
Something of Collaborative Manufacture: The Construction of Race and Gender Identities in Organizations

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Abstract

Using qualitative data, this article documents how organizations contribute to the construction of their members' race and gender identities. Data collection took place in four organizations, from a small nonprofit to a large financial services firm. Using interactions as the unit of analysis, the author compiled and investigated a database of 114 interactions, creating a process model of how working in an organization can spotlight and change the expression of racial, ethnic, and gender identities. The article makes four contributions: It suggests a broader reach for organizational influence on individual identity, since earlier research has explored work-related identities; it distinguishes among levels of influence by isolating the discrete role of interpersonal encounters, organizational practices, and the combination of the two; it casts light on how identity construction happens even without intentional effort by individuals or organizations; and it illustrates the importance of modest changes in the construction of identity.

Keywords

identity construction, interactions, organizational context, race and gender

The self, then, as a performed character, is not an organic thing that has a specific location, whose fundamental fate is to be born, mature and die . . . [The person] and his body merely provide the peg on which something of collaborative manufacture will be hung for a time.

—Goffman (1959, p. 252)

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Our work lives are filled with encounters with others, interactions that often come and go with little thought. But some interactions have more of an impact than others, perhaps even an impact on our very sense of self. This incident, for example, was recalled by a research participant long after it had occurred. Gloria, an African American employee at a large financial services company, was on the phone, at work, with a girlfriend.

And I'd say the articulation of my conversation was lacking [laughs] . . . I may have used some street terms . . . There was no need to be creative with my wording or to really pay attention to the way I'm enunciating a certain word, or whether or not that sentence was a proper sentence. I was just talking casually. And one of my colleagues [a white man] who sat a cubicle over . . . overheard a part of my conversation. And he came over and he said to me, "You sound so different when you're on the phone with your friends. You really sound black."

Such an encounter could be understood in many ways and, indeed, others have unpacked interactions like these in some depth to explore issues such as discrimination and intergroup relations (e.g., Essed, 1991; Lewis, 2003; Sue et al., 2007; Sue, Lin, Torino, Capodilupo, Rivera, 2009). In this article, I build on previous scholarship to suggest that some interactions can actually contribute to the construction of identity itself. Researchers have a long history of interest in identity construction in organizations, though this particular term has only relatively recently come into use (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1995; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006; Zhang & Huxham, 2009). However, the current profusion of research largely explores how organizations influence the construction of a variety of work-related identities, including workplace (Elsbach, 2003) and professional (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt et al., 2006) identities. This body of work has not investigated how organizations influence demographic identities, such as gender or race.

A separate line of research, often under the rubric of the "social construction of gender" or the "gendering of organizations," has explored the organizational role in the construction of gender (Britton, 2000; Ely, 1995; Gherardi, 1994). More rarely, this approach has also looked at the social construction of race in organizations (Nkomo, 1992; Watkins-Hayes, 2010; Wharton, 1992). For the most part, however, this work has not focused on the level of individual identity, but on broader conceptions of race and gender that grow from a given organizational (Ely & Meyerson, 2010) or occupational (Bell, 1990; Wicks, 2002) context.

This article integrates these two approaches by investigating how organizations contribute to the construction of individual employees' race and gender identities, through the process of individual sensemaking (Weick, 1995; Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003). I found that employees' sensemaking was triggered by interactions with others, by organizational practices, and sometimes by a combination of the two. Investigating specific incidents enabled me to isolate the influence of each level—interactional and organizational—as well as their intertwined effect. From this, I

developed a model of how organizations influence the construction of employees' race and gender identities. I begin by reviewing recent research on identity construction in organizations, using that to position the theoretical contribution of this article. I then describe my methods and findings and end with implications for theory and practice.

Identity Construction in Organizations

Identity construction is the process through which identities emerge, adapt, and change, in response to individual characteristics and actions and to contextual forces. Organizations are one site in which it occurs. Previous work in this area understands identities as fluid conceptions, rather than fixed and stable, and as responsive to a wide variety of influences from social mores to organizational practices to interpersonal interactions. Furthermore, identity construction is a social process: "Identities have long been seen as constructed and negotiated in social interaction," notes Ibarra (1999). Some call such interactions "identity negotiations" between two interactants—the self and an other, sometimes called "alter" (Gecas, 1982; Polzer, Milton, & Swann, 2002; Swann, 1987). As the Goffman (1959) epigraph suggests, our identities are collaboratively manufactured (p. 252).

Since identity is continuously recreated in interactions, it is mutable. But interactions do cluster into patterns, and those patterns can result in more embedded and stable aspects of an individual's identity (Fine, 1992; Jenkins, 1996).

The term *identity construction* acts as a broad umbrella that includes multiple smaller groupings of research. One critical distinction is the level of analysis. Micro approaches investigate how the identities of individual employees are affected by working in a given organizational context. Macro approaches are concerned with how broad, collective conceptions of a given identity, for example gender or occupational identity, are shaped by organizational life. I elaborate on each of these.

Microlevel Research

Although work on socialization and careers has long investigated how organizations influence the process of identity creation and change (e.g., Hall, 1971; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979), only recently has a specific focus on individual identity construction in organizations emerged. This work has been positioned in a variety of ways, such as "identity work" (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006; Miller & Robinson, 2004), "identity construction" (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Pratt et al., 2006), and "identity affirmation" (Elsbach, 2003). For purposes of clarity, I will refer to this microlevel research as "identity work," to distinguish it from the macrolevel work discussed below. Though this work is a "loosely affiliated body of research" (Pratt et al., 2006, p. 238), it does share several characteristics.

First, this work has focused on explaining individual identity: how the identity of individual employees is influenced in the course of working in an organization. Much of it investigates how organizational characteristics influence individuals, but is micro

in the sense that its construct of interest is at the individual level: individual identity. Whereas much of it documents significant identity change (Ibarra, 1999; Pratt, 2000), other work explores minor modifications (Beyer & Hannah, 2002; Elsbach, 2003). Second, whereas some research focuses more on encounters with individuals (Creed & Scully, 2000; Wrzesniewski et al., 2003) and other work highlights the role of organizational practices (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Pratt, 2000), both are acknowledged as influential. Identity construction is seen as a multilevel process. Third, this approach has highlighted the active, conscious, and intentional role of individuals and organizations in this process. Some work is more focused on the active role of employees themselves (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) while other work, such as Pratt's (2000) study of Amway distributors, spotlights the role of the organization as "sensebreaker" and sensegiver.

Finally, the research to date has focused almost exclusively on work-related identities. These include professional identities (Covaleski, Dirmsmith, Heian, & Samuel, 1998; Ibarra, 1999); workplace identity (Elsbach, 2003); and occupational identities (Fine, 1996; Kreiner, Ashforth, & Sluss, 2006; Kreiner, Hollensbe, et al., 2006) among others. For the most part, this work has not investigated the organizational role in constructing demographic identities, such as the racial and gender identities of individual employees, despite the fact that these are "primary identities" (Jenkins, 1996, p. 21) and relevant to work experiences (Brief, 1998, chap. 5; Nkomo & Stewart, 2006). Work on racial and gender identity has more often been conducted at the macro level.

Macrolevel Research

This loosely affiliated body of work has investigated the "social construction" of gender and, less often, of race and ethnicity in organizations (Bell & Nkomo, 2001; Ely, 1995; Frenkel, 2008; Nkomo, 1992; Wharton, 1992). Scholars in this stream draw in part from broader sociological perspectives that see these identities as continually created in social interaction, rather than fixed or static. West and Zimmerman (1991) "conceive of gender as an emergent feature of social situations" (p. 14). Gender is "more than the continuous creation of the meaning of gender through human actions. We claim that gender itself is constituted through interaction" (p. 16). West and Fenstermaker (1995a) then expand this argument to "doing difference" more broadly, applying it to racial, gender, and class differences. "We conceive of gender, race and class as ongoing interactional accomplishments (i.e., processes) that make patriarchy, racism and class oppression possible" (West & Fenstermaker, 1995b, p. 507). There are "profound historical effects" of gender and race, "but they unfold one accomplishment at a time" (West & Fenstermaker, 1995a, p. 28). Omi and Winant (1994) similarly argue that race is a social construct and then elaborate on this view: race is "an unstable and 'decentered' complex of social meanings constantly being transformed by political struggle" (p. 55). Like others writing from a constructionist perspective, they are concerned with the *meaning* of race: "Race" is what

people say it is; it has no inherent, objective status. Because of this, understandings of race must be rooted in particular social and historical contexts.¹

Organizational scholars drawing on this perspective focus on the role of organizations in shaping broad conceptualizations of gender and race, rather than how individual employees' identities are affected. For example, some of this work looks at how organizations both contribute to and are shaped by notions of masculinity and femininity (Alvesson & Billing, 1997; Collinson & Hearn, 1994; Ely & Meyerson, 2010; Gherardi, 1994; Wicks, 2002) whereas other work considers how organizational characteristics trigger collective action based on race (Wharton, 1992). This social construction work has similarities with the micro approach as well as important differences.

As with the micro work, the social construction research conceptualizes identity, including racial and gender identities, as shifting and mutable. Also like identity work research, this literature sees identity as responsive to both interpersonal encounters and organizational characteristics, as well as societal norms and institutions (Stevens, Plaut, & Sanchez-Burks, 2008).

The work on the social construction of race and gender diverges from microlevel research in that, for the most part, it documents dynamics that are implicit and unconscious rather than active and intentional. Most researchers do not suggest that individual employees are explicitly trying to modify either their gender or racial identity; nor do they suggest that organizations are deliberately trying to recast these identities. However, overall, the research does suggest that organizations contribute to the construction of both gender and race, even without any intention to do so.

This article draws on previous research on identity work and on the social construction of race and gender—two streams of research that have remained largely independent—to explore how organizations influence the construction of their employees' individual racial and gender identities. Therefore, it focuses on the micro outcome of individual identity but extends this research to demographic identities. This in itself builds on the microlevel stream of research because it suggests that the reach of organizational influence on our sense of self is broader than originally thought. Where we work can affect the way we think about ourselves as men and women, and as members of a racial group, not just about the way we think about ourselves as workers and as members of an organization. Furthermore, investigating this terrain illuminates broader issues related to identity construction.

First, it systematically explores the influence of interpersonal encounters, organizational characteristics, and the combination of the two. Although previous micro and macro work documents the importance of both the interactional and organizational levels, little of it isolates the discrete role of each as well as their joint contribution. Second, it suggests that such identity construction processes can happen implicitly and automatically, without being actively motivated by either the organization or the employee, as is assumed in much of the microlevel research. This approach highlights the importance of fleeting, unintentional, incidents that may seem inconsequential. Third, it elaborates the constructing process by examining modest alterations that can

take place in an individual's sense of self, including changes in salience and expression. This work suggests how small modifications might have large effects.

In short, my research investigates the construction of racial and gender identities in organizations while using this terrain to cast light on broader processes of identity construction.

Method

Identities exist simultaneously at multiple levels of analysis. Markus and Wurf (1987) argue, "[Identity] exists both as a cognitive structure in the mind of the person trying to convey it and as an entity out in the world . . . the situated identity is a 'joint construction' of the person, audience and situation . . ." (p. 325). The challenge for researchers is to attend to the identity as lived by the self as well as explore its profoundly social foundations. This research methodology relies on the self's sensemaking about identity but places that sensemaking in organizational context.

Data Collection

I gathered data in four different organizations. All located in the northeast United States, the organizations (all names are pseudonyms) include WomenKind, a small nonprofit agency with 6 staff members (and dozens of volunteers), serving women and girls; Media Inc., a 60-employee communications consulting company; HairCare, a consumer products company with 5,000 workers; and FSC, a large financial services company with 17,000 employees.

I chose these organizations because of their variance. Methodologists suggest a broad range of research sites to develop theory in order to draw in a wide cross-section of experiences and contingencies (Glaser & Strauss, 1967, pp. 61-62). Not only should this contribute to a richer, more varied data set, it helps ensure that patterns viewed in one site hold for others that may significantly differ. The four organizations studied in this research vary in size, industry, and economic sector. They also provide a continuum of commitment to and experience with addressing difference. HairCare was just about to launch a corporate diversity initiative whereas FSC had just completed 2 years of such a program. Media Inc. had included "the spirit of diversity" as a founding value, and inclusion was an ongoing theme in its work, whereas WomenKind had been founded as a multiracial organization and was explicitly committed to gender and racial justice as part of its work. Its status as a mission-driven nonprofit distinguishes it from the other three research sites. However, its "outlier" status makes it useful for theory development since "maximum variation" (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 28) and "extreme cases" (Pratt, 2000, p. 458) aid in such an effort. If all the research sites experience similar dynamics, that suggests broader generalizability for the theory developed here.

In each organization, I collected interview, observational, and archival data. I conducted 13 to 16 interviews in the 3 larger organizations and 8 interviews at WomenKind

for a total of 52 interviews. The interviews averaged about 2 hours in length and were taped and transcribed. In each organization, I interviewed either or both the CEO and Vice President for Human Resources (or their equivalent). In the two organizations with such a position, I interviewed the diversity manager. In these interviews, I was looking for information about the overall strategy of the organization, their HR strategy, and their attention to diversity issues. I then interviewed a cross-section of employees about their experiences at work, creating a sample that was 35% men and 65% women and 52% white and 48% people of color (23% African American, 13% Latino, and 12% Asian), with racial and gender diversity within each organization, except for WomenKind, which had no men in staff or board positions.²

Using interviews to encourage informants to reflect on their identities at work is not a straightforward task. I began with the “Who am I?” questionnaire, used for 50 years to elicit information about identity (Kuhn & McPartland, 1954). The questionnaire asked informants to answer the question “who am I?” 12 times in 12 different ways. Responses included a broad range of items, such as “a copy-writer with some talent,” “I am a strong and proud black woman,” and “film-buff.” I e-mailed the questionnaire to participants and asked them to complete and return it to me before the interview. I then put each answer on a separate index card and brought those to the interview.

At the beginning of the interview, I asked about the informants’ work and life histories. Since I was interested in how people understood their own identities, I wanted to get some basic details about their life trajectory, work history, family setting, and anything else that, in a sense, provided some of the raw material out of which their identity was formed. I then asked them to sort the index cards into piles in two different ways, first by which identities felt most important or central to their sense of self, and second, by which identities were most valued by their employer. (These card-sorting techniques are common in anthropological research [Borgatti, 1994].) I then asked them to talk me through the different piles: Why did a particular identity feel more or less central, more or less valued? As issues related to race, ethnic, or gender identities arose, I would probe in greater detail. At this point, generally about an hour into the interview, we had talked a lot about who the informants felt themselves to be. I then asked a number of questions about how it felt to be themselves at work, including the following: Do you feel you can be yourself here? Do you fit in? Are there ways you tailor or adapt yourself to fit in at work? Do you play up or play down a particular aspect of yourself in the office? Again, I probed more on examples related to race or gender. If informants did not raise anything related to race or gender by the last half hour or so of the interview, I asked them directly about these identities and how it felt to hold them in their particular organizational context.

In addition to interviews, I observed a number of meetings or trainings at Media Inc., FSC, and HairCare. At WomenKind, since I had previously volunteered for the organization, I was invited to be a participant observer, sitting on a volunteer committee, which met 4 times over a period of 4 months. I took handwritten notes while observing all events and typed field notes at the end of the day. Finally, I collected annual reports, newsletters, diversity-related materials, and the like from each site.

Most of these materials were organizational-level data since they reflected the official policies and messages of the organization. I used the archival and observational data, along with my interview data, to deepen my understanding of the organizations' mission, policies, public image, and approach to diversity.

Data Analysis

I took an inductive, iterative approach to my data analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Miles & Huberman, 1994). As suggested by such an approach, I began my data analysis simultaneously with my data collection and, in fact, early analyses significantly influenced my theoretical framework and subsequent data collection. Although the initial focus was the influence of organizational policies and practices on identity, I found that people were also telling me about interactions with others at work. I began to explore interactions more deeply and ultimately made them my unit of analysis (Collins, 1981).

As I closely read each interview, I looked for what I called "identity interactions," an instance where informants described either a single, one-time event, or some kind of multiple, repetitive set of events, between a self (the informant) and an alter, which in some way affected their sensemaking about their racial, ethnic, or gender identity. As a result of an identity interaction, the self felt some shift in that aspect of identity, though the effect could be both fleeting and subtle. I identified 114 different interactions related to race, ethnicity, or gender; 77% of the informants (40 people) described at least one such interaction. The range of interactions per informant was 1 to 7; the mode was one.

Within this database, I then analyzed each interaction in greater detail looking for different kinds, or categories, of interactions. What stood out almost immediately was that the interactions seemed to have different consequences for sensemaking. Some interactions seemed to affect the simple salience of an identity, how conspicuous an identity felt to the self. Other interactions went further, actually influencing how the self expressed or enacted the identity. This resulted in two major categories of interactions, *Spotlighting* and *Expression-shaping*, which are explored more fully in the next section.

Once those categories had been established, I looked for differentiation within the categories. The primary dimension of difference was the emotional tenor of the interaction: had the interaction felt positive or negative to the self? Because I was concerned with the self's sensemaking about the interaction, it was the self's emotional experience of the interaction that mattered. Therefore, the emotional valence was drawn from how the informant described the interaction, regardless of what the alter's intentions may have been. The concept of valence and its impact on sensemaking is explored in depth in the next section.

Once I had identified the key characteristics of the interactions themselves, I then investigated if they were influenced by organizational context. I examined one research site at a time. I began by reading my field notes and archival material to get a sense of

the site's overall context, structure, and practices. I then explored each of the identity interactions that took place in that site to see if and how organizational practices played a role in either the interaction itself or the self's subsequent sensemaking about the interaction. I had expected to find that the pattern of interactions and practices would vary significantly across the research sites, given their range of experience with addressing diversity issues. But, in fact, I found that similar interactions and practices occurred in all four organizations. In fact, as I studied the data, it seemed the same micro-processes were occurring across the research sites. Therefore, rather than creating a variance model, I decided to systematically create a process model. From the data at one site, I developed a preliminary process model of how organizations influence identity construction, which I then refined three times as I analyzed the material from the other three sites. This process led, ultimately, to a model of organizational influence on the construction of race and gender identities.

Developing a process model requires a distinctively different approach from a variance model (Langley, 1999; Van de Ven & Huber, 1990). While variance models determine causality between dependent and independent variables, process models seek to explain the temporal order of a set of events. Causality is established by identifying an underlying mechanism that determines why some events precede or follow others. The model in this article captures the order of events that most often happen implicitly and often instantaneously, with identity interactions as the underlying mechanism.

To establish reliability, I worked with a research assistant who had no previous involvement with the study. I created a subsample of the 114 identity interactions and asked her to code them in three ways: for the type of interaction (spotlighting vs. shaping expression), for the valence (positive, negative, or neutral), and for whether the interaction was entirely interpersonal, entirely organizational, or whether some kind of organizational policy or practice influenced an interpersonal interaction in some way. (In other words, was this an interaction that could have happened anywhere or was there something about the organizational environment that made it more likely to happen there?). She coded 32 interactions or 28% of the sample of 114; however, this overall number masks an important distinction. She coded 50% of the interactions at WomenKind (14 out of 28) while coding 21% of the interactions from the other three organizations (18 out of 86). Because of my previous involvement with WomenKind, I wanted to ensure against bias. Percentages of initial agreement (0.78-0.86) were all in the acceptable range (Boyatzis, 1998, p. 156), with our agreement on WomenKind interactions slightly higher (0.79-0.86) than the other three organizations (0.78-0.83).

Findings

Identity interactions, by definition, have consequences for how the self makes sense of her identity. They all begin by highlighting an aspect of identity: The alter calls attention in some way, however momentary and implicit, to the self's gender, racial, or ethnic identity. That identity suddenly becomes very salient to the self. In many

cases, that is the whole of the experience, so I called these interactions “spotlighting” interactions. However, in other cases, the spotlight was accompanied by another dynamic: the alter says or does something that leads the self to actually change the way she expresses or enacts her identity. Though these interactions began with spotlighting, they did not affect only the salience of the identity, but the expression of it, so I called them “expression-shaping” interactions. (Of the 114 interactions in the data set, 83 were designated as spotlighting and 31 as expression-shaping.) Therefore, interactions are distinguished by their impact on the self’s sensemaking about identity and the subsequent influence on the construction of that identity. However, that impact on identity comes not only from the type of interaction, but its valence or positive, negative, or neutral emotional charge. As others have shown, people react differently to affirming versus disaffirming encounters (Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). Table 1 summarizes the kinds of interactions, the number of occurrences in my data set, and gives an example of each type.

The effects on identity construction could be triggered by interpersonal encounters, by organizational practices, and by a combination of the two, in that organizational practices had some kind of effect on interpersonal exchanges. Of the 114 total interactions, 53 were categorized as interpersonal, 38 as organizational, and 23 as a combination (Entry into this last category required explicit evidence of influence from both levels, so this may be a conservative number). I begin by describing the influence of interpersonal interactions alone, then organizational practices alone, and then how the combination had an impact on how individuals made sense of their identity. (For a diagram of the model elaborated in this section, see Figure 1.)

The Influence of Interpersonal Interactions on Identity Construction

Interpersonal interactions could spotlight a particular facet of identity or shape its expression.

Spotlighting interactions. In spotlighting interactions, the self suddenly becomes aware of a particular aspect of his identity because of something the alter does or says. As these examples suggest, the alter’s reference may be explicit or implicit.

Sunita is a young Indian woman who had been in the United States for about a year at the time of the interview, working at Media Inc. She described how she gets lots of questions from her coworkers about India, about “the caste system and the population explosion and trains and the filth and the poverty and the heat.” She talked about being seen as unusual—“the whole exotic creature thing”—which she enjoyed. “A lot of my positive experiences have to do with the fact that people think I look exotic. There was this informal poll where some of the women said, “oh Sunita looks so exotic”—and that was really good for my ego! . . . I always see it as an advantage.” Sunita is referring to a series of exchanges in which alters, her work colleagues, are calling attention to her ethnicity. These interactions spotlight her ethnic identity, making it stand out for her.

Gloria, an African American woman in middle management at FSC, recounted a very different kind of interaction. Gloria traveled to Texas, along with a colleague, to

Table 1. Identity Interactions: Definitions, Examples, and Number of Occurrences

Identity interaction: An incident or encounter between a self and an alter which in some way affects the self's sensemaking about his or her racial, ethnic, or gender identity (total $n = 114$)	Positive valence	Negative valence	Neutral valence
<p><i>Spotlighting (n = 83):</i> The alter calls attention to some aspect of the self.</p> <p><i>Valuing (17)</i> Jordan, a black HR staffer at FSC felt valued when he was asked to intervene in a case in which an African American man was charging he had suffered discrimination. At first, he was annoyed that, because of his race, his manager singled him out to work on the case. However, he came to realize that he had particular professional and life experiences that helped to bring about a successful resolution. These interactions made him feel his personal experience related to his racial identity was valued and respected because of how it could be brought to bear on his work.</p>	<p><i>Depreciating (46)</i> Latifa, a young African American woman at Media Inc. described a conversation with several employees about cigars, in which she mentioned that her aunt's boyfriend liked cigars. One man "immediately turned around and said, 'no, we are not talking about blunts.'" (Blunts are cigars made with marijuana.) She recalled saying to him, "You just stereotyped me!" Though her work-mate never mentioned race, Latifa believed the man was implying that her aunt's boyfriend must be a drug user and that he made the implication because she is black, making her racial identity feel devalued.</p>	<p><i>Highlighting (20)</i> Minnie, of Chinese descent, works at HairCare. Born in the United States, Minnie has no accent when speaking English. She has had repeated interactions with other employees, with whom she's had a phone relationship, who express surprise when they find out that she is Chinese. She described one such incident that took place on the phone: "Marie asked me, 'Are you Chinese?' I said, 'Yes. I am.' She said, 'You're kidding. . . . God, Minnie, I would never think [that]'. Yes. And I get reactions like that all the time." But she did not indicate that the incident had any emotional charge for her.</p>	
<p><i>Expression-shaping (n = 31):</i> The self changes expression of identity in response to something the alter says or does.</p> <p><i>Expression-enhancing (12)</i> Sarah Jane, a board member at WomenKind, felt her gender expression had been enhanced by her work at the organization. When asked, "Has being at [WomenKind] affected how you think about being a woman," she responded, "I've made a pretty major shift in my thinking and acting and feeling about the importance of relationships as part of feminist/progressive politics . . . I have come to believe absolutely that you can't do political work without doing that." Sarah Jane felt her experiences enriched her expression of gender identity.</p>	<p><i>Expression-diminishing (9)</i> Trinh, of Vietnamese and Chinese descent, works at FSC. When asked if she adapted to FSC culture, she referenced some interactions with her manager and said, "On a special holiday, I would give money to my parents, but I think that's a really sensitive subject to a lot of people in this country . . . [I] try to keep it at low profile . . . Sometimes I think I don't always express my opinions openly because I know there is a culture difference." She talks less about her culture and identity at work, diminishing her expression.</p>	<p><i>Expression-altering (10)</i> Judith is a high-level manager at HairCare. When asked if she ever felt that, as a woman, she had to tailor herself to fit in, she responded, "You don't bring your personal stuff to the table," meaning that she did not refer to personal or family responsibilities as the reason for leaving early or missing a meeting. She did not complain about this, however; she matter-of-factly accepted it as part of the job, suggesting a simple alteration in expression.</p>	

meet with a new client. Her colleague, a white man, was in sales and had brought in the new client; he introduced the two and then withdrew to one side of the room, leaving Gloria to explain to the client how their arrangement would work. But the client, also a white man, would not engage directly with Gloria:

The client would ask the question, but . . . although he's looking at me, he would preface his question with "so, Ron," which was my colleague . . . Ron would keep saying "I'll turn that over . . . to [Gloria], since she's the expert at this, I'll let her give you that information." And I realized it was happening about ten minutes into the meeting. I don't know, I'd have to say my black pride kicked in and I said to myself, "I will make this man see me as a strong, intelligent, knowledgeable person, regardless as to the exterior coating on my skin."

Though race was never mentioned, Gloria believed that the client was refusing to accept her as a competent professional because she was black. It is a spotlighting interaction because, at the moment it was happening, her race became quite salient to her. Suddenly her race was foregrounded whereas every other part of her was backgrounded.

These examples also illustrate how interactions have an emotional valence for the self, either a positive, negative, or neutral spin or charge. Since the question here is the meaning that the self makes of the interaction, it is the self's experience of valence that matters. The valence of spotlighting interactions is determined by whether the self left an interaction with the sense that her identity felt positively valued, negatively depreciated, or neutrally highlighted in some way, regardless of the intent of the alter. That sensemaking can determine, momentarily, how the individual feels about herself and how she feels about herself in that organizational context.

Certainly, a positive valence means that the interaction felt complimentary or self-reinforcing. More specifically, valuing interactions resulted from a sense that something about the self as an individual had been recognized, even though that characteristic was connected to a group identity. Sunita's appearance, related to her ethnicity, was something that made her stand out as an individual. She was proud of it. In Gloria's case, a depreciating interaction, the opposite occurred. First, Gloria felt that her racial group was being disparaged; furthermore, she felt she was seen only as a member of her race, not as an individual.

Expression-shaping interactions. These interactions begin with spotlighting, but go one step further as the self changes how she expresses an identity in response to something the alter says or does. Here, the alter is influencing how an identity is projected, not just whether it feels valued or depreciated. As a result, the self enacts that identity differently. These expression-shaping interactions could result in an increase or decrease in expression or in a change in meaning or content. Valence matters here as well. When the self views the alter's influence positively, the self experiences the interaction as expression-enhancing. When the influence feels negative, the self views the influence as diminishing expression. When there is no emotional charge, the self simply sees the influence as neutrally altering expression.

WomenKind's executive director, Alice, recounted an interaction with a staff person that she felt had positively affected her own white racial identity. Dolores, originally from Mexico, told Alice that her concerns about proper grammar in the organization's public materials were rooted in her white identity. Alice agreed that "a big piece of it was white culture," which kept her from "trying to be open to different ways of doing things." As a result, Alice was trying to be more open to other writing styles and to see that "self-expression comes up with its own grammar and its own punctuation." Alice saw this change as a welcome piece of rethinking her white racial identity more broadly.

However, sometimes expression-shaping interactions had a negative charge. Marlene, a black secretary at HairCare, recounted conversations with another secretary, a white woman, about racism:

Sometimes [Josie] and I have discussions and I try to tell her and sometimes she just doesn't get it. She tells me I'm negative. "Oh, [Marlene], you better watch out for that. Because you are really developing a negative . . ." I'm not being negative, I'm just being realistic. This is the world.

As a result of these conversations, Marlene noted, "You have to be careful in the office. Because—even though you see these little subtle things, everybody is not going to understand it. They are going to tell you, 'You are imagining it.' . . . So, you just keep those things to yourself."

Because of interactions with Josie and others, Marlene had chosen to curtail her discussion of her racial identity in the office. She has learned that talking about racial issues at work often brings negative reactions, so she "keeps things to [her]self" instead, diminishing her expression of her racial identity.

Ultimately, the valence of expression-shaping interactions comes down to whether the self felt that she could be herself at work. Negatively valenced interactions sent the message that something about her identity expression was problematic and the self downplayed or restricted her enactment accordingly. In positive interactions, the self not only felt she could express herself fully, but that the incident enriched her enactment: She was a better person for the change. Expression-shaping interactions contribute to whether the self feels that she is comfortable in a given environment and that she can grow and develop.

In addition to referencing interpersonal interactions, informants also noted organizational policies, practices, and characteristics that had affected them.

The Influence of Organizational Practices on Identity Construction

Many of the informants in this study interacted in a similar way with organizational policies and practices as they did with face-to-face interactions: they sensed an organizational message and then reacted to these cues (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton, Ashford, Lawrence, & Miner-Rubino, 2002; Mor Barak, Cherin, & Berkman, 1998;

Wrzesniewski et al., 2003). While these were not interactions in the strict sense of a give-and-take among agentic actors, the consequences for sensemaking and identity construction were identical: in some cases, identities felt spotlighted, either valued or depreciated; in others, their expression was shaped, either enhanced, or diminished. Since organizational practices could have the same impact as individual alters, these characteristics were, in effect, organizational alters, as these examples illustrate.

To begin with, organizational practices could spotlight identities. At FSC, some employees of color felt their racial identity was more appreciated as a result of the company's 2-year old diversity initiative. As Jermaine, an African American man, put it:

Before you [had] an all white male type of administrative environment. And they're trying to change that because [FSC] wants to change their image. They don't want to be known as just a white man's corporation . . . I wouldn't necessarily say they're trying to make different quotas, but I think they would go an extra yard to promote a minority into an officer position.

Jermaine felt that FSC appreciated his racial background not simply as a token, but because they felt diversity would help their image. This contributed to Jermaine feeling his racial identity was valued. However, for Tiffany, a young white woman at FSC, the diversity program was a negative. "I don't think that that [race] should be something that they look at when they hire someone. I don't think they should look at [FSC's] record on how many Asians and how many whites and how many blacks." When asked if she felt her opportunity was limited by the diversity program, she answered yes. "Because I'm white . . . My whole time working here, no one's ever approached me to say, 'What do you want to do?' No one's ever asked me about career development." In her eyes, her racial identity was depreciated because of the diversity initiative: The organization was not interested in her development because she was white and they were focusing on developing the careers of employees of color.

The emotional valence of spotlighting interactions with organizational practices depended on whether the self's group identity felt welcome or unwelcome in his workplace. In the illustration given above, for example, FSC's diversity initiative gave some informants of color more hope about their careers, but caused one white informant to doubt her value to her department. Positive spotlighting led to a sense of greater opportunity; negative spotlighting to concerns about opportunity.

Organizational practices could also shape the expression of identity. At WomenKind, a young Hispanic woman named Lucia felt her expression of her Latina identity was curtailed. She had been told she couldn't speak Spanish in the office as some people would not understand what she was saying. But this felt like a burden for her:

I have to practice Spanish every day . . . I love to express myself in Spanish, doing something in [my] language . . . If someone gives me directions of something to do in English, I'll rewrite them into Spanish.

Lucia found ways to maintain her identity expression, but not as richly as she would like.

How the Combination of Interpersonal Interactions and Organizational Practices Influences Identity Construction

I have illustrated how interpersonal interactions and organizational practices can each act alone to influence the construction of race and gender identities. However, they can also act in concert when the organizational context has an influence on the interpersonal interactions that happen within its boundaries. In some cases, the organization makes some kinds of interactions more or less likely. In others, it influences the self's sensemaking about the interaction.

Making some kinds of interpersonal interactions more likely. Though the different types of identity interactions were found in all four of the research sites, some kinds appear to be more frequent in some organizations than others, because of differences in organizational policies or practices. A comparison of WomenKind and Media Inc. provides an illustration. In a couple of important dimensions, these organizations were similar. Both were small, with less than 60 employees. Both also had a foundational commitment to diversity. Yet there were important differences. Though Media Inc. prided itself on its racial diversity, at the time of my interviews there were only 4 (out of 60) staff members of color, none in senior positions. The majority of employees and volunteers at WomenKind were women of color, with many in senior positions, both staff and board. The kinds of interactions that took place also differed. Staff at Media Inc. reported many more negatively valenced spotlighting interactions, which made them uncomfortably aware of some aspect of their identity, usually their race or ethnicity. Two differences between the organizations could explain why: their hiring practices and their attention to issues of race.

Data suggest that WomenKind considered its applicants' values as part of its hiring process. As a white woman at WomenKind noted, "Everybody who works here has a certain commitment to the mission. So you have something in common . . . We are all in the same group . . . it's just going to be easier to bridge the gap [with employees of color]." Another staffer said, in response to a question about the staff, "We are looking for progressive people, we are looking for some commonality." Meanwhile, staff at Media Inc. lamented the incongruity between its proclaimed values and their implementation. One African American staffer believed that the company's president "really, really believes in diversity." Yet she felt this wasn't manifested in much of the rest of the organization: "I think some people believe in it [diversity] and some people don't . . . Some people really see it as . . . just kind of this thing to leverage." She felt that Media Inc.'s commitment to diversity had to start with interviewing new staff. "When they [the organization] hired people . . . I don't think they . . . asked anybody that they hired about diversity and how they felt about it."

The comparison between the two organizations suggests that hiring practices might have an effect on the kind of interactions that take place within organizational borders.

Some staff at Media Inc. felt that for the organization to enact its values, the organization needed a higher level of awareness and sensitivity among its entire staff. One way to achieve that is to deliberately screen new recruits.

However, WomenKind did not rely only on recruitment to embed its value system. It also cultivated ongoing organizational conversations about race, which could also affect the interpersonal encounters among staff. In some cases, time was set aside for looking at internal dynamics related to race. More often, race came up as part of discussions about everyday organizational questions: what performers to have at fundraisers or what individuals to recruit for board slots. One staffer remarked, “the race thing is always there in the decision making.”

One white staff member described the impact of these conversations on her sensitivity to racial issues:

I used to think that there really wasn't that much to it [being white] . . . I didn't really feel that I had all these privileges . . . And so from working here . . . I've sort of learned more the covert type of thing, the more subtle things that make a difference because they all sort of add up.

Media Inc. had a diversity task force and occasional discussions about race and other dimensions of difference. These conversations were generally well-received. But they happened rarely and weren't woven into the work of the organization as they were at WomenKind.

These data suggest that organizational policies at WomenKind did make certain interactions—negative spotlighting interactions—less likely than in other organizations such as Media Inc. WomenKind staff screened more deliberately for staff members who shared its values, and they engaged in an ongoing dialogue about difference that also sensitized its staff. Therefore, the comparison of these organizations illustrates one way in which organizational practices work together with interpersonal interactions to influence identity construction: they can make some kinds of interactions more or less common.

Influencing sensemaking about interpersonal interactions. In many cases, interactions could have happened almost anywhere. However, the organizational context can still play a role by influencing how the self makes sense of the interaction.

Carol, a middle-aged, white woman executive at FSC, reporting to the president, recounted the following incident:

We had a meeting—it opened up about the color of my hair, because last summer I was making it blonder and I reminded somebody of his wife because I was “prematurely blonde.” That was pretty uncomfortable, actually. I remember the president walking in and he said, “What are we talking about?” I said, “We're talking about my hair color.”

When asked why it was uncomfortable, she continued, “Because it draws attention to you as a woman in an environment in which you are the only woman. It puts you in a different place.” This is a spotlighting interaction because, as a result, Carol felt her gender was suddenly conspicuous. This is an exchange that could have happened almost anywhere—a casual conversation in which a man was teasing a woman about coloring her hair. Nothing at FSC would appear to make that kind of interaction more likely there than in almost any other venue.

But the data suggest that something about FSC did influence how Carol made sense of the incident. According to Carol, what made her feel spotlighted by the incident was the fact that there were no other women present. Her comment suggests that had there been other women in the room, the comment would not have had the same spotlighting effect. She is the only woman at least in part because of the organization’s hiring and promotion practices: Senior level executives at FSC are overwhelmingly men. That experience of being the lone woman has consequences for how she makes sense of interactions involving her gender identity.

Robert, an account executive at Media Inc., provided a more complex example of how organizations can influence the self’s sensemaking about an interaction. He described a meeting at which he was the only man:

I am the only male client service person . . . So you get into a meeting like I got into the other day . . . and there were nine of us, and there were eight women and me . . . That’s always been an issue for me . . . I felt like I was sitting back from the table. I mean, I was at the table, but I was away from the table.

When asked why he felt that way, he replied, “Everyone laughs about it, number one. They make a point of saying, ‘oh, you’re the only guy. Aren’t you lucky to have all these eight women?’”

From his account, Robert did not like it when someone called attention to the fact that he was the lone man at this meeting. In fact, this spotlighting incident troubled him enough that he felt like he was “sitting back from the table,” distancing himself from the group. As Robert elaborated on his experiences at Media Inc., several of the organization’s work practices appear to play a role in his sensemaking about the incident and his subsequent estrangement.

As we see from Carol’s example, simply being a minority in a group cannot only make the self uncomfortable, it can influence his sensemaking about these interactions with others. Robert underscored this when he said, “There are very few men in this company . . . And I feel like a minority here if you have to use a word.” Spotlighting his status as the lone man reminds him of his discomfort at being a “minority.” The company’s hiring practices carry at least some responsibility for the lack of male account executives.

But his issues went deeper than a concern about being a token. He also believed that men and women have different work styles and, since the company is predominantly women, his style didn’t align with the dominant one:

From the standpoint of . . . not relating and fitting in, that [the predominance of women] is an issue . . . I just think women and men behave differently in some ways. . . . Women, in general, share different bonds. I mean, they work together differently.

The female head of client services, to whom he reports, had criticized his supervision style, telling him, “You are too hard on people. You need to understand them better.” Robert believed this difference was “a gender thing.” In his words, “I am much more like . . . black and white. Like, get these people to do what they need to do. . . . So I think I run into that conflict all the time. And it’s a style.” Robert not only felt he didn’t fit in, he felt his style had been judged as deficient by his boss—and he attributed this to gender differences.

These quotes suggest that organizational context influenced Robert’s sensemaking about the meeting at which he was the only man. The comment about his good fortune as the lone male raised his concern that, as a man, he is at a disadvantage: He does not fit because of the disjuncture between his more direct, “black and white,” masculine style and his women colleagues’ feminine style, including that of his boss. Therefore, because of both organizational recruitment (resulting in the lack of male account executives) and of a dominant work style out of alignment with his own, Robert felt that being a man was something of a liability. Thus, Media Inc. as an organization is partly responsible for why Robert felt he was “sitting away from the table” and the accompanying sense that his male identity is devalued.

In summary, in this section, I suggested and illustrated two ways in which organizational characteristics and interpersonal interactions work together to influence sensemaking about identity, and thus identity construction. First, I examined how organizations can make some kinds of interpersonal interactions more or less likely. Second, I investigated how organizations can affect the self’s sensemaking about these encounters.

The Construction of Race and Gender Identities in Organizations

Figure 1 summarizes the previous narrative by depicting a process model of the construction of race and gender identities in organizations. The model begins with interactions as the starting point for the identity construction process. As described earlier, there are three different starting points. One is some kind of interpersonal encounter with other people, or alters. The second is an organizational practice that sends a cue or message to which the self reacts. The interactions catalogued in this article suggest a number of different organizational practices that could have an influence, from recruitment and promotion policies that affect organizational demography to diversity programs. However, many practices could have an effect, so this list is by no means comprehensive. The third starting point is the joint effect of the interpersonal and organizational levels, in that organizational characteristics can influence the interpersonal interactions within their bounds. They do this in two ways: by making some

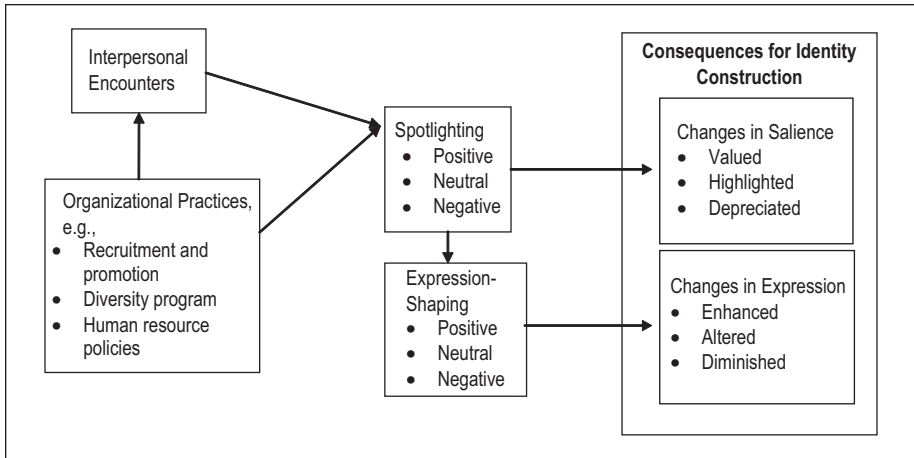


Figure 1. The construction of race and gender identities in organizations^a
 a. This diagram illustrates three different starting points for the identity construction process: interpersonal encounters, organizational practices, and the combination of the two, in that organizations influence the kinds of interpersonal encounters that happen within their boundaries.

kinds of interactions more or less likely and by influencing the self’s sensemaking about the interaction.

Although the starting point may vary, all three kinds trigger the same identity construction process. First, a particular facet of identity—whatever identity was explicitly or implicitly referenced by the encounter—is spotlighted. The effects of that spotlighting will depend on how the self perceives the emotional valence. Positive spotlighting interactions result in an identity feeling valued by the self, negative ones lead to the self feeling that somehow the identity has been depreciated, while neutral ones leave the identity highlighted without an emotional charge. The interaction may end there, in which case the spotlighting interaction has a direct effect on identity construction by affecting the saliency of an identity. However, some interactions go beyond spotlighting an identity to shaping its expression. Again, these interactions carry an emotional valence. A positive interaction results in the enhancement of identity expression, a negative interaction results in diminishment, while a neutral one leads to a simple alteration.

Discussion

In this article, I explore how organizations influence individual identity construction—not just of organizational identities, as has been well established by others, but of race, ethnic, and gender identities. While the notion that organizations shape these facets of identity is not new (Ely, 1995; Leidner, 1993; Pierce, 1995; Wharton, 1992), work in this area has largely taken a more macro interest in how organizations contribute to broad, collective conceptions of gender and, less often, of race. The micro and macro

literatures have largely existed independently of each other, despite important similarities: They are both interested in identity construction in organizations, and they both highlight interpersonal encounters and organizational characteristics as central. My article integrates the two approaches by documenting the micro-processes of individual race and gender identity construction in organizations. Doing so builds on previous work in a number of ways.

Implications for Theory

Organizational influence on individual race and gender identities. First, this article draws on earlier research on the microlevel conversation on identity construction. This earlier work has added a great deal to our knowledge of how organizational life can affect our very sense of self. But it has focused almost entirely on work-related identities. This article suggests that organizations have a broader reach at the individual level than previously imagined, given their effect on employees' race and gender identities as well. This raises the question of whether "work-related" and "demographic" identities are truly separate or distinguishable. Perhaps, at least for some employees, "work-related" identity includes demographic facets of identity, in that their sense of these identities has been shaped by—and is relevant to—their work. Elsbach (2003) has already suggested that an individual's "workplace" identity includes more than just work-related self-categorizations: It includes self-categorizations that are "used by an individual to define him- or herself at work (i.e., 'I'm a parent')" (p. 624). Some employees may well use demographic identities, implicitly or explicitly, to define themselves when they are working. More work is needed to explore how demographic facets of identity interact with other, more obviously work-related identities (Hatmaker, 2007; Watkins-Hayes, 2010), but this article establishes a foundation for that work.

The discrete effects of interpersonal interactions and organizational characteristics. A second differentiating characteristic of this work is its ability to distinguish between the effects of different levels. Management scholars have called not only for more multi-level work but also for better specification of the impact of each level: "Theory explicitly addressing the role of level in its specification of concepts and their interrelations is essential to sound cross-level and multi-level research" (Rousseau, 1985, p. 1). While ample work on identity construction speaks to the importance of both interpersonal encounters and organizational practices, for the most part, it does not systematically distinguish between the two. Most research focuses on one level or the other: some work emphasizes particular organizational characteristics and their effect on identity (e.g., Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Pratt, 2000), while other research focuses on the effects of interactions between individuals (e.g., Bartel & Dutton, 2001).

The work that does discuss both levels in-depth provides very rich, ethnographic portraits of one or two organizations (e.g., Kilduff, Funk, & Mehra, 1997; Pierce, 1995; Pratt et al., 2006). These narratives are based on a broad (and generally well-documented) assumption that context must influence interpersonal exchanges, but the particular mechanisms and consequences of influence are not specified. Nor does this

work enable us to identify instances when the levels are *not* working in concert—when it appears that either interpersonal interactions, or organizational practices, but not both, are responsible. In other words, this earlier work does not isolate the impact of one versus the other, or of their combined effect.

I can extend this important work because my work uses discrete interactions (rather than an organization as a whole) as the unit of analysis. Viewing each interaction independently also permitted me to trace the organizational influence on one interaction at a time, allowing me to determine whether organizational practices played a role at all, and, if so, how. Ultimately, I can tease out the impact of a given interpersonal encounter, the impact of a broader organizational policy or practice, whether there is a link between the two, and what that link is. By adding clarity and precision to the widely acknowledged connection between context and interpersonal behavior on identity construction, this approach provides a foundation for further work on all facets of identity.

This article's exploration of race and gender identities also adds to our thinking about two broader issues within the "identity construction" conversation: the role of intentional versus unintentional influences and the importance of more modest changes that take place in the construction process.

Intended and unintended influence. The identity work literature—as suggested by the term *work*—largely illustrates processes that are deliberately and actively driven by individuals, by organizations, or by both. Wrzesniewski et al. (2003) speak to the active work of individuals: "[O]ur perspective assumes that employees actively compose work meaning by what they notice and how they interpret the actions of others at work . . . Our perspective imbues employees with a greater sense of agency and proactivity . . ." (p. 97). Others describe the very deliberate activities undertaken by organizations: Pratt (2000) describes how Amway engages in "sensebreaking" activities to create a "meaning void" and motivate members to take on a new identity via the organization's sensegiving (p. 464).

My research shows how identity construction happens even without active or intentional involvement on the part of individuals or organizations, taking place as part of the everyday life in organizations. Thus, "identity work" sometimes happens without intentional work. My approach mirrors the social construction of identity literature, which largely assumes that the processes shaping the collective conceptions of gender or race are implicit and unintentional—on the part of both the organizations and the individuals involved. That is, men and women are, for the most part, neither intentionally trying to change their own racial or gender identities nor are organizations trying to do it for them.

However, this article extends this earlier macrolevel work by specifying the interpersonal and organizational mechanisms by which collective social understandings come to be taken on by individuals, even if no person or institution is consciously driving the process. Work on the social construction of gender has explored how alters hold us "accountable" for our gender enactment, by deeming it appropriate and acceptable—or not (West & Zimmerman, 1991, p. 22). My approach highlights the role of work organizations in that accountability process for both gender and race and, as noted before, can distinguish the impact of interpersonal encounters, organizational

characteristics, and their combination. It clarifies the mechanisms through which we are unconsciously shaped by our work environment. Future work could systematically compare conscious, active processes to implicit, unintended ones.

The importance of moderate changes in identity construction. Pratt et al. (2006) note that most work on identity construction focuses on full-blown identity creation or change and argues for the importance of looking at more modest changes (p. 256). Their study of medical residents falls into this latter category, as does Elsbach's (2003) work on identity affirmation.

This article also illuminates more moderate changes: the data in this article "freeze-frame" mundane moments of spotlighting and expression-shaping that generally come and go unnoticed. As documented here, interactions can diminish expression, encouraging the self to muffle an identity, or enhance expression, causing the self to feel an enrichment of identity, both central to identity construction. While these changes may be modest initially, effects can accumulate over time. For example, one informant described how she had become a "role model" in her words, for other women in her company, apparently as a result of her interactions with others in her organization. She noted, "I'm one of the few women in this company—and perhaps the only mother in the company—at this level. I am conscious of the awareness that people have of that and conscious of the way that—my behavior signals to others . . ." She went on, "They look for how much people travel. They look for how late you work. They look for how you interact." It appears that these interactions may have led to longer term change in her expression of her gender identity, as a role model for others.

Interactions also influence salience. Salience may seem less important, but changes in salience are critical to the construction process, for several reasons. First, salience is essential for categorization processes—for learning how others see us. Lewis (2003), in her study of racially tinged interactions among schoolchildren, argues that racial ascription "work[s] primarily through interpersonal interactions in which we attempt to assess what we know about another person" (p. 300). If an alter makes a comment understood by the self to be related to her race, then she may suddenly feel racially categorized. For example, when Gloria's client repeatedly ignored her while addressing her white colleague, Gloria suddenly felt her racial identity was salient. Gloria already identified as African American, but her race was not uppermost in her mind at that moment. By pointedly disregarding her, the client made her race salient and showed that that was the category into which he had placed her. As Lewis notes, "The moment of identification is also a moment of inclusion or exclusion" (p. 300). Such moments, though they may seem trivial, tell us how others see us—and how, sometimes, we have little control over how we are seen, despite our best efforts. Therefore, being categorized by others can shape our very sense of self.

Second, salience is about whether we are aware of a particular facet of identity at any given moment. Work from a social identity theory perspective has demonstrated that we have multiple aspects of identity and that only a subset is in our awareness at the same time (e.g., Ashforth & Johnson, 2001). Some researchers speak of a "working self-concept" or a "phenomenal self," referring to "the small part of self-knowledge

[that is] present in awareness at any given time” (Baumeister, 1998, p. 688). When a particular facet of identity is salient, it becomes part of the phenomenal self and, therefore, much more accessible to the self. If this happens over and over, that identity can feel always in the spotlight. For example, an FSC employee said that because his Latino identity was conspicuous and unwelcome to his colleagues, it was always salient to him. “I’m always more aware of what I am that they don’t want around,” he said. When I followed up with “So it [being Latino] is always . . . obvious for you, is that what you’re saying?” he responded, “That I’m Latino? Oh, sure.” In this way, small changes in salience over time may have a big impact.

In sum, this article suggests that documenting minor moments in the identity construction process is a useful complement to the work that illustrates more obvious identity change. Future longitudinal research could attempt to follow and compare both kinds of processes simultaneously, to see whether larger changes are simply accumulations of smaller ones, or whether distinctively different processes are in play.

Implications for Practice

Some years ago, an article in *Essence* magazine asked “How black can you be?” and continued “When you leave for work in the morning, do you leave a part of yourself behind?” (Edwards, 2000, p. 96). The very existence of the article suggests that identity enactment is not only a scholarly issue but a very real one for African Americans and others different from the norm. This article may fuel the concern even further given the dynamics it documents but I believe it provides some basis for hope as well.

The stories told by research participants suggest that interactions that some may view as fleeting and unimportant can carry consequences for others (cf. Sue et al., 2007; Sue et al., 2009). It may be sobering to consider all the ways in which our words as well as organizational practices may have an impact we did not intend. Indeed, some of the organizational and interpersonal dynamics documented in this article could help explain why—even as diversity programs and the accompanying “celebrating diversity” rhetoric become ever more widespread—white women and people of color continue to feel less comfortable and less welcome: the micro-processes of everyday work life still impede their full inclusion.

Nor were any of the research sites exempt from this dynamic. Indeed, even WomenKind, founded as a multiracial, social justice organization, fell short in its desire to create an atmosphere in which everyone felt they could bring their full selves. As illustrated earlier in the article, two Latina staff members, Lucia and Dolores, felt that language norms—the requirement to communicate in English and the expectation of formally correct grammar—clashed with their own authentic sense of self. In fact, it’s likely that all organizational environments, no matter how committed they are to inclusion, create cultures in which some will feel more of a resonance than others.

At the same time, there are some hints in the article about what organizations can do differently. The comparison of WomenKind and Media Inc. highlighted two practices at WomenKind that might have led to a reduction of negative spotlighting

incidents. First, it took an applicant's attitudes about race, gender, and social justice seriously in the hiring process. This may seem counter to traditional recruitment practices but it is standard for many organizations to recruit employees that are the "right fit" for their culture. This article suggests that informal interpersonal interactions—which can happen dozens of times a day, often under the radar—can have very negative or positive effects with implications for all employees' sense of inclusion and connection to others. Therefore, identifying potential contributors who understand what inclusion means (or who are open to learning) could be quite appropriate.

Furthermore, WomenKind also made race discussable within the organization. Traditionally, race is one of the great undiscussables of American life, but WomenKind made race an ongoing topic of conversation. As noted earlier, race was most often discussed as it related to work tasks but organizations can also make group dynamics part of the conversation. In fact, organizations could use the approach described here diagnostically, by using interactions—with individuals or with organizational characteristics—as a tool to surface the subtle effects of working in a particular organizational context. Employees could raise interactions as a way to ground what may seem like vague concerns in real data. Once surfaced, the interactions could be explored: Is there individual responsibility here, or organizational, or both?

Raising these concerns is difficult, especially for those who feel different from the norm. Top leaders set the tone. They must be very explicit not only about their general commitment to these issues but to the importance of bringing up difficult conversations. Those who do bring up issues should be applauded for their courage, not punished or isolated. At the same time, the issue-raisers must understand that their interpretation of whatever took place is only one perspective and that by putting the issue on the table, they are inviting multiple interpretations. Of course, the actual discussion itself is also likely to be difficult. Whenever possible, individuals trained in respectful mediation should facilitate the conversations—at least until group members develop their own skill in addressing divisive group dynamics.

This article also suggests implications for individual employees, regardless of their organizational context. Topics that seem innocuous to us may have a very different impact than we intend. Well-meant questions about individual characteristics—where someone is from, for example—might simply make someone feel uncomfortably in the spotlight. This does not mean that we cannot show genuine interest in others, only that what is appropriate to say or ask can change over time as a relationship deepens.

Limitations

More research is necessary to confirm the findings of this study since the goal of this research was to develop theory, not to test it. Testing the theory requires samples that are very diverse by gender, race, and ethnicity and could also expand the lens to include other dimensions of difference, including less visible forms of diversity, such as sexual orientation or religion. In addition to considering new markers of difference, future work should also involve research in many different kinds of organizations. This

study's four research sites, though representing a continuum of experience addressing race and gender dynamics, do not cover the landscape. Further study could determine whether interactions like the ones described here occur in other organizations and if they have a similar impact on the interactants. It could also more closely examine the relationship between spotlighting and expression-shaping interactions and perhaps identify other categories of interactions. Furthermore, this article identified several generic pathways, rather than providing a fine-grained analysis of the effects of different organization characteristics. Future research could distinguish among various organizational dimensions that influence the construction process. Additional work could also explore the degree to which the proposed model is culture bound, given that all of the research sites were in the United States. Previous research on the construction of race and gender identities emphasizes that they grow out of particular historical, societal, and political contexts, making it likely that the model could look quite different in other environments. Finally, it is likely that just as individual sensemaking is affected by the organizational context, the context is influenced by its members' sensemaking. That feedback loop could also be investigated in future research.

This article illustrates how mundane, day-to-day encounters can have consequences for organizational members, providing a mechanism by which those consequences occur. It takes a variety of seemingly disparate lived experiences and draws them together, suggesting a coherent explanation for how racial and gender identities are collaboratively manufactured in organizational life.

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Notes

1. This discussion also raises the question of how to differentiate between race and ethnicity, given that both are understood as socially constructed rather than biologically based. However, the meanings attached to race have more typically depended on "skin color, physical features, and, for some, language" (Carter, 1995, p. 14) whereas the meanings attached to ethnicity are commonly derived from "the national, regional or tribal origins

of . . . ancestors and the customs, traditions and rituals handed down by those ancestors” (Helms & Cook, 1999, p. 19). While the two concepts are analytically distinct and meaningful (Smith & Silva, 2011), in practice they can sometimes be hard to distinguish. In some of the data reported here, it is possible to distinguish whether race or ethnicity seems to be in play, and there I have chosen the appropriate term. In others, it is more difficult, and I have used “race” to stand in for the complex of race and ethnicity. I also vary terminology (e.g., “black” and “African American” or “Latina” and “Hispanic”) based both on the informants’ terms and to avoid stylistic monotony.

2. Access to and sampling of employees varied by organization. At the two smaller organizations, WomenKind and Media Inc., I was given full access to all employees and to their demographic profiles. At WomenKind, I interviewed all six staff and two board members. I included board members because I wanted a larger sample and because these two women were acting in staff-like capacities, with heavy involvement in the organization. Therefore, they would have rich experiences interacting with others, including staff. At Media Inc., I interviewed all staff of color, except one Asian man who declined to be interviewed, and then a sample of white staff in different positions and at different levels. At the two larger organizations, FSC and HairCare, I was given access to a subset of employees, with relevant demographic and job position information, from which I could choose from 10% to 20% to interview. I also asked other employees to participate if they were recommended by an informant or if I met them in the course of observing company events. Overall, in addition to looking for diversity in race, ethnicity, and gender, I chose informants at different levels, with different jobs and in different units or departments.

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