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# Legitimizing Nascent Collective Identities: Coordinating Cultural Entrepreneurship

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The concept of collective identity has gained prominence within organizational theory as researchers have studied how it consequentially shapes organizational behavior. However, much less attention has been paid to the question of how nascent collective identities become legitimated. Although it is conventionally argued that membership expansion leads to collective identity legitimacy, we draw on the notion of cultural entrepreneurship to argue that the relationship is more complex and is culturally mediated by the stories told by group members. We propose a theoretical framework about the conditions under which the collective identity of a nascent entrepreneurial group is more likely to be legitimated. Specifically, we posit that legitimacy is more likely to be achieved when members articulate a clear *defining collective identity story* that identifies the group's orienting purpose and core practices. Although membership expansion can undermine legitimation by introducing discrepant actors and practices to a collective identity, this potential downside is mitigated by *growth stories*, which help to coordinate expansion. Finally, we theorize how processes associated with collective identity membership expansion might affect the evolution of defining collective identity stories.

**Key words:** institutional theory; organization and management theory; organizational identity and identification

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## Introduction

Since its inception, research on organizational identity has broadened its reach beyond an initial focus on the central, distinctive, and enduring attributes of individual organizations (Albert and Whetten 1985) to the interorganizational level, where collective identities that encompass multiple organizations are the focal point for scholarly attention (e.g., see Glynn 2008 for a review). At this more macro-organizational level, scholars have defined collective identities as groups of actors that can be strategically constructed and fluid, organized around a shared purpose and similar outputs (see Cornelissen et al. 2007). Once established, collective identities enable internal and external audiences to distinguish between groups such as classical versus nouvelle cuisine chefs (Rao et al. 2003), Boston trustees versus New York money managers (Lounsbury 2007), and industrial versus craft brewers (Carroll and Swaminathan 2000). Recently, research has moved beyond identifying collective identities and their consequences (e.g., Kraatz and Zajac 1996, Zuckerman 1999) to analyzing how they emerge (e.g., Kennedy 2008, Khaire and Wadhwani 2010, Navis and Glynn 2011a, Weber et al. 2008).

Despite these advances, a significant unresolved puzzle remains, that of understanding how the collective identities of nascent entrepreneurial groups gain legitimacy. A common solution offered by organizational

ecologists is that membership expansion contributes to a sort of “strength in numbers” legitimacy (e.g., Hannan and Freeman 1989). However, institutional theorists have strenuously argued that population density is a weak proxy of legitimacy and masks other potential explanations (e.g., Baum and Powell 1995, Zucker 1989). Moreover, nascent collective identities with small populations have been shown to attain legitimacy (e.g., Navis and Glynn 2011a). Thus, membership expansion alone does not account fully for the legitimation of a collective identity.

In addition, there is evidence that membership expansion can be a double-edged sword and undercut legitimacy-seeking efforts by a collective. On one hand, membership growth lends materiality to an emerging group, helping it to be perceived as “real” and attention worthy. As Kennedy (2008, p. 270) argues,

[Groups] gather strength when they mobilize resources such as people and money (Edwards and McCarthy 2004). Scientific and intellectual movements gain standing as they attract scholars, articles, citations, and grants (Frickel and Gross 2005)...Counts matter because they shape what people view as a “real” job, company, or market...counts lend materiality to new social structures.

Although being “counted” matters, collective identity members face pressure to differentiate themselves

within the group to be competitively distinctive and secure needed resources (King et al. 2010, Lounsbury and Glynn 2001, Navis and Glynn 2011b). This proliferation of actors and practices can broaden collective identity boundaries but can also frustrate legitimacy by making a collective identity less obvious, coherent, and comprehensible to interested external audiences (Rao 1994, Weber and Glynn 2006, Weick 1995). Thus, there is an inherent tension between expansion and legitimation of a collective identity: too much expansion can lead to an overly broad set of members, thereby diluting the coherence of a collective identity, whereas too little can hinder the development of a visible profile to gain the attention of external audiences. It is this tension, between the expansion and legitimation of a collective identity, that we address.

We advocate for a cultural approach that focuses on the formative stages of collective identity emergence when a nascent entrepreneurial group is not significantly recognized, understood, or sanctioned. We argue that under such conditions, efforts to gain the attention of, and be validated by, external audiences require a form of active and strategic *cultural entrepreneurship* (Lounsbury and Glynn 2001)—that is, the production of rationalizing accounts or stories that astutely deploy vocabulary (Nigam and Ocasio 2010) and rhetoric (Suddaby and Greenwood 2005) to shape the attention (Ocasio 1997) and perceptions of various audiences, justifying the group's legitimacy and helping to coordinate its expansion. We theorize that the meaning and labels associated with a collective identity are narrative constructions that are bound to the stories communicated by members.

Stories often embody and explicate frames (Benford and Snow 2000, Goffman 1974) that enable collective identity members and external audiences to make sense of (Weick 1995) and meaningfully assess the nature of a collective identity (Fiss et al. 2010, Kennedy and Fiss 2009). Institutional logics (Thornton and Ocasio 2008), identity codes (Hsu and Hannan 2005), and discourse (Lawrence and Phillips 2004, Phillips et al. 2004) may also provide key higher-order cognitive and symbolic building blocks for stories because they comprise a tool kit of available cultural elements (Rao 1994, Swidler 1986, Weber et al. 2008) that help make a collective identity understandable and position it within an interinstitutional system. However, for nascent or undeveloped collective identities, stories provide a key way that identity codes become established or institutional logics instantiated in the first place. Thus, stories are a key communication mechanism that functions both to help define the identity core of the collective and to delineate the boundaries of membership that constitute it.

Our approach draws from recent work on the link between organization-level storytelling and legitimacy

(e.g., Lounsbury and Glynn 2001, Martens et al. 2007, Rindova et al. 2011, Vaara and Monin 2010) and extends it to the collective level (see Kennedy 2008). Our focus is on the legitimation of a collective identity as a meaningful and coherent category, rather than individual members who constitute the category or the concrete practices that help to define it. In noting the paucity of attention directed to the study of collective identity, Pratt (2003, p. 176) urges a focus on stories as a symbolic device that enables a collective identity to be understood in the first place; we follow his suggestion. We define collective identity stories as verbal or written expressions employed by a group of entrepreneurial actors to help project an image of themselves, collectively, as a coherent category with a meaningful label and identity. As with stories at the organizational level, collective identity stories offer ready-made constructions of credibility, appropriateness, and viability and serve as touchstones for audience assessments of legitimacy. At the same time, efforts to tell coherent and resonant stories at the collective level are far more complicated—especially as a group expands—because stories can come from a variety of members with varying individual interests and identities (Glynn 2008, Whetten 2006). Our core thesis is that the legitimation of a nascent collective identity is importantly predicated on membership expansion but culturally mediated by the content and coherence of stories told by an expanding array of members.

With respect to story content, studies have shown that understandings about categories, such as collective identity groups, are anchored by core and distinguishing practices linked to its purpose (e.g., Lakoff 1987, Rosch 1975, Rosch and Lloyd 1978). As such, we anticipate that legitimation is facilitated when a nascent group of actors agree on a *collective identity defining story* that outlines their group's core purpose and practices, theorizing their meaning and appropriateness. When a growing number of members tell consistent stories about a group, external audiences are more likely to perceive the group as real and understand its core purpose and practices, thus making legitimation more likely (Aldrich and Ruef 2006, Kennedy 2008). In the context of collective identities, however, this likely requires efforts to coordinate membership growth. We suggest that *growth stories*—stories told by group members theorizing (Greenwood et al. 2002) opportunities for new actors to affiliate with the group and pursue variants on its core practices—are an important mechanism in this pursuit. When growth is intertwined with a group's purpose and core practices, new members will be more likely to tell stories that external audiences can readily fit together—even if they emphasize their unique features in this context—thus contributing to collective identity legitimation (Lounsbury and Glynn 2001, Navis and Glynn 2011b).

Figure 1 presents our process model of collective identity legitimation that depicts how stories—of collective identity definition and growth—function as cultural mechanisms that mediate the relationship between membership expansion and collective identity legitimation. Although membership growth can enable legitimation, it is not without risks. Actors may disagree about appropriate lines of membership expansion and tell competing growth stories. As boundary objects that define the meaning and membership of the group, growth stories can also resonate beyond intended audiences and be interpreted in multiple ways (Bartel and Garud 2009). Thus, even when uncontested, expansion can result in members' telling inconsistent and discrepant stories, making a collective identity ambiguous and interfering with its legitimation (Hsu and Hannan 2005, Weick 1995). Furthermore, although our figure suggests linearity, we believe that collective identity legitimation is a dynamic and recursive process. Although membership expansion can have positive or negative effects, it will nonetheless have a feedback effect, resulting in stories that either affirm the benefits of growth or emphasize its limits.

In the next section, we elaborate our model and advance a set of integrated propositions about collective identity legitimation. We begin by reviewing the relevant literature and drawing on a variety of empirical examples that help to motivate and develop our model. Our examples do not provide exhaustive evidence in support of our claims, but animate our theorizing and highlight the fruitfulness of the lines of inquiry we suggest. We conclude by discussing the implications of our model for the study of collective identity legitimation.

## Theorizing Collective Identity Legitimation

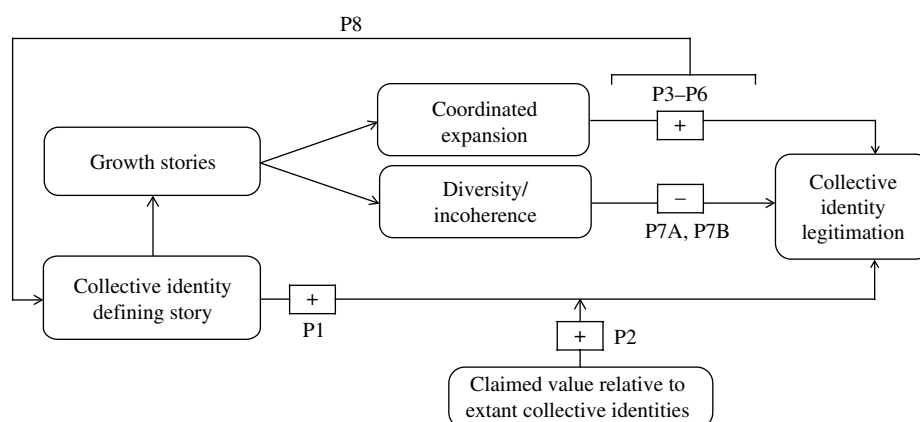
Legitimacy is a central construct in institutional theory and importantly shows how conformity to cultural sensibilities affects organizational survival (Deephouse and Suchman 2008, Suchman 1995). As Scott et al. (2000,

p. 237) note, “organizations require more than material resources and technical information if they are to survive and thrive...they also need social acceptability and credibility.” Broadly speaking, legitimacy is hinged to the cultural support for an organization or the “the extent to which the array of established cultural accounts provide explanations for its existence, functioning, and jurisdiction, and lack or deny alternatives” (Meyer and Scott 1983, p. 201). Given such cultural alignment, legitimacy ensues such that “the activities of the organization are appropriate and desirable within a taken-for-granted system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions” (Johnson et al. 2006, p. 57).

A key touchstone for legitimacy is an organization's identity (e.g., Glynn and Abzug 2002). For an organization, identity defines both “who we are” and “what we do” and also locates an organization in broader categories of meanings as a member of a group such as an industry or field (e.g., Navis and Glynn 2011b). Classifying an organization as a category member is important, because isolated actors tend to be overlooked or marginalized (Zuckerman 1999). Moreover, such categories embed “identity codes” that external audiences use to assess and legitimate organizations (Hsu and Hannan 2005, Hannan 2010). And yet, in spite of the recognized significance of collective identities in legitimation, organizational theorists have paid scant attention to the processes through which collective identity categories themselves become legitimated (for an exception, see Rao 1994).

Recent work relating to storytelling and legitimacy (e.g., Lounsbury and Glynn 2001, Martens et al. 2007, Rindova et al. 2011, Vaara and Monin 2010) provides a useful starting point. Simply put, stories are narratives structured with a beginning, middle, and end, communicated through verbal or written language (Bruner 1990). All stories include three basic elements: a narrative *subject* (focal actor), an *object* (goal), and a *destinator* (situational context) (Fiol 1989, p. 279). We propose that stories that function to legitimate the emergence and

Figure 1 A Process Model of Collective Organizational Identity Legitimation





expansion of a nascent collective identity are of two basic types: identity stories, which define and meaningfully label the collective identity; and growth stories, which explain and coordinate the increasing number of members. Both types of collective identity stories focus on enabling the cultural alignment of both the defining attributes of the group (“who we are” as a collective) and its core practices (“what we do” as a collective). Below, we elaborate on these ideas and develop propositions about the conditions under which different kinds of stories might enhance or inhibit the legitimacy of a collective identity.

### Collective Identity Defining Stories

Cultural categories, such as those that provide a label for collective identity groups, are not natural givens but products of social construction (e.g., Douglas 1983; Hsu et al. 2010; Kennedy 2005, 2008). Accordingly, we argue that the first step toward collective identity legitimation is agreement among an emerging group of actors that they are engaged in a common enterprise linked to a core set of distinguishing practices—this forms the basis for a common collective identity defining story. Without this type of story, entrepreneurs may create similar organizations in relative isolation (Aldrich and Ruef 2006, Weber et al. 2008) or tell discrepant individual stories that paint an unclear picture of a group (Rao 1994).

In the earliest stages of collective identity emergence, there is likely ambiguity about the nature of the group, what value it offers, and where it sits amidst an institutional landscape (Aldrich and Ruef 2006). A defining collective identity story, however, can subjectively distill a jumble of vague and contradictory activities into a simplified and relatively coherent portrait, making a group more perceptible and understandable to internal and external audiences (Ashforth and Humphrey 1997, p. 53). For example, in the 1990s, a small group of vintners in the Bordeaux wine region began to experiment with novel practices such as short fermentation times, sweet flavors, small production lots, and direct sale to consumers (Croidieu and Monin 2009). Proponents led by Jean-Luc Thunevin began to tell stories that theorized these collective practices as the base of a novel “garagiste winery” identity, a contrast to the deep pockets and estate ownership that made the “Bordeaux winery” identity impermeable to most would-be vintners. According to Thunevin,

The garagiste is one who has no other possibilities because he has no money, no big vineyards. He just has to do the best he can because he has to live off the sale of 3,000 bottles. For me, that’s a garagiste; that’s the pure spirit of the garage....The recipe isn’t very complicated. Halve the normal yield; tackle problems in the vineyard by physical labour rather than chemicals; pluck and arrange the leaves on the vines meticulously to make each one a high-performance ripening machine;

take whatever risks are necessary with the weather to get the grapes fully ripe; pick and sort the grapes carefully; use wild yeasts, spotless wooden vats and new wooden barrels in the cellar...garagistes, without any money, have an amazing success with their wines. (quoted in Jefford 2007)

Once understood, accepted, and repeated by members, defining collective identity stories can become institutionalized accounts that create a symbolic boundary—“conceptual distinctions made by social actors to categorize objects, people, and [practices]” (Lamont and Molnár 2002, p. 168)—that distinguishes a group of actors from others. However, securing agreement among group members on what defines the collective identity story is not necessarily smooth and may require political maneuvering by prominent advocates to pull members into alignment (Pratt and Foreman 2000, Price and Gioia 2008). When actors disagree on either the purpose or practices that define a collective identity, a clear defining story is unlikely to emerge. For example, early producers roundly agreed on the purpose of automobile production—to provide motorized transportation to the general public—yet disagreed about how cars should be powered, stopped, steered, and operated. Automakers told an inchoate array of conflicting stories, creating considerable uncertainty among external audiences and frustrating attempts to legitimate the industry until standards were developed years later (Rao 1994).

It is also possible for organizations to share common practices yet disagree on a defining collective identity story. For example, many wineries in the Bordeaux region shared the core practices articulated by proponents of the garagiste identity. Still, many of these organizations actively resisted being categorized as “garagistes,” viewing it as an undesirable identity (Croidieu and Monin 2009). Instead, they identified with the dominant “Bordeaux winery” collective identity and emphasized practices that they shared with these organizations. As a result, apparently similar wineries projected very different images through the stories they told to external audiences, creating considerable uncertainty about the garagiste identity and frustrating its legitimation. Thus, we propose the following.

**PROPOSITION 1.** *A nascent collective identity is more likely to be perceived as legitimate by external audiences when members agree upon, communicate, and repeat stories that consistently and coherently define its core purpose and practices.*

An effective collective identity defining story emphasizes not only the similarity among its constituent members and core practices but also its differentiation from other collective identities. Sharp symbolic boundaries can facilitate external audience attention and help a

nascent collective identity to be understood as a distinct entity (Lamont and Molnár 2002), yet collective identities need to be understood within broader classification schemes so that they are not dismissed or devalued (Zuckerman 1999). A collective identity is more likely to be viewed as legitimate when members tell defining stories that locate the group in relation to broader categories such as an established field, market, or industry and that theorize the value of the group's core purpose and practices in this context. Stories that locate a nascent group in this way shift the locus of identity away from the collective identity group itself and toward the context in which it seeks recognition (e.g., Czarniawska and Wolff 1998). This sort of relational positioning can aid with legitimation because it signals specific external audiences, capitalizes on their extant knowledge, and thus provides a cognitive anchor for understanding a nascent collective identity (Etzion and Ferraro 2010, Lounsbury and Glynn 2001, Wry 2009).

For example, defining collective identity stories told by proponents of French nouvelle cuisine made it clear that their nascent collective identity applied to fine dining restaurants, not cafés, pâtisseries, or fast-food establishments (Rao et al. 2003). Thus, although nouvelle cuisine embodied practices linked to freshness, innovation, short menus, and new serving methods—which were defined in opposition to “classical cuisine” (Rao et al. 2003, p. 807)—members nonetheless shared many features in common with these other fine dining establishments. By situating distinctive practices within this established context, proponents signaled external audiences such as the *Michelin Guide* and helped them to identify nouvelle cuisine as worthy of their attention—even if this attention was not positive at first (Rao et al. 2003).

Although referencing an established field, market, or form importantly contextualizes a nascent collective identity, making it more readily understandable, proponents still face a challenge in being accepted (Zuckerman 1999). Articulating the value of a group's purpose and practices in ways that capitalize on resonant value distinctions is important in this regard. As Rao (1994, p. 41) argues, actors must become skilled users of cultural tool kits, and this can take a variety of forms. Although the nascent collective identity for nouvelle cuisine gained attention by articulating distinct practices within established contexts, it was contested early in its emergence. To help overcome this, proponents made consistent links to legitimate collective identities in cognate fields, telling stories linking the group's core practices to already legitimated identities in fields such as literature and film that similarly advocated for artistry, innovation, and freedom. According to Fischler (1993, p. 247):

The Grande Cuisine, at the end of the 1960s, experiences a kind of revolution and revelation...there is a larger

wave transforming French society, and wavelets, those that the large wave indirectly induced in the Cuisine and catering industries... When studying the nature and content of the Nouvelle Cuisine, one could perceive a large part of further evolutions in the attitudes and behaviors in France.

Thus, we propose the following.

**PROPOSITION 2.** *A nascent collective identity is more likely to be perceived as legitimate by external audiences when members tell stories that situate the group within an established field or market and theorize its value and distinctiveness relative to other collective identities in this context.*

### Growth Stories, Coordinated Expansion, and Legitimacy

Collective identities are not infinitely plastic and capable of embedding a random array of actors and practices. Even if members portray a common image of a group, audiences are likely to be confused if the stories told by its members contain pronouncements about an ambiguously connected array of actors and practices (Weick 1995). Recall, for example, the immense difficulty that automobile manufacturers faced in securing legitimacy when members' stories made conflicting pronouncements about propulsion, steering, and stopping (Rao 1994). Although we attend to the potential pitfalls associated with expansion below, we believe that this potential downside can be mitigated when new members share in the group's purpose and pursue variants on its core practices. Studies in cognitive psychology have shown that categories can be internally diverse yet remain knowable among external audiences when members fulfill a common purpose and their distinctive attributes are meaningfully linked to the group's core features (Lakoff 1987, Rosch 1975, Rosch and Lloyd 1978); these dynamics have been validated for natural object and social actor categories (see Hannan 2010, Hogg and Terry 2000).

Although this research highlights the potential for social categories to be internally diverse, the variants accommodated within a collective identity do not owe to random chance, nor can they be predicted a priori (Lakoff 1987). Rather, they tend to be qualifications on the core identity prototype or exemplar (Mervis and Rosch 1981), such that members exhibit different grades of membership (Hannan 2010) but are nonetheless recognizable as rightful members who share the collective identity. Accordingly, we theorize on the ways in which stories told by group members can make the boundary of a collective identity clear but still permeable to actors who share in the group's purpose and pursue variants on its core practices; such stories lay the foundation for productive expansion. Although we recognize that collective identities can expand organically when actors

see opportunities to pursue a valued interest through group membership, this is less likely to occur when a group does not have significant legitimacy because members will have difficulty attracting material and symbolic resources, thus making cultural processes of expansion more likely (Aldrich and Ruef 2006).

To expand a collective identity boundary to accommodate specific types of actors and practice variants, members can tell *growth stories*. We identify two types of growth stories: *inviting stories*, which focus on the targeted integration of specific actors, encouraging them to extend core practices in ways that align with their extant interests, and *signaling stories*, which focus on expansion through the integration of specific lines of core practice elaboration, thereby opening opportunities for a wide variety of actors. Inviting and signaling stories are not exclusive—we expect that collective identity members will utilize both—and it is possible for stories to include inviting and signaling elements. We theorize them separately, however, recognizing that they are ideal types.

*Inviting Stories.* We conceive of inviting stories as efforts to recruit new members into a collective identity while making its boundary flexible around the practice variants these actors might pursue. Here, the imagery is of a group's orienting purpose as a sort of boundary object deployed in stories that seek to attract specific kinds of actors, encouraging them to pursue variants on core practices that capitalize on their extant interests and identities (Carlile 2002, O'Mahony and Bechky 2008). For example, Weber et al. (2008) showed that, over time, diverse actors pursued membership in the grass-fed ranching collective identity, translating practices from their existing identities into unique forms of collective identity participation: consumer health writers advocated health benefits, food writers educated consumers, consultants provided soil and animal management expertise, and scientists focused on breeding and genetics. They note that key advocates actively reached out to potential members such as freelance food writer Jo Robinson, encouraging her to identify as a collective identity member in ways that articulated with her journalistic identity and interests (Weber et al. 2008, p. 535).

Inviting stories focus on specific targets, and as the preceding example suggests, we expect that the relationship between inviting and legitimacy is strongest when already legitimate groups are targeted. To the extent that a nascent group is successful in this regard, stories told by new members will likely lend credibility to the collective identity and carry more weight among external audiences than stories coming from more marginal actors (Iyengar and Kinder 1986). For example, Lounsbury et al. (2003) showed that legitimization of recycling as a collective identity was enhanced when proponents such as Cliff Case from the National

Recycling Coalition made explicit overtures to invite solid waste haulers to join their group. Previously, recycling was subsumed and marginalized in the solid waste field category of *resource recovery*, which valorized waste-to-energy incineration practices. However, inviting stories reached out to solid waste haulers and their supporters, spurring them to imagine how core recycling practices might intersect their financial interests and extant curbside pickup practices. As a result, solid waste haulers began to embrace recycling and advocate for its recognition and use. With this powerful ally onboard, external audiences such as the industry (e.g., *Waste Age*) and popular media (e.g., *Business Week*) began to view recycling as having a distinct and legitimate collective identity.

Probing the more fine-grained cultural dynamics that enable this type of multifaceted identification, Fujimura (1997) showed how the nascent collective identity for recombinant DNA research in cancer treatment integrated progressively diverse scientific communities. Practices having to do with recombinant DNA initially seeded a collective identity among a group of high-status molecular biologists who pioneered DNA sequencing. In their efforts to mobilize support for their nascent collective identity—and have it viewed as legitimate among external audiences such as government funding bodies and medical writers—these scientists dedicated considerable effort to theorizing recombinant DNA applications in research programs for endocrinology, genetics, immunology, biochemistry, and chemotherapy. Inviting stories that theorized the link between DNA sequencing and these varied scientific disciplines were told through academic journals, conferences, and the media. According to Fujimura (1997, p. 111),

Proponents enrolled [members by telling stories that] posed questions which: (1) scientists could experimentally investigate using recombinant DNA technologies; (2) laboratories were already organized and equipped with resources to handle...; and (3) satisfied significant audiences.... Researchers could immediately begin experimentation on specific problems, while thinking of ways to translate more general problems into specific experiments.

Such stories were told by a variety of group members, effectively making the collective identity boundary more permeable as they invited new members and flexible because they called on them to leverage their extant interests and identities to pursue variants on core practices. As a result, the recombinant DNA collective identity flowered in many directions, anchored by its orienting purpose and core practices (Fujimura 1997).

Although inviting stories can aid with the productive expansion of a nascent collective identity, not all invitations are equally likely to be effective; they must resonate with their target audiences. As Griswold (1987, p. 1105) argues, a resonant work “locates itself within



a set of conventions that it strains, plays with, perhaps inverts, but does not totally ignore...[it] intrigues its recipients without mystifying or frustrating them” (see also Etzion and Ferraro 2010). Thus, we anticipate that the most effective invitations will stress the appropriateness and value of the group’s purpose in relation to a target’s interests and identity. Latour (1987, p. 109) explains this process well:

The first and easiest way to find people who will...invest in the project or buy the prototype is to tailor the object in such a way that it caters to these people’s explicit interests. Interests are what lie in between actors and their goals, thus creating a tension that will make actors select only what, in their own eyes, helps them reach these goals.

However, interests need not be narrowly instrumental. As Fujimura (1997) notes, invitations to extend recombinant DNA practices resonated, at least in part, because they were presented as an opportunity to use “sexy” new techniques that would provide members a mark of distinction within their extant disciplines. Regardless, crafting a resonant invitation is an intensive process that requires nuanced understandings about the actors being targeted as well as creativity to translate a nascent group’s purpose and practices in ways that intersect their interests. Thus, we propose the following.

**PROPOSITION 3.** *Growth stories are more likely to contribute to the coordinated expansion and perceived legitimacy of a nascent collective identity when they invite established actors to pursue the group’s purpose and link their existing activities to its core practices.*

**Signaling Stories.** Whereas inviting stories involve attempts to expand a collective identity boundary by targeting specific types of actors, signaling stories emphasize particular extensions of core practices that may apply to multiple kinds of actors. In imagining the future practice possibilities of a collective identity, signaling stories theorize a new collective identity boundary, making the extant boundary flexible to sanctioned practice variants. Furthermore, by targeting broadly, the concern is not that all potential members will affiliate with a collective identity and pursue a signaled practice variant, but rather that a few will. For example, DiMaggio (1988) signaled an elaborated boundary for neoinstitutional theory around issues of agency and change. The call was neither geared at a specific audience, nor did it plot a specific approach. Instead, DiMaggio (1988) provided a call for scholars to imagine how their work could inform questions of institutional change. Subsequently, studies have drawn on social movements, entrepreneurship, practice, science and technology studies, and cultural sociology to explain institutional change (for a review, see Greenwood et al. 2008).

The membership expansion of a “new carbon science” collective identity in the early development of the nanotechnology field provides another useful example, evidenced in particular by signaling stories told by Nobel Laureate Richard Smalley. After the discovery of the buckyball—a new allotrope of carbon—and derivative structures such as carbon nanotubes (CNTs), the new carbon science emerged as a collective identity uniting researchers with a shared interest in these novel compounds (Meyyappan 2005). Although early efforts were focused primarily on cultivating core practices for creating and purifying nanotubes for scientific and commercial gain, subsequent years saw many proponents work to guide development by theorizing a wide variety of potential uses and benefits for CNTs (Berube 2006, Meyyappan 2005). Smalley was particularly active in this pursuit, and his efforts were vital in shaping subsequent trajectories of practice (Kaplan 2008). Starting in the mid-1990s, Smalley told stories that signaled avenues of practice extension linked to energy applications and broadcast these through congressional testimony, research presentations, journal articles, and the popular press (for a review, see Mody 2009, Smalley Institute 2009). An excerpt from a presentation given at the University of Dallas and repeated worldwide details the three lines of practice variation that Smalley (1995) signaled in his storytelling:

Nanotubes to the rescue!... 1: Power cables [superconductors, or quantum conductors] with which to rewire the electrical transmission grid, and enable continental, and even worldwide electrical energy transport; and also to replace aluminum and copper wires. 2: H<sub>2</sub> storage, light weight materials for pressure tanks and LH<sub>2</sub> vessels, and/or a new light weight, easily reversible hydrogen chemisorption systems. 3: Fuel cells.

Smalley’s signaling stories were aimed at three very broad audiences: government funders, students, and scientists from multiple disciplines (Smalley Institute 2009). Unlike a highly tailored invitation to each group, however, these stories sat at a fairly high level of abstraction: the focus was on enlarging the boundary defining core practices (Zietsma and Lawrence 2010), not the necessity of specific actors or techniques to accomplish this. The presentation from which the above quote is extracted was presented to audiences of physicists, chemists, material scientists, engineers, and others (Smalley Institute 2009). Furthermore, comparing the above quote to Smalley’s (2004) congressional testimony, we note that there was no significant tailoring of the story for this different audience:

[Energy] must be cheap. We simply cannot do this with current technology... There are two key aspects that will make a huge difference: (1) massive long-distance electrical power transmission, and (2) local storage of electrical power... Nanotechnology in the form of single-walled carbon nanotubes forming what we call the Armchair



Quantum Wire may play a big role in this new electrical transmission system.

Although it would be a simplification to reduce the expansion of the new carbon science around energy applications solely to Smalley's signaling stories, these practice variants now sit comfortably within an elaborated collective identity boundary and have evolved into one of the most prominent areas of CNT research. According to the prestigious journal *Science*,

[Smalley's] vision of using nanotechnology to help solve the energy crisis...is motivating governments to fund effective programs. Many will dedicate themselves to a goal that Rick focused upon during his last 4 years of life: a carbon nanotube quantum wire cable much stronger than steel that would carry a current 10 times as high as that carried by copper wire and weigh one-sixth as much. (Adams and Baughman 2005, p. 1916)

As with inviting, signaling stories must resonate to be effective. However, because signaling stories are aimed at broader audiences than invitations, the sources of their resonance are likely different: a story designed to intersect the interests of a specific group is less likely to resonate broadly. A signal's resonance is more likely a function of its alignment with cultural understandings that are shared among wider audiences (Etzion and Ferraro 2010, Wry 2009). For example, Smalley's signals about energy applications in the new carbon science were linked to broader societal issues such as environmental protection, poverty, and security (Mody 2009, Smalley Institute 2009). Thus,

**PROPOSITION 4.** *Growth stories are more likely to contribute to the coordinated expansion and perceived legitimacy of a collective identity when they signal how core practices can be appropriately extended to include a broader array of practice variants.*

*The Distributed Nature of Stories.* Although there is empirical support for the relationship between collective identity membership expansion and legitimacy (e.g., Kennedy 2005, 2008; Rao et al. 2003; Weber et al. 2008), extant accounts tend to portray external audiences as perceiving expanding groups in a direct and unmediated way. However, legitimation is often not an inherent outcome of expansion; rather, it is a culturally mediated process, and one that can be enabled or frustrated depending on the content and constancy of stories told by an expanding membership. Consistent collective identity stories that emanate from an expanding array of members can positively influence collective identity legitimation (Aldrich and Ruef 2006, Kennedy 2008). Actors have a stake in the legitimacy of the groups in which they claim membership because this affects their own legitimation possibilities (Hudson 2008). Thus, members are typically predisposed to tell

their group's defining collective identity story and advocate for the value of its purpose and practices, especially when legitimacy-attainment efforts are at their earliest stages. As stories about the appropriateness of a nascent collective identity accumulate, they can suggest to external audiences that there is broader agreement about its value.

Additionally, evidence suggests that when actors communicate their individual identities to external audiences, they tell stories where the situational context (or story destinator) is the collective identity where they claim membership (Glynn 2008, Lounsbury and Glynn 2001, Navis and Glynn 2011b). As such, the inclusion of new actors and practice variants can facilitate legitimacy by conveying collective identity expansion even as members communicate their unique positions in this context. As a growing array of members communicate their identities in ways that articulate with a defining collective identity story, external audiences are more likely to be aware of membership expansion and view a group as something real, stable, and attention worthy (Kennedy 2008). As such, even when a field or market creates pressure for competitive differentiation, collective identity membership expansion can facilitate legitimation. Thus,

**PROPOSITION 5.** *A nascent collective identity is more likely to be perceived as legitimate by external audiences when an expanding array of members tell consistent and coherent stories about the group.*

*The Role of Leading Members.* We expect that growth stories will be particularly effective when told by leading collective identity advocates who are widely recognized and have credibility with key external audiences. These may be members who are viewed as exemplars (or prototypes) of the group—such actors have the highest cue validity among internal and external audiences and are typically perceived as a group's de facto leaders (Hogg and Terry 2000, Rosch and Lloyd 1978). Authoritative growth stories may also be told through more formal channels such as an industry association (Rao 1994) or by specialized industry media, critics, and commentators (Carroll and Swaminathan 2000, Weber et al. 2008). Although these may emerge somewhat later in the development of a collective identity, such centralized voices may be necessary to facilitate the articulation of consistent growth stories and membership expansion that articulates with the core purpose and practices detailed in a group's defining story.

In either case, we expect that coherent and consistent growth stories coming from the recognized leaders of a collective identity will be more efficacious because they are expected to speak on behalf of the group, and the stories they tell help internal and external audiences make sense of what the group is, what it stands for, and how it might expand productively (see Price and Gioia 2008 for a related argument at the organizational

level). Leading members are also more likely to have disproportionate access to dissemination channels such as the popular and industry press, giving them a considerable advantage in shaping collective identity stories and boundaries. There is also evidence that the status of prominent actors provides a halo around their efforts to move a collective identity in a new direction, efforts that might be decried or overlooked if they originated with peripheral actors (Frickel and Gross 2005). Indeed, although invitations to solid waste haulers were contentious among recycling organizations, the main actor responsible for these, Cliff Case, was the founder and president of the National Recycling Coalition. This position lent credence and influence to his storytelling and the ultimate alliance between these strange bedfellows (Lounsbury et al. 2003). Thus, we propose the following.

**PROPOSITION 6.** *Growth stories are more likely to contribute to the coordinated expansion and perceived legitimacy of a collective identity when they are told consistently and more exclusively by a group's leading members.*

### **Problematic Expansion: Diversity and Incoherence**

Until now, we have presented growth stories as relatively smooth-functioning mechanisms. In some cases, however, efforts to alter the boundaries of a collective identity can be highly contentious (Gieryn 1999, Zietsma and Lawrence 2010). Growth stories can originate with any member of a collective identity, not just leading ones, and there is no guarantee of consistency. As a result, a nascent group may project inconsistent messages about its defining identity and appropriate expansion. In its banal form, this may result in signals and invitations going unrequited, confusing potential members about how a group is growing and how they might pursue their interests within it. A more serious problem can ensue, however, when members actively contest growth stories, perceiving theorized actors and practice variants as inconsistent with the group's defining collective identity story.

For example, the early years of the chiropractic collective identity were characterized by disputes over the signaling stories that some members told advocating for the use of instruments to extend the group's core practices of spinal manipulation. Many "straights" (chiropractors who did only manual manipulation) decried the use of instruments as inconsistent with the group's core purpose of nonmedical treatment and feared it would allow medical doctors to control the nascent profession (Philips 1998). The argument over the boundary of chiropractic proceeded for years, with one group arguing for expansion and the other for boundary reinforcement and the expulsion of instrument-based practices. As a result of this contested signaling, the boundaries of chiropractic were obscured, slowing membership growth

and interfering with legitimation by making the group more prone to attacks from the American Medical Association (Philips 1998).

Inviting stories created similar problems among early members of the recycling collective identity. The initial recycling centers established in the 1970s were motivated by anticapitalist ideology, with proponents viewing their central purpose as promoting education, community building, and environmentalism. According to Seldman (1986, p. 6),

Recycling was practical and educational. It was a vehicle for restructuring our thinking about the determinants of waste in our society. It was a path away from the concentration of political and economic power which treated virgin resources as a grand barbecue of the American continent, and similarly exploited the resources beyond our borders. We began to think about decentralized methods of production with closed-loop production/re-use/recycle systems.

However, as some members began to craft inviting stories targeted to solid waste haulers, theorizing about how they might extend recycling in ways that articulated with their extant landfilling and curbside pickup practices, other collective identity adherents actively resisted because they viewed these as incompatible with the group's defining collective identity story (Lounsbury et al. 2003).

Even when members tell consistent growth stories, however, there are potential pitfalls that can undermine their enabling role in the membership expansion–legitimacy nexus. Stories are boundary objects that can resonate with multiple audiences (Bartel and Garud 2009). Thus, inviting stories might attract nontargeted groups, and signaling stories may resonate with actors who do not share in the group's orienting purpose, creating problems for legitimation. For example, a collective identity for "Dogme" filmmakers began to gain legitimacy in the late 1990s, only to be undone by problematic inviting. The initial emergence of Dogme was linked to the efforts of four independent (indie) Danish filmmakers (the Dogme brothers) who defined Dogme films in opposition to big-budget Hollywood productions and linked this to core practices related to simplicity, low technology, and a focus on story (Wood 1999). The brothers issued invitations to other indie filmmakers in Europe and Latin America through a series of seminars that taught core Dogme practices and encouraged directors to integrate and extend them in their films. However, these invitations resonated with unintended groups—most notably mainstream American directors such as Steven Spielberg and Martin Scorsese, who expressed interest in making Dogme films. The Dogme brothers viewed these actors as inappropriate members with little commitment to the collective identity and whose concurrent lines of work violated the central purpose of Dogme filmmaking. Fearing cooptation and corruption,

the brothers disavowed their affiliation with Dogme, stalling—and eventually reversing—the group’s expansion and legitimation (Gilbey 2002).

In addition to providing entrée for unintended actors to affiliate with a nascent collective identity, growth stories can be interpreted in a variety of ways (Bartel and Garud 2009), and actors may, intentionally or unintentionally, pursue a range of unsanctioned practice variants. This problem may be further amplified if a story resonates with multiple constituencies who each extend core practices in a different way. Recall that the introduction of diversity within a collective identity can create problems when members pursue, and tell stories about, practice variants that do not articulate meaningfully with those at a group’s core. When stories diverge in this way, the symbolic boundary of a collective identity can become unclear, making it problematic for external audiences to perceive which actors and practice variants comprise a collective identity and which might better fit in other categories (Weber and Glynn 2006, Weick 1995). This can undermine legitimation by making a collective identity nebulous.

The collective identity for Dogme filmmakers again provides a good example. As we noted, inviting stories told by the Dogme brothers facilitated membership expansion as indie filmmakers across Europe and Latin America began to view themselves as Dogme filmmakers. However, whereas some adhered closely to the practices outlined in the group’s defining collective identity story, many drew on them haphazardly, integrating some but not others and mixing them with features of more mainstream films (Wood 1999). As stories from these directors accumulated, attaching an ambiguously linked set of practices to the Dogme collective identity, it became unclear among external audiences as to what exactly Dogme was and how it differed from other types of independent filmmaking (Gilbey 2002, Wood 1999). Thus, we propose the following.

**PROPOSITION 7A.** *Growth stories can inhibit legitimation when members disagree about appropriate lines of expansion and thus tell stories that invite discrepant types of actors or signal a disparate array of practice variants.*

**PROPOSITION 7B.** *Growth stories can inhibit legitimation when they create misalignment between a group’s defining story and the stories told by its members. This may happen when growth stories attract actors who do not partake in the group’s purpose or who engage in practices that do not articulate meaningfully with the group’s core practices.*

### Feedback Effects: The Evolution of Collective Identity Stories

We expect that benign or problematic expansion related to growth stories will have feedback effects on how

members of a collective identity understand themselves, leading to potential alterations of the core collective identity defining story. For instance, when membership expansion occurs through the addition of discrepant actors and practices that threaten a group’s legitimacy, leading members may dissociate themselves from these and tell stories that encourage a narrowing of the group’s symbolic boundary. We expect that such stories will emphasize the limits on expansion and reaffirm the primacy of the group’s defining story. For example, in the early 1990s, a group of chefs began to cultivate a new collective identity for “techno cuisine,” telling stories that defined its purpose as enhancing flavors and textures through the use of core practices linked to investigation and experimentation. According to chef Ferran Adrià, a leading proponent of techno cuisine,

Nouvelle cuisine was creative. [Our] approach is to investigate. It is not the same. This takes a team, equipment, money and time. We have one rule here: It has to be new. It may be good, but if we’ve done it before, it doesn’t matter. (quoted in Matthews 1998)

The goal is to provide unexpected contrasts of flavour, temperature and texture. Nothing is what it seems. The idea is to provoke, surprise and delight the diner (quoted in Moore 2006).

In years surrounding the turn of the millennium, chef Adrià and other leading proponents such as Dave Arnold and Heston Blumenthal invited nouvelle cuisine chefs to learn and elaborate core techno cuisine practices; they also told stories that signaled avenues where techno cuisine might be productively extended through the integration of specific scientific practices, particularly those related to molecular gastronomy (Abend 2008). These efforts were largely successful and chefs from around the world began to affiliate with techno cuisine. However, this membership expansion brought a litany of new practices, which created ambiguity about the boundary of techno cuisine as a distinct collective identity category. Moreover, leading chefs and culinary journalists viewed many of techno cuisine’s new members as diverging from the group’s core purpose of enhancing flavors and textures by simply trying to shock the diner. As a result, chefs Adrià and Blumenthal along with Thomas Keller and Harold McGee began to emphasize the limits on membership expansion, reaffirming the group’s defining collective identity story and clarifying its core purpose and practices:

Along with many other developments, a [techno cuisine] approach to cooking has emerged in restaurants around the globe, including our own. We feel that this approach has been widely misunderstood, both outside and inside our profession. Certain aspects of it are overemphasized and sensationalized, while others are ignored. . . . We wish to clarify the principles and thoughts that actually guide us.



We embrace innovation—new ingredients, techniques, appliances, information, and ideas—whenever it can make a real contribution to our cooking. We do not pursue novelty for its own sake. We may use modern thickeners, sugar substitutes, enzymes, liquid nitrogen, sous-vide, dehydration, and other nontraditional means, but these do not define [us]. They are a few of the many tools that we are fortunate to have available as we strive to make delicious and stimulating dishes. (Adrià et al. 2006)

However, when membership expansion unfolds in a productive way—when members share in the group's purpose and pursue clear variants on core practices—leading members may tell stories that elaborate the group's defining story, affirming the benefits of expansion and providing a foundation for further growth. For example, mirroring stories about the successful expansion of CNT research in line with the variants signaled by Richard Smalley—such as the story in *Science* discussed earlier—proponents of recombinant DNA told stories capitalizing on its growth and emergent legitimacy to signal further lines of development:

[In 1984] we had \$198 million in recombinant DNA [funding]...that figure includes work being done in oncogenes, but it also includes people who are walking up and down the genome...looking for something else. And they're going to find the regulatory elements that control the oncogenes...[recombinant DNA researchers] have told us something very important, but now you want to find out what regulates these genes so that you can...turn them on and off. (DeVita 1984, p. 5)

Similarly, the collective identity for grass-fed ranching leveraged its productive expansion in stories that pointed to the proliferation of members across diverse geographic areas. By identifying an expanding group of producers and their growing legitimacy in the eyes of external audiences, stories told by leading advocates in outlets such as the *Stockton Grass Farmer*—a magazine dedicated to grass-fed ranching—fostered internal understanding and cohesion among new members, helping to ensure constancy and coherence in the stories they told, and motivating them to invite new members into the collective identity (Weber et al. 2008, p. 550). Thus, we propose the following.

**PROPOSITION 8.** *The outcome of membership expansion will affect the stories told by a group's leading members: problematic growth may lead to the reassertion of a more delimited collective identity defining story emphasizing limits to expansion; productive growth may be celebrated, leading to an elaborated collective identity defining story.*

## Discussion

Although the notion of collective identity has become a central concept for organization theory research on how fields become culturally partitioned and more diverse,

most extant research has focused on how external audiences such as critics and other third parties value and sanction collective identity members (e.g., Zuckerman 1999). We complement and extend this line of inquiry by building upon burgeoning efforts to study processes of collective identity creation in institutional fields and markets (e.g., Kennedy 2008, Navis and Glynn 2011a, Weber et al. 2008) to develop a more systematic research agenda on the emergence, expansion, and legitimation of collective identities. In developing our theoretical approach, we concentrated on the tension between collective identity membership expansion and legitimacy. Although membership expansion of a collective identity can importantly facilitate legitimation, we argue that this relationship is culturally mediated by the stories told by a group's members. Building on work that examines the relationship between organizational storytelling and legitimacy (e.g., Lounsbury and Glynn 2001, Martens et al. 2007, Rindova et al. 2011, Vaara and Monin 2010), we developed a process model at the collective level, where attempts to tell consistent, coherent, and resonant stories to attain legitimacy are more complicated.

We argued that securing agreement among an initial set of group members on a defining collective identity story can lay the foundation for legitimation by generating growth and bounding expansion. Drawing from cognitive psychology, which suggests that categories can integrate considerable diversity without undermining their coherence if members share a common purpose and pursue variants on core practices (Lakoff 1987, Rosch 1975), we proposed that two types of growth stories—inviting and signaling—can help a nascent group to coordinate membership expansion. When these stories effectively manage expansion, a growing group is more likely to be noticed, understood, and sanctioned by external audiences. However, when members tell an ambiguously connected array of stories, legitimacy may be inhibited or challenged, leading to prominent members refining the group's defining story and stressing the limits to expansion.

Although we have suggested ways in which different types of stories can aid with the legitimation of a nascent collective identity, there is much empirical work to be done. We encourage research that examines the content and frequency of different types of stories, how these differ among group members, and how the temporal ordering of defining and growth stories unfolds in varying contexts. The efficacy of different types of defining and growth stories is also worth investigating. For instance, are the stories told by partially embedded group members who make their primary identities in different fields more or less efficacious than the stories told by dedicated group members? There is also important work to be done in identifying the boundary conditions for the processes that we theorize. Although the types of expansion that we expect to aid in legitimation



have been empirically validated across a range of contexts (see Lakoff 1987, Rosch 1975, Rosch and Lloyd 1978), these studies typically examine extant groups. The dynamic nature of collective identity expansion adds a layer of complexity and points to the importance of identifying just how far a group's core practices can be extended before they undermine its intelligibility. This is particularly prescient considering the distributed nature of growth stories. As various members invite new actors and signal lines of practice elaboration, there is the potential for a nascent group to become unwieldy and ambiguous rather quickly, even if there is no significant contestation over its boundaries.

Additionally, in developing our approach to collective identity legitimation, we emphasized the study of collective identities that are nascent and whose boundaries are still in formation. As such, our work complements extant studies of collective identity, which tend to focus on established ones and the ways that they constrain their members (see Hsu and Hannan 2005, Zuckerman 1999). By theorizing earlier stages of collective identity emergence and legitimation, our framework highlights the importance of studying boundary fluidity and change. In doing so, we have focused on the importance of constructing and actively managing symbolic boundaries (Lamont and Molnár 2002). To wit, we theorized inviting and signaling stories as mechanisms that members might use to manage boundaries during legitimation processes, and we encourage scholars to study these empirically, identifying their prevalence, utility, and limits.

In addition to directing attention toward boundaries, our approach highlights the potential for a group's practices to be elaborated or changed over time and thus points to a subtler and more endogenous engine of institutional change than typically offered in institutional theory (for a review, see Greenwood et al. 2008). More specifically, our framework suggests that a group's purpose might remain constant while its practices wax and wane—especially among more peripheral members. For example, whereas the core cultural elements that define “action movies” have remained quite constant over time, their associated practices have changed dramatically (Hsu 2006). This has had serious implications for the scope and risk of movie projects as well as the rise of dedicated organizations, such as Industrial Light and Magic, which have emerged to support these practices. We also think that by more fully embracing the duality of culture and practice, institutional theorists might find productive intersections with cognate literatures, such as that on practice (Lounsbury and Crumley 2007) or on social worlds (e.g., Strauss 1978), where scholars have long recognized the potential for groups sharing a common purpose to change as they fragment into different communities of practice.

Furthermore, in laying out the basic contours of collective identity legitimation through storytelling, we have emphasized some aspects while downplaying others; this points to several important avenues of research. For one, although we recognize that securing agreement on a defining collective identity story is a prerequisite for legitimation, it is important that future studies probe these dynamics more fully, illuminating the mechanisms and enabling conditions that facilitate this foundational step in collective identity legitimation. It would be especially useful to study how broader cognitive and symbolic elements linked to institutional logics, identity codes, and frames become deployed in stories and how the dynamics of stories might help to reshape those broader cultural structures and labels. Also, although our model has focused primarily on the stories told by collective identity members, we recognize that these stories are received by a variety of external audiences who may react to them differently, resulting in varying perceptions about a group's legitimacy (Deephouse and Suchman 2008).

The stories told by group members may also be filtered or interpreted by external audiences, especially cultural intermediaries such as journalists, critics, industry media, ratings agencies, and consumer associations (Kennedy 2008, Rao et al. 2003). Cultural intermediaries have been shown to play a crucial role in authorizing the claims made by collective identity members and in shaping the perceptions of other external audiences such as the general public and the members of other collective identities (e.g., Deephouse 2000). At the organizational level, the perceptions of such audiences have been shown to have an important feedback effect on identity (Corley and Gioia 2004, Gioia et al. 2000), and such effects may extend to large groups or collectives such as we have described. In addition, although we have emphasized the key role of stories told by collective identity members themselves, stories about a collective identity can also be told by a variety of other actors including cultural intermediaries—in some cases, such “other” stories may fundamentally shape legitimation processes as well as the stories told by collective identity members. We encourage future researchers to expand our theorizing in ways that account for the role of cultural intermediaries and the complexity of stories and their relationship to legitimacy.

Finally, even though we concentrated on collective identity dynamics in the context of entrepreneurial groups in organizational fields and markets, we believe that our approach has more general utility. For instance, the notion of collective identity has been employed beyond the purview of macro-organization theory research to address the emergence of social movements (e.g., Melucci 1995), societal groupings related to gender and ethnicity (e.g., Griswold 1987), or even smaller collectives such as virtual teams (Pratt 2003). However,

as Pratt (2003) notes, not all collective identities are alike, and we need further empirical research to understand how various kinds of collective identities differ to develop more general theory about collective identity dynamics. We believe that the research we suggest will usefully guide scholars toward the development of a more general theoretical understanding.

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