

Hijacked by Hope

Dynamics of Mission Drift and Identity Dilution in a Nonprofit Organization

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HIJACKED BY HOPE: DYNAMICS OF MISSION DRIFT AND IDENTITY DILUTION IN A NONPROFIT ORGANIZATION

Sequestrado pela esperança: Dinâmicas de desvio da missão e dissolução de identidade em uma organização sem fins lucrativos

Secuestrado por la esperanza: Dinámicas de disolución identitaria y desviación de la misión en una organización sin fines de lucro

ABSTRACT

This article addresses how organizational identity and mission are constructed and reproduced over time through processes of remembering and forgetting. Building on literature that views organizational memory as a strategic resource, this paper showcases the enabling effects of history, memory, and the past for organizational resilience and survival. Although temporal narratives may be employed as rhetorical tools to construct coherency between the past, present, and future, we find they also have the potential of sidetracking and hijacking an organization's direction. Our study shows how an excessive focus on the future can cause mission drift and identity dilution. However, the identity dilution can be resolved through revisiting and remembering the past. The organizational past is not merely a strategic resource for identity construction, it is also a temporal anchor from which the organization may (re)discover its original purpose. The findings are based on a qualitative, in-depth, ethnographic case study of a nonprofit organization whose goal is to establish a national network of local school gardens.

KEYWORDS | Organizational identity, organizational memory, historical narrative, temporal focus, nonprofit organization

RESUMO

Este artigo aborda como a identidade e missão organizacionais são construídas e reproduzidas ao longo do tempo por meio de processos de lembrança e esquecimento. Com base na literatura sobre memória organizacional, em uma perspectiva de recurso estratégico, o artigo apresenta os efeitos da história, da memória e do passado que permitiram a resiliência e a sobrevivência organizacional. Enquanto narrativas temporais podem ser aplicadas como ferramentas retóricas para construir a coerência entre passado, presente e futuro, descobrimos que elas também têm o potencial de "derivar" e "sequestrar" a direção organizacional. O presente estudo mostra como um foco excessivo no futuro causa desvio de missão e ambigüidade de identidade. Contudo, a ambigüidade de identidade é resolvida revisitando e lembrando o passado. O passado organizacional não é apenas um recurso estratégico para a construção da identidade, mas uma âncora temporal a partir da qual a organização pode (re)descobrir seu propósito original. Os resultados são baseados em um estudo de caso qualitativo, aprofundado e etnográfico de uma organização sem fins lucrativos com o objetivo de estabelecer uma rede nacional de hortas em escolas locais.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE | Identidade organizacional, memória coletiva, narrativa histórica, foco temporal, organização sem fins lucrativos.

RESUMEN

Este artículo aborda cómo la identidad y la misión organizativa se construyen y se reproducen a lo largo del tiempo a través de procesos de recuerdo y olvido. Con base en la literatura sobre memoria organizacional, a través de una perspectiva de recurso estratégico, el artículo presenta los efectos de la historia, de la memoria y del pasado que permitieron la resiliencia y la supervivencia organizacional. Mientras que las narraciones temporales se pueden aplicar como herramientas retóricas para construir la coherencia entre pasado, presente y futuro, descubrimos que ellas también tienen el potencial de "desviar" y "secuestrar" la dirección organizacional. El presente estudio muestra cómo un enfoque excesivo en el futuro causa desviación de misión y ambigüedad de identidad. Sin embargo, la ambigüedad de identidad se resuelve al revisar y recordar el pasado. El pasado organizacional no es sólo un recurso estratégico para la construcción de la identidad, sino un ancla temporal a partir de la cual la organización puede (re)descubrir su propósito original. Los resultados se basan en un estudio de caso cualitativo en profundidad y etnográfico de una organización sin fines de lucro con el objetivo de establecer una red nacional de huertos en escuelas locales.

PALABRA CLAVE | Identidad organizacional, memoria organizacional, narrativa histórica, enfoque temporal, organización sin fines de lucro.

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“It puzzles me sometimes... Why look back at what has been done for more than a hundred years? Why not look forward and say what could be fantastic?”

(Chair and Nonprofit founder)

INTRODUCTION

The ways in which the mechanisms of memory shape the construction of organizational identity over time has recently emerged as key area of interest among organizational scholars (e.g., Anteby & Molnár, 2012; Foster, Coraiola, Suddaby, Kroezen, & Chandler, 2017; Schultz & Hernes, 2013). This stream of research has stressed the temporal underpinnings of identity construction in which lived experience is mobilized in the present to project the organization’s future direction (Ezzy, 1998). By drawing attention to the temporal agency of organizations (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), this paper highlights the plasticity of organizational identity and how identities are subject to ongoing change (Kreiner, Hollensbe, Sheep, Smith, & Kataria, 2015). We build on previous research that views identity construction as an unfolding process of searching in response to events, transitions, and turning points (Maclean, Harvey, Gordon, & Shaw, 2015). Previous results have shown how organizations direct their attention on the past to mobilize present memories towards the future (Schultz & Hernes, 2013). While these findings indicate that temporal focus—the degree to which organizations tend to direct and focus their attention on the past, present, and/or future—matter, the *role* temporal focus plays in identity construction has nevertheless remained largely implicit.

Bringing this issue to the forefront, this study probes into the mnemonics of identity construction by showing how organizations must balance continuous adaptation to changing environmental conditions while simultaneously remaining true to themselves. Previous findings have noted how organizations consciously or unconsciously select or omit particular historical elements from their narratives in order to promote a particular identity and direction towards the future (e.g., Foster, Suddaby, Minkus, & Wiebe, 2011; Hatch & Schultz, 2017; Rowlinson, Casey, Hansen, & Mills, 2014). Organizational memory may, therefore, not only facilitate change but also create a sense of identity continuity (Anteby & Molnár, 2012). Subscribing to this view, we argue that an organization’s ability to leverage and employ such memories depends on its capacity to continually shift temporal focus. Stressing the temporal dimension of organizational identity,

we ask the following question: *How does temporal focus shape processes of organizational identity construction?*

To answer this question, we draw on a qualitative case study of a nonprofit organization. We show how a series of incidents and actions results in organizational memory loss and the development of a one-sided temporal focus on the future. This process is driven by an exaggerated concern over development to realize a “hoped-for-future,” which, in turn, has consequences for organizational identity. We argue that organizational forgetting might lead to the production of loosely coupled identity narratives that hijack and displace the original organizational identity and mission. High employee turnover and pressures from external benefactors, from whom the organization financially depends for continued operation, further fuel this process. These precarious conditions consequently induce an excessive focus on future-oriented projects, and a decreased attention to past and present operations. By being overly concerned with pleasing external stakeholders, the organization generates an identity vacuum whereby a newly constructed organizational narrative becomes a patching tool to construct coherency between new and ongoing projects. Our study, however, also shows that identity narratives may be rebalanced when efforts are devoted to revisiting and remembering the past. Our findings expand and contribute to the social constructivist approach to memory, which currently focuses mainly on intra-organizational processes (Mena, Rintamäki, Fleming, & Spicer, 2016). Previously, discussions on collective forgetting have highlighted a broad number of concerns, both positive and negative, in relation to organizational identity (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2011). While we acknowledge that forgetting may encourage identity maintenance and stability (Anteby & Molnár, 2012), we argue that organizational memory loss may also lead to organizational mission drift and identity dilution. The concept of “dilution” originates from Law theory studies on trademarks, which “as originally conceived, referred to the harm that occurs when a famous, distinctive mark loses its singular meaning” (Dogan, 2006, p. 103). Frank Schechter, who coined the term in 1927 (Bone, 2007), defined dilution as “the gradual whittling away or dispersion of the identity and hold upon the public mind of the mark or name by its use upon non-competing goods” (Schechter, 1927, here from Dogan, 2006, p. 103).

Temporal identity narratives

The interplay between organizational temporality and identity is a growing field of scholarly interest. This stream of research

examines how organizations engage with their past, present, and future as a way of constructing their identity (e.g., Foster et al., 2011; Hatch & Schultz, 2017; Schultz & Hernes, 2013). Despite its character of permanence and endurance (Albert & Whetten, 1985), identity has gradually emerged as a dynamic concept. Because identity narratives describe lived, ongoing time, they are “in-process and unfinished, continuously made and remade as episodes happen” (Ezzy, 1998, p. 247). As organizations draw on lived experience in the present to project their identity into the future, organizational identity may thus be considered a process of continuous construction and change (Kreiner et al., 2015).

Previous studies have already noted how organizational actors engage in temporal work by mobilizing organizational memories to guide the ongoing construction of present and future identities (Cappelen & Strandgaard Pedersen, 2020; Maclean, Harvey, Sillince, & Golant, 2018; Schultz & Hernes, 2013). We define organizational memory as a form of collective memory, consisting of mental and structural artifacts embedded and distributed across different levels and structures in and beyond the organization (Walsh & Ungson, 1991). This understanding of collective memory assumes that group memory exists and lives beyond individual recollection. Memories are not seen as a repository of past experience but rather as images that become activated in particular social contexts (Halbwachs, 1992). Organizational memory is therefore closely tied to organizational identity, as groups become constituted in the process of remembering when the past is remade for present collective purposes (Olick & Robbins, 1998).

The act of assigning particular present significance to past events has been conceptualized as “organizational remembering” and is defined as “the process by which actors use both rhetoric and history to socially construct membership with an organization” (Suddaby et al., 2016, p. 298). Using rhetorical tools and discursive narratives, organizational actors create shared values based on shared memory in order to construct a common identity anchored in a socially constructed common past. In these attempted uses-of-the-past, organizations employ mnemonic traces and narratives as raw material from which identity is subsequently assembled. To do so, actors rely on mnemonic technologies, such as symbols as material memory forms and shared narratives, to frame and inform what is collectively remembered (Lippmann & Aldrich, 2016; Schultz & Hernes, 2013). How organizations identify themselves is thus “intimately and intricately connected with the stories they have embraced regarding the path they have travelled to the present” (Heisler, 2008, p. 15) and to where they imagine themselves heading in the future.

Organizational memory work

While in a state of flux, organizational identities can, nevertheless, appear stable (Anteby & Molnár, 2012). Managers may tamper with *organizational remembering* by repeatedly omitting contradictory elements from the preferred organizational narrative, as Anteby and Molnár (2012) portrayed in their study of a French aerospace company. Through the strategic use of historical narratives, organizations might also construct demarcations between the past and the present to promote identity change. Ybema (2010) argued that organizational actors might alter organizational identity by engaging in temporal *discontinuity* talk. In the case of a Dutch national newspaper, organizational actors enabled identity change by constructing sharp contrasts between old and new through organizational narratives and stories. These examples illustrate how the intentional use of narratives and discursive resources plays a major role in identity formation and change. Through repetition, temporal narratives gain salience over time, thereby contributing to the stability of organizational identity and the meanings individuals share regarding organizational past (Dailey & Browning, 2014). In their study of an organizational transition in Procter & Gamble, Maclean et al. (2018) found organizational rhetoric and narrative was used both as an anchor with or touchstone of the past and as a tool for preparing the organization for future change. In this way, narratives are both generative and performative (Maclean et al., 2015), as the stories (re)told and remembered provide organizations with action scripts for the future (Bluedorn, 2002).

Whereas discussions of organizational memory tend to elicit a focus on remembrance, *organizational forgetting* is a uniformly important aspect of memory. The concept denotes the nonexistence of a shared version of the past, following “the absence of institutionalized memory” (Fine, 2012, p. 59). While some organizational forgetting occurs as a result of high employee turnover (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2011) or unconscious processes of inertia over time (Walsh & Ungson, 1991), collective forgetting may also result from deliberate, active, and instrumental “forgetting work” (Mena et al., 2016). Because forgetting is context dependent, its consequences can be regarded as positive as well as negative (Holan & Phillips, 2004). Studies illustrating the *positive* organizational outcomes of forgetting postulate that forgetting strengthens the organization’s ability to disrupt and innovate, promotes change and renewal, and reduces loss in morale following failure (Wilkins & Bristow, 1987). Other studies suggest that selective forgetting may also support identity maintenance (Anteby & Molnár, 2012;

Ybema, 2010) or enable organizations to distance themselves from a past that is considered illegitimate in the present (Booth, Clark, Delahaye, Procter, & Rowlinson, 2007). Other studies show how forgetting induces mnemonic communities to become more attentive to environmental changes and, thereby, more apt to develop and adjust according to continuously changing surroundings (Blaschke & Schoeneborn, 2006). Shifting attention towards the *negative* consequences of forgetting, these studies typically revolve around issues of organizational knowledge and learning (e.g., Madsen, 2009) (or lack thereof) (e.g., Brunsson, 2009; Holan & Phillips, 2004) and loss or silencing of identity (e.g., Albert & Whetten, 1985; Maclean, Harvey, & Stringfellow, 2017). Therefore, to prevent memory loss, organizations should strive to uphold “a continuous link to its ‘old timers’ to ensure adequate organization memory acquisition and controlled retrieval processes” (Walsh & Ungson, 1991, p. 78).

Temporal agency and focus on identity construction

The notion of identities as processual, whereby memories of lived experience are continuously integrated into the identity narrative, assumes that organizations draw on past memories and future imaginaries to construct and envision their identity. This implies a level of agency in the way in which organizations construct and make use of the past and the imagined future in its ongoing identity construction. Emirbayer and Mische (1998) coined the phrase “the chordial triad” to describe the temporal modalities of past, present, and future, which are temporal conceptions that are seen as entangled (Reinecke & Ansari, 2016). While temporal conceptions denote the properties that organizations ascribe to time (i.e., past-present-future), temporal orientations refer to the *value* that is given to time (Kunisch, Bartunek, Mueller, & Huy, 2017). Temporal orientations are distinct yet related to temporal focus, which refers to the degree to which organizations tend to direct and focus their attention on the past, present, or future (or a combination of these). Organizations holding a past temporal orientation and focus will tend to ascribe higher value and priority to past events (Clark & Collins, 1993), whereas a future orientation and focus emphasize and value what is yet to come (Bluedorn, 2002; Maclean et al., 2018). Correspondingly, organizations with a dominant present focus prioritize the here and now in their actions and risk becoming prey to short-termism (Marginson & McAulay, 2008).

While few studies explicitly discuss how temporal focus shapes organizational identity, some research has discussed how temporal focus influences strategy (Kunisch et al., 2017). Some scholars argue that organizations that possess a past temporal focus tend to be less adaptable and more averse to new experiences. Such organizations are less likely to initiate strategic changes or introduce new products than those characterized by a stronger present or future temporal focus (Nadkarni & Chen, 2014). Other scholars find that a present temporal focus influences organizations to emphasize immediate, adjacent, and short-term goals (Marginson & McAulay, 2008), while a past temporal focus might enhance organizational learning and decision-making (Shipp, Edwards, & Lambert, 2009). We argue that temporal focus is key for organizational identity construction. However, it has been largely neglected in prior research. Whereas previous studies show how organizations mobilize memories and visions to construct their identities (Schultz & Hernes, 2013), *the way in which they shift between temporal foci* in this process has mainly remained implicit (Corley & Gioia, 2004). We bring this mechanism to the forefront by showing how a lopsided temporal focus on the future may lead to identity dilution. We argue that identity dilution results from a failure to continuously integrate lived experience (i.e., organizational memory) into the temporal identity narrative. Finally, we demonstrate how an ongoing shift in temporal focus (between the past, present, and future) enables organizations to restore identity balance.

THE STUDY

Context of the research setting

For this study, we conducted an empirical case study of a nonprofit organization whose goal is to establish a national network of culinary school gardens. The school garden is promoted as an “alternative classroom” and has been proven to strengthen the food and social competences, health, and environmental awareness of children (Wistoft, 2013). As such, the organization holds the potential of creating more food-knowledgeable children and sustainable local communities through its educational concept. The organization operates in a context in which nonprofit organizations have played a substantial societal role ever since the “freedom of association” was written into the Danish democratic constitution in 1848 (Henriksen, Strømsnes, & Svedberg, 2018). Following the advance of the welfare state in the aftermath of World War II, which was characterized by tax-

financed welfare provisions and a redistribution of progressive tax-based income, Danish nonprofit organizations gradually began cultivating their role as interest organizations (Henriksen & Bundesen, 2004). As the welfare state model came under pressure in the late 1980s, the government increasingly relied on the nonprofit sector to provide supplementary welfare services. In policies developed in the mid-1990s, it was recommended that nonprofit organizations should alleviate increasing pressure on public welfare by acting “as entrepreneurs to tackle emerging social problems” (Henriksen et al., 2018, p. 17). Although the nonprofit sector has grown in prominence, public resources to fund its operations have slowly declined. To fill this gap, privately owned industrial foundations have gained a more prominent role in securing continued operation for Danish nonprofit organizations. In 2017, industrial foundations donated more than €2.3 billion (DKK 17,25 billion) to the sector (Kraft & Partners, 2019). This shift has also meant a reorganization of the nonprofit sector that is characterized by project-based organizations and short-term funding schemes.

Data collection and analysis

The findings are based on an in-depth case study conducted during 2016–2019. Data materials include various sources of archival data (organizational documents, web pages, reports etc.) and public media material (news-clippings, etc.). In addition, extensive on-site participant observations (meetings, school garden events, seminars, etc.) have been carried out. The results of this study are largely drawn from observational data (150 hours) collected over the course of three years. During this time span, we organized and conducted a total of eighteen workshops, of approximately four hours each, in collaboration with members of the nonprofit management team. These meetings had a dual function: first, to acquire knowledge about the organization and its background, context and developments; and later, to specifically generate data on how the organization’s members collectively view issues of organizational mission, vision, strategy, identity, culture, and image (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). As we consider identity construction to occur through dialogue, language and narratives, the workshops also represented an opportunity to observe and note how organizational memories and imaginaries were brought into play in a group context (Olick, 1999). The workshops allowed for regular access to the organizations, which permitted us to follow the ongoing development of the organizational identity narrative closely. The workshops further provided opportunities for capturing photos and extensive note-taking.

To supplement our observational material, a total of twenty-five interviews were conducted. Seven interviews were conducted with the main organization (one interview was carried out with the organizational founder and current chair of the board, and six interviews were conducted with members of the organization’s secretariat and management teams). Furthermore, thirteen local school gardens were visited, during which interviews were carried out with local school garden representatives. These interviews were carried out individually or in groups and lasted between one and two hours. During the interviews, we aimed to stimulate the recollection and sharing of “flashbulb memories” (Brown & Kulik, 1977): memories that follow a surprising or consequential event that people perceive as decisive. We also inquired into more stable memory structures grounded in prevailing organizational narratives (Boje, 2008). While querying the memory of our informants, we were sensitive to the cue dependency of such recollections, as the ability to remember is “obviously highly dependent on a number of contextual factors, factors that are themselves always in flux” (Olick, 1999, p. 340). To limit the effects of cue dependency, questions were asked in an open form and manner to avoid directing the process of recollection to match our preconceived ideas of decisive organizational events. Finally, five interviews were conducted with representatives from five foundations operating in different industries to inform the organizational context of nonprofit organizations. (See Exhibit 1 for an overview of data.)

All interviews were transcribed and sent to the interviewees for quality control and validation. Following validation, each of the study authors separately coded transcripts in NVivo before comparing and discussing their interpretations and codes. All data were compiled into a linear timeline that formed the starting point of a final coding process. We coded for narrative cues that presented expressions of identity, which enabled us to see a shift in temporal focus over time.

Findings

In the following section, we present our findings as a linear sequence of events to account for their contingency (Sewell, 2005). We argue that a gradual shift in temporal focus, whereby the organization increasingly directs its attention to the future, is linked to organizational forgetting and identity dilution. We bring this mechanism to the forefront by outlining a series of events, transitions, and turning points that instigated these shifts. We show how identity dilution results from a failure to continuously integrate lived experience into the temporal identity narrative; we then demonstrate how an ongoing shift in temporal focus allows for a reinstatement of identity balance.

Exhibit 1. Overview of data

| Type of data collected | Specification | Data use |
|---|---|--|
| Observations: ca. 150 h. | Workshops and meetings: 80 h. School garden networking events: 30 h. School garden visits: 43 h. | Provided us with narrative cues, as we were able to observe shifts in identity and mission over time. |
| Interviews: 20 | Organizational management team: 6 interviews conducted in person; notes taken. Duration: 1–2 h. Organizational founder and chair of the board: 1 interview conducted in person; notes taken. Duration: 1-2 h. School garden representatives: 13 interviews conducted in person; notes taken. Duration: 1-2 h. Foundations: 5 interviews in person: notes taken. Duration 30 min. -1 h. 15 min. | Interview statements were used to identify organizational memories and narratives. These provided insight into how actors made sense of the organization's past, present and future. |
| Examples of organizational documents | Project applications: 227 pp. Project evaluations: 212 pp. Organizational strategy proposals: 6 p. Organizational statutes and description: 63 p. School garden manuals: 90 pp. Press releases: 16 pp. Email correspondence with organizational members Webpage material w/descriptions of organizational vision, mission, educational concept etc. | Project applications and evaluations provided insight into how temporal focus developed over time. We consider both the number of applications and their content. Organizational statutes, descriptions and strategy proposals provided insight into organizational changing organizational mission and shifts in temporal focus and identity over time. Email correspondence between observations allowed us to probe organizational members on emerging themes in our data. Public material (i.e. press releases and webpage material) provided depictions of organizational mission, vision and self-presentation in the public domain to supplement narratives collected via observations and interviews. |
| Media material | Press clippings containing interviews and portrayals of the organization from 2003-2019 from mainly national sources. | Providing external audiences' view on the organization and used to provide contextual understanding of historical background and present political and socio-economic context. |
| Examples of photographic material | Self-captured photos during observations. | Documented physical-material manifestations of the activities during meetings and events. |

Getting started: The early years

The nonprofit organization studied was established in 2006 as a spin-off from a commercial, organic meal-kit provider. The newly formed organization began with the explicit aim to strengthen children's knowledge concerning food culture, health, and sustainability by establishing what they framed as the "best classroom in the world" (Internal Organizational Manual, 2011). The nonprofit organization developed an educational concept based on eight theoretical and practical modules with three focus areas: school gardening, nature, and outdoor cooking (Internal Organizational Manual, 2011). Early in their operation, the organization established an ongoing collaboration with their local municipality that helped finance the regular visits of local schools (fourth and fifth graders). In addition, donations from two foundations helped to fund the initial operations. The nonprofit was managed on an ad-hoc, informal basis, run by the founder, a manager, and a few part-time school garden instructors and volunteers (Ejlertsen, 2019).

As the concept of school gardens proved successful (Wistoft, 2013), gardening enthusiasts from municipalities across the country soon reached out to the organization to ask for assistance to establish their own local school gardens. To accommodate the growing interest, the organization applied for funding from one of Denmark's largest foundations to initiate a national dissemination of the educational concept in 2013 (Funding Application, 2013). In its effort to attract financial support, the nonprofit eagerly stressed its connection to its well-recognized parent company in their funding application. Through its repeated mentioning of the parent organization (16 times), the nonprofit's identity remained closely narrated and connected to that of its founder. Emphasizing the synergetic relationship between the two organizations, the application describes how the parent company represents an indispensable part of the nonprofit's past:

[The nonprofit] is located on the same grounds as [the parent company], which has made it possible to develop what now constitutes the basic concept of [the NPO]. There are waterproof economic shutters between the two organizations, yet both organizations gain from sharing the same location. (Funding Application, 2013, p. 4)

After successfully attaining the grant (€1.3 million) they applied for, the nonprofit was ready to embark on the impending project of implementing school gardens across the country. However, after receiving the grant, the school garden manager

left to pursue other opportunities, leaving the organization nearly vacant.

The office was actually completely empty for 4–5 months, where I, as the Chairman, was thinking: 'Wow!' At that point we'd just received 10 million kroner [€1.3 million] from [the foundation] that were just hanging in the air. And like, what do I do? With whom do I do it? (Chair interview, 2017)

To embark on the task of introducing school gardens across the country, a new set of full-time employees was hired: a manager, a communications developer, and two school garden instructors who were in charge of teaching and developing the educational concept. However, the new employees were faced with the challenge of constructing some basic organizational systems and routines for the nascent organization. The informal basis on which the organization had previously been managed left few mnemonic traces (such as documents and established procedures) to guide the employees in their task and identity narrative.

I realized pretty fast that some very basic systems were missing. And even if it wasn't my specialty or anything, I chose to throw myself at it, as the first thing I did. And tried to build it. (Management team member interview, 2017)

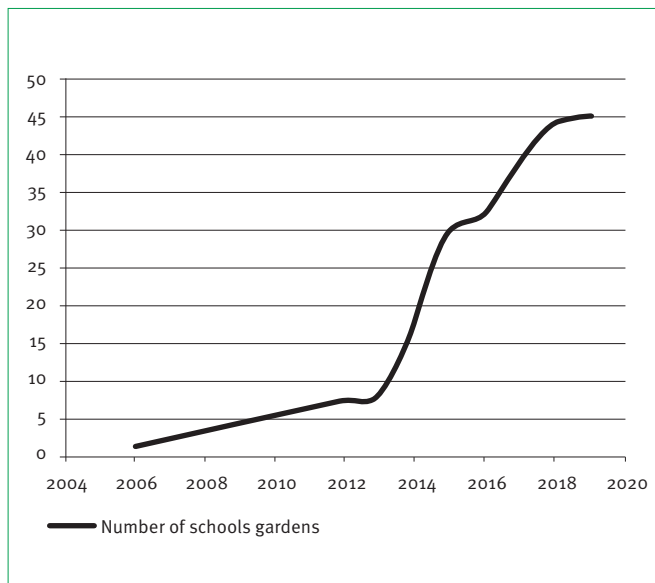
With the exception of the chair of the board, a serial entrepreneur with an inexhaustible amount of new ideas, the entire organization turnover meant that there was no one to transmit the organizational memory to the new employees. Therefore, with the grant application as a blueprint, the newly hired employees began constructing a new organizational identity narrative by looking towards the future and making sense of the promises made in the project application.

Development: Growth in scale and scope

The gradual shift in temporal focus was manifested in the organizational expansion that followed the attainment of the grant in 2013. Between 2014 and 2016, the number of school gardens across the country grew from 7 to about 30 (see Figure 1). This growth coincided with the implementation of a national school reform in 2013, which, amongst other things, demanded an increased focus on natural science, physical activity, and longer

but more flexible school hours, thereby making school gardens an excellent tool for meeting the new governmental demands (Olsen & Trier, 2013).

Exhibit 1. Total number of school gardens



In addition to increasing the number of school gardens across the country, the nonprofit organization also pursued a series of new projects. Rather than staying within the boundaries of food education, the organization sought to exploit the widespread societal interest in sustainable agendas and the growing number of green initiatives by expanding the organization's mission:

We need to open up for other relevant areas. There's not enough in the educational field by itself. (Management team member interview, 2017)

Riding a wave of attention, the nonprofit organization gradually found itself in a cycle of writing applications to fund new initiatives, developing new concepts and procedures, while also trying to expand the number of school gardens. The decision to expand the organization's mission resulted its venturing into other areas by trying to adapt the original school garden concept to fit other contexts (e.g., social housing). This development was further fueled by the nonprofit organization's financial model, which was dependent on external grants and made the organization vulnerable to the demands and expectations of its benefactors. Because funding from foundations is primarily allocated to new initiatives rather than to maintain existing operations, the nonprofit faced a problem: In order to keep

afloat, promises of new deliveries had to be made. To maintain legitimacy and a favorable relationship with potential funders, the organization made decisions based on its future hopes, shaping the organization's direction in unintended ways:

I'm very pleased that we've opened up [for new areas], but we probably wouldn't have, if it weren't for... if it wasn't the only way [the foundation] and others would financially support us again. (Chair interview, 2017)

To address the ongoing pressure for securing new funding, the organization continued to generate new ideas about how to adapt the school garden concept to other settings. One such initiative was to develop a children's cookbook with inspiring recipes that would enable children to expand their culinary curiosity, knowledge, and skills at home with their families. In 2015, 170,000 copies were published and distributed for free, thanks to an additional donation from the sponsoring foundation (€0,7 million/DKK 5.1 million). To further support this initiative, the nonprofit established nationwide cooking clubs for children. Another project the organization pursued was an initiative which aimed to improve quality of life in social housing communities through social gardening. In addition, the nonprofit organization committed itself to creating a digital learning platform, an annual food festival, developing five new pilot projects, and establishing an annual cycle of year-round activities (seminars, theme days, etc.). Programs to extend the school garden concept to other age groups (e.g., kindergarteners, teenagers, and retired seniors) and to vulnerable groups (e.g., refugees and people with various disabilities) were also considered as potential new projects. An organizational member explains:

You wouldn't believe all the things we've been over. It's been everything from organic conversion of municipalities. [...] It's crazy! (Management team member interview, 2017)

Hijacked by an imagined future

Having attempted to separate its identity narrative from that of its founder, the nonprofit became increasingly focused on its future potential rather than its past achievements. After harnessing its identity as a nonprofit organization and silencing its past, hardly any reference was made to the parent organization in the project applications submitted after 2015. Instead, the nonprofit's identity became increasingly defined and informed by its ongoing

projects and future aspirations, which were encouraged and legitimized by funding foundations who preferred that explicit mentions of the nonprofit's past were kept to a minimum (email correspondence, 2017). Conversations that took place during meetings and workshops further demonstrated how organizational members increasingly considered their main task to be developing new projects and not maintaining previous endeavors. In these discussions, organizational members seemed to agree that the original mission had become redundant, as it did not embrace the wide array of new organizational activities and ambitions. Although the mission was deemed “*too limited*” and “*lacking focus*” (field notes, 2017), management had difficulty articulating the organization's current identity claims. When asked about the organization's different roles, the majority of employees described their roles as primarily related to “*development*” while depicting the organization as “*a developer of ideas*” (field notes, 2017). These notions came to form the basis for the emerging organizational identity, which was guided by new project applications, temporally located in the future, and almost completely detached from the past.

The future temporal focus of the new, emerging identity narrative was further reflected in how and which tasks the nonprofit performed and prioritized. Consequently, numerous working hours and efforts were devoted to searching for and identifying new funding possibilities and subsequently developing project applications to fund potential future initiatives. The continuous search for new project ideas resulted in a culture that likened “new” to “good” at the expense of ongoing tasks:

[People] really fired up and spoke about all this ‘development’ and other ideas one also could pursue. And that... that was... You could say, what happens is that it trickles down into the organization. It's just as if it's not as important, what I'm sitting and doing. Neither is there anyone who sets a direction and frames it. And then it's just really hard to prioritize it. (Management team member interview, 2017)

The increased attention on new projects gradually shifted the nonprofit's temporal outlook to an imagined future, as tasks related to development gained “*prominence in terms of value and prestige*” (email correspondence) among the employees. While the range of projects expanded and more efforts were vested in developing new projects and funding applications, ongoing operations were gradually neglected. Reinforced by an organizational culture that celebrated innovation and development, mundane tasks and present activities were given

less priority. As the organization became increasingly future-driven, the identity narrative that previously informed the nonprofit's mission and identity drifted into the background:

It puzzles me sometimes... Why look back at what has been done for more than a hundred years? Why not look forward and say what could be fantastic? So, when people ask: ‘From where do you get all these ideas?’ I say: ‘We look ahead! What is it that we dream about?’ (Chair interview, 2017)

As the organization gradually became defined by its future potential, new projects began to constitute new organizational identity markers. The transfer of the school garden concept to other contexts proved far more troublesome than initially expected, as it was challenging to acquire sufficient knowledge to transfer and adapt the concept to other areas. Although the organization described its culture as characterized by “*high energy*” and “*devoted employees*,” its focus on developing new projects had diverted the organization from its original mission. As the nonprofit's identity diluted and an identity vacuum emerged, a new identity narrative was needed to create coherence and make sense of all the divergent projects being developed:

(...) a clear common thread through all of our initiatives is needed. Even if you think it might be a bit further away from the core, a clear common thread is needed. (Management team member interview, 2017)

The new emerging identity narrative was a story about an organization in which “development” was the heart of its identity. This shift in self-perception led to identity dilution, where the organization's original mission became hijacked by its imagined future.

Addressing identity dilution and mission drift

Over time, a growing awareness emerged among employees that the nonprofit had departed from its original path, which resulted in confusion over the organization's identity and strategic direction. One employee recalls thinking the following:

There is something wrong here. There weren't anyone who dared to address that there was something wrong in the way we were assembled

[as an organization], and it was never brought up. (Management team member interview, 2017)

Uncertainty concerning the organization's purpose and mission made identity questions emerge: Are we still a school garden organization, and if not, what are we? The organization's identity and memory about "who we are, and where we come from" was at stake.

What I realized was that there were no one who had an overview. There simply wasn't when I arrived. (Management team member interview, 2017)

The growing identity frustration among nonprofit members culminated in the beginning of summer 2017. Efforts to address the rising dissatisfaction resulted in two layoffs, a managerial transition, and changes in the top management team. A new top manager, who had previously overseen the contact to the local school gardens was internally recruited. The transition meant a change in management style and a strict focus on core tasks. As a result, eleven anticipated projects became stranded in a "developmental limbo" (email correspondence).

From the development team being the most important thing in the world, we are now a support function. (Management team member interview, 2017)

Thus, the change entailed a kind of back to basics approach in the sense that the nonprofit organization rediscovered itself as a school garden organization, thereby realigning its identity and temporal focus.

I think we are on the right track now. We're really down to core business, which is the school garden part. (Management team member interview, 2017)

As a result of this realignment, the nonprofit organization also became aware of its internal memory assets by acknowledging how its most abiding members were the real common thread and identity carriers in the organization. Through a series of meetings, the organization started to revisit its relatively short past in search of its identity. In examining their past, the nonprofit became aware of a broader history of school gardens that extended farther back in time than they realized. In this way, the nonprofit organization *redefined and extended their history* by acknowledging how they were part of a wider and older school garden movement. The organization expanded its retrospective outlook to encapsulate a

more distant history, than merely by referring to its own founding past. However, stretching their temporal horizon not only affected the organization's conceptualization of its past, it also enabled them to envision their future. The organization expanded its future horizon by moving from having a focus on near future temporal horizons, defined by each project-funding period, to adopting the UN 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda as its mission. This broadening of past–future horizons further assured them of the importance of their original mission and core task: "to strengthen children and youth's commitment to sustainability, food culture and health" (authors' translation of web page material). Exhibit 2 provides an overview of the shifts in temporal focus.

DISCUSSION

Throughout this paper, we have illustrated how an emerging one-sided, temporal focus on the future, instigated by a series of actions and events, resulted in organizational memory loss and identity dilution. This process was driven by an exaggerated concern with development to realize a hoped-for-future, which, in turn, had consequences for organizational identity. We argue that organizational forgetting might lead to the creation of loosely coupled identity narratives that hijack and displace the organization's original identity and mission. Other factors, such as high employee turnover and pressures from external benefactors who the organization depends on financially to ensure continued operation, further fuel this process. These precarious conditions consequently induce an excessive focus on future-oriented organizational projects and a decreased attention to past (and present) operations. In being overly concerned with pleasing external stakeholders, the organization generates an identity vacuum, whereby a newly constructed organizational narrative becomes a patching tool to construct coherency between new and ongoing organizational projects. Interpreting our results in relation to extant theory, we note how narratives take on a performative role in identity construction processes (Maclean et al., 2015). We contribute to previous discussions by suggesting that emerging identity narratives that assert a consistent, one-directional temporal focus will tend to amplify and feed off each other, heightening the risk of identity dilution. Although organizations have temporal agency (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998), we show how they, nevertheless, might not *deliberately* exert it. Our findings suggest that organizational memory is not merely a strategic resource for identity construction (Foster et al., 2011) but also a temporal anchor that keeps future ambition in check (Maclean et al., 2018).

Exhibit 2. Shifts in temporal focus marked by events, transitions and turning points

| Year | Major events, transitions and turning points | Temporal focus |
|------|--|--|
| 2003 | Nonprofit founder initiates activities on the company's ground that later will evolve into the nonprofit organization | <i>Present</i> |
| 2006 | Nonprofit is established. | <i>Present –future</i> |
| 2013 | Major batch funding attained. Founding company mentioned 16 times in the application. Depicted as synergistic, close relationship Focus on outside recognition and (local) legitimacy | <i>Past-present-future orientation</i> |
| 2014 | Complete turnover in the organization. New hiring (without lived experience of the org. past). | <i>Present-future orientation</i> |
| 2015 | New project(s) added to the portfolio. | <i>Future orientation</i> |
| 2016 | New major project. Funding organization never mentioned (partly based on wishes of the funder, meeting with foundation later, legitimacy of funders). Organizational psychologist hired to help shape the development of the organization. A new administrative leader is hired. | <i>Future orientation</i> |
| 2017 | Workshops initiated. Expressed wishes to further focus on development. Vision expressed as too narrowly focused on children. Need to find the core of the organization; an idea and concept developer? Promise of establishing another five pilot projects New employees unaware of organizational past | <i>Shift from (short) future</i> |
| | Top management dismissed | <i>to past-present-future</i> |
| | UN development goals and school garden history becomes part of the identity narrative | <i>to long past-present-future orientation</i> |

From the outset, we have considered remembering and forgetting as two sides of the same coin, on both of which the narratives that inform organizational identity depend, including and excluding elements of the organizational and field level pasts (Foster et al., 2011). Previous research on organizational forgetting has largely focused on *the intentional action and the strategic potential of forgetting*, whereby organizations consciously omit or select elements from the past to enable identity coherency, authenticity, and legitimacy (e.g., Anteby & Molnár, 2012; Foster et al., 2017; Hatch & Schultz, 2017). In these studies, organizational forgetting is largely viewed as a strategic decision, in which top management omit particular elements of the organization's past to construct and promote a particular, desired identity and strategic direction. While we concur with these arguments, our study contributes to a less examined aspect of organizational forgetting by focusing on *unintended action* and consequences of

silencing or forgetting the past. Moreover, previous studies show how organizations engage in intentional forgetting work (Mena et al., 2016) and emphasize how organizations manipulate what is remembered (Anteby & Molnár, 2012). Thus, they assume that as some memories are silenced, others are mobilized in their place. However, our case demonstrates how organizational past is silenced and forgotten all together. This is supported by Maclean et al.'s (2017) study of East Germans' identity transition as they transitioned to a reunified Germany and their original identity was hijacked and displaced by the West German identity. Therefore, we extend the research on organizational memory by highlighting how temporal focus constitutes a key mechanism for organizational remembering and identity construction. We theorize a link between temporal focus, organizational memory, and identity by showing how a number of (unintended) events, transitions, and turning points influence and shape the organization. Our

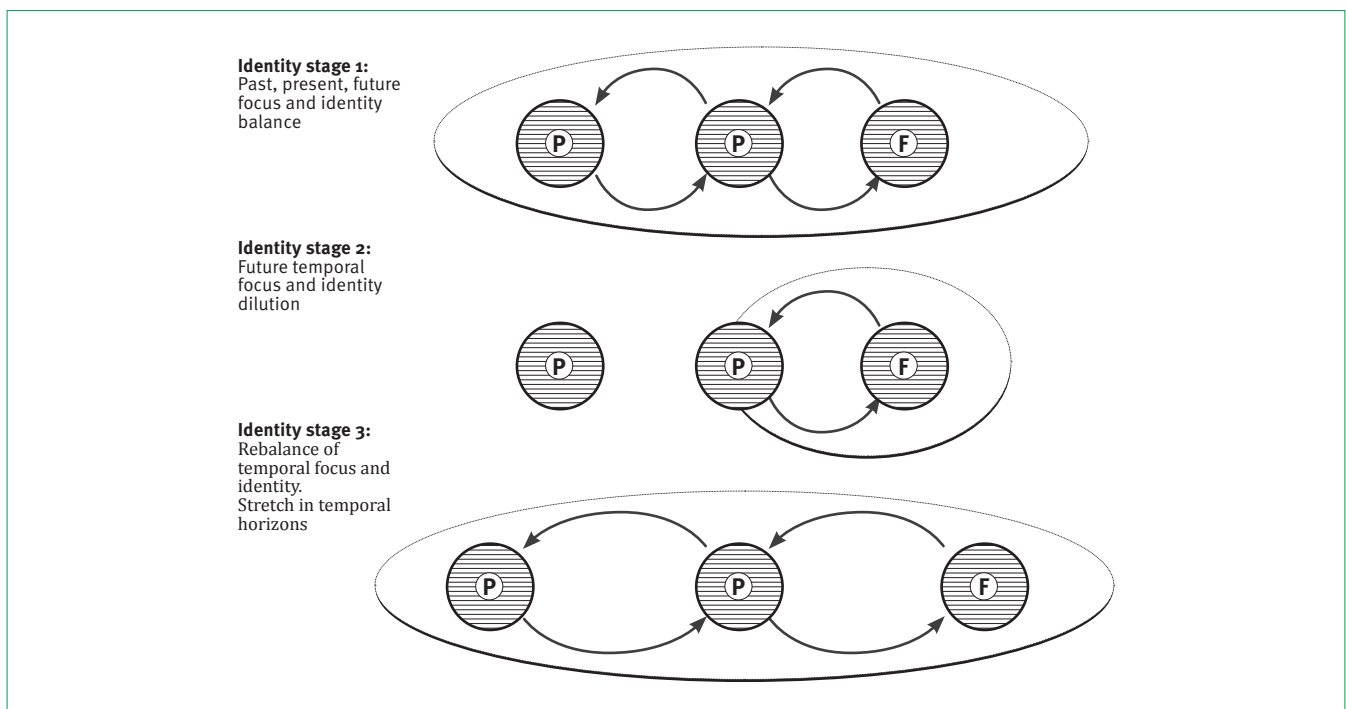
contribution is on forgetting, not merely as a strategic choice and the result of deliberate action (Mena et al., 2016), but also as the *unintended* effects of a series of actions and decisions made as a result of the organization's financial dependency on external funding, recruitment practices, organizational turnover, organizational growth, cultural inclination, and a strategic orientation concerned with development and innovation.

Our study supports previous findings by Easterby-Smith and Lyles (2011), who argue that *high organizational turnover* may induce organizational forgetting and identity dilution. Our findings suggest that narratives of the past are forgotten due to rapid growth and personnel turnover that is characterized by an almost complete change in organizational staff. Our case illustrates how the nonprofit organization engaged in *identity work* to establish independence from its parent organization in an attempt to define and make sense of their identity and mission. Engaging in this type of work, organization members *make use of mnemonic technologies* (Olick, 1999) as a substitute for the previous identity narrative and memory that connected it to its parent organization. In an effort to establish a new identity by changing the tight historical link between the parent company and the nonprofit organization, the nonprofit shifted its temporal orientation and focus towards the future by installing the funding application — with its emphasis on organizational development — as a new identity marker. Our findings further demonstrate how

the successful attainment of new (future) projects results in the organization forgetting its past, thereby leading to *mission drift*.

Moreover, due to the nonprofit structure of the organization, it remains *highly dependent on external funding* and, thus, is highly vulnerable to the demands of its external benefactors (Santos, Pache, & Birkholz, 2015). These precarious relationships consequently induce an excessive focus on future-oriented organizational projects and a decreased attention to past and ongoing operations that results in hyper-adaptation (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). The outcome of this one-sided temporal outlook, which focuses largely on the future, is further reflected in and supported by an organizational culture in which “new” becomes equated with “good.” This temporal outlook causes management to neglect to revisit the basic and important questions of “who we are” (Albert & Whetten, 1985) and “where do we come from?” (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000), which in turn spurs a negative backlash against the organization's identity. Thus, our findings suggest that in times of change, identity work is critical for an organization's survival. Our findings also support previous research, showing how the past is used *for the future* (Schultz & Hernes, 2013). As such, the past, present, and future are inseparable entities that are inherently bound together (Emirbayer & Mische, 1998). We illustrate the three stages of identity search and dilution and shifts in temporal focus in Figure 2 below.

Figure 2. Temporal focus and stages of identity search and dilution



We find that the past is not only a strategic identity resource for constructing authenticity and legitimacy (Hatch & Schultz, 2017), but, in line with Maclean et al. (2018), it is also a *temporal anchor* from which the organization may seek its purpose, avoid identity dilution, and prepare for future change.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Our study contributes to the literature on temporal narratives as identity building forces, and the study's results provide insights into the power and mechanisms surrounding such narratives. While temporal narratives may be employed as rhetorical tools to construct temporal coherency between different organizational actions, we claim that they also have the potential of "hijacking" organizational direction. This risk, we suggest, particularly holds true for present- and future-oriented organizations, as silencing the past (Maclean et al., 2017) and forgetting its history may distort the organization's intended mission. By being overly concerned with pleasing external stakeholders, the organization generates hyper-adaptation (Hatch & Schultz, 2002), which leads to identity dilution and an identity vacuum. The newly constructed organizational narrative becomes a patching tool to create coherency across the expanding portfolio of new organizational projects. These new narratives may, nevertheless, gradually hijack and replace the original organizational mission. We suggest that organizations may be less prone to hyper-adaptation, identity dilution and mission drift when taking a longer-term view (Maclean et al., 2018) and envisioning *distant pasts and futures*, as the organization becomes less sensitive to short-lived changes in tastes and external demands from the field. However, our study also shows that organizational identity may be restored when revisiting and remembering the past. As such, our study also demonstrates the enabling effects of the past for organizational resilience and survival shown in other studies (e.g., Anteby & Molnár, 2012; Foster et al., 2011; Schultz & Hernes, 2013). We suggest, however, that the organization's past is not merely a strategic resource for identity construction, it is also a *temporal anchor* from which the organization may seek its purpose and prepare for future change. Finally, we suggest that an organization must be able to *balance its temporal focus* and look towards its imagined future *while* also remembering the past.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

The authors declare that they participated in all stages of development of the manuscript. From the conceptualization and theoretical-methodological approach, the theoretical review (literature survey), data collection, as well as data analysis, and finally, writing and final review the article.