strategic ends. In this regard, collective identity is a social accomplishment that is subject to change as patterns of interaction (coorientation) change. Collective identity may at times appear to be stable, but this stability is a function of sustained interaction patterns, not an inherent property of the organization that exists outside its current membership and organizing practices. Future research should focus more on the active processes of meaning creation, not static descriptive characteristics.

In addition, this study makes important contributions to the literature on the CCO. By examining the communicative constitution of an IOC’s collective identity we gain a better sense of how CCO research applies to alternative organizational contexts. Previous empirical CCO research focuses mainly on single organizations—and often limited conversational episodes within organizations—whereas the present study extends this work to the important context of interorganizational relationship, using a case study approach that involves longitudinal study of multiple episodes. This article builds on previous CCO work but is distinct in terms of focusing on the emerging authority of abstract textual representations and the generation of collective action in collaboration. IOC members often represent organizations across economic sectors (business, nonprofit, government), adding even more complexity because of the divergent values, norms, and ways of seeing the world that various sectors represent (Austin, 2000). All of these issues make the achievement of collective action in IOCs incredibly difficult. The case study of CP demonstrates the utility of CCO theory to explain IOC collective identity, and shows how the IOC context can enhance our understanding of key CCO concepts.

Furthermore, this study contributes to the CCO literature by making a theoretical connection between collective identity and the notion of an authoritative text. This connection complements previous CCO research highlighting the conversational modality of organizational identity (Robichaud et al., 2004), the utilization of specific documents in the negotiation of identity (Chaput et al., 2011), the presence of an organization's particular mode of being (Cooren et al., 2008), and the mobilization of actors through collective recognition (Taylor & Van Every, 2011). Thus the present study can be seen as a response to Chaput et al.'s. (2011) call for future research that examines the communicative constitution of collective identity over longer periods of time and in a variety of organizational settings, and Cooren et al.'s. (2008) call for "considerably more empirical work" (p. 1362) to ground the ideas of Montreal School theorizing.

Finally, this study responds to recent calls in the literature to develop research that demonstrates communication's capacity as a distinct mode of explanation (Deetz, 2009; Koschmann, 2010), especially in the nonprofit sector (Koschmann, 2012). Rather than seeing communication as merely a tool for expressing already-formed identities that are cognitively processed, this study shows how communication is the constitutive social process that can explain collective identity formation and influence. Instead of exploring communication phenomena in organizations, this study investigates organizational phenomena (collective identity) from a communication perspective. This shift has the potential to raise the profile of organizational scholarship that is distinctly communicative and to demonstrate the utility of communication theory to understand important organizational realities.

Despite these important implications, this study is not without limitations. Although I spent an extensive amount of time with CP, this research is still only a snapshot of the collaboration and its development over the years. This study should be seen as one explanation of key events in CP, not a comprehensive analysis of the entire collaboration. CP will no doubt go through future issues of collective identity as members turn over, issues evolve, and budgets change. The goal is not discovering their definitive identity but rather how various identities emerge, how these identities coordinate and control work at given periods of time, and how communication processes enable or disrupt a collective sense of self in collaboration.

In addition, this research is limited by its focus on a single case study. Case study research often must sacrifice breadth for depth, so any extension of these results to other contexts should be done cautiously. Yet much can be learned from "samples of one" (March, Sproull, & Tamuz, 2003), and single

case studies can offer valuable insights to guide future research (Yin, 2009). Future research should thus seek to validate or challenge the findings in this study to enhance our understanding of collective identity and communicative constitution of IOCs.

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Bio

Matthew A. Koschmann (PhD, University of Texas at Austin) is an assistant professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Colorado Boulder. His research focuses on organizational communication and collaboration, especially in the civil society sector.