When Cymbals Become Symbols: Conflict Over Organizational Identity Within a Symphony Orchestra

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Abstract

In this qualitative field study, I explore how the construction of a cultural institution's identity is related to the construction of strategic capabilities and resources. I investigated the 1996 musicians' strike at the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra (ASO), which revealed embedded and latent identity conflicts. The multifaceted and specialized identity of the ASO was reinforced by different professional groups in the organization: the ideologies of musicians and administrators emphasized institutional resource allocations consistent with the legitimating values of their professions, i.e., artistic excellence versus economic utility. These identity claims, made under organizational crisis, accounted for variations in the construction of core competencies. I propose a model that explicates how the construction of core capabilities lies at the intersection of identification and interpretive processes in organizations. Implications are discussed for defining firm capabilities in cultural institutions and for managing organizational forms characterized by competing claims over institutional identity, resources, and core capabilities.

(Identity; Strategic Capabilities; Intergroup Conflict; Crisis; Qualitative Study)

Introduction

Symphony orchestras are "ensembles whose primary mission is public performance of those orchestral works generally considered to fall within the standard symphonic repertoire and whose members are compensated nontrivially for their services" (Allmendinger and Hackman 1996, p. 340). Orchestras are particularly important cultural institutions because they are one of the early organizational forms that produced and delivered art to the public (*Americanizing the American Orchestra* 1993, p. 2). However, while orchestras may be singular in their cultural contribution, they are multiprofessional in their identity.

Most cultural institutions have identities composed of contradictory elements because they contain actors (artisans and administrators) within the organization who come from different professions; as a result, different groups of actors cherish and promote different aspects of the organization's identity (Albert and Whetten 1985, Golden-Biddle and Rao 1997). Central identity elements in cultural institutions—artistic and utilitarian — hybridize the organization's identity because they colocate "two or more types that would not normally be expected to go together" (Albert and Whetten 1985, p. 270). Consequently, tension and conflict can erupt when, in response to environmental change or organizational retrenchment, one identity element is emphasized over another.

It is through their particular identity lens (artistic or utilitarian) that organizational actors, by virtue of their organizational position and/or professional affiliation, craft their particular definitions of institutional resources and core capabilities. The result is to problematize the definition of core capabilities for multiprofessional institutions. Resource-based analyses of the strategy formulation process routinely exhort managers to identify core capabilities and match them to available environmental opportunities (Prahalad and Hamel 1990). Typically, the definition of core capabilities is portrayed as rational, analytical, and impersonal (e.g., Amit and Shoemaker 1993), but this has often proven to be a mirage in practice. Wide variation exists in executives' perceptions of an organization's distinctive capabilities (Stevenson 1976); my research illuminates how identity dynamics within a cultural institution can account for such perceptual variations.

In this qualitative study, I investigate how discrete

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identity fields, i.e., sets of actors clustered around "socially constructed identities" (Hunt et al. 1994), affect the construction of an organization's resources and problematize the definition of core capabilities. I conducted fieldwork research at the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra (ASO), where latent rifts between musicians and administrators culminated in a pivotal event, the 1996 musicians' strike. Strikes by professionals in organizations constitute "environmental jolts" and reveal ". . .properties that were not so visible during more tranquil periods" (Meyer 1982, p. 516). While disharmonious elements of utility and ideology may coexist in "collaborative evolution" in the orchestra (*Americanizing the American Orchestra* 1993, p. 67), environmental jolts awaken slumbering differences, which become expressed as discord, conflict, and strife.

I begin with a review of the relevant literature on organizational identity. Next, I describe the hybrid, specialized identity of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra (ASO), noting how the different identity elements championed by different groups relate to their definitions of the institution's core capabilities. In turn, I show how budgetary constraints excited such embedded, divisive tendencies. I conclude with a model that shows how identity dynamics make the construction of core capabilities a contested process in cultural institutions. One of the key contributions of this study is to offer a counterpoint to extant formulations of core capability construction; the findings suggest that the process of delineating such capabilities is nonlinear, nonrational, and socially constructed, particularly under conditions of organizational crisis.

Organizational Identity

Organizational identity is a key intangible aspect of any institution. It affects not only how an organization defines itself, but also how strategic issues and problems, including the definition of firm capabilities and resources, are defined and resolved (e.g., Dutton and Dukerich 1991, Dutton et al. 1994, Dutton 1997). A statement of organizational identity consists of three *claims*: "the criterion of *claimed* central character . . . the criterion of *claimed* distinctiveness . . . [and] the criterion of *claimed* temporal continuity" (Albert and Whetten 1985, p. 265, emphases added). Developing an organization's identity can be construed as a *claim-making process* about those organizational attributes that are central, distinctive and enduring. Lending support to this perspective are Ashforth and Mael's (1996) notion that "claim" relates organizational identity to strategy, and Porac et al.'s (1999) definition of identity construction as "an explicit claim that an organization is of a particular type."

Research on the sociology of social problems reveals how claim-making activities construct problems, particularly when problems are contentious. Spector and Kitsuse (1977) conceive of social problems as claim-making activities, such that claims are definitional activities that arise around issues that groups of people find troublesome. Claim-making is a rhetorical activity, typically conducted by a group of social actors to persuade an audience to accept their construction of a problem as legitimate and, thus, their proffered solution (Best 1989). Claims derive from an underlying ideological script (Wolfgang 1996) which is reinforced in language and by the mass media, both of which are important devices in articulating claims (Fritz and Altheide 1987).

In the sociological literature, claim-making has been studied in a wide variety of contexts. For instance, Gerber and Short (1986) demonstrate how activists used the press to problematize a previously nonproblematic issue, i.e., the marketing of infant formula in less developed countries; public claims from organizational outsiders gained attention and generated pressure on corporations to change. In studying the emergence of child custody laws, Coltrane and Hickman (1992, p. 400) investigated how the claim-making of fathers' rights groups evoked counterclaims by mothers' groups; they found that claim-making activities of both groups involved rhetorical strategies that included "horror stories, numeric estimates, and an implied social consensus." Mulcahy (1995) investigated the 1981 Northern Irish hunger strike as a claim-making activity in which prisoners constructed their identities as legitimate political actors rather than terrorists. Goodrick et al. (1997) examined the role of physicians' claims in hospitals' ideological shift from social welfare to business-management.

As is evident from this research, claims can originate from social actors who coalesce around an issue, and/or from professional (or occupational) groups who may have a vested interest in an issue. The role of professional groups in making claims on organizations has been recognized (e.g., Goodrick et al. 1997). Professionals institutionalize expertise in a bid to garnish legitimacy through the formalization of work (Abbott 1991). In other words,

> At the simplest level, institutionalization of expertise means the emergence of a set of rules for handling it, a set of roles to play relative to it, and arrangements of those norms and roles into larger structures—organizations for delivering expert services, hierarchies of types of expertise, routines for reproducing expertise, and so on. (Abbott 1991, p. 20)

Logical systems, ideological values, and knowledge stores that attempt to monopolize a body of cultural capital govern professions or expertise from which rents can

be extracted (Abbott 1991, p. 28). Thus, professionals have a stake in maintaining their identity in a professional field, and claiming a set of identity attributes that can be used to their advantage in society and/or in the marketplace of business.

When an organization is characterized by multiprofessionality (Abbott 1991) and multiplicity in identity, intergroup conflict often emerges; claims and counterclaims over the organization's identity are made in an effort to legitimate certain groups over others, thereby defining firm capabilities in ways that advantage them. Identity dynamics are wedded to the social context in which such groups situate their claims (Markson 1989). This sociological perspective on claim-making, when applied to cultural institutions, potentially offers an explanation as to why variations in the construction of core capabilities exist within organizations. More than that, it raises interesting questions concerning how core capabilities and resources may be contested and changed over time.

The identity of cultural organizations is specialized or ideographic; contradictory identity elements—normative artistry and utilitarian economics—coexist and are claimed by different units within the organization (Albert and Whetten 1985, p. 271). In the symphony orchestra, for instance, musicians enact the normative identity and administrators (managers and board members) enact the utilitarian identity, which is "governed by values of economic rationality, the maximization of profit, and the minimization of cost" (Albert and Whetten 1985, pp. 281–282). The multifaceted, complex nature of the symphony's identity is further elaborated in, and reinforced by, the existence of different professional groups within the orchestra. Musicians have a professional identity as performance artists and union members (The American Federation of Musicians, AFM); orchestra executives are somewhat underprofessionalized, lacking certification (but seeking it), and trying to combine both business skills and artistic training, since many are former musicians. For board members, the symphony board is largely a secondary affiliate, following after their primary occupation (e.g., law, business, medicine).

The pluralism of the organization's identity is encoded institutionally, in both symbol and structure. Symbolically, utilitarian values are encoded in the bottom line, and ideological values are encoded in musical icons—cymbals—that are potent reminders of the orchestra's normative identity. For instance, the Boston Symphony Orchestra, as part of its identity, adopted a logo featuring a stylized gold horn (Selame and Selame 1985). The symbolic differences are further reinforced by the symphony's structure, which has been characterized as rigid, isolating orchestra members from each other (*Americanizing the American Orchestra* 1993, p. 177). Its organization has been likened to a three-legged stool, consisting of the executive director, board chair, and music director/conductor. The musicians have no formal role in the leadership structure, and their voices often emerge through other institutional forms, such as the union.

Given the differences that exist structurally and symbolically in the orchestra, conflict between ideological elements in the organization's identity seems almost inevitable. Particularly during periods of organizational retrenchment or crisis, latent identity conflicts erupt (Albert and Whetten 1985). This occurs because groups resist attempts to label their particular function or activity as peripheral, preferring instead to champion their own group's identity and, indirectly, to promote selected elements of the hybrid organizational identity to the exclusion of others. I argue that the ideology embedded in identity claims filters organizational members' perceptions of firm resources, and thus affords a partial explanation for the observed variations in the definition of core capabilities that can be used for competitive advantage.

Research Methodology

Research Setting

The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra (ASO) was founded in 1947. For its first quarter-century, it grew in prominence as a regional orchestra and is today ranked among the top 10 orchestras in the United States. The ASO is housed under a cultural umbrella, the Woodruff Arts Center (which also encompasses the High Museum of Art, the Atlanta College of Art, and the Alliance Theater Company), whose founding concept was "not just to advance the arts, but to use the arts to advance Atlanta" (Rice 1994, p. 17). From early in its history, the dual chords of artistry and utility have resonated within the ASO.

The ASO consists of 95 full-time musicians and a conductor/artistic director, a 72-member board of directors (58% male), and a 44-member administration, which includes administration (16), artistic administration (6), development (11), and marketing and public relations (9). The 1996 musicians' strike took place over a 10-week period (September 22–December 4). This year was "an unusually stormy year for orchestras nationally" (Gay 1997, p. 1). Although the issues were different for every orchestra—in Philadelphia, it was recording contracts; in San Francisco, health benefits; and in Atlanta, wages and weeks of employment—the form these disagreements between musicians and administrators took was the same: a musicians' strike.

The ASO strike centered on the terms of a new musicians' contract and, in particular, on salary and working conditions. A key event precipitating the strike was management's decision not to tenure six probationary ASO musicians due to lack of finances, in spite of their having satisfied tenure standards of musical quality. The board, in explaining its decision, emphasized elements of the orchestra's economic identity (i.e., budget constraints and financial resources) at the expense of musical standards. In opposing the decision, musicians emphasized the normative identity, citing the need to improve artistic quality by playing challenging pieces which necessitated more, rather than fewer, players. When musicians' claims failed to persuade the board to change their decision, they initiated a strike to make their claims clearer and more unavoidable. A chronology of the strike and the precipitating and ensuing events is depicted in the Appendix.

Data Collection

An in-depth, qualitative methodology was used because it is effective in investigating sensitive matters, such as conflict (Kumar et al. 1993, Mouly and Sankaran 1997). Guided by earlier research (Mulcahy 1995, Coltrane and Hickman 1992, Allmendinger and Hackman 1995), two data sources were used: (1) semistructured interviews and (2) archival documents and press accounts.

Semistructured Interviews. Thirteen interviews were conducted (ten during the strike and three within the three months afterward), with the following individuals: three musicians, three board members, two managers, three audience members/subscribers, a music critic (who regularly reported on the ASO), and an industry expert and member of the American Symphony Orchestra League. These individuals, because of their position and/or tenure, were "knowledgeable about the issues being researched and able and willing to communicate about them" (Kumar et al. 1993, p. 1634). Musicians occupied key positions in the orchestral hierarchy (as principals or assistant principals) or in the players' union, managers included the president and CEO, and board members were on the executive committee. Interviews averaged from 1.5 to 2 hours, and were tape-recorded or transcribed with (nearly) verbatim notes. All interviews were conducted by two or more researchers; notes were compared after each interview to check accuracy and consistency. Additionally, several repeat interviews were conducted to modify data and theory (e.g., Glaser and Strauss 1967, Eisenhardt 1989).

Archival Sources. Published information about the ASO was reviewed, including materials generated by the musicians (e.g., ASOPA News, the official bulletin of the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Players Association), press releases, leaflets/pamphlets distributed to audiences and the public, and materials generated by management and the board (i.e., reports, press releases, and advertising). This was supplemented with more general information about American symphony orchestras and the classical music industry (e.g., *Harmony*, the forum of the Symphony Orchestra Institute; *Symphony*, the magazine of the American Symphony Orchestra League; and *Americanizing the American Orchestra* (1993), the report of the National Task Force of the American Orchestra: An initiative for change). I conducted electronic media searches and located all press accounts of the 1996 ASO musicians' strike and its aftermath; this yielded 105 articles (from September 1, 1997–February 27, 1998). From all these accounts, claims about organizational identity, core capabilities and resources were extracted. Claims were identified as those statements that emphasized the identity, image, or character of the ASO and were categorized by respondents' group membership (as musicians, managers, board members, or ASO outsiders). Managers and board managers were generally aligned in terms of their construction of an organization's identity and its core capabilities; for parsimony, the term "administrators" is used to refer to these two groups jointly. However, whenever relevant (e.g., in interviews), I will identify the respondents' professional group as management or as board member.

The analyses are presented in three sections: (1) backdrop for the strike, which explores the conflicting identities embedded in the ASO; (2) the 1996 musician's strike, which examines the inherent conflicts over identity; and (3) aftermath of the strike, which delineates negotiated and reclaimed identities.

The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Strike

1. Backdrop for the Strike: The Conflicting Identities of Artistry and Utility

ASO Artistic Identity. Musicians felt that there were two sets of claims on the ASO identity: one which they claimed to espouse ("a world-class orchestra in a world-class city") and another which they claimed to be espoused by management ("the best orchestra *we can afford*"). Implied in these identity claims are technological competency and orchestral excellence in the former and financial capabilities in the latter.

Several musicians opined that, over the last 30 years, they had witnessed increasing polarization between management and musicians. Musicians acknowledged that the orchestra needed to negotiate a balance between an "idealistic, musical vision-driven perspective"(theirs) and the "revenue-driven, fiscally realistic view" (claimed to be

management's). They testified to an ever-widening gulf in the aesthetic orientation of the two groups. Twenty or 30 years ago, the ASO board consisted largely of an "old guard" of doctors and lawyers who were not necessarily "big money" but were "lovers of music." More recently, the board shifted to embody a "corporate mentality," seemingly driven by increasing numbers of business people who became members. As a result, musicians claimed that there was an increasing focus on bottom-line expenditures with a fondness for what musicians described, in derogatory tones, as "McKinsey-like" presentations, briefings, reports, and "indoctrination." An article in the local press expressed the views of an ASO violinist, who spoke for many musicians:

> [ASO management is] looking at the orchestra like it was a potato chip factory . . . A potato chip factory can have a good product with fewer workers, with automation and all. But in an orchestra, the product is the sum of the musicians. . . . I'm not even sure management knows what quality is. Otherwise, they wouldn't be playing Russian roulette with us. (Kindred 1996, p. C3).

Themes of mistrust, disillusionment, and hurt resonated through the musicians' rhetoric. To the musicians, the orchestra's artistic identity did not seem to be appreciated or understood by the board; their musical prowess ("skilled as surgeons") was not acknowledged as a key and unique resource which could be claimed by no other group, and especially not by the board. As one musician put it: "I don't know anyone who has ever bought a ticket to attend a board meeting" (*Americanizing the American Orchestra* 1993, p. 67). One ASO player summed it up:

> [Board members] are not really interested in socializing with us. Their level of wealth and power, community stature is so high. It's a whole 'nother world that isn't going to let us in. They're not interested in bringing us into that world. We're musicians, we play music. We make it look easy—only 20 hours a week and 8 weeks vacation—but they have no understanding of what it took to get here, the level of commitment it takes to continue here.

While contesting the control that the ASO administration held over their artistry, the musicians felt they controlled an important intangible resource: board members' reputations.

> The musicians had something the board wanted—their reputation as altruistic people. [Board members] hate being made to look bad; that's why they're on the board—to look good.

Thus, with their rhetoric, the musicians claimed the artistic identity of the ASO, while downplaying (and often denigrating) its utilitarian or economic identity. Commensurate with their identity claims, they defined core capabilities and resources in terms of intangibles, i.e., musical talent and artistic enterprise, which in turn would draw board members who wanted to identify themselves as patrons of the arts. As Becker (1953) noted, within the musical profession there is inherent conflict between aesthetic autonomy and employment opportunities. At the ASO, professional tensions over identity were exacerbated in the contest for organizational identity.

ASO Economic Identity. To a person, administrators expressed enthusiasm and support for the musical caliber of the orchestra, and were confident that musical performance was on a very high level. In spite of this, however, they cautioned that musical excellence alone would not overcome budgetary problems; finances were key, they claimed.

Board members emphasized that they did not take the attitude of "play well and (the audience) will come." Said one board member: "It will take more than great playing to get ASO into financial shape." They pointed out several environmental changes that would affect ongoing financial support for the ASO (for example, an industry in decline, a "graying" audience base, decreasing recording contract opportunities, and diminishing government funding for the arts). These perceptions were substantiated in an external research report, *The Financial Condition of Symphony Orchestras*, distributed to board members, which noted that "sustaining the economic vitality of orchestras has become a growing and difficult problem for the field" (*Americanizing the American Orchestra* 1993, pp. 4–5). Like other orchestras, the ASO had been accumulating a significant structural deficit. According to one board member:

> The amount of money available from the endowment, coupled with the usual fund giving, coupled with ticket sales, coupled with extraordinary incidental items that come up, year in, year out, run half a million dollars. And had done so eight out of the last nine years.

Compounding these financial issues were concerns that musicians were insular and ignorant of such environmental changes. Administrators felt musicians needed to temper their view of ASO as a "world-class orchestra" and, instead, condition their expectations on what *"we can afford."* Administrators claimed that musicians were suspicious and mistrustful about the financial picture; musicians counterclaimed that the orchestra had received a multimillion dollar grant and had done costly but largely cosmetic (and unaesthetic) renovations to the symphony hall. This was money they felt could have been put directly into musical development. The board rebutted by giving limited financial information; any more, they

claimed, would be ''too complex'' for musicians to understand. More generally, the board seemed to resent musicians' inquiry into the financial picture because they felt this questioned their province of professional expertise, as well as their motives. In the words of one board member:

> We serve selflessly. . .what do we get out of it? We're looking out for their best interests. The musicians got the details (on financial issues) but they lacked the expertise to understand it. The (financial) information was out there; I felt my questions were answered and nothing left room for suspicion, but the musicians were suspicious. Musicians had an inability to accept that the money had to have come from somewhere. Musicians didn't want to understand the financial picture because then they couldn't make the demands they were making.

Overall, musicians and administrators claimed different elements of the orchestra's identity while simultaneously and emphatically downplaying other elements. The construction of organizational resources and capabilities was shaped and articulated by their identity claims. Each group made resource claims consonant with their capabilities: musicians claimed to control intangible, reputational resources and administrators claimed tangible, financial resources. These differing identity claims embedded and fueled the dynamics of the musicians' strike.

2. The 1996 Musician's Strike: Conflict Over Identity

The rhetoric surrounding the contest for institutional identity and resources is outlined in Table 1, which presents the perspectives of musicians and administrators, respectively.

''Keep Your Symphony World Class.'' The musicians claimed that the issue of vision or identity was central to the strike, and described ASO as lacking ''a common vision.'' When striking musicians rejected a ''final'' contract proposed by ASO management, the ASO Players' Association president, Doug Sommer explained their rationale:

> We are happy that management has finally chosen after nine months to engage in meaningful negotiations. However, we cannot accept management's proposal because it does not satisfy our vision of the public's vision for the future of the ASO (Kindred 1996).

Thus, musicians' rhetoric invoked the ideology of musical excellence, as well as their alignment with the music-loving public, which had important cultural capital and consequence.

Musicians claimed that their strike was lofty and ambitious; they were striking for ''the future of the orchestra, the future of collective bargaining processes.'' They felt it absurd to believe the strike was about money; they insisted it was about working conditions, wage scales, and season length. They were skeptical about the administration's ability to meet their needs, claiming that ''if we had negotiated the contract, management would ask for a salary freeze.'' Moreover, if they waited until they had sufficient funding for salary increases, musicians would never get raises.

My interviews with musicians uncovered strong emotions in their rhetoric. Musicians claimed management portrayed them as ''money-grubbing weasels'' who played the ''union card,'' an image that they felt management pushed hard because it was unattractive. The musicians countered by saying ''we do our job'' but that management didn't do theirs; ironically, the musicians claimed, administrators ''needed incentives to raise money.'' Thus, implicit in their logic of identity were not only the capabilities they claimed, but also those that they distinctively disavowed; for the musicians, this was fundraising. More than that, in claiming their identity, musicians seemed to deny ASO administrators theirs.

The musicians claimed to be driven by ideals and an ''incredibly unified Orchestra.'' What few differences there were among the musicians were at the fringe; some musicians became more militaristic or more managerially oriented, while others withdrew from the conflict. The musicians described several tactics they used to keep their membership of a singular mind: one involved collecting and disseminating information (updates, surveys, etc.) and another involved playing music. They gave free, impromptu concerts on the streets, in malls, and in public places in the city; they also joined with players from other orchestras (Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, Baltimore, and Montreal) who came to Atlanta to play. One musician explained: ''We're musicians and we need to play.'' This helped to maintain their professional identity, and to alleviate feelings of isolation, idleness, and frustration (''keep the members busy''), thus decreasing the chance that musicians might migrate to management's view. In many ways, these tactics seemed to be deliberate identity strategies employed by musicians to keep their professional ideology intact, particularly in the absence of the usual behavioral cues (e.g., playing as an orchestral member in concert). Such identity-preserving strategies helped to solidify their framing of the strike as an ideological issue, one that involved musical quality rather than financial concerns. Furthermore, it also increased their emphasis on resources consonant with this identity.

Receiving neither resources nor other support from administrators, the musicians reached out to their audience.

Table 1 Claims of Organizational Identity, Resources, and Core Capabilities: 1996 Atlanta Symphony Orchestra Strike

	Organizational Identity	Resources Emphasized	Claims of What Core Capabaility Is	Claims of What Core Capability Is Not
		Part A: The Musicians' Perspective		
Claims Made	Normative: "idealistic, music-driven" "Musicians wanted to take a stand for American orchestras"	Aesthetic vitality of the orchestra: —increased size —more tenured musicians —"top ten" orchestra quality	Producer of high-quality classical music	
Conflict with Management	"(ASO management is) looking at the orchestra like it was a potato chip factory"			*Not* in business of fund-raising, marketing, etc.
		Part B: The ASO Management and Board Perspective		
Claims Made	Utilitarian: Organization of an orchestra is not dissimilar from business. The product is music. . .fiscal stability is crucial." "The issue is always money."	Major donors and foundations Subscribers and consumers Community Recording Contracts Volunteers	Low-cost, community responsive producer of classical music	
Conflict with Musicians	"It's not just that we're having a test of wills, we are talking about whether or not you could write a prospectus about this organization that says it's a going concern"	"It will take more than great playing to get ASO into financial shape."		*Not* adaptive to a changing, uncertain environment

When tensions began in early spring, with negotiations underway and musicians upset about the firing of six of them, they began to ''leaflet'' audiences at concerts. The musicians hired a public affairs consultant, partly to counter the in-house public relations staff that worked with ASO management, but more importantly, to get their views out to the local press. They ran this outreach like a political campaign, concentrating on getting the attention of the mayor of Atlanta to help salvage ''Gospel Christmas'' and raising concerns about the possibility of canceling popular holiday concerts (at which point, musicians claimed, the administration would look like ''grinches''). In addition, the musicians helped to find the first 20 members for a public support group, which became an energetic and committed force on behalf of the musicians.

The many free public concerts offered around Atlanta (for example, lunch hour concerts at a local food court, and others at different local performing arts centers) garnered a favorable response from the press:

> The Atlanta Symphony Orchestra musicians have not sat idly by during their current strike for a new and better contract. They've given the public a chance to hear them at sites other than Symphony Hall . . . And they've afforded an opportunity to showcase just how good individual players in the orchestra are (Henry 1996).

Thus, by invoking their professional identity, the musicians were able to present their views favorably and find support and credibility with the community. They appeared somewhat successful in persuading audiences to see the strike from their ideological perspective and in framing the strike as artistry versus economics. Thus, they seemed to be seeking the power that came from the sanctioning of their values and the legitimation of their ideology (Clegg 1987). Embedded within the identity conflict were conflicts over status and power, and implicitly, control over the resources that would confer such status and power.

''*The issue is always money.*'' The board rationalized its decision not to tenure the six musicians as ''a very

tough business decision . . . (we) didn't have any criticism of the players, (we) just didn't have the funds to tenure.'' In general, the board and management construed the strike as a business event, with money as the bottom line:

> The reason finances were the issue, and they were always the issue, and they were always the only issue, was because that was the problem (interview with board member).

The ASO president and CEO likened the orchestra to a business, where ''the product is music; PR, marketing, development, finance, (special events)—all are different departments. The President reports to the board and the music director reports to the board,'' and there is a creative tension between balancing the budget and ''creating the most excellent artistic production'' that permeates the management of the orchestra. The rhetoric of administrators was couched in the language of business (Fine 1996), where efficiency was the coin of the realm. Administrators repeatedly stated that the strike was about management–labor relationships.

Administrators felt that musicians succeeded in their attempts to solicit sympathy from the public. One board member described newspaper articles as being ''detrimental, biased, and misrepresenting the facts.'' The ASO president said she gave the musicians an ''A'' for press, for presenting a very elegant, unTeamsterlike image on the picket line, playing the French horn in fine attire. The board viewed the public support group (CSASO) as ''labor agitators,'' a ''union tool'' that exerted an antagonistic, polarizing force in the strike.

While management could not voice the ideological rhetoric of musicians in their claims, they used a different tactic to legitimate their position. Management invoked prestigious expertise to lend credence to their perspective on ASO's identity. In one letter to subscribers, representatives wrote that from the board and management, the guardianship identity was invoked:

> It's not the board's responsibility (to protect the endowment and not use it as a cash fund). Yale Professor James Tobin said it best: ''The trustees of an endowed institution are the guardians of the future against the claims of the present.'' (ASO open letter to all subscribers)

Overall, both the board and management seemed to see the conflict as a choice between collaboration and confrontation; they felt that musicians chose the latter because it was the one choice that would secure them the most money and a better contract. It is interesting to note that the board imputed their motives to musicians and saw the players as being ''in it for the money.'' Thus, as much as the conflict was about claiming a particular identity and issue, it was about disclaiming another; the board disavowed the notion that musical quality was the *real* issue and the musicians correspondingly disavowed that finances were the *real* issue. As much, then, as this was a conflict over claims, it was also about disclaims, or claiming what the institution's core capabilities were *not*. The strike was ultimately settled in December 1996, when both sides agreed to a new contract and a new set of working conditions; in the end, both sides claimed victory.

3. Aftermath of the Strike: Negotiated and Reclaimed Identities

The strike inflicted several organizational wounds; however, its resolution created an overall desire for healing. As a result, some of the initial reaction following the strike was to unify the entire membership—musicians, managers, and board members—and claim a new, integrated, negotiated identity. A harpist for the ASO (one of the six newest tenured members) reflected this in her statement:

> I think the strike was a huge growing experience that forced us to crystallize our vision as an orchestra and how we want to be seen in the community. It sharpened my awareness of what it means to be a musician and what my responsibilities are (Henry 1997a).

In December, the holiday concerts resumed their schedule. The music director, Yoel Levi, expressed his relief that the strike was over and his hope that ''now we can go back and be again a great orchestra and do what we are supposed to do, which is (perform) great music'' (Henry 1997b).

However, there were lingering divisions. Each group, while affirming the newly negotiated reunification of the ASO, also reclaimed its own professional identity with its associated resources and capabilities. Nowhere was this more evident than in poststrike press coverage. One pediatrician who has been a subscriber and contributor for nearly three decades expressed his nonsupport for the perspective of ASO administrators:

> I feel the strike should have been settled earlier. Money was coming in from the public, and the orchestra had done a wonderful job, and deserved more (money). I feel the board was very cavalier (in its handling of the situation). (Henry 1997b).

Musicians returned to work a bit more wise, if not a bit more wary. For their part, management and board members also found support in the press, which helped them to reclaim their custodial and financial identities. Scathing criticism of musicians and orchestral strikes in general was evidenced in one *Wall Street Journal* article, where the author argued that support from the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) has actually had destruc-

tive effects on symphonies. He perceived that musicians benefit from a pro-union bias in NEA's grant-making procedures:

> . . .musicians' unions may be less visible in direct NEA lobbying efforts, but they are ever more powerful in the industry generally. Union ideology—the idea that only those who join the club should be paid to perform—pervades all big-city music establishments and the entire grant-giving culture, including that of the NEA. The American Federation of Musicians (slogan: "We're the Professionals!") has a cartel-like lock on music performance in most major cities. Woe to those who are not members. (Ritenour 1997)

Identity conflicts were still much in evidence, even after the strike concluded. Newly negotiated contracts and ideologies of artistic excellence did not fully bridge the gap between the discordant identity elements.

> The symphony also has had to contend with unseemly contract negotiations last year with music director Yoel Levi that ended with a three-year contract renewal but an understanding that it would be his last—a termination widely understood to be not of Levi's choice. (Schwartz 1998a).

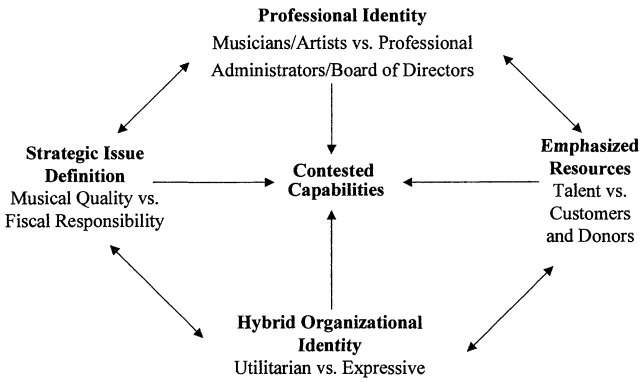
Ten months subsequent, "(in) a move almost without precedent in the history of American orchestras" (Schwartz 1998b), Levi withdrew his resignation and asked to continue beyond his current contract. Eventually acknowledging that the board forced Levi's resignation as a condition of renewing his contract (Schwartz 1998b), the board members voted not to accept his resignation withdrawal, ironically citing artistic issues.

How Identity Shapes Resource Claims

The ASO's ideographic identity, that of two seemingly incompatible dimensions of artistic excellence (at any cost) and fiscal solvency (at the expense of musical development), was claimed by two distinct ASO units, musicians and administrators, respectively. By implication, these claims on the organization's identity also claimed very different sets of resources. Claims on the aesthetic identity evoked resource claims consonant with artistry (e.g., expanding the size of the orchestra, tenuring more musicians, investing in more complex musical pieces, touring worldwide, hiring guest conductors, etc.); claims on the economic identity argued for a pecuniary strategy of resource deployment (e.g., cutting costs, increasing ticket prices, raising funds, growing the endowment, limiting the number of costly orchestra performances, etc.).

To explain how these different claim-making processes between units within the symphony orchestra shape the contest over core capabilities and account for variations in resource definition within the institution, I propose a model, presented in Figure 1. The four elements that comprise the identity and strategic resource definition are: (1) professional or occupational identity in which professional and occupational memberships are differentiated only by degree of exclusivity and use of abstract knowledge (Abbott 1991), dimensions not significant for this study and thus not differentiated herein, (2) organizational identity, (3) strategic issue definition, and (4) claimed resources. Together, these four elements affect the definition of core organizational capabilities through two joint and interactive processes: *identification processes*, which bridge between professional identity (i.e., Who am I? What kind of professional role/position do I play in this organization?) and organizational identity (i.e., What kind of organization is this?), and *interpretative processes*, which relate the perception of strategic issues (e.g., fiscal crisis versus music quality) to the resources claimed to address these issues (e.g., cost-cutting versus orchestral development).

Figure 1 Identity, Resources, and Core Capabilities



The Role of Identification Processes. It is through their professional and/or occupational affiliations that musicians and managers/board members *identify* with different elements of the organization's identity. Since identification is predicated on a perception of oneness between the self and the collective (Ashforth and Mael 1989), the process of identifying enables organizational members to reinforce their professional identity by advancing claims on the organization's identity elements that are congruent with their expertise and capabilities. For musicians, this involves emphasizing the aesthetic over the economic; as Becker (1951, p. 136) noted: "The most distressing problem in the career of the average musician is the necessity of choosing between conventional success and his "artistic" standards." Identification is stronger when organizational members perceive a large overlap between those attributes that characterize their professional identity and those that characterize the organizational identity (Dutton et al. 1994).

Professions seek legitimacy in order to establish the ''cultural authority'' of their work; as Abbott (1991, p. 187) illustrates: ''some professions employ the economic legitimations of profit, security, and economic growth. . .Others legitimize their work with values like happiness, self-actualization, personal culture. . .beautiful music.'' To establish their legitimacy, administrators as a professional group tend to place more worth on economic values, while musicians as a professional group tend to place more worth on less tangible values. Thus, as evidenced in this study, within professional groups shared values and identities develop and are mutually reinforced through social interactions, the language of the professions, and the rhetoric of claim-making. However, across professional groups, the construction of organizational problems may not be clear and uncontested, but rather marked by divergent and sometimes contentious claims, which spring from different ideologies held by groups who occupy different institutional positions (Trice 1993, Weick 1995). Thus, different professional groups are likely to claim as legitimate different types of organizational problems; the type of problem they claim is likely to be one they can solve, thereby increasing their own legitimacy and prestige.

Evident in these identity dynamics are sociopolitical processes. Disputes over what type of organization this is—and thus, what type of solution remedies a problem—are resolved politically (Walsh and Fahey 1986). Whichever professional group has the power to resolve a problem comes to the fore (Pfeffer and Salancik 1978) and, with their expertise valued and ideology accepted, gains power and political clout (Clegg 1989). Armed with such political advantage, the group regulates meaning—and conveys this meaning in their rhetoric (Clegg 1987)—to claim identity elements valued by the group. Thus, professional and occupational rhetoric frames and voices identity claims for the institution (Fine 1996). Fiscal crises tend to empower those groups who traffic in the rationale of business, i.e., administrators (Fine 1996); crises of musical quality, however, shift power towards those musicians who can play better and more complex orchestral pieces. Thus, crises can prompt a shift in the perceived legitimacy of a professional group and its claimed ideology; as a result, the relative emphasis on one element of the organization's identity may shift to the direction of the claims made by those who can resolve the crisis.

The Role of Interpretive Processes. How strategic issues become noticed and associated with a set of resources is the process of *interpretation.* Interpretive or sensemaking processes give meaning to individual perceptions and behavior (Weick 1995), as well as direction to strategic initiatives (Dutton 1997; Gioia and Chittepeddi 1991). Once strategic issues are framed and categorized (Jackson and Dutton 1988), resources are aligned accordingly. In the ASO, strategic issues were perceived to be one of two types: musical quality or financial solvency. Depending upon which of these was invoked, different resources were emphasized; clearly, artistic growth would require more talent, more touring, more exposure to challenging musical works, and thus more funding. Conversely, making an organization fiscally viable, particularly in the short term, would argue against such an investment of resources and for taking more aggressive cost-cutting measures. Claiming concerns about ''generational equity,'' one board member described his interpretation of issues and how that dictated the management of resources:

> You're not buying music for yourself. What you're trying to do is provide music for your grandchildren. And the idea that you're just going to invade the trust and go take the money out of the endowment because you want to pay the musicians now is really stealing from the musicians of tomorrow. . .If you try that (and people have), your orchestra goes out of business.

How issues are defined affects resource definition. A few months before the strike, the ASO board developed a set of long-range projections and options for the orchestra. The board mapped the following three possible strategic options, estimated their costs, and planned to choose one of them:

1. *World-market focus*, a 105-member orchestra. This was the most expensive option (more than $100 million); one musician described it as ''pie in the sky.''
2. *Atlanta-market focus,* or the status quo, a 92-member orchestra, with a cost of approximately $30 million.
3. *Fiscally conservative*, with tight fiscal controls, players cut to 80, and reputation enhanced by innovative music and marketing.

Strategic issue options for the ASO, ranging from world-class to more limited status, were tightly linked to resource availability and support. One board member put it succinctly: These three options had ''price tags'' of ''More, Same, or Less.'' The language of the board in framing these options (as different possibilities for *market* focus, rather than different possibilities for *musical* focus) seemed to reflect its interpretation of the issues.

The model proposed (Figure 1) depicts how the contest over core capabilities lies at the intersection of identification and interpretative processes in the orchestra. It is through one's identification of self and one's organization that interpretations are made about strategic issues and sets of resources. It was through their professional identities as musicians that ASO players sought to define the central issues as aesthetic and seek resources to invest in developing artistic tradition and excellence. Conversely,

the ASO board identified themselves as selfless guardians who sought to preserve the ASO for future generations; thus, they defined issues such as financial viability for the long term and emphasized resources that were monetary, not musical.

Each of the four elements (professional identity, organizational identity, strategic issue definition, and emphasized resources) affects and is affected by the others to create a set of conditions that make it ripe for cultural institutions to experience conflict and contest over claims to the organization's core capabilities. Such a conflict over claims about identity, resources, and core capabilities was very much evident in the ASO musicians' strike.

Conclusions

This study of the 1996 musician's strike at the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra revealed that the definition of organizational identity has a significant effect on the perceptions of its core competencies. Like most cultural institutions, the ASO displayed a specialized or ideographic identity, whose dual elements of economic utility (where financial return symbolizes success) and normative ideology (where artistic creativity and excellence symbolize success) came into conflict during organizational retrenchment. The crisis engendered by the strike made manifest the latent identity claims that characterized the different units in the organization, as well as the professional status they embodied. Thus, the multifaceted identity of the symphony, reinforced by the organization's multiprofessionality, evoked variations in the way that firm capabilities and resources were defined and problematized.

The professional ideologies of musicians and administrators were at odds over the orchestra's allocation of resources; consistent with the legitimating values of their profession, the musicians emphasized investment in artistry, and administrators, seeking a demonstration of fiscal responsibility, emphasized cost containment. Each group felt that their prestige, legitimization, and power to influence others rested on their ability to realize such outcomes. The inherent conflict between these two professional groups was reinforced by the formal organizational design at the symphony.

This study extends theories on the resource-based view of the firm to account for variations in the construction of core capabilities. The dynamics of institutional identity claims, which reflect the social identities of professional groups, were found to account for differentiation in resource definitions. Resource-based views of the firm presume that resource definition is nonproblematic (Prahalad and Hamel 1990). By showing how resource definition and core capabilities are problematized by identity conflicts, this study illustrates how resource identification is neither impersonal nor rational (Amit and Shoemaker 1993) but, rather, closely tied to the sociopolitical dynamics embedded within actors' identity spheres. When actors with multiple and divergent identities exist within the same institution, different resources can become defined as core competencies, and strategic decision making can become increasingly contentious; thus, conflicts of strategic definition and resolution can stem from conflicts over identity.

Strategic issue definitions emerged from distinct "identity fields" (Hunt et al. 1994). For the symphony, these corresponded to organizational roles and professional occupations. Competing resource claims premised on the different logics underlying different identity elements led to conflict, especially during organizational crisis. When competing claims on organizational identity and, by implication, resource definition are advanced, conflict can be resolved through the logic of aggregation (bargaining) or the logic of integration (where parties learn from each other) (March and Olsen 1995). At the ASO, when integration failed, aggregation ensued, and its failure resulted in the musicians' strike. This research demonstrates how organizational identity can frame the manner in which resources become emphasized, prioritized, and deployed, and how perceptions of core capabilities can become constructed for the institution. Just as important, perhaps, was the insight that the same dynamics also determined perceptions of what the core capabilities were *not*.

Furthermore, this work suggests how an organization's identity may not be grounded simply in organizational images of what is central, enduring, and distinctive (Albert and Whetten 1985), but may also incorporate the identity dynamics of professional and occupational groups. Thus, identities of those individuals in key organizational roles (e.g., players, administrators, and board members) shape and construct the hybrid identities of the symphony. Because it incorporates such professional groups, the identity of this cultural institution is emergent from, and attenuated by, the interests that spring from these group identities. It is through the processes of identification, where professionals perceive an overlap between their profession's attributes and those of the organization, that group memberships affect the construction of core capabilities. Commensurately, these professional identity groups also direct attention towards particular definitions of strategic issues and resources and away from others; interpretative processes at the interface between issue definition and resource foci construct an institution's core capabilities.

Identity conflicts can occur among many issues in a wide variety of organizational contexts, but the conflict

tends to be more salient in cultural organizations, often leading to polarization between professional groups. In other words, tension over identity conflict is more common among firms in cultural industries.

This qualitative field study examined the conflict between two key identity elements of cultural organizations: ideology and utility. Management and the board were aligned in their claims of core capabilities as economic, but we can readily see that such an alignment may not be unchanging. A sociopolitical perspective on identity and resource claims would suggest that individuals or professional groups would act in their own self-interest. For instance, when it is managerial contracts, salaries, and working conditions that are in dispute, symphony management may well revert to the musicians' perspective on institutional identity and claim that the excellent delivery of musical traditions is paramount and to be rewarded, regardless of financial constraint. Thus, politicizing the construction of core capabilities alerts us to the fact that shifting coalitions may, at varying times, emphasize a different array of resources for the same institution.

Finally, there are implications for the leadership of cultural institutions, as well as other organizations with specialized identities populated by multiple professional groups. Albert and Whetten (1985, p. 288) state that "Effective leaders of dual identity organizations should personify and support both identities . . . during retrenchment . . . they must be perceived as the champion of the normative as well as the utilitarian values of the institution." In the case of the ASO, the musical director had an independent occupational identity, without strong professional ties to either the musicians or the administrators. He seemed to neither be disclaimed nor claimed by either of the competing groups, as he seemed to personify neither identity. His neutrality may have been admirable, but as Albert and Whetten might predict, it cost him his job. Thus, a more savvy political strategy may have been to embrace the organization's identity more fully and to claim the key ideologies as one's own. Organizational leaders need to carefully attend to the rhetoric of claims made on the institution's identity; as this study demonstrates, management of intangible assets via symbolic elements is essential

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Appendix

Chronology of the 1996 Musicians' Strike at the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra

Date	Description of Event and Impact
2/6/96	Six probationary ASO musicians not tenured for financial reasons; season cut to 48 weeks Musicians feel this reflects management's "idiotic lack of understanding" and creates atmosphere of mistrust.
5/15/96	In response to infusion of new funds (gift of $4 million, with a $5 million challenge gift) and community outrage, the board recants and grants the six probationary musicians tenure. Negotiations for renewal of contract begin.
8/24/96	Musicians' contract expires.
Early Fall	Musicians hire a new attorney, who has a long history and strong reputation with union negotiations. Management and board view this as a strong signal of intent from the musicians.
9/21–9/23/96	Musicians vote to strike, walk out of negotiations, and begin to picket.
9/26/96	Last day musicians receive salary from ASO. ASO staff and the musical director are paid for the duration of the strike; striking musicians receive union compensation (initially, $150/week for not more than 15 weeks; increased to $300/week on Oct. 23, with a scheduled increase to $450/week when the strike enters the ninth week).
10/23/96	Offer and counteroffers made, as follows: *By management*: 1) 95 players minimum; 2) tenure trial of two years; and 3) new three-year contract with freeze in year one, and 2% raises for years two and three (0,2,2) *By musicians*: New four-year contract with a 3% raise years one and two, and a 4% raise in years three and four (3,3,4,4).
11/26/96	Musicians offer to return to work on condition that both sides submit to binding arbitration; board rejects their offer.
12/3/96	Proposal for new contract sent to board, with following terms: 1) 95 tenured orchestral positions, 2) outreach to metro Atlanta schools (with no additional compensation), 3) pension plan changed from an ASO managed plan to one managed by the union, and 4) new four-year contract with a wage freeze in the first year, a 2% increase for the second and third years, and 4% increase in the fourth year (0,2,2,4); in the final year, the lowest salary will be $62,500.
12/2/96	Musicians and management/board meet, without attorneys.
12/4/96	Board votes to accept. The ten-week strike is settled and musicians return to work in time for the holiday events.

4/24/97	ASO musical director, Yoel Levi, negotiates a three-year extension on his contract, to expire the summer of 2000.
4/27/97	Yoel Levi announces his resignation in 2000, at the conclusion of his contract.
2/27/98	Yoel Levi asks to withdraw his resignation and stay beyond his contract.
3/10/98	At special meeting of the board of directors, the board votes not to accept Levi's resignation withdrawal, citing artistic issues.

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