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Putting Identification in Motion: A Dynamic View of Organizational Identification

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Abstract. Building on work at the individual and organizational levels suggesting that an individual's self-concept and an organization's identity are dynamic, we relax the generally held assumption that perceptions of organizational identification are perceived as relatively stable over time and highlight the importance of understanding the perceived dynamism in members' relationships with their organizations over broader time horizons. We introduce various identification trajectories—a member's current perception of how his or her identification has evolved and will evolve over time—and investigate the sense of momentum that characterizes these trajectories. We also generate theory about the different action tendencies created by various types of trajectories and examine their influence on cognition, affect, and behavior in the present. Our theoretical model helps to explain why two members of the same organization with similar degrees of identification in the present might think, feel, and behave quite differently. In addition, our theoretical perspective enables us to understand why high (or low) identifiers might display cognition, affect, and behavior typically associated with low (or high) degrees of identification.

Keywords: organizational identification • identity • identification trajectory temporality • sensemaking

Introduction

Social identity theory suggests there is an important distinction between being a member of a group and identifying with that group (Tajfel and Turner 1986, Haslam and Ellemers 2005). In organizational studies, identification has been conceptualized as the extent to which an organization's essence is perceived by a member as self-defining (Ashforth et al. 2008) or the extent to which one adopts into the self-concept "the same attributes as those in the perceived organizational identity" (Dutton et al. 1994, p. 239). The more an individual identifies with a particular social group, the more he or she perceives a sense of "oneness with or belongingness to some human aggregate" and invokes "us" or "we" language when referring to a group instead of "they" language (Ashforth and Mael 1989, p. 21).

Interestingly, both "inputs" to one's sense of current identification—an individual's self-concept and his or her sense of an organization's identity—have been characterized as dynamic or changeable. At the individual level, the literature on identity work—defined as the individual "forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and distinctiveness" (Alvesson and Willmott 2002, p. 626)—implies that one's self-concept is dynamic and often in flux (e.g., Kuhn 2006, Watson 2008, Kreiner and Murphy 2016, Brown 2017). Furthermore, many studies imply that an organization's identity is likewise dynamic and evolving across time (e.g., Dutton and Dukerich 1991, Elsbach and Kramer 1996, Corley and Gioia 2004, Clegg et al. 2007, Bubenzer 2009). However, despite this recognition of the dynamism of these two inputs to an individual's sense of organizational identification, identification is often characterized as "deeply rooted" and relatively stable and enduring in nature (Ashforth et al. 2008, p. 332). As a result, most studies of organizational identification attempt to measure the current degree of identification in predicting various outcomes (Bergami and Bagozzi 2000, Ashforth et al. 2008). In addition, although various process models of organizational identification have been created (e.g., Dutton et al. 1994; Pratt 1998, 2000; Ashforth 2001; Bartel and Dutton 2001; Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Fiol 2002; Fuller et al. 2006; Ashforth and Schinoff 2016; Sillince and Golant, 2018; cf. Thomas 2009, Brown 2017), they have tended to focus on sensemaking and sensegiving during the initial stages of identification or during singular events over relatively short time frames while ignoring the perceived dynamism of identification over a broader historical sweep of organizational membership. Given this conceptualization of organizational identification in the literature, some scholars have

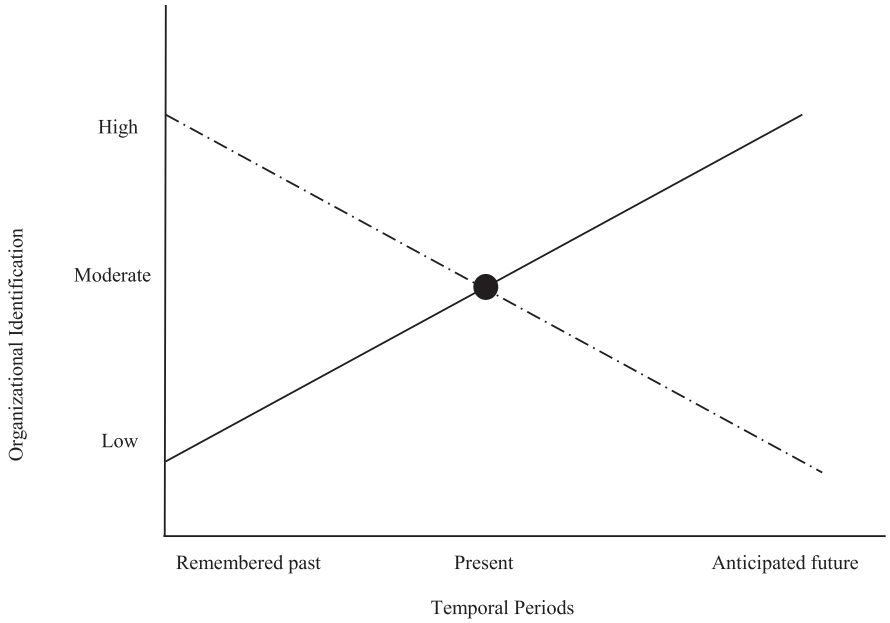
lamented the prevailing focus on "snapshot images" of the currently perceived degree of identification and the lack of theory development focused on the perceived dynamics of identification over broader time horizons (Ashforth et al. 2008, p. 340; see also Demo 1992, Kerpelman et al. 1997, Pratt 1998).

The limits of ignoring the perceived dynamism of identification over a broader sweep of time can be illustrated with a hypothetical example. Consider the experiences of Bill and Helen, two corporate employees of Uber with similar degrees of organizational identification in the present (depicted in Figure 1), who are making sense of the controversial exit of chief executive officer (CEO) and cofounder Travis Kalanick (Isaac and Benner 2017). If we take a snapshot view of the currently perceived degree of identification (i.e., presently perceived overlap), we can conclude that both Bill and Helen have a moderate sense of identification. Our current approach to understanding organizational identification, assuming that identification is relatively stable over time, gives us no reason to anticipate variance in the thoughts, feelings, or actions of Bill and Helen. However, if we acknowledge that identification might be perceived as dynamic over time and stretch our view of Bill and Helen's perceptions to include perceived movement from the past to the present, and anticipated movement into the future, we see that their perceived relationships with Uber are on different trajectories that likely engender a different sense of momentum.[1]

Looking into the past, Bill perceives that he had relatively high identification in his early days with Uber, whereas Helen perceives that she had a relatively rocky start with Uber and fairly low identification. Bill perceives that Uber's actions over time have dampened his sense of identification, whereas Helen perceives that her sense of identification has steadily increased. Furthermore, the exit of Kalanick has reinforced Helen's anticipation that her identification will continue on this positive trajectory as she sees Uber becoming more closely aligned with her core values (e.g., treating others with respect). Conversely, Kalanick's exit has reinforced Bill's anticipation that his identification will continue to decrease, as he sees Uber becoming more "corporate" and less loyal to those who made Uber what it is today. As a result, we argue that although Bill and Helen *both currently identify with Uber to similar degrees, they each perceive different identification trajectories with the organization that are characterized by a very different sense of momentum.* Thus, despite the fact that they both currently identify with Uber to a moderate degree, in Bill's case we would anticipate cognition, affect, and behavior that would traditionally be associated with a low identifier, and in Helen's case we would likely see cognition, affect, and behavior traditionally associated with a high identifier.

How then can we move the conversation beyond its emphasis on snapshot images of the current degree of organizational identification and create an expanded

Figure 1. Example of Perceived Organizational Identification Trajectory for Two Hypothetical Members (Bill and Helen) of the Same Organization



Notes. The black circle indicates Bill and Helen's current level of organizational identification. The dotted-dashed line represents Bill's perceived organizational identification trajectory (a regressive trajectory). The solid line represents Helen's perceived organizational identification trajectory (a progressive trajectory).

understanding of the member–organization relationship? In response to this important question, we extend extant work on the process of identification by considering members' retrospective thinking regarding their past relationship with the organization and members' prospective thinking regarding the future of that relationship. By moving beyond a focus on the initial formation of identification, or how individuals make sense of limited events in the present, we challenge the notion that the current degree of identification will uniformly predict cognition, affect, and behavior. It is important to note that this retrospective and prospective thinking pertains not only to a member's own perceived past and anticipated future but also, as Dutton et al. (1994) called for, to one's perceptions of the *organization's* past and future. We argue that differences in the way members in the present interpret and structure their past experiences with and future expectations of their organizational membership give rise to various identification trajectories—one's current perception of how one's identification has evolved and/or will evolve over time. We assert that the member's identification trajectory captures the perceived convergence and/or divergence over time of his or her self-concept and the organization's identity, and it will have an important influence on his or her cognition, affect, and behavior.

In the following sections, we extend previous research on organizational identification by offering a dynamic view of identification. Specifically, we examine the sensemaking efforts of organizational members and the sensegiving efforts of the organization as members seek to define themselves in relation to their organization, and we explain why members might perceive that the relationship between their self-concept and the identity of the organization is dynamic over time. We then develop theory and formal propositions explaining how differences in the way members interpret the past and anticipate their future with the organization will influence cognition, affect, and behavior. This more nuanced perspective will help explain why two people with the same degree of identification at a point in time might be expected to think, feel, and behave quite differently in the same organization. Furthermore, our theoretical perspective helps us understand why high (or low) identifiers might exhibit cognition, affect, and behavior typically associated with low (or high) degrees of identification.

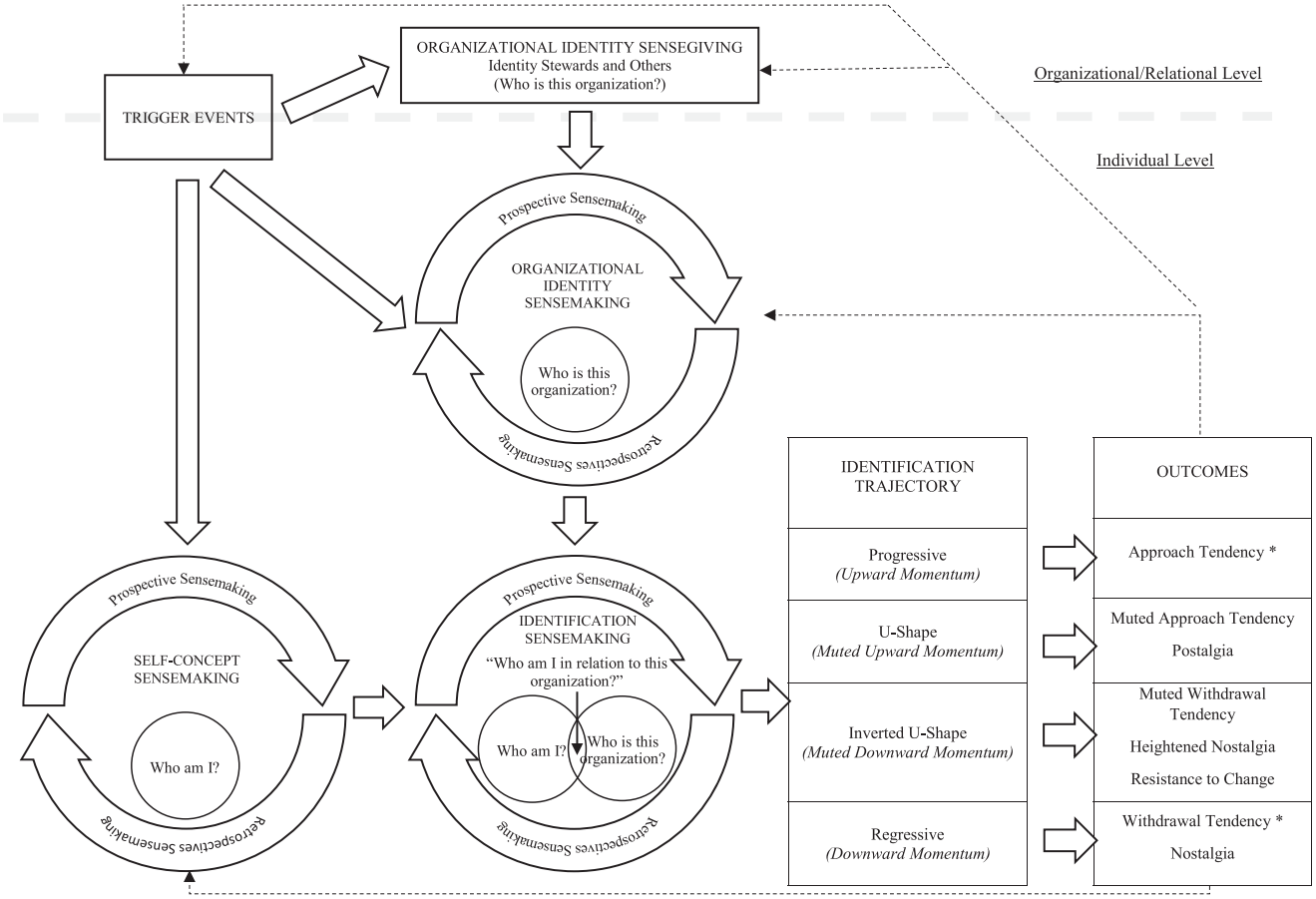
A Dynamic Sensemaking View of Organizational Identification

To begin, it is important to outline our theoretical assumptions about organizational identification and illustrate why a dynamic view may further our understanding of this critical construct. First, organizational identification is generally defined (and measured) as the currently perceived overlap between the self-concept of a focal member and the organization's identity (Dutton et al. 1994, Bergami and Bagozzi 2000). The area of overlap between the two identities captures the sense of oneness the member feels with their organization and, as noted previously, is predictive of important cognition, affect, and behavior in organizations. However, if we assume that a member perceives change in his or her degree of organizational identification from past to present and perceives that his or her relationship with the organization will continue to evolve from present to future, simply measuring current degrees of overlap between the member's self-concept and the perceived organizational identity fails to capture this perceived movement of the member's relationship with the organization over time. Thus, we believe there is great value in moving beyond a snapshot view of current identification to a deeper understanding of the dynamism perceived by the member in his or her relationship with the organization. In other words, we hope to be able to supplement our understanding of where a member's sense of identification is "at" by also understanding the member's sense of where it has been and where it is going.

We offer a view of organizational identification that focuses on the sensemaking efforts of members as they seek to understand and (re)define their relationship with their organization. Sensemaking has been defined as "individuals engaging in retrospective and prospective thinking in order to construct an interpretation of reality" (Sonenshein 2010, p. 479). This sensemaking includes retrospective thinking, or looking to the past to make sense of that which has occurred (Weick 1995, Weick et al. 2005), and prospective thinking, or seeking to anticipate and make sense of the probable future (Gioia et al. 1994, Maitlis and Christianson 2014). We argue that these two types of sensemaking (retrospective and prospective thinking) are critical in the ongoing accomplishment of making sense of the relationship between one's evolving self and one's evolving organization (cf. Dutton et al. 1994, Pratt 2000, Alvesson and Willmott 2002, Fiol 2002, Ashforth and Schinoff 2016).

In this ongoing sensemaking process, members must engage in retrospective and prospective thinking about the following questions: (1) "Who am I?" (2) "Who is this organization?" (3) "Who am I in relation to this organization?" (See Figure 2.) This sensemaking process involves the creation of a narrative of one's relationship with an organization. This narrative interprets and orders disparate experiences over time in a way that defines and explains the relationship of one's self-concept to the organization's identity (Kondo 1990, Humphreys and Brown 2002; cf. Boje 1991, Maitlis 2005, Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010, Sonenshein 2010).

Figure 2. A Dynamic Sensemaking View of Organizational Identification



*For examples of specific cognition, affect, and behaviors, see Table 1.

Unlike the current level of identification, characterized by the area of overlap between the member's self-concept and the organization's identity, a member's narrative of his or her identification at least implicitly encompasses a temporal view and is characterized by a sense of momentum from the past into the future that we theorize has critical implications for cognition, affect, and behavior. We begin by examining the two critical inputs to a member's sense of identification—the member's own self-concept and his or her perceptions of the organization's identity—and examine why each might be perceived as evolving across time. We then highlight how differences in the perceived trajectory of members' identification with the organization over time engenders a sense of momentum that may produce different patterns of cognition, affect, and behavior, which may not be predicted by their current degree of identification.

Who Am I? Dynamic Perceptions of the Self

Critical to the process of organizational identification is sensemaking about one's own self that gives rise to a cognitive meaning structure called the self-concept: "The totality of an individual's thoughts and feelings having reference to himself [or herself] as an object" (Rosenberg 1979, p. 7). The self-concept captures the overarching answers to the present tense question *Who am I*? but the self-concept is infused with a sense of significance and purpose when an individual looks to the past and perceives progress and looks to the future and perceives desirable and meaningful goals within reach down the road. Thus, the end goal in sensemaking about the self is not merely "a matter of feeling that one's life has meaning . . . but also as a matter of *cultivating higher degrees* of richness, complexity, or integration in that meaning" (Bauer et al. 2008, p. 83, italics added; see also Roberts et al. 2005). In other words, individuals in the present crave the sensation that they are becoming someone better over time. This suggests that sensemaking about the self to answer the "Who am I?" question is not just about content (i.e., "What are my defining attributes?") but also about course (i.e., "Where have I been and who am I seeking to become?"). It also suggests that one's

present perceptions of the self cannot be fully understood without also understanding the broader sweep of one's retrospective sensemaking about the past ("Who have I been?") as well as one's prospective sensemaking about the future ("Who am I becoming?"; McAdams 1988, Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010, Sonenshein 2010, Maitlis and Christianson 2014). As a result, scholars are increasingly viewing the self-concept through the lens of self-narratives, which help individuals bind their disparate experiences and anticipated futures into a meaningful whole (Gergen and Gergen 1986, McAdams 2001).

Because the self-concept is one of the two critical inputs to one's current degree of organizational identification (the other being the perceived identity of the organization), changes in the way one looks back on the self and anticipates the self in the future are likely to influence one's sense of identification as the member's self-concept may be seen as becoming more aligned or less aligned with the perceived identity of the organization. There are a number of trigger events that may lead to sensemaking that changes the way a member looks back on the self and anticipates the self in the future. As Morgeson et al. (2015, p. 515) argue, "[E]vents become salient when they are novel, disruptive, and critical." Given the multifaceted nature of the self-concept (Ramarajan 2014, Ramarajan et al. 2017), novel, disruptive, and critical events can prompt sensemaking that leads to the adoption, disposal, or disturbance of various identities in the self-concept. For example, Christian Picciolini found that positive interactions with minorities challenged his core ideology as a white supremacist and made it increasingly difficult to justify his relationship with a hate organization called Chicago Area Skinheads (Pashman 2017). His evolving view of his own self, spurred by life events such as having a child, ultimately resulted in him ending his membership with the organization as his sense of self and his perception of the organization's identity became less aligned. As another example, following the 9/11 terrorist attacks in the United States, lawyers born in New York exhibited a greater propensity than lawyers born elsewhere to exit their firms to pursue work that they perceived as more meaningful, likely because they began to question whether their current organization was providing—or would be able to provide—meaningful experiences through work (Carnahan et al. 2017). Thus, events can upset the self-concept and prompt sensemaking that changes the perceived relationship between the member and their organization.

Sometimes events can trigger sensemaking about the self-concept, and influence the way individuals identify with an organization, because they prompt new forms of introspection and social comparison. For instance, if members are triggered to engage in retrospective sensemaking and compare their current life course to that of peers, family members, or others who have taken alternative life paths, it may cause their current position or rate of progress to seem more or less desirable, thus affecting their sense of identification with their current organization. In addition, being triggered to consider what Obodaru (2012, p. 34) called "alternative selves" or "selves not taken"—that is, "self-redefining counterfactuals that are part of the self-concept"—might further shape members' sense of identification. For example, in 1993, following the death of his father, basketball icon Michael Jordan left the Chicago Bulls at the height of his career to become a professional baseball player because he had lost his "sense of motivation and the sense to prove something as a basketball player" (Neyer 2017). Becoming a professional baseball player was an alternative self that Jordan and his father had often talked about. Thus, events can prompt introspection and social comparisons that change the way a member looks back on the self and anticipates the self in the future, leading to changes in the member's identification with their focal organization.

Whereas some changes in the way we look at our past or future self may be triggered by disruptive external events, other trigger events may arise more naturally due to aging or maturation. For example, as individuals come closer to retirement, they may be prompted to see their past or future self differently in relation to the present, and such changes may have implications for how individuals view their relationship with their employing organization (e.g., Erikson 1968, Levinson 1978). Such individuals might increasingly seek to create or do something of lasting value, and they may come to see opportunities to mentor more junior employees as important to their self-concept and identify more strongly with their organization because it encourages such activities (cf. Perry et al. 2012). Such trigger events as a result of natural maturation or aging contribute to the perceived dynamism of the self.

In sum, a variety of trigger events may prompt retrospective and prospective sensemaking that changes a member's self-views, and this dynamism of the self-concept shapes a member's relationship with his or her organization. When the self-concept changes so that it is perceived to be more aligned with the identity of the organization, organizational identification is likely to increase; when the self-concept changes so that it is perceived to be less aligned, identification is likely to decrease. Thus, the dynamism of the self-concept shapes a member's sense of identification in important ways.

Who Is This Organization? Dynamic Perceptions of the Organization's Identity

The second critical input to members' current degree of organizational identification is their perception of

the organization's identity, or their answer to the question *Who is this organization*? This critical question gets at the organization's essence or soul (Ashforth and Mael 1996) and cannot be fully answered without members engaging in retrospective sensemaking about the organization's past and prospective sensemaking about its future. As noted by historian David Carr, "The present gets its sense from the background of comparable events to which it belongs" (Seaman and Smith, 2012, p. 46) and, we would add, the anticipated future to which it is leading. Like a member's sense of self, the way a member looks back on the organization's past and anticipates the organization's future can change, and these evolving perceptions have important implications for the member's sense of identification as he or she views the organization's identity as becoming more or less aligned with his or her self-concept (Foreman and Whetten 2002, Bubenzer 2009).

Like the self-concept, trigger events can change the way a member perceives the organization's identity. As Morgeson et al. (2015) argue, events can commence within or beyond the organization's boundaries and are often nonroutine in nature, breaking established routines and moving members beyond normal patterns of automatic cognitive processing. As noted earlier, they also become most salient when they are novel, disruptive, and critical. Such events might include mergers, bankruptcies, leadership changes, new strategic visions, or revelations about unknown aspects of the organization's past. For example, employees at Wells Fargo who held a positive view of the organization's past and future likely had to make sense of where the organization had been and where it was headed as the recent ethical scandal rocked their confidence in the organization's vision statement: "Our vision has nothing to do with transactions, pushing products or getting bigger for the sake of bigness. It's about building lifelong relationships one customer at a time" (Warner 2017). As one employee commented, "It's beyond embarrassing to admit I am a current employee these days. My family and friends think I'm a fraud for working at Wells" (Egan 2016). Thus, like an individual's perceptions of the self, an individual's view of the organization and its identity is also subject to change over time as the individual establishes and updates his or her sense of the organization's past and its anticipated future (e.g., Chreim 2005, Schultz and Hernes 2013). Thus, when a member perceives that the organization's identity is becoming less aligned with his or her own self-concept, identification is likely to decrease. By contrast, when a member perceives that the organization's identity is becoming more aligned with his or her self-concept, identification is likely to increase (Foreman and Whetten 2002, Bubenzer 2009). For example, an employee at New Relic, who is passionate about helping women get into the tech industry, found that his company was highly supportive of his request to sponsor an introductory coding class for women. He stated, "I'm proud that my coding community cares enough to organize this event, and I'm even prouder that my company is sponsoring. *I love working at New Relic* because of things like this, and because I get to do great work with great people" (Miller 2012, emphasis in original). The organization's support of the issues he was passionate about likely helped fuel the perception that the organization was becoming increasingly aligned with his self-concept. Thus, dynamic perceptions of the organization's identity have important implications for a member's sense of identification.

Organizational Identity Sensegiving. As members continually make sense of their organization's identity, and as they navigate certain trigger events, the organization engages in sensegiving efforts that seek to shape the way members look back on the organization's past and anticipate its future. Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991, p. 442) define *sensegiving* as "the process of attempting to influence the sensemaking and meaning construction of others toward a preferred [definition or] redefinition of organizational reality." Research on sensegiving in organizations has, not surprisingly, tended to focus on leaders, especially CEOs (e.g., Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991, Bartunek et al. 1999, Maitlis and Lawrence 2007). We refer to these formally sanctioned individuals who act on behalf of the organization to create and promote a positive view of its identity as organizational *identity stewards* (e.g., executives, managers, human resources (HR), public relations specialists) (cf. Howard-Grenville et al. 2013; see also Davis et al. 1997, Humphreys and Brown 2002, Hernandez 2012, Kreiner and Murphy 2016). Identity stewards help members in the present to understand the central, distinctive, and somewhat continuous and desirable characteristics of the organization by drawing on the past and the anticipated future (Albert and Whetten 1985, Brown 2006, Schultz and Hernes 2013, Vaara et al. 2016, Zundel et al. 2016). In short, identity stewards aid individual members as they attempt to answer "Who is this organization?" For example, Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) describe how a CEO conveyed his strategic vision of his organization becoming a top 10 public university. After announcing this vision, the CEO met frequently with stakeholders to espouse the vision and explain key initiatives, and he selectively restructured programs and invested resources: "Rather than making sense of an ambiguous situation for himself, he was now in a mode of making sense for others, i.e. of supplying a workable interpretation to those who would be affected by his actions" (Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991, p. 443).

Because organizational members have not usually experienced identity-relevant events that happened prior to their organizational entry, identity stewards often try to shape their retrospective sensemaking about the organization's identity through various forms of sensegiving we call *memory work*. In some cases, identity stewards help members associate with or "remember" aspects of the past that they believe will help foster a sense of identification and community and communicate the organization's identity (e.g., Schwartz 1996, Olick and Robbins 1998, Erll et al. 2008, Anteby and Molnár 2012, Langenmayr 2016, Suddaby et al. 2016). For example, after the death of Steve Jobs in 2011, a blogger following Apple noticed that

> Apple is continuing to infuse the legacy of its cofounder and former CEO Steve Jobs with photo posters and quotes around the Cupertino, Calif.-headquarters. The photos of Jobs range from the early days of the Mac to more recent product introductions, and they are simply motivational and powerful. (Gurman 2012)

In addition, Apple continues to maintain Jobs' office six years after his death (Grossman 2016). Such physical and textual resources, coupled with communicative and commemorative activities, are the lifeblood of social remembering and foster identification in the present as individuals perceive a particular aspect of the past as reflecting positively on the organization and its members (Sandelands 2003).

In other cases, identity stewards may attempt to shape members' retrospective sensemaking about the organization's identity by disassociating the organization from or "forgetting" unwanted aspects of its past (e.g., Brunninge 2009, Anteby and Molnár 2012, Langenmayr 2016). For example, when an organization experiences a damaging or tarnishing event, it is common to hear of organizations deleting online communications (e.g., tweets) from public display, firing key individuals, and removing artifacts that support associations between the identity of the organization and the controversial person or event (e.g., Rittenberg 2011, Anteby and Molnár 2012, Van Natta 2012). In one case, after the release of a grand jury report alleging sexual abuse of minors by former assistant coach Jerry Sandusky, iconic college football coach Joe Paterno was fired by Penn State after nearly 46 seasons, and his name was stripped from the Stagg-Paterno Trophy given to the Big Ten Conference champion (Rittenberg 2011). Six months after his death, his university also took down a bronze statue of his likeness outside the football stadium (Van Natta 2012). In other cases, organizations may want to dissociate from their past in order to change the nature of their identity. For example, when entrepreneur Josh James bought Corda Technologies in 2011, he held a "funeral" for the old name and rebranded the organization Domo Technologies, with a changed emphasis on cloud technologies (Hesseldahl 2011). These acts of dissociative memory work send powerful messages to members that help them answer the question, "Who is this organization?"

Identity stewards also attempt to shape a member's prospective sensemaking about the organization's identity. Through a form of sensegiving we call *prospective identity work*, identity stewards often try to frame decisions, actions, and events as movement toward a more positive future. For example, identity stewards often frame current moments of struggle or future uncertainty as moments of reinvention, rebirth, and/or overcoming challenges (cf. Ravasi and Schultz 2006, Gioia et al. 2013). When Sports Authority announced it was filing for bankruptcy, CEO Michael Foss said publicly,

> We are taking this action so that we can continue to adapt our business to meet the changing dynamics in the retail industry. We intend to use the Chapter 11 process to streamline and strengthen our business both operationally and financially so that we have the financial flexibility to continue to make necessary investments in our operations. (Church and Klein 2016)

Note how filing for bankruptcy is portrayed as a necessary adaptation to "streamline," "strengthen," and increase organizational "flexibility" in the future. However, months later, the organization was bought out by liquidators and quickly went out of business, causing anger and bitterness among employees and highlighting the need for sensegiving efforts to be accompanied by consistent actions in order to be perceived as authentic and facilitate lasting organizational identification (McCoy 2016). In addition, the episode highlights the potential need for members to update their relationship with the organization as new identity claims are made and organizational actions provide further insight about its identity.

Other Sources of Sensegiving. Identity stewards may not be the only stakeholders influencing the way that a member makes sense of the "Who is this organization?" question. Other members of the organization both formally and informally connected to a focal member may also intentionally or unintentionally engage in memory work and prospective identity work that influences the way the member makes sense of the organization's identity. These individuals are likely to influence the focal member's views as they share perspectives, interpretations, and opinions related to the organization (cf. Ibarra and Andrews 1993). For example, Nike has an informal group of young employees who frequently discuss with each other how to maintain the greatness from Nike's past

and preserve Nike's upward momentum into the future (Knight 2016). Although not formal identity stewards, such individuals are likely to be highly influential in how other organizational members answer the question, "Who is this organization?" In many cases, these individuals and other stakeholders will complement the way identity stewards are seeking to help members make sense of members' views of their organization's ongoing story.

However, because organizations are often complex, dynamic, and equivocal, with many members and stakeholders holding divergent perspectives and interests, alternative views of the organization's identity are likely to emerge that may not be supportive of the sensegiving attempts made by the organization's identity stewards (e.g., Humphreys and Brown 2002, Dawson and Buchanan 2005). As a result, members may find that there are other individuals internal or external to the organization besides the formal identity stewards who promote various versions of the organization's identity. For example, Bob Ortega, a journalist who had covered Walmart for the *Wall Street Journal*, published a book titled *In Sam We Trust: The Untold Story of Sam Walton and How Wal-Mart Is Devouring the World*. Ortega's (1998) view of Walmart's essence is quite different from the story espoused by Walmart itself and has the potential to influence members as they make sense of the organization's identity. This suggests that exposure to differing or supporting perspectives from credible others (where credibility is affected by trust, expertise, and liking; see Fisher et al. 1979, Dutton and Ashford 1993) also provides an important source of sensegiving about the organization's identity over time. Thus, as organizational members answer "Who is this organization?" they are likely to be influenced by identity stewards as well as other organizational stakeholders.

Accounting for Dynamic Organizational Identification: Identification Trajectories

Like previous conceptions of organizational identification, we assume that a member's self-concept and their perceptions of the organization's identity are important to sensemaking related to identification. However, we also assume that a members' self-concept and perceptions are shaped by the way he or she looks back on the past and anticipates the future. Changes in the way a member looks backward and forward lead to dynamic views of the self and the organization's identity, and this dynamism is likely to create change in the way the member identifies with the organization. Because the present is always a fulcrum for interpreting the past and anticipating the future (Shipp and Jansen 2011), certain events in the past may be reinterpreted and expectations of the future may evolve in light of new insights in the present, making a member's previous degree of identification in the past potentially less relevant or misleading.

As outlined above, the perceived dynamism of identification over time can be a function of (1) perceiving the self-concept moving toward or away from the organization and/or (2) perceiving the organization moving toward or away from the self. Members who currently look back on their history with the organization and perceive an increasing (decreasing) sense of identification from past to present demonstrate positive (negative) retrospection. Members who currently look to their future with the organization and perceive the potential for increasing (decreasing) identification from the present into the future demonstrate positive (negative) prospection. As can be seen in Table 1 and as illustrated in Figure 3, different patterns of retrospective and prospective sensemaking about one's identification with an organization give rise to perceived *identification trajectories*. *Merriam-Webster* defines a "trajectory" as "a path, progression, or line of development."[2] We thus define identification trajectory as one's current perception of how one's identification has evolved and/or will evolve over time (cf. job satisfaction trajectory in Liu et al. 2012 and authenticity progression in Seto and Schlegel 2018). For organizational members, different identification trajectories will tend to create different perceptions of upward or downward momentum—a sense of motion that is expected to continue into the future.

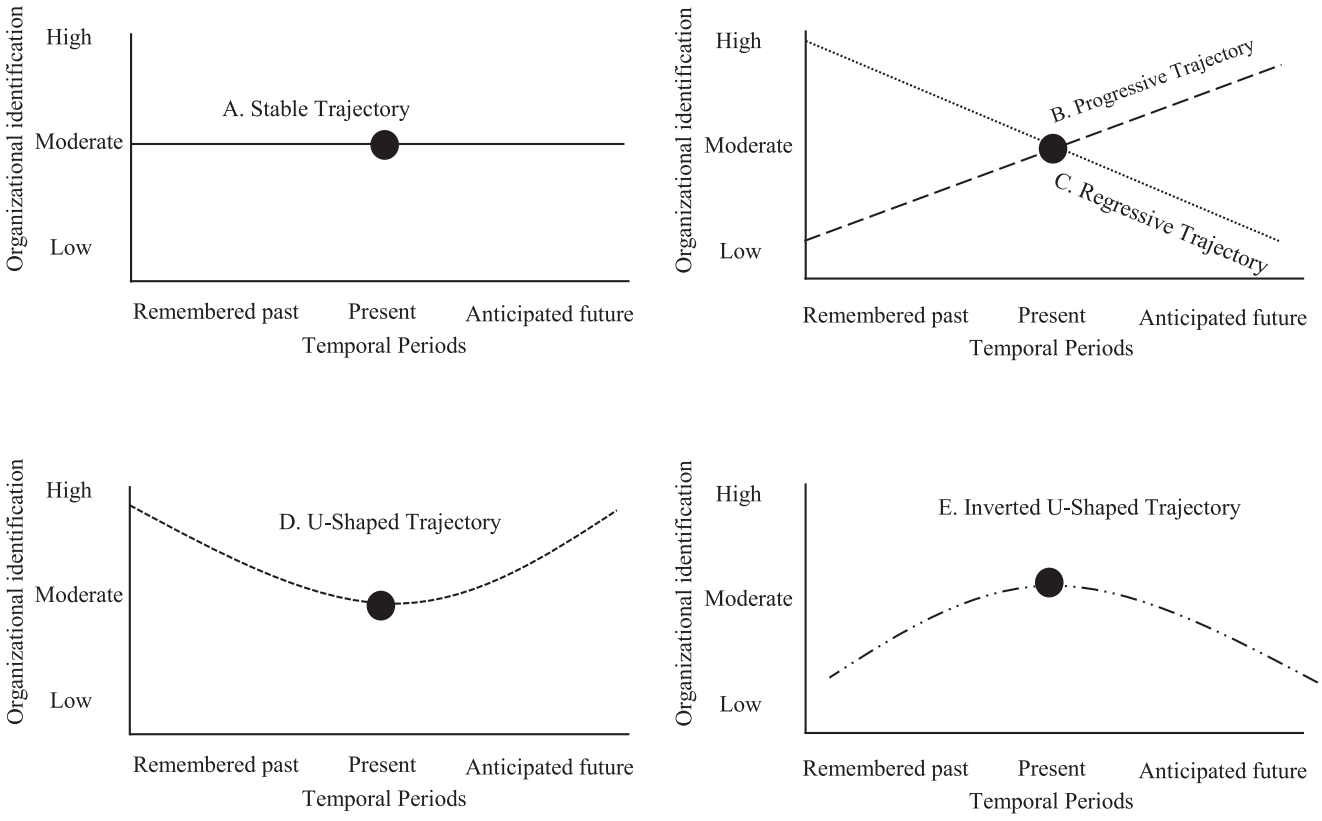
The sense of momentum of a member's identification trajectory produces different action tendencies that shape cognition, affect, and behavior in the present. Research in psychology suggests that "behavior is built from two distinct kinds of action tendencies," often referred to as "approach and avoidance (or withdrawal)" (Carver 2006, p. 105). We posit that when members perceive that their trajectory has upward momentum into the future, the action tendency will be toward approach. When members perceive that their trajectory has downward momentum into the future, the action tendency will be toward withdrawal. However, a member's sense of momentum is also likely to be influenced by their retrospective thinking about the past. For example, a member might perceive that his or her trajectory has a downward sense of momentum into the future, but this sense of momentum may be tempered by a sense of progress that occurred in the past (or vice versa). Different patterns of retrospective thinking and prospective thinking illuminate four prototypical trajectories (i.e., progressive, regressive, U-shaped, and inverted U-shaped) that we suggest below have important implications for cognition, affect, and behavior (see Table 1 and Figure 3).

Table 1. A Typology of Prototypical Identification Trajectories

	Positive prospection	Negative prospection
Positive retrospection	*Progressive trajectory* Sense of momentum • Upward Outcomes • Approach action tendency (e.g., happiness, committing, engaging)	*Inverted U-shaped trajectory* Sense of momentum • Muted downward Outcomes • Muted withdrawal action tendency (e.g., muted unhappiness, decommitting, disengaging, turnover cognitions) • Heightened nostalgia • Resistance to change
Negative retrospection	*U-shaped trajectory* Sense of momentum • Muted upward Outcomes • Muted approach action tendency (e.g., muted happiness, committing, engaging) • Postalgia	*Regressive trajectory* Sense of momentum • Downward Outcomes • Withdrawal action tendency (e.g., unhappiness, decommitting, disengaging, turnover cognitions) • Nostalgia

It is important to note that our arguments cut across degrees of identification. An argument based on current degrees of identification would likely predict that members with higher degrees would have more of an approach tendency toward the organization, whereas members with lower degrees would have more of a withdrawal tendency. However, our theorizing suggests that trajectories with different types of perceived momentum—upward versus downward—may create an approach tendency among those even with low degrees of identification and a withdrawal tendency among those even with high degrees of identification. This aligns with Kahneman's (1999, p. 17) argument that "quite different states can be assigned approximately the same utility if they represent the same change relative to the reference level." As such,

Figure 3. Visual Representations of the Prototypical Identification Trajectories



Note. The black circle indicates the current level of organizational identification.

we argue that the withdrawal action tendency associated with a sense of downward momentum and the approach action tendency associated with a sense of upward momentum are likely to cue certain cognitions, affects, and behaviors across current degrees of identification. It is also important to note that the four prototypical trajectories we highlight below can take on an infinite number of shapes as a result of varying "slopes" of past perceptions and future anticipation. Thus, these four general forms can be manifested in a variety of ways. Although these are presented as somewhat "smooth" trajectories, we will also discuss the impact of volatility below.

Progressive Identification Trajectory. When members perceive that the overlap between the identity of the organization and their own self-concept has increased over time, and they have an expectation that this trend will continue into the future, they perceive a progressive identification trajectory. Although the particular slope of the progressive trajectory can vary and be nonlinear, essentially the plotline of the narrative is "my relationship with this organization has improved and is expected to continue improving across time" (cf. adaptive identity development in Dutton et al. 2010 and "learning to love" onboarding scenario in Solinger et al. 2013). This is a trajectory of increasing identification with the organization that, following Solinger et al. (2013), often appears to move through the overlapping processes or phases of accommodation, inclusion, and internalization. Members with this type of trajectory perceive that at organizational entry they had lower degrees of identification, but through a period of accommodation, they altered and adapted to the context, and some beliefs, values, behaviors, and so forth evolved to align with the organization (Bauer et al. 1998). Then, through a period of inclusion, they began to feel integrated in the organization's social networks (Morrison 2002) and gained a sense of social validation (Smith et al. 2013). Finally, through a period of internalization, the company's identity became increasingly adopted into the self (Ashforth and Schinoff 2016). Across time, members perceive that the overlap between their self-concept and the organization's identity has increased and will continue to increase.

We posit that when members sense they are on a progressive trajectory from past to present and anticipate upward momentum into the future, they will experience an approach action tendency toward the organization characterized by positive cognition, affect, and behavior. We hypothesize that the sense of upward momentum that typifies a progressive trajectory will fuel a sense of happiness—"the belief that one is getting the important things one wants, as well as certain pleasant affects that normally go along with this belief" (Kraut 1979, p. 178; see Fisher 2010 for a discussion of happiness at work). Sources of disappointment may seem less problematic in view of the growing regard and hope for the organization and turnover cognitions are likely to decrease (Nelissen 2017). As such, commitment, defined as "a volitional psychological bond reflecting dedication to and responsibility for a particular target" (Klein et al. 2012, p. 137), is likely to increase. On the basis of Kahn's (1990) foundational definition of personal engagement—the harnessing of a member's self to his or her work role—we further posit that members who are currently experiencing a progressive trajectory are likely to exhibit increased engagement because the work role is one of the primary means through which members contribute to the organization's goals (Rich et al. 2010). Hence, we propose the following:

Proposition 1. *A member with a progressive trajectory will experience a sense of upward momentum and exhibit an approach action tendency (e.g., happiness, committing, engaging).*

Regressive Identification Trajectory. Conversely, perceiving that one's identification has decreased over time, and expecting this decline to continue in the future, represents a regressive identification trajectory. As with a progressive trajectory, a range of conceivable slopes exist, but essentially, the plotline is "my relationship with this organization has deteriorated and is expected to continue deteriorating in the future." A member narrating this kind of relationship perceives that a better past has given way to a worse present, which will in turn give way to a worse future. For example, socialization research suggests that members often experience a "honeymoon hangover" (Boswell et al. 2005, 2009; Solinger et al. 2013) wherein their initially strong bond with the organization declines as they encounter difficult or disappointing experiences (e.g., declining supervisor support; Jokisaari and Nurmi 2009).

In contrast to the progressive identification trajectory, we argue that when the organization and the member are perceived to have moved away from each other over time, and are expected to continue moving away from each other into the future, the action tendency will be toward withdrawal. Members with this kind of trajectory likely experience a sense of downward momentum and define their relationship with the organization through experiences that engender distance, dissatisfaction, and doubt about the relationship's future. As the relationship between the member and the organization is perceived to have declined, and is expected to continue declining, the member is likely to experience increasing unhappiness.[3]

Another likely outcome of the perceived loss of a better past is organizational nostalgia (Gabriel 1993). *Merriam-Webster* defines nostalgia as the "pleasure and sadness that is caused by remembering something from the past and wishing that you could experience it again."[4] Abeyta et al. (2015, p. 1029) similarly note that nostalgia involves a sense of "loss and the desire to relive or return to the past." Nostalgia plays a critical role in sustaining the self—especially when the self and its well-being are threatened in the present (Gabriel 1993, Routledge et al. 2011). Thus, we argue that when one's sense of identification with an organization is perceived as having regressed and likely to regress even more in the future, one will experience organizational nostalgia—a yearning for the organization's past when one's relationship with the organization was better (cf. Ybema 2004, Wildschut et al. 2006).

Bock (2015) observed this phenomenon at Google, where experienced Googlers longed for Google's past (i.e., what it was like in their first few months at Google) and saw the organization as losing its appeal as a fun and distinctive place to work. This heightening unhappiness may also fuel declining commitment and other forms of withdrawal such as increased thoughts about turnover. Members may also feel a declining sense of engagement, given that the ability to invest the whole self in the organization and its work roles has been compromised (Kahn 1990). Not surprisingly, the longer the downward trend is expected to continue, the more pronounced these effects tend to become, and the greater the likelihood the member will exit the organization. Thus, we posit the following:

Proposition 2. *A member with a regressive trajectory will experience a sense of downward momentum and nostalgia and exhibit a withdrawal action tendency (e.g., unhappiness, decommitting, disengaging, turnover cognitions).*

U-Shaped Identification Trajectory. The U-shaped trajectory includes a period of perceived regression punctuated by a current moment that is giving way to a progressive view of the future. Essentially, the plotline of a U-shaped identification trajectory is "My relationship with this organization has been declining but I anticipate it will improve." This type of trajectory is "postalgic": "with hope and desire projecting the future as the perfected antipode of an imperfect [past and] present" (Ybema 2004, p. 832). This type of identification trajectory tends to have a redemptive quality involving "a transformation from a bad, affectively negative life scene to a subsequent good, affectively positive life scene" (McAdams et al. 2001, p. 474). For example, Fiol (2002) describes how organizational change at a high-tech firm was associated with "deidentification," as members' ties with the firm's outgoing identity were loosened, and subsequent "reidentification," as ties were built with the firm's revamped identity (see also Empson 2004, Gioia et al. 2013). As Fiol's (2002) study suggests, the dramatic change involved in a U-shaped identification trajectory is typically precipitated by a salient trigger event or the anticipation of an event that is novel, disruptive, and critical (Morgeson et al. 2015).

Whereas a U-shaped trajectory is defined in part by a sense of upward momentum into the future, we theorize that the negative perceptions of the experienced past serve as a moderating influence on the outcomes outlined above for progressive trajectories. The shape of the U (i.e., the slope change from negative to positive) suggests a contrast effect wherein "past experiences serve as standards for comparison in determining reactions to present experiences" and the anticipation of the future (Zhao et al. 2016, p. 1731; see also Markman and McMullen 2003, Ybema, 2010, Shipp and Jansen 2011). In this case, the very negativity of the regressive trajectory experienced in the past partly fuels the perceived positivity of the progressive reversal that is anticipated. However, following the adage "Once burned, twice shy" (e.g., Strahilevitz et al. 2011), and drawing on the conclusion of Baumeister et al. (2001, p. 323) that "bad is stronger than good,"[5] the fact that the member has experienced the previous period of regression will tend to dampen his or her happiness compared with someone with a progressive trajectory, and it will likely make him or her more cautious in their approach toward the organization. As Ybema (2004, p. 833) puts it, "Postalgia is not just an optimistic belief in a better world to come. It is… a desire that is accompanied by anxious doubts whether this future will come true." In sum, we propose the following:

Proposition 3. *Compared with members with progressive trajectories, members with U-shaped trajectories will experience a muted sense of upward momentum, as well as postalgia, and exhibit muted approach action tendencies (e.g., muted happiness, committing, engaging).*

However, if the expected progression gives way to actual perceived progression, members are likely to feel a greater sense of confidence engaging the self in the organization. This experienced redemption may give the member more confidence in the relationship's resilience. Returning to Fiol's (2002, p. 662) study of a high-tech firm, as members experienced success with the firm's revamped identity, they expressed an attitude of "We are all in this together."

Inverted U-Shaped Identification Trajectory. In contrast to the U-shaped trajectory, an inverted U shape includes a period of perceived upward momentum

coupled with the expectation of downward momentum into the future. The plotline of this narrative is essentially "My relationship with this organization has improved but I anticipate it will decline." The inverted U-shaped trajectory differs from the regressive trajectory in that the expectation of regression has been preceded by a period of experienced progression. For example, in 2011, while working as a special assistant for the Los Angeles Lakers, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (who was a revered Hall of Fame player for the Lakers) spoke to the press about his increasingly "fractured" relationship with the organization and the growing sense that the organization no longer valued his presence (Medina 2011). McAdams (1993, p. 145) describes such turning points as "contamination" sequences, where a "good and positive past" hinges toward a negative future, causing a "fall from grace" or a "turn for the worse." As in the U-shaped trajectory, the shift of slope in the inverted U is usually precipitated by a salient trigger event or the anticipation of such an event.

Also like the U-shaped trajectory, the inverted U is defined by the contrast between the narrated past (in this case, progression) and the anticipated future (regression). This contrast tends to moderate the outcomes of a traditional regressive trajectory. On one hand, the experienced progression from the past enhances the perceived negativity of the anticipated regression in the future, heightening the sense of loss and nostalgia. Such feelings can lead to resistance whereby members of the "old guard" protest the actions of members of the "new guard." As Ybema (2004, p. 830) notes, "Nostalgia not only takes us back to the atmosphere of bygone days, away from the present, so to speak, but, at the same time, indirectly criticizes that selfsame present through recalling the past." This resistance to the changes that are causing the progressive relationship to reverse will likely result in greater conflict between the member and organization (e.g., Ullrich et al. 2005). On the other hand, similar to the logic of the U-shaped trajectory, we argue that despite the heightened nostalgia of the inverted U, the fact that one has experienced the previous period of progression is likely to encourage stronger resistance and yet less extreme withdrawal from the organization compared with the traditional regressive identification trajectory. The progressive past encourages the individual to believe in the possibility of arresting the anticipated regression.

Proposition 4. *Compared with members with regressive trajectories, members with an inverted U-shaped trajectory will experience a muted sense of downward momentum, heightened nostalgia, resistance to change, and muted withdrawal action tendencies (e.g., muted unhappiness, decommiting, disengaging, turnover cognitions).*

However, we return to the robust finding of Baumeister et al. (2001) that "bad is stronger than good." Because negative events are more likely to have a larger impact than positive events, we posit that the dampening effect of the previous period of progression will quickly weaken *if* anticipated regression is actually experienced, and the member may rapidly quit resisting and begin withdrawing as he or she perceives a sense of downward momentum into the future (cf. Carlsen and Pitsis 2009). For example, Petriglieri (2015, p. 528) describes how some BP executives, in the wake of the infamous Gulf of Mexico oil rig explosion and subsequent oil spill, lost faith in their company's identity "as a beacon of technical excellence and environmental consciousness" and deidentified with BP.

The Role of Volatility. Although most members will experience some volatility in their relationship with an organization, they will tend to engage in "narrative smoothing" (cf. Spence 1986) to construct a more parsimonious plotline, portraying the relationship with the organization as simpler or less messy than it really was and may yet be. However, in some instances volatility may become a defining characteristic of the way the member narrates his or her relationship with the organization over time. As the relational volatility associated with multiple inflections (i.e., multiple ups and downs) continues and is expected to continue over time, it is likely to take a toll on members' relationship with the organization and make them even more volatile in their reactions to organizational actions. For example, uncertainty associated with ups and downs in an interpersonal relationship causes individuals to become more reactive and sensitive to interactions with the other party (Arriaga 2001). This heightened reactivity places greater strain on the relationship, dampening trust, satisfaction, commitment, and experienced closeness (Arriaga 2001). Analogously, although members may recognize positive actions by the organization, the experience of multiple ups and downs may cause them to hesitate in projecting these positive moments into the future (Arriaga et al. 2006). In extreme cases where members experience numerous traumatic and negative events, declining trust in the organization is likely to give way to outright cynicism regarding the organization. As members become cynical, they are likely to adopt a negative attitude that involves "a belief that the organization lacks integrity" and a general "negative affect towards the organization" (Dean et al. 1998, p. 345). In addition, research suggests that individuals who experience greater volatility in an interpersonal relationship are more likely to eventually terminate the relationship, independent of the underlying trend of the experienced satisfaction with the relationship (Arriaga 2001). In short, the greater uncertainty associated with ups and downs in

a volatile trajectory, regardless of the underlying trend of the trajectory, makes it more difficult for the individual to remain as committed and engaged, and it may even give way to more negative outcomes such as cynicism and actual turnover. Thus, we have the following:

Proposition 5. *Members who perceive greater volatility in their relationship with the organization will exhibit greater distrust and cynicism, as well as greater withdrawal action tendencies (e.g., heightened unhappiness, decommitting, disengaging, turnover cognitions).*

Identification Spirals. Members' retrospective and prospective sensemaking related to their current relationship with the organization creates an identification trajectory with a characteristic sense of momentum that produces an approach or withdrawal action tendency. The cognition, affect, and behavior stemming from the particular action tendency are likely to *reinforce* the trajectory members perceive they are on, thereby creating a feedback loop (see Figure 2). For example, members with a progressive trajectory who have approach-related tendencies (committing, engaging) are likely to increasingly adopt into the self-concept the defining attributes of the organization, or answer "Who am I?" by relying on attributes derived from their organizational membership. In addition, they are likely to increasingly view the organization in positive terms and downplay negative things they perceive about the organization. By contrast, members on a regressive trajectory who have withdrawal-related tendencies (decommitting, disengaging, turnover cognitions) are increasingly likely to define their self-concept in ways that depart from their organization's defining attributes. They are also increasingly likely to view the organization in negative terms and downplay positive things they perceive about the organization. As these processes continue, members increasingly see their self concept and the organization moving together or growing apart unless this sense of upward or downward momentum is interrupted by organizational actions that jar their sense of "Who is this organization?" or by other trigger events that cause a change in their self-concept.

Influencing Sensegivers and Trigger Events. Finally, members' action tendencies provide a feedback loop to the way identity stewards and others engage in sensegiving about the organization's identity, and they may set the stage for future trigger events. The cognition, affect, and behavior fueled by approach and withdrawal tendencies can be an important source of feedback for identity stewards as they try to decipher how their sensegiving efforts are being interpreted. This feedback may result in identity stewards altering their own conceptions of the organization's identity and/or lead to the replacement of identity stewards with new individuals who have different conceptions of the organization's identity. For example, in 2015, students at the University of Missouri accused the administration of persistent unaddressed racism toward minority students. As these protests increased in fervor, the president and chancellor were compelled to resign, and a series of initiatives were announced to address racial tensions, including the hiring of a diversity, inclusion, and equity officer; additional support to students, faculty, and staff members who experience discrimination; and the creation of a task force to improve diversity. These actions were lauded by the governor as necessary steps "toward healing and reconciliation on the University of Missouri campus" (Eligon and Pérez-Peña 2015). White House press secretary John Ernest noted of the changes, "A few people speaking up and speaking out can have a profound impact" (Eligon and Pérez-Peña 2015). Thus, the cognition, affect, and behavior stemming from particular action tendencies may influence the sensegiving of identity stewards and set the foundation for future trigger events.

Summary. The propositions underscore our argument that members with similar degrees of organizational identification are likely to exhibit different cognition, affect, and behavior if they perceive different identification trajectories. Returning to our example of Bill and Helen (Figure 1), we argued that despite similar degrees of identification in the present, we might expect them to think, feel, and act differently. Following our propositions, in scenario 1 depicted in Figure 1, Bill would be experiencing a withdrawal action tendency in contrast to Helen's approach action tendency. If we maintain their present degree of identification but create an alternative scenario 2 by reversing their expectations of the future (making Bill's trajectory a U shape and Helen's an inverted U), we argue that Bill would be experiencing a muted approach action tendency (in comparison with Helen in scenario 1) and Helen, a muted withdrawal action tendency (in comparison with Bill in scenario 1). If we create a third scenario, keeping present degrees of identification the same but assuming that Bill or Helen have a volatile trajectory, we would expect that either could be headed toward cynicism and organizational turnover. These different predictions, all stemming from individuals with the *same* degree of current identification, highlight the necessity of understanding an individual's trajectory and sense of momentum when considering identification.

Discussion

The organizational identification literature has generally focused on the positive consequences of members

adopting their organization's identity as self-defining. However, our understanding of the potentially dynamic nature of identification and how organizational members narrate and respond to their ongoing and potentially changing relationship with the organization is limited. In this paper, we offered a dynamic view of organizational identification that focuses on both retrospective sensemaking about the past and prospective sensemaking about the future. This leads to the important conclusion that a member's sense of identification is on a perceived trajectory, which has a characteristic sense of momentum that shapes cognition, affect, and behavior in meaningful ways.

Theoretical Implications

This dynamic perspective adds an important nuance to our theoretical understanding of the process of organizational identification. In so doing, our model makes several contributions to ongoing conversations about identity and identification in organizations. First, by viewing organizational identification vis-à-vis sensemaking related to the broader sweep of one's organizational membership, we gain greater insight into the way members think of their ongoing relationship with the organization. To be sure, the extant literature includes various models of the identification process (e.g., Dutton et al. 1994; Pratt 1998, 2000; Ashforth 2001; Bartel and Dutton 2001; Alvesson and Willmott 2002; Fiol 2002; Fuller et al. 2006; Ashforth and Schinoff 2016; Sillince and Golant, 2018). However, most models tend to focus on the initial stages of identification, or changes in identification in response to singular events, and not on the ongoing and potentially evolving nature of identification. Furthermore, whereas the literatures on organizational identity change and individual identity work incorporate members' identity modifications (e.g., Fiol 2002, Watson 2008, Clark et al. 2010, Brown 2017), they tend to focus on limited events or an unwanted present rather than on the wider history of one's past association and projected future with the organization. Our perspective builds on these existing approaches by incorporating the influence that one's retrospective thinking about the past and one's prospective thinking about the future have on members' organizational identification. Accounting for the perceived dynamism of identification from the past and into the future provides a more nuanced understanding of members' identification and how it influences cognition, affect, and behavior.

Second, and relatedly, by illuminating different patterns of retrospective and prospective sensemaking over time, we introduced four prototypical identification trajectories beyond the typically assumed stable trajectory: progressive, regressive, U-shaped, and inverted U-shaped. We further explained how these identification trajectories are characterized by members sensing different types of momentum, which influence cognition, affect, and behavior in meaningful ways (cf. Liu et al. 2012, Seto and Schlegel 2018). This broader conceptualization of organizational identification in terms of narrative and trajectory makes it possible to explain the intriguing puzzle wherein a member strongly (weakly) identifies with the organization and yet exhibits the kind of withdrawal (approach) that one might typically associate with low (high) degrees of identification. In addition, our perspective helps illuminate why two people with similar degrees of identification might think, feel, and behave quite differently within the same organization. Our perspective also suggests that descriptive and predictive models of identification can be enriched by incorporating sensemaking about the broader sweep of one's organizational membership.

Finally, we extended the research on sensegiving in organizations (e.g., Gioia and Chittipeddi 1991, Bartunek et al. 1999, Maitlis and Lawrence 2007) by highlighting three sensegiving mechanisms by which organizations try to influence the way members perceive the organization (i.e., associative memory work, dissociative memory work, and prospective identity work). Furthermore, we highlighted the important role of organizational identity stewards and other key stakeholders (Davis et al. 1997, Howard-Grenville et al. 2013) in the sensegiving process, who create and promote various notions about the organization's identity. This view of the process of identification draws greater attention to the dynamic interplay between the member and the organization and underscores the importance of the past and the future for shaping one's relationship to the organization in the present.

Methodological Implications

Studying the perceived dynamism of members' identification trajectories presents opportunities to explore additional methodological approaches to understanding identification. Qualitative research approaches may be particularly well suited to capturing process dimensions (e.g., temporality) that are central to identification trajectories (Langley et al. 2013, Humberd and Rouse 2016). For example, ethnography, semi-structured interviews, and turning point analysis[6] may be particularly appropriate for probing the sensemaking of organizational members and elucidating the sense of momentum in their identification trajectories. Furthermore, the method of "graphic elicitation" (Bagnoli 2009), in which participants are asked to illustrate their perceptions during an interview, could help elicit an understanding of how the participant sees his or her relationship with the

organization changing across time and help capture the participant's sense of momentum associated with his or her identification trajectory.

The notion of identification trajectory also presents opportunities to build on standard organizational identification instruments (e.g., Mael and Ashforth 1992, Bergami & Bagozzi 2000). A potentially valuable contribution could be made by creating measures that capture the form of one's overall trajectory, which would be used in conjunction with traditional measures in identification research. For example, much like the visual measure that captures the perceived overlap between the member's self-concept and the organization's identity (Bergami and Bagozzi 2000), members could respond to survey questions to indicate which visual representations of the modal identification trajectories best represent their experience in the organization. It might also be useful for researchers to supplement their understanding of current organizational identification (e.g., Mael and Ashforth 1992) by using separate measures to capture perceptions of change from the past to the present and anticipated change in the future (see Figure 4). Researchers could use these additional measures to look at the moderating role of past perceptions and future anticipations on the relationship between current identification and various outcomes. Taking such an approach could add an important nuance and possibly allow for more precision in identification research. For example, in looking at the relationship between organizational identification and turnover, understanding how employees anticipate that their identification may change in the future (as well as how it has changed in the past) is likely extremely relevant. Researchers might also consider various combinations of all three scores (current degree of identification, past–present trajectory, and anticipated future trajectory) as well as contrasts between the past and anticipated future to understand how various trajectories influence outcomes. By specifying specific time frames when asking individuals to evaluate their identification trajectory (see Figure 4), researchers can also compare perceived rates of change over specific time frames to understand how the *velocity* of change might be consequential.

Finally, it is important to make clear that our perspective *does not* advocate for longitudinal measurement of identification over time (although this might be appropriate for some research questions) to ascertain one's perceived identification trajectory. Because the present is always the fulcrum for retrospection about the past and prospection about the future, a member's view of the past may actually be malleable and subject to change as new events and information cause the member to update his or her perceived relationship with the organization. For example, someone might appear to have a progressive identification trajectory if he or she had three successive measurement periods in which identification increased. However, new information or events in the present (e.g., finding out that a boss was embezzling funds in the past) might cause a member to recraft his or her perception of past experiences (Ashforth and Schinoff 2016), making the member's past measures of identification less relevant or even misleading. Thus, we argue that a measure of one's identification trajectory should be designed to capture a member's *current* perceptions of the past and the future (e.g., Figure 4).

Practical Implications

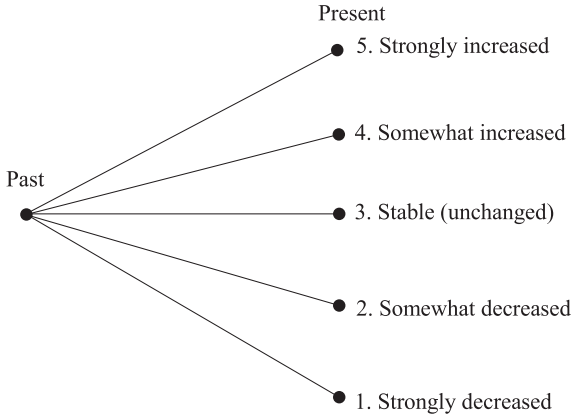
Our model has several important implications for practitioners. First, it highlights the importance of organizations helping members answer the "Who is this organization?" question in positive terms to facilitate organizational identification. This means that identity stewards should be especially conscious of the way they craft and propagate the organization's identity. For example, Patagonia employs substantial resources (e.g., videos, books) that encourage member (and other stakeholder) sensemaking related to the ongoing environmental crisis and sensegiving related to Patagonia being in the vanguard of companies conducting business in a responsible manner aimed at addressing the crisis (e.g., Chouinard 2006, Chouinard and Stanley 2016). Mentoring and/or coaching sessions, and other formal and informal venues, should be recognized as powerful forums for sensegiving, particularly if there is an organizational aim to reduce conflict and/or turnover during periods of change that could potentially lead to declining identification (e.g., a new leader with a dramatically different vision than his or her predecessor). Such meetings should focus on sharing perceptions of the organization's past, perceptions of the organization's recent actions, and future expectations of members' relationship with the organization (see Mirvis 1997 and Cable et al. 2013 for related practices).

This need for members to answer the "Who is this organization?" question in positive terms also extends to interactions organizations have with potential members in preemployment stages. For example, the notion of anticipatory identification (Ashforth 2001), which builds on Merton's (1957) anticipatory socialization (see also Handley 2018), suggests that organizations can begin to influence members' perceptions of the organization's identity before they enter the organization. Thus, efforts from HR, hiring managers, and employment websites may guide future members toward a positive trajectory, even before a formal employment relationship is established. When this can be achieved, members are likely to have a positive start to their relationship with their organization and be less likely to succumb to challenges

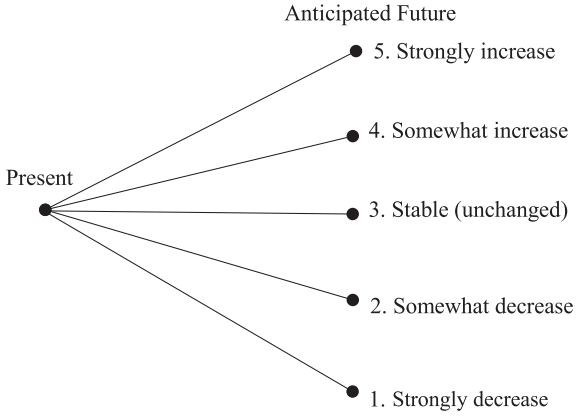
Figure 4. Potential Measure to Assess Perceptions of the Past and Anticipated Future

Instructions: Organizational identification has been defined as the degree to which individuals perceive a sense of oneness with their organization. Below you will be asked to think about how your organizational identification has changed in the past, and how you anticipate it may change in the future.

B. Please indicate in the space provided which trajectory (1-5) most closely resembles how your identification with Company X has changed from the past* to the present. _____



A. Please indicate in the space provided which trajectory (1-5) most closely resembles how you anticipate your identification with Company X may change in the future*. _____



* Could be changed to specific periods of time (e.g., six months), depending on the research question, to capture the velocity of change across a designated time frame.

related to adjusting to their new organization that could result in a more negative trajectory.

Our theorizing also illuminates the need for identity stewards to be especially conscious of the authenticity and ethicality of their own sensegiving efforts and the sensegiving efforts of others. For example, Ken Lay and Jeff Skilling espoused Enron as a company of integrity when this was clearly not the case behind the scenes (Ferrell and Ferrell 2011). Identity stewards should be especially careful not to take advantage of their members in situations where members have a weak and/or diminished sense of self (e.g., young employees, recently returned military veterans who are seeking a place in society) that is susceptible to a need for identification with an organization. Such situations have the potential to result in overidentification or other negative outcomes that could be detrimental to the well-being of the members and the organization (cf. Dukerich et al. 1998). Our theorizing also suggests that identity stewards should not reflexively discount the perspectives of employees evidencing a regressive or inverted U-shaped trajectory or the perspectives of other stakeholders who are "giving sense" about the

organization's identity (cf. Galvin et al. 2010). These often counternormative perspectives can provide valuable feedback and help to create positive change in the organization.

It is important for managers to consider the potentially harmful effects of taking advantage of employees who perceive "steep" progressive identification trajectories into the future. In such cases, employees may be willing to attach to a toxic or unhealthy culture because of the perception that the organization is on such a positive trajectory. For example, a former Amazon employee, Dina Vaccari, once bragged about not sleeping for four days straight to meet a deadline and using her own money to pay freelancers to help her get more done (Kantor and Streitfeld 2015). Furthermore, Silicon Valley employees have often bragged about "their prodigious work hours, their ability to pull all-nighters, [and] their ability to get the work done under almost any circumstances" (Pfeffer 2018, p. 179). In addition, research suggests that individuals who see their work as a calling may be especially prone to making personal sacrifices to accomplish their work (Bunderson and Thompson 2009). Realizing this, organizational leaders should be responsible and thoughtful in their approach to managing employees, as employees with progressive trajectories may be especially blinded and susceptible to the negative effects of highly demanding work cultures.

Perhaps equally important, our analysis has shown the power of perceived momentum in the member–organization relationship over time in shaping individual cognition, affect, and behavior. Whereas most annual surveys, performance reviews, etc., focus on static snapshot images of various attitudes or behaviors, we have explicated the importance of understanding Bill and Helen's perceptions of the trajectory of their relationship with the organization across time, as well as the specific experiences upon which these perceptions are based. Thus, an important practical suggestion is to design annual surveys and performance reviews so they capture not only variables of interest but also employees' current sense of *momentum* regarding those variables. In addition to measuring perceptions of momentum (Figure 4), managers could design ways to capture members' narrations of their experience within the organization. For example, a simple question such as, "Tell me how the last year (or preferred time frame) has been for you" might reveal much more about the person's lived experience and the reasons for his or her behavior than a static measure collected annually. Likewise, a question that enables members to narrate their expectations for the future might also provide a valuable source of insight. This might help managers intervene with employees who seem to score relatively high on important variables but who are actually in decline and may be in danger of leaving the organization. Furthermore, regressive trajectories are likely to inspire employees to generate change that takes the organization in a direction that better reflects their values or to exit the organization in favor of one that better reflects those values. This practice of understanding perceived momentum could help managers understand how members are engaging with the organization and interpreting organizational changes, and allow for early detection of signs related to withdrawal as well as facilitate giving feedback to the member.

Moreover, performance evaluations of CEOs and others in leadership roles might draw on aggregated employee identification trajectories as a source of feedback about how their leadership is resonating with their subordinates. For example, a corporate board could look at aggregated trajectories of members to assess how identification among employees has been perceived to have changed during a CEO's tenure and how it is anticipated to change in the future. Turning points in the aggregated trajectory could provide important feedback about how particular events or actions were interpreted by employees. Similarly, leaders could look at employees' anticipated future identification as an indicator of how their vision for the future is being embraced. Aggregations could also be explored at various levels, departments, and geographic locations of an organization for a more nuanced perspective.

Future Directions

Our perspective invites future research about identification trajectories. First, for the sake of parsimony, we did not theorize about the litany of individual differences that might influence a member's sensemaking and perceived trajectory. For example, one's temporal focus, or the "attention individuals devote to thinking about the past, present, and future" would likely be important because "it affects how people incorporate perceptions about past experiences, current situations, and future expectations into their attitudes, cognitions, and behavior" (Shipp et al. 2009, p. 1; see also Karniol and Ross 1996). The identification trajectory of someone with a past temporal focus might be more influenced by the positive or negative experiences of the past than his or her anticipation of the future, resulting in a different identification trajectory than someone with a future temporal focus. In addition, members who see themselves in a particularly heroic light (e.g., Synnott 2009) might be more likely to view their relationship with the organization as improving in the future because of their heroic efforts to keep or put the organization on a positive course (progressive or U-shaped trajectory). Other members might be predisposed to construe

themselves as victims who gave much to their organization and yet are now being taken advantage of (regressive or inverted U-shaped trajectory). Certain members might also have a "need for drama" (Frankowski et al. 2016), making a volatile trajectory more likely.

Furthermore, individual difference variables such as cognitive complexity (McGill et al. 1994), need for cognition (e.g., Cacioppo et al. 1996), and desire for authenticity (e.g., Weigert 2009) may influence the extent to which the comprehensiveness, nuance, and accuracy, respectively, of one's narrative of one's past and projected relationship with the organization affect one's sense of identification. Although some members may gravitate toward a detailed and accurate history and forecast of their relationship with the organization, others may see entire periods or key events as irrelevant or undesirable to their sense of self. For instance, some members may feel a strong need to involve an element of their past relationship with the organization that was shameful (e.g., a period of formal probation as a result of low individual performance) in order to achieve a sense of authenticity, whereas other members may develop highly curated views (e.g., a progressive trajectory that glosses over downturns in the relationship) that have little relation to more objective versions of the past, present, and future of their relationship with the organization. These individual differences may influence the extent to which identification trajectories are "smoothed" (Spence 1986).

Second, future research might explore additional moderators that influence the way individuals make sense of their identification trajectory and the proposed relationships between trajectories and outcomes. For example, are identification trajectories influenced more by actions attributed to the organization or actions attributed to the self? In addition, does the perceived size and pace of movement over time matter? For instance, does a U-shaped trajectory that is perceived to have occurred over a matter of weeks have a stronger or weaker effect than a U-shaped trajectory that is seen as occurring over a number of years? Research might also explore the way certain sensegiving themes (e.g., the heroic quest, the coming of age story; Gergen 2009, Ibarra and Barbulescu 2010, Bock 2015) resonate with different types of individuals. Fleshing out additional nuances to our theoretical perspective should be a critical area for future research.

Third, future research might also seek to unpack the extent to which identification trajectories deviate from more objective trajectories (i.e., identification measured longitudinally). This would allow researchers to better understand the sensemaking processes whereby individuals retrospect about the past and prospect about the future, and reveal various memory biases and prospective biases that may influence the way members make sense of their relationship with the organization over time. For example, certain episodes that could lead to an instantaneous, major shift of identification (e.g., the revelation of an unknown aspect of the organization's past, the sudden onset of an organizational crisis) might retrospectively be seen as having only a subtle influence on the member's identification over a long period of time. In addition, future research might explore the explanatory power of objective versus perceived trajectories. For instance, research has shown that individuals' perceptions of the intensity of a painful stimulus over time explains more variance in summary evaluations of that experience than the objective intensity of the painful stimulus over time (Ariely 1998).

Finally, future research might examine the extent to which our prototypic identification trajectories—progressive, regressive, U-shaped, and inverted U-shaped—are applicable to other aspects of the member–organization relationship, such as job satisfaction, leader–member exchange, and team member exchange (cf. Fairhurst and Hamlett 2003). Just as organizational members make sense of their degree of overlap with the organization over time, so too are they likely to develop perceptions of their relationship to their jobs, leaders, and colleagues over time. These analogous perceptions matter because (1) they are likely to be intertwined with one's organizational identification trajectory, and (2) they are likely to affect one's cognition, affect, and behavior beyond one's current degree of satisfaction, leader–member exchange, and so on.

Conclusion

Scholarly views of organizational identification generally focus on understanding the current degree of a member's identification. By contrast, this paper argues for a more dynamic view of identification. Our model deepens our understanding of the sensemaking processes that occur as members seek to make sense of themselves, their organization, and their relationships to their organization. We further illustrate how different patterns of retrospective and prospective thinking lead to various identification trajectories that have a sense of momentum that is critical to understanding member cognition, affect, and behavior. We believe this perspective opens new avenues for scholars to better understand one of the foundational constructs in organizational studies.

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Endnotes

[1] In physics, linear momentum is the product of an object's mass and velocity. In this paper, we invoke the term "momentum" in a more colloquial manner to connote a sense of motion that is expected to continue into the future.

[2] *Merriam-Webster*, s.v. "trajectory," accessed November 3, 2017, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/trajectory.

[3] Although there is some disagreement regarding the orthogonality of happiness and unhappiness (e.g., Tellegen et al. 1999, Pawelski 2013), the relative orthogonality of happiness–unhappiness does not affect our argument.

[4] *Merriam-Webster's Learner's Dictionary*, s.v. "nostalgia," accessed November 3, 2017, http://learnersdictionary.com/definition/nostalgia.

[5] More specifically, the authors argue that negative events tend to have a stronger and more enduring impact on the individual than do positive events, and that negative perceptions tend to be more resistant to disconfirmation than positive perceptions.

[6] Less common in organization studies, turning point analysis (or the retrospective interview technique) involves having individuals—typically during repeated interviews—plot their currently experienced level of a variable of interest and discuss possible reasons for any changes since their last plot (e.g., Bullis and Bach 1989; cf. Solinger et al. 2013).

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