

# IDENTITY AS NARRATIVE: PREVALENCE, EFFECTIVENESS, AND CONSEQUENCES OF NARRATIVE IDENTITY WORK IN MACRO WORK ROLE TRANSITIONS

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**Self-narratives—stories that make a point about the narrator—help people revise and reconstruct identities during work role transitions. We propose a process model in which people draw on narrative repertoires to engage in narrative identity work in role-related interactions. Using feedback from their interactions, they revise both the stories and repertoires. Successful completion of the transition is facilitated by enduring and coherent repertoire changes to express the new role identity.**

Those who do not have power over the stories that dominate their lives, power to retell them, rethink them, deconstruct them, joke about them, and change them as times change, truly are powerless because they cannot think new thoughts (Rushdie, 1992: 432).

The practices and strategies by which people craft and negotiate work identities are at the heart of a burgeoning stream of research. In recent years scholars have paid increasing attention to the diverse means people use to craft and negotiate work identities—for example, how they use humor, dress, personal style, and office decor to signal who they are to others (Elsbach, 2003; Ibarra, 1999; Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006; Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997; Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006). Accounts, narratives, and other rhetorical strategies form an important part of this arsenal for identity work (Ashforth, 2001; Scott & Lyman, 1968; Van Maanen, 1998; Weick, 1995). Among rhetorical strategies, telling a “good story” helps people create meaning (Gergen, 1994; McAdams, 1996, 1999) and increases the likelihood that their identity claims will be granted (Ashforth, 2001; Van Maanen,

1998). Yet narrative forms of expressing and claiming identity have not received adequate attention in organizational research.

A self-narrative is a narrative that makes a point about the narrator (Linde, 1993). Scholars concur that self-narratives are both expressive of and constitutive of identity (Bruner, 1990; Gergen, 1994; Josselson, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1991; McAdams, 1996; Pentland, 1999). Indeed, McAdams defines identity as “the internalized and evolving story that results from a person’s selective appropriation of past, present and future” (1999: 486). Although organizational researchers have noted that people use self-narratives to manage strain in work identity (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003), to explain work role movements (Ashforth, 2001; Ibarra, 2003), and to lay claim to central components of work identities (Van Maanen, 1998), we do not yet have a clear understanding of important ways in which self-narrative forms and narrating processes vary, nor do we have conceptual frameworks specifying their role in identity construction. As a result, several theoretical issues remain undeveloped—particularly, the elements of narrative that allow people to achieve desired identity aims and the dynamics of the process by which new narratives are explored and rejected or retained for future use.

A concept of identity as narrative, we argue, is especially critical for our understanding of identity dynamics during macro work role transi-

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tions, defined as passages between sequentially held organizational, occupational, or professional roles (Louis, 1980a).<sup>1</sup> Common examples are organizational entries and exits; promotions, transfers, and demotions; interorganizational moves; and occupational changes. During these passages, identity work is required to sustain feelings of authenticity, despite the changes a person is experiencing (Ibarra, 2003), and to fashion a "culturally appropriate self," complete with stories deemed appropriate by a new professional group or community (Kunda, 1992; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Sutton, 1991; Van Maanen, 1998). More insight is needed into the means by which people "story" their role transitions, making use of narrative to instate a sense of continuity between who they have been and who they are becoming, as well as to obtain validation from relevant parties. In particular, scant attention has been devoted to how people claim work identities that are seemingly discontinuous, or how they otherwise deviate from socially scripted or highly institutionalized trajectories (Ashforth, 2001). As nonlinear, discontinuous, or boundaryless careers become more common (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996; Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006), understanding the variety of means available to people as they construct, alter, and revise their work identities is an important and timely concern.

Building on the literature on work role transitions and on narrative theory, we develop a process model in which people draw from personal narrative repertoires to accomplish their identity goals in the social interactions that are part and parcel of the macro role transition process. While characteristics of the role transition affect the prevalence of narrative identity work, attributes of the story told and the storytelling process in any given interaction vary along dimensions that impact their effectiveness in identity work. We propose a dynamic model by which successful stories (those that generate feelings of authenticity and are deemed valid by their target audience) are more likely to be re-

tained or embellished for future use. When stories are unsuccessful, in contrast, we postulate that a person will seek alternative narratives. Over time, adding, subtracting, and revising stories alters the repertoire. In successful transitions a narrative repertoire that coalesces around new and enduring stories about the changes implied by the transition helps the narrator internalize a new role identity and gain passage through the inclusion boundaries of the new work organization; incoherent or divergent repertoires, in contrast, impede or prolong the transition. Understanding this interplay between interpersonal narration and intrapersonal repertoire creation allows us to make predictions about identity outcomes of work role transitions.

With this article we aim to contribute to a growing stream of literature that links role transitions and identity processes (Ashforth, 2001; Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 1999, 2003). Although it is well established that people actively engage in identity work to claim, revise, and alter their various identities (Ibarra, 1999; Kreiner et al., 2006; Pratt et al., 2006), many questions remain about the means available to people in transition as they experiment publicly with provisional identities that serve as trials for possible future selves, along with the consequences of using these diverse means for work role transition outcomes. We advance the current literature by bringing to bear a diverse and loosely organized body of research on narrative to identify narrative identity work as a form of identity work that is not only particularly prevalent and necessary in macro work role transitions but, if successful, ultimately accounts for enduring identity changes that are observable at the repertoire level. By focusing not just on narrative identity work episodes but also on the evolution of a person's narrative repertoires, our model also answers recent calls for greater attention to identity's dynamism over the course of an increasingly discontinuous professional life (Ashforth et al., 2008).

We divide the article into three major sections. In the first we develop the notion of narrative identity work. We argue that work role transitions are key occasions for narrative identity work, and we specify the work role transition attributes and interaction characteristics that influence the prevalence of narrative identity work. We further propose that effectiveness of

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<sup>1</sup> We distinguish macro role transitions from both intra role transitions, which are changes in a person's orientation to a role already held (Louis, 1980a), and micro role transitions, which are psychological movement and (if relevant) physical movement between simultaneously held roles (Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000).

narrative identity work is measured against authenticity and validation outcomes, and we draw from the narrative literature to specify key attributes of narratives and narrative processes that make for effective identity work in any given interaction episode. In the second section we develop the notion of a narrative repertoire that informs identity work, detail the processes by which the repertoire is modified based on feedback, and advance ideas about the consequences of narrative repertoire processes for work role transition identity outcomes, including the internalization of a new role identity and inclusion within a new work or occupational group. The discussion section highlights the contributions of our thinking for research and theorizing on work role transitions and on identity work.

### NARRATIVE IDENTITY WORK IN WORK ROLE TRANSITIONS

Identities are the various meanings attached to an individual by the self and by others; these meanings may be based on the social roles a person holds—social identities—or on personal, idiosyncratic characteristics the individual displays and others attribute to him or her based on his or her conduct—personal identities (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Gecas, 1982). Identities vary along such dimensions as their centrality or importance to the individual, whether they reflect actual or potential achievement, and the extent to which they are enduring or provisional (Markus & Wurf, 1987; Stryker & Serpe, 1982). There is shared agreement that identities are multiple, mutable, and socially constructed (Baumeister, 1998; Cooley, 1902; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934) but coexist within a self that integrates diverse experiences into a unity (Baumeister, 1998; Gecas, 1982; Markus & Wurf, 1987).<sup>2</sup>

Identity work has been defined as people's engagement in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, or revising their identities (Snow & Anderson, 1987; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Forms of identity work vary, ranging from displays of dress, office decor, and personal objects (e.g., Elsbach, 2003) to such cognitive strat-

egies as ideological reframing and selective social comparison (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999), searching for optimal balance among multiple identities (Kreiner et al., 2006), experimenting with possible selves (Ibarra, 1999), and using a variety of rhetorical devices, including accounts, stories, justifications, disclaimers, and other "vocabularies of motives," to express the identity problem the individual is facing (Pratt et al., 2006; Scott & Lyman, 1968; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Van Maanen, 1998).

In this paper we introduce the term *narrative identity work* to refer to social efforts to craft self-narratives that meet a person's identity aims. By self-narrative we mean a narrative or story—terms we use interchangeably—about the self.<sup>3</sup> Despite a diversity of definitions across disciplines (e.g., Pentland, 1999; Riessman, 1993), there is agreement that a narrative is a sequence of events with the purpose of making a point (Bruner, 1990; Labov, 1972; Weick, 1995). These attributes distinguish narratives from other elements of self-referential discourse, such as chronicles, jokes, and explanations (Linde, 1993). Organizational scholars concur that stories are uniquely suited for making sense of ambiguous or equivocal situations because they selectively distill fragmented or contradictory experiences and information into a coherent portrait (Boje, 2001; Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001). In the sections below we develop a set of propositions about the prevalence and effectiveness of narrative identity work in work role transitions. Figure 1 summarizes our key arguments.

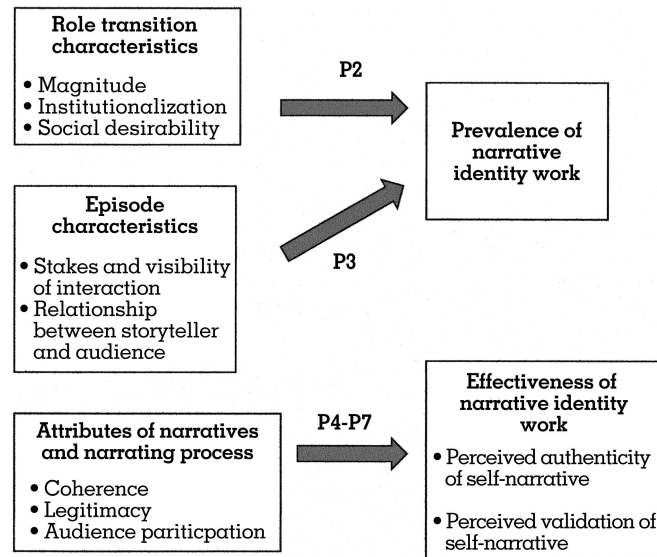
### Prevalence of Narrative Identity Work in Work Role Transitions

Career theorists have treated macro role transitions as both actual role changes (e.g., Brett, 1984; Nicholson, 1984) and as the processes that precede and follow a role change (e.g., Ashforth, 2001; Hall, 1976; Louis, 1980a); we use the term to refer to a process that may begin long before an actual role change and that often extends significantly beyond it. Our conceptualization of the transition process is situated in a tradition of socialization research that argues that identity

<sup>2</sup> The self-concept is a dynamic collection of self-representations or identities that regulates an individual's actions and reactions (for comprehensive reviews see Baumeister, 1998; Gecas, 1982; Markus & Wurf, 1987).

<sup>3</sup> Our definition distinguishes any single self-narrative from a life story, which includes a person's entire set of self-narratives, as well as the relationships among them (Linde, 1993: 21–25).

**FIGURE 1**  
**Prevalence and Effectiveness of Narrative Identity Work in Work Role Transitions**



changes accompany macro role transitions; because new roles requires new skills, behaviors, attitudes, and patterns of interpersonal interactions, they may produce fundamental changes in an individual's self-definitions (e.g., Becker & Carper, 1956; Hall, 1976; Hill, 1992; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979).

Various forms of identity work have been associated with macro role transitions. As they move into a new workplace or role, individuals may adapt by using a range of methods, including bringing favorite objects along with them, such as photographs, coffee mugs, and office decorations, enacting comforting rituals, such as reading the paper in the morning (Csikszentmihalyi & Rochberg-Halton, 1981; Silver, 1996), or experimenting with possible selves (Ibarra, 1999). Among diverse forms, however, we propose that self-narration will be particularly prevalent during macro role transitions because role movements involve "not only changes of action and demeanor but of the verbalized reasons that are associated with them" (Strauss, 1977: 102). And while people may engage in narrative identity work on a daily basis, its prevalence and importance wax and wane as a function of significant life events:

During times of significant transition, identity work may move to the front burner of everyday consciousness as the person seeks explicitly to align his or her evolving story with rapidly

changing events and self-conceptions. During other periods of marked stability in the life course, however, the person may do no more than occasionally tweak and edit the story (McAdams, 1999: 486).

Self-narratives are powerful instruments for constructing a "transition bridge" (Ashforth, 2001) across gaps that arise between old and new roles and across identities claimed and granted in transition-related social interactions. Such gaps occur throughout the transition process: when people begin to explore new options and must explain both their background and future goals (Ibarra, 2003); when they are fresh recruits into a new role, trying to establish their footing (Ibarra, 1999; Van Maanen, 1998) or make sense of confusing or unanticipated changes (Louis, 1980b); and when they look back on role moves to justify the rationale for the transition to themselves and others (Ashforth, 2001; Ebaugh, 1988). Stories help people articulate provisional selves, link the past and the future into a harmonious, continuous sense of self, and enlist others to lend social reality to the desired changes. Building on these arguments, we propose that narrative identity work will be particularly prevalent during work role transitions.

*Proposition 1: Narrative identity work will be more prevalent during work*



*role transitions than in the absence of such transitions.*

**Role transition characteristics.** Work role transitions differ along a number of well-established dimensions. The magnitude or radicalness of the change from one role to another refers to the intensity of changes involved in any given career transition (Ashforth, 2001; Hall, 1976; Latack, 1984) or the degree to which the role permits the exercise of prior knowledge, practiced skills, and established relationships (Louis, 1980a; Nicholson & West, 1989). Intercompany, function, and profession changes are more radical than changes within those domains. Role changes may also differ in the extent to which they are institutionalized, novel, or idiosyncratic. Noninstitutionalized changes do not form part of an established occupational ladder or organizationally planned career path, and socialization processes are disjunctive—that is, newcomers are not following in the footsteps of immediate or recent predecessors in their current organization or occupation (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Often, these are career changes—for example, when a litigator leaves law to run a nonprofit organization, a corporate employee starts his or her own business, a government official enters private industry, or a consultant becomes a movie producer. Finally, role changes may be desirable or undesirable; a socially desirable transition is one that is generally regarded by members of one's role set in positive terms (Ashforth, 2001: 94). A key assumption underlying the notion of social desirability is that a role transition should represent progress; any regression—loss of status, title, or prestige, for example—represents a deviation from what is socially valued and expected.

Highly routine, institutionalized, and desirable career changes are normative; they require little if any explanation since they are part of an accepted social order. A succession of jobs that takes the storyteller from less desirable to more desirable work, for example, is easily accepted by the audience because the possibility of progressive change is a powerful motivator of actions in our society (Ashforth, 2001; Gergen, 1994). Transitions that depart from established conventions, in contrast, typically require greater justification to both the self and others:

If someone begins working as a proofreader . . . , then switches to a job as a copy editor, and moves

to a job as a production editor, people within that professional world would see the succession as a continuous sequence. But someone who moves from a position as a banker to one as a candle maker is seen as having a large and recognizable career discontinuity (Linde, 1993: 151).

Other things being equal, therefore, we expect that the need for narrative identity work will depend on attributes of the role transition.

*Proposition 2: Narrative identity work will be more prevalent the more the work role transition is radical, noninstitutionalized, and/or socially undesirable.*

**Episode characteristics.** Social interactions vary in their visibility, the stakes involved, and the relationship between the parties to the interaction; these episode characteristics also influence the likely prevalence of narrative identity work.

The public visibility of the interaction affects one's motives for the interaction (Leary, 1996: 54) and, therefore, the likelihood that narratives will be used in one's identity work. The more public the episode, the more motivated people are to manage impressions (Schlenker, 2003) and, thus, the more purposeful or planned their constructions. Bill Gates' dropout story and Hewlett and Packard's garage beginnings, as well as Barack Obama's childhood stories, are examples of self-narratives that are carefully crafted for public consumption.

More generally, people strive to make good impressions when the stakes are high: when interacting with high-status, powerful people or key role set members; when expecting to have future contact with the target; and when valued outcomes depend on the target's behavior (Leary, 1996; Roberts, 2005).<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, interactions with members of a new role set—superiors, team members, or clients—might elicit more narrative identity work than interactions with familiar contacts, since the focal individual is still unknown to them and they are high-stakes audiences for the success of the work role transition. On the other hand, narra-

<sup>4</sup> A range of other factors might affect what motives predominate, including situation factors, such as job market vacancies and promotion prospects, and individual characteristics, such as self-monitoring. We discuss these in the discussion section.

tive identity work may also be prevalent in interactions with audiences who are already familiar with the storyteller's skills, accomplishments, and personal histories, since the transition may require more "accounting" so as to fit with what the audiences expect of the person based on past history, as well as more emotional management of the relationship (Goffman, 1959; Kopelman, Shoshana, & Chen, 2009; Schlenker, 2003). In contrast, people typically face fewer constraints with new or distant interaction partners, who are less likely to question the authenticity of a new and different self-narrative (Ibarra, 2003).

*Proposition 3: Narrative identity work will be more prevalent the more the work role transition interaction episodes are high stakes, are visible, and/or concern role set members.*

### Effectiveness of Narrative Identity Work

Narrative episodes, like all social interactions, are evaluated relative to the motives that engendered them (Goffman, 1959; Leary, 1996). This evaluation, in turn, partly determines whether the self-narrative will be used again in future identity work or whether it will be modified or a different story substituted. People engage in identity work for both personal and social reasons. While a thorough review of motives for identity work in role transition is beyond the scope of this paper (see Ashforth, 2001), we propose that macro role transitions make authenticity and social validation motives especially salient. Authenticity and validation correspond to the identity challenges that, as indicated above, arise in macro work role transitions: bridging past and future identities and assuring that identities claimed in social interactions are granted by relevant parties.

**Authenticity outcomes.** We define authenticity as integrity of self and behavior within and across situations (Baumeister, 1998) or one's "true" or "real" self (May, 1983; Rogers, 1959); therefore, authenticity implies some measure of self-consistency or continuity across time and situations. Being true to oneself, however, is a dynamic process whereby a person remains faithful to "oneself as self-same" yet changes "within the cohesion of lifetime" (Ricoeur, 1988: 246); the desire to construe oneself as constant

and consistent over time also implies attempts to achieve ideal and desired future selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Emotional discomfort arises when people are unable to draw a continuous link between old and new selves, leaving them feeling inauthentic (Ibarra, 1999) or devoid of an enduring sense of self (Ebaugh, 1988). Adjusting to new work settings, for example, is harder when people cannot draw on their past as a resource for present sensemaking (Beyer & Hannah, 2002). Emotive dissonance also results from discrepancies between what people really feel and the images they feel compelled to convey in social interactions (Rafaeli & Sutton, 1989). For instance, people attempting radical career changes must persuade family, prospective employers, clients, or financiers that the move makes sense and will work out, even when they themselves are privately ambivalent about it (Ibarra, 2003). Since macro work role transitions, by definition, entail rupture and discontinuity, we expect that self-perceptions of authenticity (or inauthenticity) are an important outcome of any storytelling episode.

**Validation outcomes.** We argue that macro work role transitions also arouse social motives, particularly the desire to obtain validation as legitimate role entrants, or at least as plausible and credible aspirants who deserve help in making the transition. Making a macro work role transition often hinges on obtaining concrete resources, such as information, leads, job offers, and favorable terms, as well as diverse forms of social support, including acceptance and inclusion. A good story helps make the case—for example, helping entrepreneurs acquire the financial resources they need (Lounsbury & Glynn, 2001; Martens, Jennings, & Jennings, 2007) and convincing prospective employers or new role set members that they are a good fit for the job (Ibarra, 2003). If the account of the work role transition is persuasive, the identity claimed by the account is more likely to be granted (Bartel & Dutton, 2001; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006; Scott & Lyman, 1968), as the quote below from an investment banker seeking to move into international development illustrates:

With the nonprofits, the first hour of any interview was "Why the heck would somebody with your background and your pay scale be doing this?" It took an hour's worth of credibility building; they weren't wondering "What is your background

and what can you offer" but "Are you insane?" (Ibarra, 2003: 108).

Having a story that is not just authentic but also credible is especially critical in convincing gatekeepers. As this example shows, validation is a second important outcome of the social interactions the person in transition engages in.

It is important to note, however, that validation assessments may be difficult to make unequivocally since people tend to be biased in their self-perceptions (Swann, 1983).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, audiences do not always provide clear signals. While some listeners may confront storytellers directly when their expectations are not met (Linde [1993: 17], for example, tells of a situation in which she was corrected by a friend for producing a story that he judged too accidental and not enough related to her long-standing interests), others may emit more ambiguous signals or even have norms against confrontation (Snow & Anderson, 1987). In macro work role transitions a common form of failed validation results when the listener rejects claims that the skills and competencies a person developed in a prior role are transferrable to or relevant for a future role (Ibarra & Lineback, 2005). Although some signals of validation—for example, getting a second interview or job offer, being invited to important events, or being revealed sensitive information (Bartel & Dutton, 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1991; O'Mahony & Bechky, 2006)—may be immediately and objectively discernible, decrypting others might take time or depend on the personal competencies of the storyteller.

### Attributes of Narratives and Narrating Process

Not all self-narratives are equally satisfying or effective in meeting the implicit or explicit goals that motivated their telling. Drawing from the narrative literature, we make three arguments about the attributes of narratives and narrating processes that will affect the outcomes of any given narrative identity work episode. First, a coherent self-narrative depicts a career as a series of unfolding events that make sense sequentially, in which the protagonist's

agency provides a key narrative thread or causal explanation for the story's events. Second, a legitimate self-narrative embeds the individual story in a culturally accepted discourse, facilitating the identity's granting. Third, a negotiated storytelling process creates conditions for the story's social validation by involving its audience.

**Coherence.** Coherence refers to the extent to which a story makes sense on its own terms (McAdams, 1996: 315). A good story hangs together coherently from one episode to the next so that the turns of events are plausibly accounted for and the protagonist acts consistently and deliberately from beginning to end. Stories are coherent to the extent that they establish adequate causality for their events and continuity of their protagonist (Linde, 1993; McAdams, 1996). Two primary devices for building narrative coherence are plot structure and protagonist agency.

Plot refers to a goal-directed sequence of events in which the past is related to the present, and from that connection one can extrapolate to the future (Gergen, 1994; Weick, 1995). Most plots share a three-part structure consisting of a beginning, middle, and end (McAdams, 1996). The "first act" typically poses a dilemma. The middle concerns the protagonist's journey. As in all great epics, midway through the hero spends a period of time lost, wandering in the wilderness (Campbell, 1956). This second act typically ends with a turning point, climax, or catalytic event, as in most stories about major role transitions (Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003). Endings resolve the tension built up in the middle.

Through "emplotment"—the process by which narratives link temporal events by directing them toward a conclusion (Ricoeur, 1984)—idiosyncratic actions are woven into a meaningful whole (Polkinghorne, 1991). Continuous story lines link events so that the person's trajectory remains essentially stable, improves, or deteriorates in relation to an unchanging goal or outcome (Gergen, 1994). In discontinuous "before-and-after" plots, in contrast, the goal or outcome sought by the protagonist changes, and turning points reframe personal hardship or doubt as a meaningful part of a personal odyssey (Ibarra & Lineback, 2005; McAdams, 1999). While both continuous and discontinuous plots can be effective, not all stories have clear plots; rather, they may be loosely structured, fragmented, or provi-

<sup>5</sup> People tend to seek feedback that confirms their self-views, particularly with regard to self views about which they are certain, but they tend to be more receptive to discrepant information when they do not have definite views about themselves (Swann, 1983).

sional constructions that become more structured as people make sense of the equivocal events that their stories recount (Bartel & Garud, 2009).

Protagonist agency is a second important means of establishing narrative coherence because the protagonist provides the thread that ties together the meaning of the story's events (Pentland, 1999; Rimmon-Kenan, 1983). The protagonist's role is to account for any apparent discontinuity in the story. For instance, a person may show that although two professions are normally discontinuous, they are significantly related (e.g., "I used to be a banker and now I am a candle maker, but really what I liked about banking is just what I like about candle making," or "the skills I learned as a banker are helpful to me now in my candle shop" [Linde, 1993: 152–156]). Or a person may instead emphasize the personal values motivating an otherwise difficult to explain role change, as in the story told by a psychiatrist about why he left a stellar career to become a Buddhist monk: "I had a great reputation and was comfortable financially. But that wasn't enough. . . . None of that fulfilled my longing for spirituality" (Ibarra, 2003: 5). An action-oriented protagonist, like the one in this story, embodies the ideal of self as the agent of change, in control of life occurrences and impervious to obstacles and constraints.

Agentic protagonists help the audience approve of the storyteller's actions and identify with him or her. In studies of the persuasiveness of movie scripts, for example, protagonists who change and grow throughout the movie are assessed more favorably by the public than those who remain static (Eliashberg, Hui, & Zhang, 2007). In his ethnography of the socialization process of junior police officers, Van Maanen (1998: 7) found that the more agency the rookie police officers displayed in their self-narrative, the more appreciated the story was by their intended audience, veteran police officers. Showing repeated agency is an important way of constructing a consistent and authentic self (Cross, Gore, & Morris, 2003; Linde, 1993).

Protagonist agency is critical for explaining work role transitions because the most powerful explanations for choice of profession rest on intrinsic personal attributes, such as aptitudes and character (Linde, 1993). A scientist turned

entrepreneur who recounts how she always had a commercial knack and decided to follow it demonstrates greater agency than a peer who tells how he ended up working in universities that encouraged links between academia and industry. Self-narratives that rely on accidents or random events as causal mechanisms, in contrast, often involve a deficient degree of intention or agency by the protagonist, requiring further accounting (Linde, 1993). However, in certain cases, such as in involuntary or undesirable transitions, a successful self-narrative might productively invoke external forces as explanations for the role change. For example, blue collar workers who have been made redundant might use a narrative that takes the burden of the account away from the individuals and places it on the employer, the government, or the globalization of the markets (Newman, 1999). Whether or not self-narratives with agentic protagonists will be more effective, therefore, will be moderated by social desirability of the work role transition.

*Proposition 4: In work role transitions, self-narratives with structured plots are more likely to achieve authenticity and validation outcomes than unstructured narratives.*

*Proposition 5: In work role transitions, self-narratives with agentic protagonists are more likely to achieve authenticity and validation outcomes in socially desirable work role transitions, but are less likely to do so when transitions are socially undesirable.*

**Legitimacy.** People tell stories about who they are and how they became that way by referring to existing social narratives and specific cultural norms (Callero, 2003; Linde, 1993). Legitimate self-narratives embed an individual's story in a larger cultural discourse that is easily recognizable as part of the "canon" (Chreim, Williams, & Hinings, 2007; Phillips, Lawrence, & Hardy, 2004; Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2003; Somers, 1994). By using canonical themes—that is, archetypal character portrayals, settings, and story lines and institutionalized scripts drawn from collective narratives—people increase the legitimacy of their story (Gergen, 1994; McAdams, 1996; Somers, 1994).



Work role transition stories are often built around institutionalized scripts based on myth, folklore, or contemporary culture, such as heroic quests, coming-of-age stories, and rags-to-riches plots (Campbell, 1956; Gergen, 1994; McAdams, 1996). For instance, the story of how a person became an entrepreneur is likely to be more effective in identity work if it resembles stereotypical anecdotes of the "American dream" or Horatio Alger rags-to-riches story line; unsurprisingly, this story line is prevalent in entrepreneurs' self-narratives (Czarniawska-Joerges & Wolff, 1991). Likewise, plots about "wandering in the wilderness" before finding one's true purpose are common in career change narratives (Ibarra & Lineback, 2005). Stories told in familiar, culturally accepted plots and containing archetypal characters are more convincing than stories that do not follow agreed upon cultural rules (Bruner, 1990; Cruikshank, 1997).

Self-narratives also indicate how a person partakes of a common set of narrative resources unique to the particular organizational group he or she belongs to or seeks to join. Recovering alcoholics, for example, learn to tell their story "the AA way" by including canonical elements of plot, such as "hitting bottom," while newcomers to Codependents Anonymous adopt references to dysfunctional families as a constant fixture of their life stories (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 2001; Irvine, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Snow & Machalek, 1984). Kunda, Barley, and Evans found that technical workers making the transition from salaried employment to contract work told stories with a common script:

The narrative begins with the lament of an expert for whom the tension between the ideal of technical rationality and the political reality of organizational life has become a source of simmering discontent. Then, an employer's action or an unanticipated event that undermines job security leads the expert to act on his or her discontent. Aided by serendipitous encounters with the world of contracting, the expert finally chooses to escape the world of full-time employment into the world of contingent work, which promises a way of life more consistent with the expert's worldview (2002: 240–241).

We argue, therefore, that making a macro work role transition also entails learning and adopting culturally sanctioned stories and story elements; stories that reflect these influences

will be more legitimate and, thus, more effective.

*Proposition 6: In work role transitions, self-narratives that contain elements of cultural archetypes are more likely to achieve authenticity and validation outcomes.*

**Audience participation.** Most storytelling is done in conversation and involves the listeners (Boje, 1991; Linde, 1993). Audiences are not only sensitive to a good story (Eliashberg et al., 2007; Green & Brock, 2000) but often act as coproducers, joining in the story's telling by advancing corroborating points and obliging the narrator to compromise on certain stances or to find middle-ground positions (Boje, 1991; Linde, 1993; Polletta & Lee, 2006).

How a story is negotiated shapes its form and evaluation (Barry & Elmes, 1997; Boje, 1991; Linde, 1993; Scott & Lyman, 1968). The negotiation process directly influences the coherence and legitimacy of a self-narrative as audiences cue the storyteller, interject their own data, and, if necessary, guide the story toward more subculturally appropriate plots and morals. In the process known as "scaffolding," veteran members of established communities build on the appropriate parts of novices' stories while ignoring the inappropriate story parts (Holland et al., 2001). If a newcomer to Codependents Anonymous searches for the origin of her codependency problem in recent events of her life, for example, the audience will suggest that the likely cause is something that happened in her childhood (Irvine, 2000). Lave and Wenger's description of what occurs when a new member of Alcoholics Anonymous is called on to talk about his or her life illustrates the notion of audience negotiation:

One speaker follows another by picking out certain pieces of what has been said, saying why it was relevant to him, and elaborating on it with some episode of his own. . . . Other speakers will take the appropriate parts of the newcomer's comments, and build on this in their own comments, giving parallel accounts with different interpretations, for example, or expanding on parts of their own stories which are similar to parts of the newcomer's stories, while ignoring the inappropriate parts of the newcomer's story (1991: 83).

The most important aspect of the negotiation process is achieving agreement on the story's

moral or main point (Bruner, 1990; Linde, 1993). The moral casts light on how the narrator understands himself or herself and how the audience should understand him or her, and it sets the standards against which the story can be evaluated (Linde, 1993; Pentland, 1999). Since a story always invites reconstrual of what might have happened (Boje, 1991; Bruner, 1990), it is up to the narrator to highlight those intentions and actions of the hero that are most likely to trigger the desired interpretation by the audience and to signal what kind of response he or she desires; it is up to the audience to indicate understanding and acceptance or, alternatively, to express disagreement (Linde, 1993). Since people rely on others' reactions to confirm their self-views (Down & Reveley, 2009; Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934), achieving agreement on the moral lends weight to the identity claimed in that interaction.

*Proposition 7 In work role transitions, narrative identity work processes that are participative are more likely to achieve authenticity and validation outcomes than narrative processes that do not involve the audience.*

### EVOLUTION OF NARRATIVE REPERTOIRE AND CONSEQUENCES FOR WORK ROLE TRANSITION OUTCOMES

People have not one but many coexisting self-narratives that ensure a flexible presentation of self (Bateson, 2004). They engage in a dynamic process of crafting stories about new events and reinterpreting favorite, often repeated story lines, and they tell different versions of their stories to different audiences (Boje, 1991; Linde, 1993). We propose that the variability people need to tell appropriate stories in different contexts is provided by a narrative repertoire that informs and guides narrative episodes. This notion of self-narrative repertoire is related to the idea of interpretive repertoire in discursive psychology—a register of terms and metaphors from which people draw selectively to characterize and evaluate actions and events (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Reicher, 1987).

We further propose that narrative repertoires consist of previously told stories and the actual behavioral "tools" needed to convey them or vary their form from one situation to another—

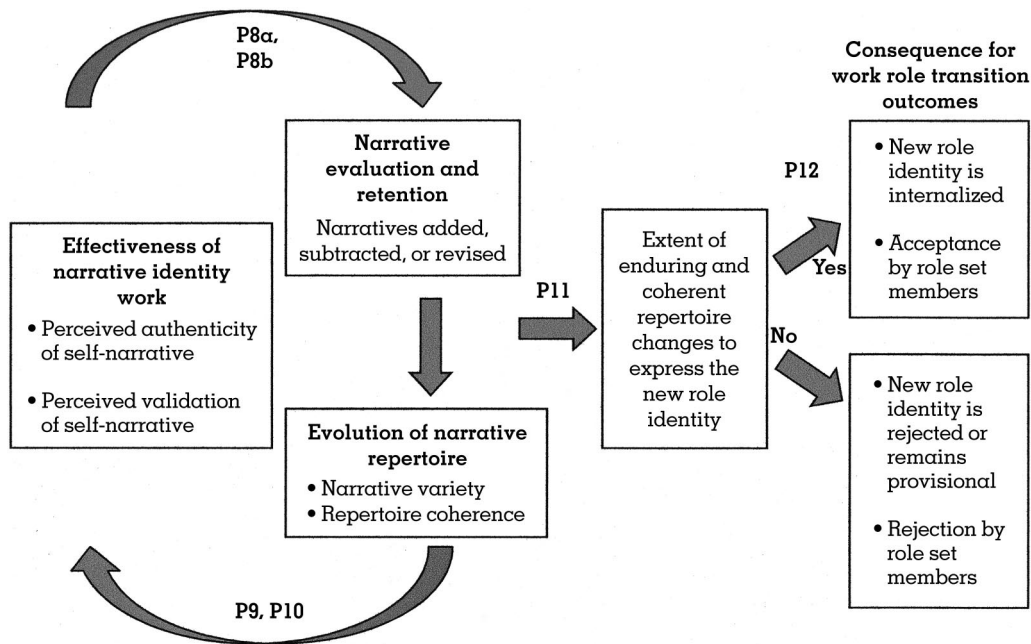
for example, attitudes, styles, self-presentation tactics, language, demeanor, and so on.<sup>6</sup> Taking a humorous tone in telling a story, for example, is likely to produce a different effect than telling the story dramatically. Repertoires may also include provisional narratives or story fragments, such as events and personal anecdotes that have not yet been structured into beginning-middle-end sequences, familiar institutionalized scripts and cultural archetypes, and the stories one has heard others tell about related experiences. Repertoires allow people to pick and choose narrative elements according to the context and purpose of the interaction. Having a repertoire, therefore, implies active selection of some stories and omission of others in any given circumstance. In the remainder of our paper, therefore, our focus shifts from the interpersonal identity work episode to the evolution of the intrapersonal narrative repertoire over time and its consequences for work role transition outcomes. The two levels of outcomes are linked: the authenticity and validation outcomes of any given narrative episode ultimately affect identity internalization and identity acceptance outcomes of the transition by way of the proposed repertoire processes. Figure 2 depicts our proposed process model.

### Narrative Evaluation and Retention

Like the stories within them, self-narrative repertoires are dynamic entities that evolve as people encounter new circumstances and construct provisional identities. People acquire and develop discursive elements for their narrative repertoires directly, through interactions with others (Creed, Scully, & Austin, 2002; Edwards & Potter, 1992), and indirectly, through their participation in a range of cultural activities, such as reading fiction and biography and watching films or the news (Swidler, 1986), as well as via their sensemaking efforts in the wake of significant events (Ebaugh, 1988; Louis, 1980b; Weick, 1995). Our model proposes feedback loops or double interacts (Weick, 1979) between narrative identity work episodes and repertoire processes over time, as unsuccessful episodes lead people

<sup>6</sup> Our notion of narrative repertoire is akin to Swidler's (1986: 273) idea of a "toolkit" of "habits, skills and styles from which people construct strategies of action" and which they modify to varying degrees with experience.

**FIGURE 2**  
**Evolution of Narrative Repertoire and Consequences for Work Role Transition Outcomes**



to add to or draw alternatives from their evolving repertoires and as successful episodes reinforce existing contents.

As discussed above, people evaluate narrative identity work episodes based on internal (authenticity) and external (validation) criteria. People compare the identity negotiated in narrative form with their private representations of the kind of person they “really” are or would like to be; a self-narrative episode that reaffirms or clarifies personal self-conceptions is more likely to create the conditions for perpetuating the self-narrative in further interactions than one that does not. By the same token, people evaluate their stories by gauging their audiences’ reaction; audiences affect the fate and evolution of a self-narrative by validating or failing to endorse its premise and by providing feedback about how to improve the story (Linde, 1993). Authenticity and validation criteria are related, since how others see us matters for how we ultimately come to see ourselves (Baumeister, 1998). When communicators experience their message as creating a shared reality with the audience, they see the message as more reliable and valid (Echterhoff, Higgins, & Groll, 2005). In the course of work role transition-related episodes, stories that feel authentic and are vali-

dated are more likely to be told again in future episodes than stories that feel contrived or do not meet audience approval.

*Proposition 8a: In work role transitions, self-narratives that achieve authenticity and validation outcomes are more likely to be added to a person’s narrative repertoire than those that do not.*

*Proposition 8b: In work role transitions, self-narratives that do not achieve authenticity and validation outcomes are more likely to be revised or discarded from the repertoire than those that do.*

### Narrative Repertoire Attributes

The process of narrative evaluation and selection proposed above has consequences for attributes of a person’s narrative repertoire—notably, its variety and coherence. A varied narrative repertoire allows people to customize stories to specific audiences, selecting different episodes of their lives to make the same point or to make different points to flesh out a consistent character profile (Ashforth, 2001; Brown, 2006;

Linde, 1993). Linde, for example, describes the many different stories she tells about why she became a linguist: "The existence of so many multiple accounts seems to assure that the choice of profession is well-motivated, richly determined, and woven far back in time" (1993: 5–6). Likewise, business school academics, for instance, may offer alternative self-narratives that emphasize differently the importance of teaching, research, and consulting work, depending on whether they address an audience of students, scholars, or corporate clients (Brown, 2006: 739).

Having access to a variety of institutionalized scripts may also be critical for accomplishing one's identity aims. Managers who become unemployed, for example, are often portrayed as "falling from grace," partly because the narrative customarily available to managers is one of meritocracy, self-belief, and diligence; this institutional script is not useful for the subsequent job search because it places the blame for the layoff on the individual (Newman, 1999). To counter the effect of a tainted institutionalized script, a standard story line might be substituted for another—for instance, an ousted executive might regain heroic stature by finding plausible motives that exclude assuming responsibility for the downfall (Sonnenfeld & Ward, 2007) or reverting to a redemption narrative of self-renewal following a downfall (Gergen, 1994; McAdams, 1999).

But although people tailor stories to their audience, too much variation can be problematic. Having vastly different coexisting self-narratives may conflict with one's desire to maintain one's own integrity, since perceptions of self-coherence depend on one's ability to integrate diverse experiences into a unity (Baumeister, 1998). When people craft vastly different stories for the different career paths they are exploring, for example, they also often report feeling "rudderless," as one career changer reported: "It concerns me that I've opened the array of possibilities so broadly. . . . I wonder do I really know what is my identity? How do I define myself, and how do others define me?" (Ibarra, 2003: 157). Clashing self-narratives may also be unsustainable across multiple interactions because recipients may cross-check and react negatively if they discover wide inconsistencies (Vinitzky-Seroussi & Zussman, 1996). The usefulness of a narrative repertoire, therefore, depends on its

coherence such that component stories do not contradict each other but, rather, hang together plausibly (Linde, 1993). In sum, the more varied the narrative repertoire, the greater the possibility for situational adaptation and innovative response, but, at the same time, variety increases the danger of inauthenticity across different episodes.

*Proposition 9: The more varied one's narrative repertoire, the greater the likelihood one will achieve validation outcomes in narrative identity work during work role transitions.*

*Proposition 10: The more coherent one's narrative repertoire, the greater the likelihood one will achieve authenticity outcomes in narrative identity work during work role transitions.*

### Evolution of Narrative Repertoire

As new stories are added or revised in the selection processes described above, the variety and coherence of a person's narrative repertoire may also change. Bateson (2004) suggests that research on the evolution of identity might distinguish periods during which identity aims are best accomplished by telling variations on the same basic story line from periods in which a portfolio of different stories is needed. Building on Corley and Gioia's view that the transition process entails "moving from an existing clarity of understanding to doubt, uncertainty, and/or ambiguity, and ultimately to a state of renewed clarity that resolves into an altered form" (2004: 174), we argue that narrative repertoires similarly evolve with the transition, with multiple and inconsistent stories initially allowing people to test provisional or equivocal constructions but, over time, in successful transitions, adhering to variations on a common theme.

The mechanisms by which this convergence occurs are practice and feedback. Early in the transition process, people may feel uncertain of their own identity and, as such, experiment with diverse and even contradictory possible selves; each alternative under consideration requires a different narrative, and even a single alternative might be justified by a number of divergent stories (Ibarra, 2003). As people progress through the role transition, their initial intuitions about what might be plausible or appealing become



grounded in direct experience. They also encounter multiple occasions in which they are asked to tell their story. Repeated storytelling helps speakers identify their own preferences and learn competing interpretations, unfamiliar views, and others' stories (Polletta & Lee, 2006; Weick, 1995). As people increase their understanding of what elements they can use to create stories that are validated and feel authentic, they discard earlier, more provisional narratives or structure them into more coherent tales. For example, Ibarra describes the iterative process by which an aspiring money manager developed a story about why she was leaving an academic career:

June's attempts at explaining herself—why she wanted to make such a seemingly crazy career change, why a potential employer should take a chance in her, why she was attracted to a company she never heard of a day before—were at first provisional, sometimes clumsy ways of redefining herself. But . . . she experimented with different versions of her story, each time getting feedback on what her audience found plausible and what made her more or less compelling as a job candidate (2003: 60–61).

Narrative repertoires, therefore, undergo changes over the course of a work role transition as people encounter many situations in which they are asked to explain themselves. These repertoire changes may be because people retain new stories about meaningful events that occurred in the course of the transition and/or reinterpret past events, therefore revising old stories about those events. If identity work using old or new stories is effective over multiple episodes, these changes will likely be enduring, coherent, and in the direction of the new work role identity. If the identity work is not successful, however, any changes to the narrative repertoire are likely to be provisional, inconsistent, and/or at odds with the new work role.

*Proposition 11: Effective identity work over multiple episodes during work role transitions will lead to enduring and coherent changes to one's narrative repertoire so as to express the new identity.*

### **Consequences of Narrative Repertoire Processes for Work Role Transition Outcomes**

From telling a story about the self there emerges a sense of self (Ricoeur, 1988). In this

final section we make the link between the narrative processes described above and identity outcomes of the work role transition. Of course, not all work role transitions result in identity changes: outcomes may range from situations where role innovation occurs without personal change (Nicholson, 1984) to full identity transformation (Ashforth, 2001), and repeated failure in classic narrative situations such as job interviews, professional events, and networking encounters may lead individuals to abandon attempts to enter or establish themselves in a given profession.

The proposition that narrative mechanisms directly account for identity change is squarely grounded in a vast body of literature indicating that overt behavior, such as storytelling, potentially changes self-conceptions through internalization and reflected appraisal processes (Bem, 1972; Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934; Tice, 1992). Self-narratives that can be justified as representative of enduring identities are more likely to be internalized than those that clearly contradict private self-beliefs (Schlenker, 2003). Likewise, social feedback produces gradual changes in identity, because people replicate behaviors that win them approval and seek alternatives to those that do not (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). Telling one's story in culturally resonant ways catalyzes the support of the community, which, in turn, helps newcomers feel a greater sense of belonging within the community (Holland et al., 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1991).<sup>7</sup> Identities claimed successfully across a range of social interactions become more salient and central; identities premised on few or peripheral relationships, in contrast, remain peripheral (Stryker & Serpe, 1982).

Building on the argument made above that narrative repertoires adjust so as to reflect the evolution of a person's sense of self, we propose that evidence of identity change in work role transitions consists of enduring and coherent changes to a person's narrative repertoire. Provisional narratives become more structured into a clear beginning-middle-end format, and while story variations remain or even multiply, vari-

<sup>7</sup> This does not mean that all newcomers to a workgroup will internalize the same work role identity. Successful self-narratives personalize social identities, illustrating common cultural values with unique personal traits and histories (e.g., Van Maanen, 1998).

ants unite around a common theme that has become self-defining. The consequences of such amendments are more profound than the simple addition of a new favorite story; the repertoire itself must also shift so as to take into account relationships among its diverse narratives (Linde, 1993). For example, incorporating a new successful story about "why I left my career as a banker to become a candle maker" or "how a quant jock like me became a people manager" will likely lead to alterations in related stories already in the repertoire (e.g., about early childhood interests, family relationships, or educational choices) so that they are consistent with the choices and meanings of the work role transition. Alternatively, incorporating a new story that makes sense of an unsuccessful transition will increase the salience of stories and events that highlight the misfit of the new role with the person's other life commitments, choices, or values.

A narrative repertoire that coheres around consistent and compelling stories that justify the transition, we suggest, helps the person complete the transition, internalizing the new work identity and penetrating the informal inclusion boundaries of a new work or occupational group. Alternatively, role identities are more likely to remain provisional and the work role transition incomplete or unsuccessful in cases of failure to develop a narrative repertoire that adequately explains the transition across different situations and audiences or one in which its various stories are at odds with each other.

*Proposition 12: In work role transitions, internalization of a new role identity and acceptance in the new workgroup depend on enduring and coherent changes to one's narrative repertoire so as to express the new identity.*

## DISCUSSION

By opening gaps between past and future selves and between identities claimed and granted in social interactions, the work role transition process presents multiple and varied occasions for narrating oneself. Our model argues that people draw from an evolving narrative repertoire to engage in narrative identity

work so as to bridge these gaps as they arise in social interaction. If the variant of "one's story" told in any given episode generates feelings of authenticity and is validated by its target audience, it is more likely to be retained and embellished for future use. Otherwise, the person will seek alternative narrative material. Characteristics of the role transition and of the interaction episodes are key influences in this process. In successful transitions a coherent and compelling narrative set emerges from repeated interaction and revision, helping the narrator to internalize the new role identity and gain passage through the inclusion boundaries of the new work or occupational group. Alternatively, passages that do not find plausible or consistent narratives remain incomplete or fail.

Our notion of narrative identity work and our process model contribute to the literature on work role transitions in several important ways. Although the role of narrative in making sense of role transitions has been noted (e.g., Ashforth, 2001; Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003), testable links between narrative variables and transition processes or outcomes have been lacking. Our model specifies what makes for a good story and storytelling process and how these attributes correspond to the psychological and social challenges of macro work role transitions. More important, our perspective suggests that the evolution of identity in role transition is matched and evidenced in a parallel evolution of the person's narrative repertoire such that its various components eventually coalesce around the new self-understandings that result from the transition.

While these ideas are applicable to a range of role transitions, our propositions are especially germane for understanding discontinuous, uninstitutionalized, or traditionally undesirable transitions—passages that are increasingly common today yet understudied relative to more formal and routine organizational passages. For example, researchers agree on the key role of significant events or turning points in helping people make and explain voluntary role exit (e.g., Ashforth, 2001; Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003). Yet how self-narratives matter beyond the actual events they narrate has not been treated in sufficient depth. By specifying in testable form how events serve as raw material for narrative identity work that must meet certain requirements if it is to achieve its goals, we put "skin on

the bones" of the frequently cited enactment perspective—that is, the idea that "people learn their identities by projecting them into an environment and observing the consequences" (Weick, 1995: 23).

Moreover, while current theorizing highlights how people use narratives retrospectively—to create continuity and to make sense of completed role transitions (e.g., Ashforth, 2001; Nicholson & West, 1989)—our model also informs our thinking about how narrative facilitates rupture, allowing people to drive their story's action prospectively, toward possible but tentative selves. The idea that midtransition narratives will tend to be more provisional and less consistent with other repertoire stories than those constructed post hoc, when the narrator knows the end point of the story (Bartel & Garud, 2009; Weick, 1995), sheds light on the state of uncertain identity in which people midtransition report feeling "in a vacuum," "in midair," "neither here nor there," and "at loose ends" (Ebaugh, 1988; Ibarra, 2003). By the same token, our perspective suggests that uncertainty is resolved and the transition completed not when an actual role change occurs but when a person is finally able to resolve the conflict and contradiction in his or her narrative repertoire. Our argument that evidence of identity change consists of enduring and profound amendments to one's narrative repertoire is a novel contribution to literature that has been especially vague with regard to what constitutes the end point of a work role transition (see Ashforth, 2001, and Ashforth et al., 2008, for reviews).

The notion of narrative identity work developed here also contributes to a broad but "loosely organized" (Pratt et al., 2006: 238) body of literature on identity work in at least three important ways. First, we name and flesh out an underspecified but important category of identity work. Our model identifies the specific narrative mechanisms through which identities are constructed, distinguishes these from other rhetorical devices, and provides a conceptual framework for analyzing antecedents and consequences of narrative identity work. Second, we answer recent calls for greater attention to how cultural forces impact identity dynamics (Chreim et al., 2007) by specifying the importance of institutionalized scripts on the raw material available for and the effectiveness of narrative identity work. Third, and perhaps most

important, as Ashforth et al. (2008) note, surprisingly little research captures the dynamics of a life's alternating periods of identity stability and change. Much empirical and conceptual work on identity work (e.g., Pratt et al., 2006; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Van Maanen, 1998) offers a static picture of how people respond to the identity challenges they experience at a particular point in their lives. Our model, in contrast, focuses on the interplay between these day-to-day negotiations and the accumulated understandings of a whole life's experience.

The concept of a narrative repertoire, consisting of established and provisional stories, story fragments, and institutional scripts from which people draw to make narrative identity claims in social interactions, and which evolve as the transition process unfolds, is a final area of contribution that we would like to highlight. While notions of repertoire abound in both discursive theory and occupational sociology, the rhetorical properties and evolutionary dynamics of personal resources for identity work have been underspecified. Our conceptualization of narrative repertoire builds on and contributes to a stream of socialization research that highlights the role of individual agency in constructing self-tailored identities within the constraints of well-defined occupational norms (e.g., Chreim et al., 2007; Fine, 1996; Ibarra, 1999; Rao et al., 2003). Fine (1996), for example, showed how cooks pick and choose among "bundles of images" or repertoires of occupational rhetorics to define their work identity and to respond to different situation needs, and Chreim et al. (2007) described how doctors reconstruct identities to adapt to changes in their institutional environment. None of these studies, however, specifies the interaction dynamics by which an individual's own narrative repertoire shifts in response to changes in the institutional environment so as to reinforce or transform work identities.

### Individual and Situational Influences

Because our purpose in this paper has been to bring narrative scholarship to the literature on identity work in work role transitions, the model proposed here focuses exclusively on immediate influences on narrative identity work. A much broader literature on individual differences that potentially affect storytelling propensities, aptitudes, and styles can inform the dy-

namics depicted in our model (e.g., Ashforth, 2001; Baumeister, 1998; Leary, 1996). Self-monitoring and public self-consciousness are associated with the propensity to engage in impression management or to monitor one's public person (Carver & Scheier, 1985). More generally, learning styles, self-monitoring, public self-consciousness, and desire for feedback account for variation in responses to new role demands—in particular, the extent to which people innovate or conform (Ashford & Taylor, 1990; Bell & Staw, 1989; Nicholson, 1984).

Likewise, a number of situational factors are also likely to influence the resources and motives with which people enter a narrative episode. Both narrative repertoires and identity construction strategies are likely to vary depending on the characteristics of a person's role model set and professional networks (Ibarra, 1999), and these, in turn, are heavily influenced by attributes of the organizational and professional settings in which relationships are formed and maintained.

### Implications for Future Research

Our perspective on the role of narrative processes in identity change can inform future research on the various manifestations of the boundaryless career (Sullivan & Arthur, 2006). Investigating sources and consequences of having multiple self-narratives, for example, is especially germane as people make more frequent and unconventional career changes. While a consistent narrative told across diverse social circles consolidates identity, it also constrains the person to live up to the self he or she has claimed to be; alternatively, different interpretations help people construct different futures (Bateson, 2004: 69). Further research is also needed to understand when narrative variety produces feelings of inconsistency or inauthenticity and when, instead, creating variety is a prerequisite for crafting an authentic yet different or changed self. While numerous scholars have argued that there are advantages to having multiple versions of one's life story, the conditions under which multiplicity is more or less beneficial remain to be investigated.

Research on narrative repertoires at the institutional level might further explore how institutionalized scripts emerge or change and become a common fixture of role occupants' repertoires.

Rao et al. (2003), for example, demonstrated how identity movements create institutional gaps and give rise to new logics that are disseminated via models and stories, and Kunda et al. (2002) described the emergence of a new script to explain the trend toward freelance work in technical workers. Our perspective follows in the tradition of the Chicago sociologists, who viewed adult socialization as learning sanctioned accounts that "enabled individuals to align themselves with the events of their biographies" and, as such, justify their position in the social order (Barley, 1989: 49). Our theory suggests that institutionalized scripts might become even more important for identity construction efforts as the prevalence of boundaryless careers increases, since the greater the magnitude or discontinuity of the role change the greater the need to justify it with a socially acceptable script. Future research is needed to explore the occupational contingencies that lead to the establishment of new institutionalized scripts and repertoire alterations at the occupational level, as well as the extent to which the current times are producing an increasing stock of institutionalized "transition" or "career reinvention" stories.

Future empirical work might also explore how the effectiveness of self-narratives is contingent on the type of work role transition and on the cultural contexts in which the transition occurs. As discussed above, different narrative forms and processes explain transitions that are "upward," into managerial roles or higher-status occupations, or "downward," into lower-status occupations or unemployment. The cultural context in which the transition is taking place may also create contingencies in the importance of the attributes of narratives and narrative processes we highlighted. Agency and consistency of self, for example, are particularly valuable elements in Western culture, but they are not as crucial in East Asian cultures (Cross et al., 2003).

For many people, although certainly not everyone, a job or occupation is a central component of their understanding of who they are. As a result, they must be able to tell a good story about how they came to do what they do for a living. As Nicholson and West note, "If work histories are lifetime journeys, then careers are the tales that are told about them" (1989: 181). We have argued in this paper that narrating the self changes the self. Just as people construct work



identities by telling their story, they also reinvent themselves by telling new stories about what is happening to them, reinterpreting past events in the light of these new understandings, and weaving past and present into a coherent repertoire that allows them to communicate their identity and negotiate it with others.

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