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WEATHERING A META-LEVEL IDENTITY CRISIS: FORGING A COHERENT COLLECTIVE IDENTITY FOR AN EMERGING FIELD

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We employed a longitudinal, grounded-theory approach to investigate the occurrence of an identity crisis in an emerging collective of organizations attempting to form a new academic field. The findings indicate that legacy identities and the nested structure of such organizations have implications for the formation of identity at this level. Specifically, the co-evolution of organization-level and collective-level identities, and the interdependencies between the levels, rendered the collective identity formation process as multiphased, complex, contentious, and continuously precarious—ultimately leading to an identity crisis that was resolved not by arriving at a "consensual identity," but, rather, a "coherent identity." The findings contribute to the nascent stream of literature on collective identity beyond the organizational level by explicating identity-work processes involved in the precipitation, manifestation, and resolution of an identity crisis in an emerging field.

> Information is becoming the most important issue for future generations. The iSchools are going to be at the forefront of this change. Some may think this is too grandiose and ambitious a claim because, clearly, there is an identity challenge today. If you are a new field, you must grope for the field's identity. Some might even experience [our current situation] as an identity crisis.
>
> (iSchool dean)

> All is flux. What can be said with assurance, however, is that, as a result of recent structural rumblings and readjustments, the discourse space we occupy has been enlarged (a healthy enough development in itself), even if the accompanying rhetorical excesses and ontological legerdemain leave something to be desired. For now, our identity crisis continues to flourish.
>
> (Cronin, 2005, writing about the iSchools)

Identity is a key concept that shapes, sustains, and steers individuals within any social system. It is, by now, also clear that the notion of identity has extensive conceptual reach, such that it can be viewed as a key concept that shapes, sustains, and steers collectives as well. Whether such collectives are teams, departments, organizations, industries, fields, or even societies, developing an identity is vital for most social actors. At a more micro level (e.g., groups or teams), collective identity not only satisfies members' need to belong (Baumeister & Leary, 1995) and to engage in self-evaluation (Greenwald & Breckler, 1985), but it also facilitates

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knowledge transfer, innovation, and group performance (Kane, 2010; Sethi, 2000). At the organizational level, identity influences a wide range of important activities, including strategic decision making (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996), spinoffs (Corley & Gioia, 2004), stakeholder relationship management (Brickson, 2005, 2007), and major organizational change initiatives (Nag, Corley, & Gioia, 2007). Identity is also important at even more macro levels, as evidenced by research in the context of industries (Porac, Thomas, Wilson, Paton, & Kanfer, 1995), social movements (Melucci, 1995), market categories (Navis & Glynn, 2010; Weber, Heinze, & DeSoucey, 2008), entrepreneurial groups (Wry, Lounsbury, & Glynn, 2011), and academic fields (Hambrick & Chen, 2008). We will use the term "meta level" to distinguish the supra-macro level of collectives of organizations from the "macro" level of a single organization.

Identity associated with such meta-level collectives can influence many issues. For instance, at the field level, collective identity helps to determine membership in the field (Benford & Snow, 2000; Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2003), competitive and co-operative behaviors (Fligstein & Dauter, 2007; Porac et al., 1995; White, 2002), and collective actions that members undertake and justify (Fligstein, 1997). Collective identity also enables external audiences to distinguish among fields (see Lounsbury, 2007; Rao et al., 2003) and to perceive them as attractive and legitimate (Glynn & Abzug, 2002; Navis & Glynn, 2010; Wry et al., 2011). Furthermore, at the same time that collective-level identity helps to shape a field, it can also influence the fortunes of the field's member organizations (Clegg, Rhodes, & Kornberger, 2007; Glynn & Abzug, 2002; Glynn & Marquis, 2006; Porac, Wade, & Pollock, 1999; Rao, Davis, & Ward, 2000), as well as evaluations by external audiences (Benner, 2007; Zuckerman, 1999).

Research has shed light on identity formation at the organizational level (Clegg et al., 2007; Czarniawska, 1997; Gioia, Price, Hamilton, & Thomas, 2010). At yet higher levels of analysis, however, we have inadequate understanding of collective identity formation processes, despite the centrality of identity to the regulation and maintenance of collectives. By focusing on meta-level collectives with established identities, many studies tend to treat collective identity as a given, and have typically "avoided the indeterminate early before-identity processes" (Fiol & Romanelli, 2012: 607). Although there is some recent literature concerning meta-level collective identity, there are still important questions about the processes by which such an identity forms. The few studies that have begun to explore aspects of identity at this level do so from an institutional perspective and focus on category or market identity (e.g., Khaire & Wadhwani, 2010; Navis & Glynn, 2010; Weber et al., 2008; Wry et al., 2011) and the attendant concerns with legitimacy. The core question of how collective identities are negotiated and emerge is underexplored. Much of extant literature implicitly depicts the development of category identity as a sequential and relatively linear process, however, and therefore may not capture the complex, contested dynamics of the early stages of collective identity formation where member- and collective-level identities are both evolving. Further, existing studies have focused mainly on one aspect of collective identity emergence—the formal claims made on behalf of a field by its member organizations (e.g., Navis & Glynn, 2010; Wry et al., 2011). These studies, in effect, treat consensus on claims as consensus on identity. Achieving a collective identity, however, is arguably a more complex phenomenon, consisting of establishing both claims *and* the associated meanings of those claims (Gioia et al., 2010; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006).

In this study, we tracked an emerging international consortium of 46 "information schools" ("iSchools") over a period of seven years to examine some of the deeper processes involved in the emergence of identity in a nascent field. Our main research question was: *By what processes do organizations in an emerging field develop a collective identity?* We adopted a cross-level design (organization ↔ field) to investigate the dynamics of identity formation within this meta-level collective. We also investigated attempts to develop common claims as well as common meanings associated with identity formation. Our findings revealed the contestations involved in collective identity formation, which led to a meta-level "identity crisis" that needed to somehow be resolved before the development of a new field could proceed. The study's main contribution lies in the cross-level grounded model and its depiction of how and why this identity crisis occurred. The model not only helps to illuminate processes involved in collective identity development, but also shows that organization- and field-level identities evolve in tandem—with identity development at each level influencing, and being influenced by, identity development at the

other. Finally, we found that the crisis resolved because of the emergence of a "coherent" rather than a "consensual" identity, a finding that holds implications for our conceptualization of identity at the collective level.

REVIEW OF RELEVANT LITERATURE

There is burgeoning interest in understanding identity-related processes at higher levels of analysis (see Fiol & Romanelli, 2012; Gioia, Patvardhan, Hamilton, & Corley, 2013; Powell & Colyvas, 2008; Pratt, 2003). Identity at the collective meta level has been studied in diverse contexts, and has employed a wide variety of terms—"market/industry/category identity," "identity codes," "collective identity," etc. In trying to reconcile these different terms, we note that, although issues such as boundary definition, categorization, and legitimation provide a common thread, the traditions from which these studies arise (e.g., institutional theory, population ecology, social movements, etc.) tend to view collectives of organizations somewhat differently. For example, although institutional perspectives take a category approach to identity (e.g., Navis & Glynn, 2010; Wry et al., 2011) and primarily focus on the cognitive underpinnings of identity claims and their legitimation, social movements perspectives (Fligstein & McAdam, 2011; Melucci, 1995) emphasize the social and relational dynamics (e.g., negotiation and bargaining among members of a collective) involved in identity formation. In this paper, we adopt the generic term "collective identity" with the intent of encompassing both the cognitive/category aspects and the social/relational aspects of meta-level identity.

We studied an emerging consortium of academic institutions that set out with the expressed intent to establish a new academic field and came to organize themselves formally under the label of the "Information Schools" and use the moniker "iSchool" to describe themselves.[1] The iSchools focus on the "interdisciplinary and application-oriented study of information" and, as of this writing, have a current membership of 46 schools in 12 countries (the U.S.A., Canada, England, Scotland, Ireland, Finland, Denmark, Portugal, Germany, China, Australia, and Singapore). Although there are academic institutions outside this consortium that pursue information study, given our interest in understanding the emergence of identity among the members of a collective of organizations, we bounded our study to include only members of the group of iSchools. We did so for three reasons: (1) this consortium talked overtly in terms of establishing a new academic field; (2) it eventually became clear that this expanding group was composed of prototypical organizations that represented this soon-to-be field; and (3) by the end of our data collection phase, the study of information, with the iSchools as the main representatives, was widely recognized as a new "field of study" in the academic domain.

We began this project to investigate processes through which a collective-level identity forms by observing the interplay of collective- and organization-level identities (thus answering Ashforth, Rogers, and Corley's 2011 call for studies of cross- and multilevel identity dynamics to avoid overlooking important aspects of an identity story by examining only a single level of analysis). Early interviews and analyses of archival data revealed iSchool members' heightened engagement with the issue of collective identity—especially their concern with the absence of a well-defined identity for their group and their budding field (see King & Lyytinen, 2004; Wobbrock, Ko, & Kientz, 2009). Given the rapid pace at which the member iSchools had created a niche for themselves within their respective universities, their struggle to develop a common identity emerged as an important, even pivotal, issue. What intrigued us was the relative ease with which member schools (re)defined their organizational identities (see Gioia et al., 2010)—even as they struggled to converge on a consensual collective identity. These struggles eventually led to the experience of a meta-level "identity crisis" (see Cronin, 2005; Wobbrock et al., 2009). Unlike the

[1] DiMaggio and Powell define a field as "those organizations that, in the aggregate, constitute a recognized area of institutional life: key suppliers, resource and product consumers, regulatory agencies, and other organizations that produce similar services or products" (1983: 148). Consistent with this definition, the concept of an "organizational field" is common in the organizational literature. We view a "field" as a more encompassing notion, however; one that signifies a broad area of interest, knowledge, and practice (e.g., the study of information). We therefore treat organizations as collectives that represent a field, rather than constituting the field itself. Thus, we set out to study the emergence of the identity of a collective of organizations representing the emerging field of information study.

traditional notion of threat to an existing identity (e.g., Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000), the crisis stemmed from concerns pertaining to the development of identity in an emerging field. Given members' pronounced concern with the identity crisis, we elected to concentrate on the precipitation, manifestation, and resolution of the crisis as a theoretically rich opportunity.

Collective Identity at the Micro and Macro Levels

The concept of "collective identity" or "we-ness of a group" has helped to extend identity research from the individual to the group level (e.g. Brewer & Gardner, 1996). For instance, a strong group identity has been shown to be a major influence on members' commitment to collective action (Haslam & Ellemers, 2005; Haslam, Ryan, Postmes, Spears, Jetten, & Webley, 2006) and encourages members to reduce self-interest in favor of group interest (Brewer & Kramer, 1986). Other micro-level studies suggest some constraints on collective identities, however. Brewer's (1991, 1993) theory of optimal distinctiveness, for instance, posits that individuals' simultaneous needs for inclusion and distinctiveness poses one such constraint. In a related vein, Kreiner, Hollensbe, and Sheep (2006) reported identity tensions when members of a collective attempted to strike an "optimal balance" between their personal and social identities. Taken together, these micro-level studies indicate that strains exist between member identity and the identity of the collective.

Identity at more macro levels has predominantly been studied in the institutional, social movements, and population ecology traditions. Population ecologists often employ the term "identity" or "identity code" (Hannan, 2005; Hsu & Hannan, 2005; Polos, Hannan, & Carroll, 2002) with regards to categories and organizational forms, and refer to identity as perceptions held by external audiences as to what it means to be a prototypical member of a category (Elsbach & Kramer, 2003; Mervis & Rosch, 1981). Among institutional theorists, interest in identity stems from the central concern with legitimation and its associated concepts, including identity. Historically speaking, organizational fields were mostly conceptualized as stable and homogenous settings (DiMaggio, 1988), so identity was considered to be given and taken for granted. A focus on the dynamic aspects of institutional identity has emerged from work on institutional change (e.g., Greenwood & Suddaby, 2006; Leblebici, Salancik, Copay, & King, 1991; Rao et al., 2000) and institutional formation (Anand & Jones, 2008; Anand & Watson, 2004; Purdy & Gray, 2009). Some studies have alluded to identity formation at the collective level (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994; Clegg et al., 2007; Fiol & Romanelli, 2012; Fligstein, 1997; Khaire & Wadhwani, 2010; Navis & Glynn, 2010; Weber et al., 2008; Wry et al., 2011)—but only a few have empirically investigated the process.

Examining the emergence and legitimation of identity in the context of a new market category, Navis and Glynn (2010) observed that, in the early phases of a market category's development, firms mute their individual distinctiveness and espouse a collective identity. This projected sameness or isomorphism brings legitimacy, which, in turn, enables firms to highlight their distinctiveness from one another in later phases of the category's development. Describing the emergence of a new category identity, Khaire and Wadhwani (2010) showed how meanings take shape through changing discourse and create comparison and valuation criteria for the new category. Investigating the emergence of a new market for grass-fed meat and dairy products, Weber et al. (2008) found that formation of collective identity is central to market functioning as it builds internal cohesion among producers and achieves external differentiation vis-à-vis adjacent categories and competitors. Theorizing about the processes involved in collective identity formation, Wry et al. (2011) and Fiol and Romanelli (2012) highlighted the pivotal role of "storytelling" in collective identity formation and maintenance processes.

Much of this literature implicitly depicts identity development at the category level as a sequential and relatively linear process, however, and therefore may not capture the complex, contested dynamics of the early stages of collective identity formation. One possible reason for these depictions is the single level of analysis adopted by many macro-level studies. As noted, a single level of analysis cannot account for the dynamics of nested or embedded identities across levels (Ashforth et al., 2011), which characterize all fields, whether those fields be industry based (e.g., pharmaceuticals) or issue based (e.g., strategic management). Clegg et al.'s (2007) study of the newly emerging field of business coaching in Australia noted that operating in a nascent industry marked by an "ambiguous and poorly understood" identity required

organizations to engage in construction of both organizational and industry identities. These firms' efforts to portray themselves simultaneously as "similar" to other business coaching firms—to be recognized as part of the emerging industry—as well as "unique"—so as to justify their position as a distinct player—led Clegg et al. to depict identity construction in an emerging field as "conflictual, multiple and negotiated" and "embedded in a field of differences" (2007: 510). In sum, prior studies indicate that a significant challenge in collective identity formation—at micro, macro, and meta levels—stems from members' simultaneous needs for inclusion and distinctiveness. Mature systems appear to manage the push–pull of such opposing forces, but dichotomous forces may impose a destabilizing effect on nascent collectives where member- and collective-level identities are both evolving. This study of a collective of organizations trying to establish a new field provides a unique opportunity to empirically investigate the dynamics of such nested identities across levels of analysis.

Another possible reason for these depictions is the "social actor" view of identity (Corley, Harquail, Pratt, Glynn, & Fiol, 2006; Whetten, 2006), wherein identity is viewed as a "set of claims to a social category" (Glynn, 2008: 419) and can, therefore, be readily (if roughly) inferred from industry membership (Rao et al., 2000) and an institution's public declarations (Czarniawska & Wolff, 1998; Whetten & Mackey, 2002). This perspective, however, tends to elide the meanings that underlie such claims and the processes by which such meanings come into being. It therefore underplays the "fundamentally social nature of collective identity formation" (Fiol & Romanelli, 2012: 598) and thus offers an incomplete understanding of identity. We therefore argue that reconsidering the conceptualization of collective identity at the meta level implies a need to account for both social actor and social construction views.

The social construction perspective promises to be even more insightful when we consider that arriving at agreement on meanings for collective claims is difficult and arguably involves a great deal of "institutional level identity work." Identity work has been conceptualized at the individual level as the set of activities in which people engage to create and maintain a consistent self-concept (Snow & Anderson, 1987; Snow & McAdam, 2000). This notion extends rather straightforwardly to more macro levels in the form of activities that organizations or collectives of organizations (industries, associations, or disciplines) employ to construct a sense of "self" for themselves and their stakeholders, and to do the maintenance (Lok & de Rond, 2013) and regulatory work (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) necessary to sustain identity. Fligstein noted that a major challenge for institutional entrepreneurs in emerging fields is to "bring groups together by finding a collective identity for as many actors as possible" (1997: 401). Adopting a social construction view and "eavesdropping" on internal processes would afford an inside-out, meanings-based perspective on collective identity formation processes to complement the outside-in view currently prevalent in literature.

In adopting a social construction view of meta-level collective identity, we also take some pointers from the literature pertaining to social movements. Collective identity is often defined as a shared sense of oneness or "we-ness" (Gamson, 1992; Hunt, 1991; Melucci, 1995) among members of a community. Melucci defines collective identity as an "interactive and shared definition produced by several individuals (or groups at a more complex level) and concerned with the orientations of action and the field of opportunities and constraints in which the actions take place" (1995: 44). The idea of collective identity as constructed, activated, and sustained through interaction among members of a community (Taylor & Whittier, 1992) suggests that the emergence of a meta-level identity is likely to entail some form of social identity formation or transformation at the member level, but, more importantly, it would also involve processes of social construction and negotiation at the collective level, as members interact and negotiate "shared values, definition of the situation and plan of action" (Gecas, 2000: 100).

Finally, it is unclear whether identity at the collective-of-organizations level is appropriately viewed as merely an extension of the organizational-level construct. Studying identity renewal in the context of communities, for instance, Howard-Grenville, Metzger, and Meyer (2013) observed that, within communities, in the absence of top-down leadership, identity construction relies more on informal processes and "identity custodians." We also note that organizational collectives are structurally different from single organizations (e.g., there is no common hierarchy), so it is possible that the features and processes of identity at the meta level differ from those at the organizational level. Taken together, the above literatures indicate that the formation of meta-level identity will dis-

play some features consistent with those of an emerging collective at the organizational level (see Déjean, Gond, & Leca, 2004; Garud, Jain, & Kumaraswamy, 2002; Lawrence & Phillips, 2004), but that we might also expect some distinctive features, as well. In this paper, we report on a longitudinal investigation of identity formation in the developing collective of iSchools. Although we studied the collective-identity formation process over the entire history of an emerging academic field, we focus specifically on the experience of a pivotal identity crisis. We investigated the crisis in some depth—to understand why it emerged, how it manifested, and how it was resolved—and, in doing so, developed and elaborated theory about the key aspects of collective identity formation.

METHODOLOGY

Research Design

We employed a qualitative, grounded-theory research approach, as most appropriate given the limited literature on the emergence of collective, field-level identity (Edmondson & McManus, 2007). Because there is some existing work on meta-level collective identity, however, we used grounded theory not only as a means for generating new theory, but also to elaborate existing theory. This orientation aligned well with our interpretive approach, too, in that we were especially interested in understanding events as experienced by organizational actors from their own perspective (Burrell & Morgan, 1979). Investigating a dynamic phenomenon such as identity formation ideally also calls for a process theory approach (Langley, 1999). We followed Burgelman's (2011) suggestion of relying on "strategic inflection points" to determine the length of observation. Beginning our (archival) data collection from the origination of the field, as well as conducting interviews with some of the key founders of the field, we later observed the dynamics of field identity formation for a period of seven years, during which time a crucial "identity crisis"—a critical inflection point in the formation of the field's identity—occurred and was workably resolved.

Data Collection

We relied on both primary and secondary sources of data, including: (a) semi-structured interviews with people involved in the formation of the nascent field, as well as those involved in the formation of member schools in the new field; (b) archival data about the iSchools and the field; (c) attendance at key events, such as "iConferences"; and (d) non-participant observation at a member school by the first author. We also maintained a formal diary of field notes and researcher discussions. Our primary data collection spanned more than seven years and comprised two extended phases—one beginning in 2004, including the field's first iConference in 2005, and extending until 2007, and the other beginning in 2009 and extending through the ostensible resolution of the identity crisis in 2011. Overall, we conducted 74 formal interviews and many informal interviews with faculty, staff, students, and alumni, including interviews with the dean of every school in the iSchool population (31 schools as of the end of our data collection). We attended three iConferences to capture the discourse and dynamics of the field as they emerged. Our sources for archival data included the iSchools website, websites of all member iSchools, and peer-reviewed as well as media articles pertaining to the iSchools and the field of information sciences in general. We relied on archival data for the period prior to our primary data gathering in 2004. These archival data also helped to triangulate the self-reports of key informants, and, thereby, mitigate possible "retrospective bias" in the interviews with the field's founders.

Interview and Sampling Technique

We pretested the interview protocol to eliminate questions that were too value laden, double barreled, or biased (Berg, 1994), and adapted it as interviews progressed. We initially identified information schools and their deans via archival search. Subsequently, we employed purposeful sampling (Patton, 1990) and snowball sampling (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) to identify other informants—especially founder members, communications heads at iSchools, and field experts. Consistent with traditional grounded-theory approaches, the sampling logic moved from purposive to theoretical sampling, with data collection largely guided by the theoretical framework emerging from earlier phases of data collection (Glaser & Strauss, 1968). For instance, when concepts with potential for theoretical insight emerged (e.g., those surrounding the important identity crisis), we "zoomed in" and focused in greater depth on the processes involved in

experiencing and resolving the crisis. We continued sampling until we achieved theoretical saturation; that is, the data gleaned from new informants or archival data ceased to yield any new conceptual categories or insights.

Data Analysis

We analyzed the data using an open-coding approach (Strauss & Corbin, 2008), which involved selecting, categorizing, and labeling direct statements (i.e., first-order, informant-centric codes) that we could assemble into more theoretical perceptions (second-order, researcher-centric themes), and which we later could condense into more general theoretical concepts (overarching dimensions). We began first-order coding by reviewing interview transcripts and archival data and identifying "thought units"—words, lines, or passages that represented a fundamental idea or concept. Where possible, to preserve informant-level meanings, we used "in vivo" labels (terms actually used by informants). In other cases, we assigned labels adequate at the level of meaning of the informant to capture first-order observations (Spradley, 1979) to keep labels as close as possible to the informants' own language. To enable the eventual construction of a cross-level model, we also noted explicitly whether identified codes reflected member-level or collective-level processes. We used constant comparative methods to compare and contrast data over time and across informants and sources (Glaser, 1978) to establish and maintain analytic distinctions among the codes. As we worked through the data, we compared thought units with previously identified codes and either categorized new data under existing codes or created a new code if it was analytically distinct. Through this iterative process, we identified 84 first-order codes.

The second-order analyses involved axial coding (Strauss & Corbin, 2008)—synthesizing and clustering first-order codes into higher-order themes. Again, using constant comparative methods and comparing data over time and across codes, we aggregated the 84 first-order codes into 23 second-order themes that were level specific (i.e., either field- or organization-level). Eleven of these themes pertained to the identity crisis itself. The final phase, theoretical coding (Glaser, 1978: 72), involved assessing the semantic relationships among these themes, a process that generated eight overarching dimensions, four of which were associated with the crisis. Finally, we arrived at the grounded theory model by segregating the member-level and field-level dimensions and tracing sequential and interactive relationships among them, thereby transforming the previously static and standalone dimensions into a dynamic, integrated, theoretical process model. To affirm our findings, we used member checks (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) with a key informant at various stages in the study. Before beginning later rounds of interviews, we prepared a case on the iSchools based on archival data and shared it with key informants, who verified, supplemented, and embellished the description. Finally, we focused on building a rich, detailed database that can allow readers to render judgments about the transferability of the emergent themes and grounded model.

FINDINGS: OVERVIEW

Table 1 displays the timeline of events pertinent to the development of the iSchools field.

We present our findings in two parts; the first covering a prologue period, where we briefly summarize the key processes leading up to a pivotal, collective, meta-level identity crisis, and the second offering a more detailed analysis of the crisis itself. Together, these two parts provide the basis for the comprehensive, cross-level, grounded theory model of collective identity formation presented in Figure 1 (which "magnifies" the identity crisis period to emphasize our main focus). The generation of such a model actually constitutes the final step in the grounded theory development process. We present the model first, however, to provide an organizing framework that lends structure to the findings narrative and serves as a preview of the findings. It shows the dimensions that explain how and why a crisis occurred, why such a crisis is likely to be associated with meta-level collective identity formation, and why such crises are unlikely to be resolved by seeking a consensual identity. The model is a dynamic process model, as connoted by the gerund ("-ing") form of all the dimensions.

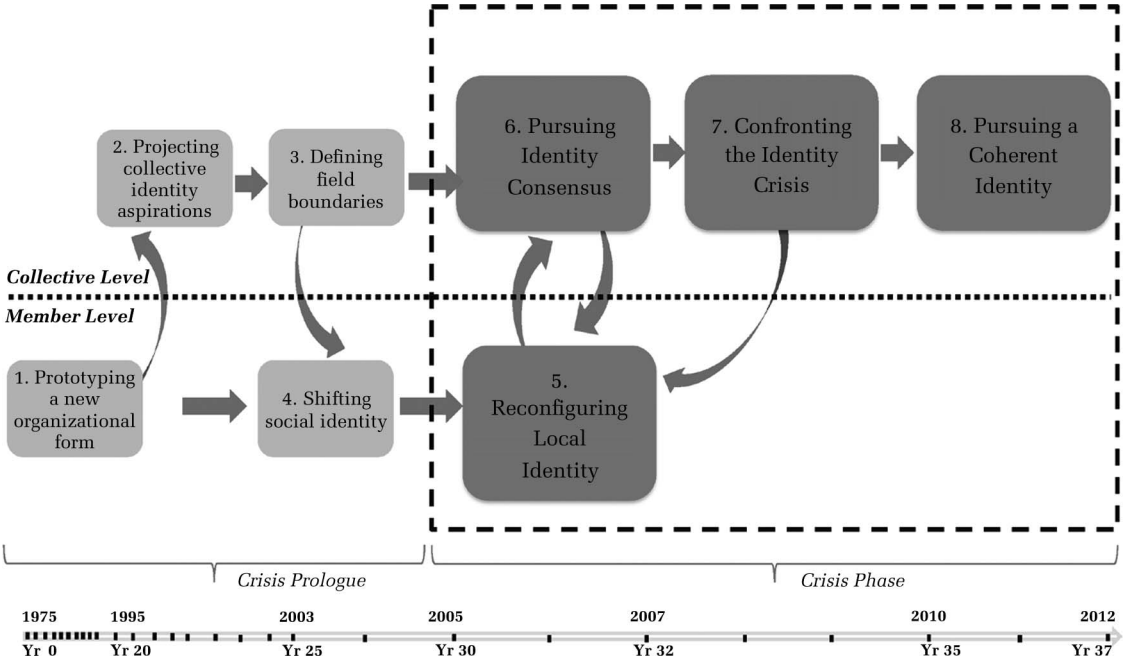
Figure 2 displays the ordering and structuring of the data that identify the codes, themes, and dimensions that capture the early (prologue) stages of the iSchools movement. We aggregated the informant-based, first-order codes (left-hand side) into researcher-induced, second-order themes (middle of the figure), which we further distilled into overarching theoretical dimensions (right-hand side). Collective- and organization (member)-level iden-

TABLE 1
Timeline of the Events Involved in the Emergence and Growth of iSchools

Year	Key Events
Pre-study period 1910–1970s	*Emergence of "library schools" as well as "computer sciences" and "computing" disciplines on the North American academic landscape*
	University of Washington (UW) founds Library School; University of Michigan (UMich) starts the School of Information and Library Studies; University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC-Chapel Hill) creates School of Information and Library Science program; University of California, Berkeley (Berkeley), starts School of Library Science; University of Maryland (UMD) starts Study of Library Science; University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA), creates School of Library Services; Georgia Institute of Technology adds computing as a major; University of North Carolina establishes a computer science department; University of Pittsburgh (Pitt) adds information science (IS) to its catalogue of studies
1975–1997 (Years 0–22)	*Some "library and information science"/"computer science" schools begin to incorporate the term "information" into their name, introduce an "information" curriculum, and hire interdisciplinary faculty*
	School of Library Information officially titled at Indiana University (IU); Department of Information and Computer Science forms at the University of California, Irvine (Irvine); Syracuse University (Syracuse) changes from library science to information studies; (late 1980s) University of North Carolina adds IS and creates a master's program in IS separate from the master's program in LS; Syracuse approves and initiates the master's degree
1990	Transformation of UMich program begins; new dean hires new faculty; program starts at Florida State University (FSU); Berkeley changes the School of Information Management's name to the School of Information Management Systems
1996	School of Information and Library Science re-chartered as the School of Information at UMich
1998–2002 (Years 23–27)	*"Gang of five" mobilize support for "Information Schools"*
1998	"Gang of five" meet in Pittsburgh; first class at Berkeley matriculates; Pennsylvania State University (Penn State) creates a new school; UW's School of Information becomes an independent school; IU's School of Library and Information Science creates informatics program; Pitt changes program's name to School of Information Sciences; Irvine's department makes a petition to become a School of Information and Computer Science; UNC-Chapel Hill joins the information schools movement; Irvine's program formally takes the name the Donald Bren School of Information and Computer Sciences
2003–2012 (Years 28–36)	*Information schools movement begins to coalesce into the iSchool field and addresses issues of identity*
2003	Deans of seven leading information and library science schools meet at UNC-Chapel Hill to discuss the "information schools movement." They adopt the term "iSchool" to describe their institutions and "iCaucus" to describe themselves
2005	Original 4 colleges and 13 additional information schools formally vote to approve the iSchools charter; first formal conference of the iSchool community (the "iConference") held at Penn State; 19 institutions from the USA and Canada were identified as iConference schools
2006	Second iConference at UMich; marketing firm presents its vision for the iSchool branding campaign to the iDeans, gets the green light, and starts working on strategic plan; marketing firm rolls out the materials for the branding campaign
2007	*New members*: University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada (Toronto); UC Irvine; UCLA; UMD
2008	Third iConference at UCLA; marketing exercise abandoned early
	New members: Carnegie Mellon University; Humboldt University of Berlin, Germany; Royal School of Library and Information Science, Denmark; Singapore Management University, Singapore
2009	Fourth iConference at UNC-Chapel Hill
	New members: Wuhan University, China; University of Sheffield, England
2010	Fifth iConference at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign
	New member: University College Dublin, Ireland
2011	Sixth iConference at UW
	New members: University of British Columbia, Canada; University of Kentucky; University College, London, UK
2012	Seventh iConference at Toronto, Canada
	New members: Nanjing University, China; University of Tampere, Finland

Note: Berkeley = University of California, Berkeley; FSU = Florida State University; Irvine = University of California, Irvine; IS = information science; IU = Indiana University; Penn State = Pennsylvania State University; Pitt = University of Pittsburgh; Syracuse = Syracuse University; Toronto = University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada; UCLA = University of California, Los Angeles; UMD = University of Maryland; UMich = University of Michigan; UNC-Chapel Hill = University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill; UW = University of Washington.

FIGURE 1
Grounded Model of the Collective Identity Crisis



tity formation processes often occurred in tandem, so Figure 2 intersperses the dimensions pertaining to organization-level processes with the collective-level processes. Table 2 provides additional first-order data in support of the themes and dimensions. Because this period in the collective movement is not theoretically revelatory, we offer only a brief summary of these germane themes and dimensions (1–4), which served as precursors to a meta-level identity crisis that became salient circa 2004–2005. We have explicitly identified the constituent themes in Table 3, however, so the reader can discern the specific themes supporting our summary.

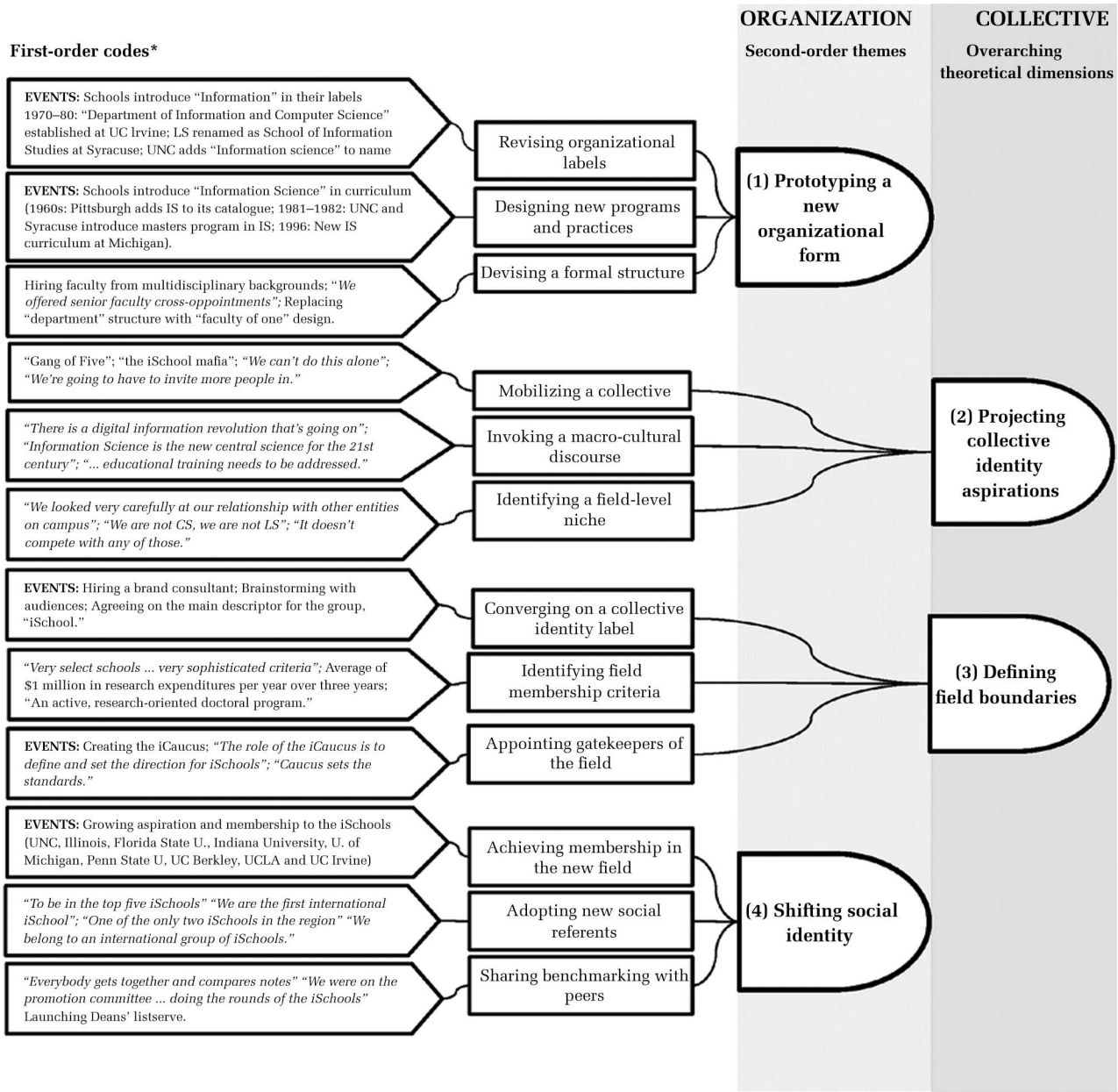
FINDINGS: PART I—PROLOGUE TO THE COLLECTIVE IDENTITY CRISIS

In the early 1900s, well before the advent of modern technology, the progenitors of the information sciences field had taken shape in the form of library sciences (LS) as an academic discipline focused on documentation, storage, and retrieval of information. By the 1960s, with the rise of computing, another progenitor, computer science (CS), which dealt mainly with computer hardware and software technologies, appeared in the repertoire offered by universities. Engagement with information and technology thereafter continued in multiple streams within academic institutions, and the study of information became scattered across various disciplines such as CS, LS, informatics, computer engineering, information technology, management information systems, etc. In the late 1970s, the NATO Institutes attempted to formalize a unique disciplinary niche for "information science" (IS), but the diversity of stakeholders and an inability to agree on the definition of "information" rendered these efforts ineffective (see King & Lyytinen, 2004). By the 1980s, with the rising interest in information and the perceived declining relevance of LS, library science departments began to transform themselves into broader IS departments, which motivated an effort to create an academic field focused on the study of information. Against this backdrop, the development of the iSchools began to take shape.

Prototyping a New Organizational Form: Dimension 1 (Member Level)

This first phase extended over roughly 25 years, beginning in the mid-1970s when a few former library schools independently experimented with creating the early prototypes of an information school. A major hallmark of this period was the

FIGURE 2
Prologue to the Identity Crisis Data Structure



* First-order codes include data from archives and interviews with informants.

re-labeling of a number of library schools to include the term "information" in their names to become "Library and Information Science" (LIS) schools. Others even dropped the term "library" from their titles (e.g., Syracuse University rechristened its "School of Library Science" as the "School of Information Studies"). These early prototype schools began hiring faculty from a wide range of disciplines as well as designing new curricula that emphasized interdisciplinary, information-related practices. Many also revised their formal structures from a traditional departmental design to a faculty-of-one design, within which faculty members from various disciplines were integrated under one common hierarchy. A founding member remarked:

TABLE 2
Representative Quotes, Events, and Archival Entries Underlying Second-Order Themes for the Prologue to the Identity Crisis

Prototyping a new organizational form: Dimension 1 (member level)	
Revising organizational labels	"It was in this period that many schools added the term 'information' to their name, most often by shifting 'library' to 'library and information,' although there were other combinations as well" (Olson & Grudin, 2009: 16). "Almost at the same time, the United States began to explore new methods of LIS education, including the renaming of the LIS schools" (Chen, Wang, Wu, Liu, Wu, & Ma, 2012: 217).
Designing new programs and practices	"[We] founded the nation's first master's degree in information resource management (which is now called information management) in 1980." (Member iSchool's website) "After renaming, the new information schools have expanded their teaching areas, reflecting a new direction for LIS schools" Chen et al. (2012: 217)
Devising a formal structure	"I would say the school is quite invested in being a faculty-of-one—and not being divided up into departments. There is some nibbling at the edges of that concept . . . but the faculty is pretty committed to the idea of being one faculty." (Dean 3) "The faculty I recruited were from business schools or computer science programs or telecommunications programs so that I could have people with the right expertise to complement the other faculties that I already had." (Dean 6)
Projecting collective identity aspirations: Dimension 2 (field level)	
Mobilizing a collective	"We would go around to different campuses—as a group and individually—to promote the concept. So I had the whole group out here at [university] when we became a school because that was like a validation to the others . . . We are not alone out here and some of these really important schools also buy into this information school thing." (Dean 1) "If we really have this thing be something, it has to become a going concern. We need to invite more people in; we can't just do the library tradition stuff. It's got to be broader. And so everybody kind of agreed on that, and that is when we pulled in [names of universities] so that's the way we built it up to where it is right now." (Dean 2)
Invoking a macro-cultural discourse	"We are in the information age . . . New ideas, applications, and theories will emerge over the next few decades that will create even more profound change across apparently diverse fields from science to business." (Dean 7) "There is no doubt that we are in the midst of a revolution, just as the 19th century went through the Industrial Revolution. Globalization, distribution of information, computer networks . . . all of these phenomena have taken on a huge importance. This is a new era, in which the fundamental sources of wealth are now knowledge and communication. There is no denying that knowledge has transformed the economy." (Dean 5)
Identifying a field-level niche	"Scientifically speaking, we're not just where a computer science and business and humanities meet or [a] social science. There is a unique information discipline. There's an information perspective." (Dean 8) "Compared to the computer science side, I think the difference is that the emphasis in these schools [iSchools] is much more on human factors. Those issues have been peripheral at best in computer science except in a few areas like computer interaction. So many of the things that we work on have a human side to them . . . but that's not the side computer science researchers are looking at first and sometimes not at all." (Dean 2)
Defining field boundaries: Dimension 3 (field level)	
Converging on a collective identity label	"It was voted on and it was not unanimous but I am sure it was pretty close that we would call ourselves 'I-Schools' and we would agree to refer to ourselves as that." (Marketing consultant, 2006) "[Name] came along and called it 'iSchool' which has a lot of configurations and disciplines within the school depending on the university involved. So this was part of the strategy which was useful in order to get 20–30 schools associated with the iSchools." (Dean 4, 2006)
Identifying field membership criteria	"Criteria for being recognized as an iSchool are not rigid, but schools are expected to have substantial sponsored research activity (an average of $1 million in research expenditures per year over three years), engagement in the training of future researchers (usually through an active, research-oriented doctoral program), and a commitment to progress in the information field." (iSchools Charter, 2009) "Schools that share our purposes and can provide evidence they meet the baseline characteristics described in the charter are encouraged to apply for membership." (iSchools Charter, 2009)
Appointing gatekeepers for the field	"The membership committee vets prospective members to recommend whether they should be part of the iSchool or iCaucus." (Dean 16, 2006) "The role of iCaucus . . . it seems to vary. There is a mission. People have been talking about it at this moment. It is basically to set the direction for iSchools in terms of research, teaching, and service. It is to define and set the direction for iSchools . . . to keep some sort of cohesion across the iSchools . . ." (Dean 6, 2006)
Shifting social identity: Dimension 4 (member level)	
Achieving membership in the new field	2003–2005: University of North Carolina, University of Illinois, FSU, IU School of Library and Information Science, UMich, Penn State, Berkley, UCLA, and Irvine, among others, joined the "iSchools movement." (Archival data)
Adopting new social referents	"Looking to the future is what keeps the college relevant. That is why we became one of the 19 North American iSchools." (Member iSchool's website) "[University] is one of only two Texas colleges or universities represented among the 27 iSchools in Asia, Canada, Europe, and the USA." (Member iSchool's website)
Sharing benchmarks with peers	"And then finally if I wasn't getting the current information I wanted, I would call up the members of the iSchools to find out what kind of information they would be willing to share." (Dean 21, 2007) "[E]verybody gets together and compares notes . . . I think the iConference is meant to be a point of departure to establish those sorts of relationships . . . benchmarks . . . sharing of information." (Dean 11, 2007)

Note: Berkeley = University of California, Berkeley; FSU = Florida State University; Irvine = University of California, Irvine; IU = Indiana University; LIS = library and information science; Penn State = Pennsylvania State University; UCLA = University of California, Los Angeles; UMich = University of Michigan.

TABLE 3
Representative Quotes, Events, and Archival Entries Underlying Second-Order Themes for the Identity Crisis

Reconfiguring local identity: Dimension 5 (member level)	
Reconciling legacy identity	"I think my second day was a branding meeting with two alumni and five faculty. They said: 'We are a library school. We need to maintain as a library school with all our connections.' And they didn't want to hear reasons why we were moving towards a different direction." (Dean 9, 2006) "A significant number of the alumni are members of the ALA and have jobs that require an ALA-accredited degree . . . Many of them got it when they were a library school not an iSchool, we didn't want to degrade their appearance or what they had earned." (Dean 8, 2007) "We didn't have all those legacy issues . . . It's much better as a greenfield operation." (Dean 5, 2006)
Balancing nested identity	"To be honest our [promotion] criteria are constrained by [University]. We have very high standards on how we evaluate people but we need to account for the university's criteria." (Dean 3, 2007) "We're an institution that's part of another institution [the university], so we have to recognize that we can't be completely independent. We're part of this place and we're part of the iSchools. It's a fine balancing act." (Dean 17, 2006)
Emphasizing local optimal distinctiveness	"[T]he interdisciplinary idea really became rooted in us. The trick was for us to understand that we could inform on information better than any other college—that we were distinct. " (Dean 18, 2008) "The [iSchool at the University] is a leader in the iSchools movement: it was one of the first schools to recognize the importance of having an academic home in this university for the investigation of information and the connections between information, technology, and society." (Member's website)
Pursuing identity consensus: Dimension 6 (collective level)	
Seeking consensus on identity claims	"He [brand consultant] said, 'You have already got the brand.' We were the only ones calling ourselves the iSchool and we all are on board with that (Dean 2, 2006). "[S]tudents, faculty, and staff collaborate to unite technology, people, and information to make a fundamental difference in this knowledge society—a society in which citizens collaboratively and freely create." (Member iSchool's website)
Seeking consensus on the meaning of identity claims	"There were many attempts to define what we meant by saying we study 'information' or we are 'interdisciplinary.' We couldn't even agree on the meaning of those basic terms. It was disconcerting." (Dean 5, 2007) "There appears to be as much intellectual ferment, confusion, and even chaos today as there was in the old days, which indicates that closure about the ultimate nature of information or its science has not been achieved." (Debons & Harmon, 2006: 20) "[T]he information field does need to establish its own identity in terms of who we are and what we are attempting to do." (Bruce, Richardson, & Eisenberg, 2006: 12)
Confronting the identity crisis: Dimension 7 (collective level)	
Framing the discourse as an identity crisis	"The great breadth of research done by faculty and students in these departments can contribute to the identity crisis of the iSchool institutions (which go by many names already . . .)." (iConference 2012 Accessibility Fishbowl, 2012) "What does it mean to work at the intersection of people and technology? To us, it means doing what no other academic units can do—bring together deep social science with deep technology innovation . . . [N]o other academic departments have established their headquarters at the rigorous intersection of the two. We think this goes a long way in solving the identity crisis facing the iMovement." (Wobbrock et al., 2009: 70)
(Re)contesting the common core	"What defines or differentiates an [iSchool]? It's very fuzzy. When you look at the population, you have schools that are effectively computer science schools and some that are effectively library science schools. What's the common denominator? There isn't one." (Dean 4, 2007) "You have to teach people something and you have a responsibility that there is at least a common thread among schools. You identify a person as this iSchool [as a] professional product, that there is something there that is common—like you are an accountant . . . We don't have that yet, and it's getting to be a big problem." (Dean 11, 2008)
(Re)contesting field membership boundaries	"There is some intellectual struggle over the definition of boundaries—some think it should be here . . . some think it should be there." (Dean 2) "[W]hat is difficult is defining what the borders of the iSchool group are . . . defining the limits of the identity. It changes all the time." (Dean 9)
Pursuing a coherent identity: Dimension 8 (collective level)	
Changing the focus of the identity discourse	"We are working together on common problems, common interests, common goals, etc. That's where we have agreement. I don't think all the schools are represented right now, but it's pretty darn close and everybody is taking on these big chunky tasks and it's so cool to watch this happen." (Dean 26, 2010) "Let's [acknowledge], 'We work on the same things in different ways and that's OK. We've all at least agreed on our sphere . . . So iSchool does not equal iSchool and it's better that way." (Dean 4, 2010)
Portraying ambiguity and crisis as normal	"[Y]ou only have two alternatives. One is to look very flat footed figuring out how to try to get concrete about something that you actually don't have any concrete thinking about. Or you make a virtue out of that ambiguity." (Dean 2, 2007) "I don't want to rush into that [identity discussion] because I think we may regret that. I think it is a matter of patience and evolution and a notion from my childhood that ambiguity is my friend. I believe that things will mature in their own time. No need to rush it." (Dean 6, 2008)
Benefitting from generational effects	"[T]he funny thing is I think our graduate students or PhD students are much more comfortable crossing the disciplinary boundaries than our faculty are . . . they're not people so imbedded in a particular discipline." (Dean 5, 2011) "What I sensed was that the younger cohorts were identifying with the iSchools. The more senior faculty still identified more with their home fields." (Dean 24, 2011)

Note: ALA = American Library Association.

> So what I've been trying to do through a number of steps is to wear down those silos. We've done that in a number of ways—abolishing departments, for example; creating unified faculty; trying to build some incentives for multidisciplinary collaborative research. So the real shift that we're in the midst of is trying to build a truly multidisciplinary faculty.
>
> (Dean 14)

Projecting Collective Identity Aspirations: Dimension 2 (Collective Level)

In the mid-1980s, the deans at three of these pioneering schools formed a "Gang of Three" and referred to their institutions explicitly as "information schools." By the late 1990s, this group grew to a "Gang of Five"—Toni Carbo (University of Pittsburgh), Ray Von Dran (Syracuse University), Mike Eisenberg (University of Washington), David Fenske (Drexel University), and John King (University of Michigan)—who expressed their intention to form a new academic field focused on information study. Although these pioneering schools had managed to create a niche for their schools within their respective universities, the deans sensed that their schools' positions within those universities and in the academy more generally would be precarious if they continued to operate as freestanding enterprises. Recognizing a sense of shared fate, one dean explained: "We can't do this alone. We need to be able to point to a number of other strong institutions that are doing this too. We all need each other." This core group began to mobilize their effort by trying to persuade other LIS and CS schools to join their movement. They began to make identity claims for the proposed field, doing so in a manner that would legitimize the new field—especially in the eyes of potential members. This the deans accomplished in two ways; first, by invoking the prevailing cultural discourse about the onset of the "Information Age":

> There is a digital information revolution going on. The cost of doing computation and communication has been falling exponentially for 30 years . . . That's transforming the way humans engage with each other—activities such as business, governmental, social, cultural. There is a demand for what we do.
>
> (Dean 17)

Second, they argued that the proposed new field's domain lay outside the boundaries of existing fields such as LS, LIS, and CS. In doing so, they articulated an academic niche for the new field at the interstices of those already established fields. A vague identity emerged that involved strong claims about who they were not ("we are not computer sciences and we are not library sciences") and diffuse claims about who they were ("information oriented," "interdisciplinary," "applied").

> We sat down to think through what the school should be . . . and we looked very carefully at our relationship with other entities on campus. We shouldn't compete directly with what's in our management school, what's in computer science, what's in a communications studies program. It doesn't compete with any of those in any really direct way.
>
> (Dean 2)

Universities were receptive to the proposed field's fundamental concept because it not only helped to save programs facing imminent closure, but, more significantly, any new interdisciplinary program on the hot topic of information study also enhanced the image of academic institutions as operating on the cutting edge.

Defining Field Boundaries: Dimension 3 (Collective Level)

By 2003, the now "Gang of Seven" made attempts to better differentiate their emerging field. One of their first steps was to hire a brand consultant to help distinguish them from adjacent fields. The consultant was instrumental in implementing a branding exercise, noting that: "Clearly, the idea is that there is a 'B School' and . . . a 'law school,' etc. Our goal is to have iSchools be seen as a peer in a student's decision about career choice." Because the popularity of the iSchools was rising, the deans began to refer to their growing group as the "iSchools Movement." This group then established tentative eligibility criteria for aspiring members, including: (a) an average of $1 million in research expenditures per year for three years; (b) a research-oriented doctoral program; and (c) direct reporting of the dean to the provost (iSchools Charter, 2009). A founding member remarked: "It's not like anyone who is willing to pay $10,000 is in, though; it's very select schools, so certain sophisticated criteria apply" (Dean 3). These criteria, however, did not specify how aspiring schools would be evaluated on the key features of being information focused and interdisciplinary, so discussions about admission did not produce definitive boundaries. Consequently, membership decisions came under the purview of the iCaucus (the iSchool leadership):

> The caucus itself is really an asset to establish a set of credentials for what it means to be a successful iSchool within a community; then to facilitate the membership of other schools who would aspire to make those standards.
>
> (Dean 6)

Although all the original schools in the movement were former LIS schools, the budding field soon attracted members from CS, computer engineering, information systems, informatics, and management information systems. In identity terms, with the new label and loose membership criteria established, the iSchools transitioned from defining themselves according to the boundaries of pre-existing fields (e.g., LIS or CS) to defining themselves in self-referential terms (e.g., "the iSchools' domain").

Shifting Social Identity: Dimension 4 (Member Level)

For institutions newly admitted into the iSchools domain, membership brought with it a shift in social identity. As former LIS and CS schools joined the group, they began increasingly to identify with the iSchools—in some instances, renaming themselves as "iSchool at [university name]"—although they continued to be active members in their disciplinary fields. A member school announced in a newsletter:

> As part of a national identity campaign to raise awareness of "information" as an academic discipline, college and university programs across North America are beginning to use the "iSchool" moniker to describe themselves and elevate name recognition collectively by indicating solidarity for the field.
>
> (University of Michigan School of Information, 2007: 8)

The shift in social identity manifested in two distinct ways. First, where member schools previously defined and ranked themselves in relation to schools in their previous "home" fields (e.g., LIS or CS), they now began to do so with reference to other iSchools. As the dean of a member school remarked:

> If you are a dean of a school, you have to defend yourself—the provost says, "Who do you compare yourself to?"—at least now you have a reference group . . . If parents say, "We read *Newsweek* and we heard that your school is number three or number one in information schools, what does that mean?", then you have an answer on a comparative basis. The iSchool provides that as your reference point at many levels.
>
> (Dean 8)

The member schools revised their vision statements to reflect their new membership; for example, ". . . the overarching goal of this strategic plan is to be in the top five iSchools in public universities and in the top eight in all universities within the next ten years" (member iSchool's website). Member schools also began to benchmark other iSchools' policies and practices on issues such as faculty hiring, compensation, promotion and tenure, and curriculum.

The data structure of Figure 2, the supporting data in Table 2, and the brief narrative above serve as empirical prologue to the major inflection-point event in the formation of the iSchools as a collective: the manifestation and resolution of a meta-level identity crisis, which we analyzed in depth.

FINDINGS: PART II—EXPERIENCING A COLLECTIVE IDENTITY CRISIS

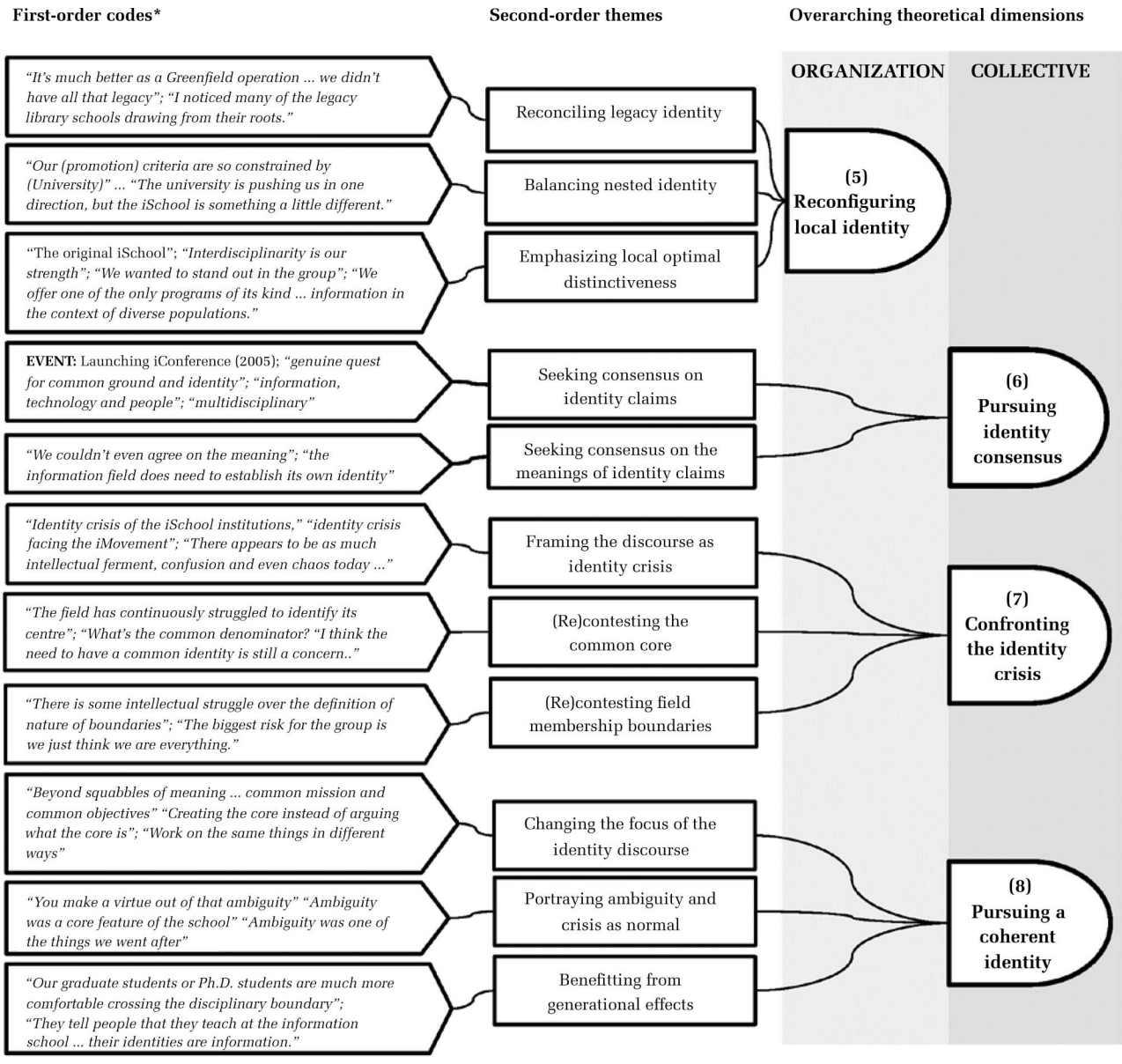
Figure 3 shows the data structure pertaining to the meta-level identity crisis itself, which we treat in more depth because of its theoretical significance. Once again, we aggregated the first-order, informant-based codes (left side) into researcher-induced, second-order themes (middle of the figure), which we further distilled into overarching theoretical dimensions (right side). Figure 3 also accounts for the interplay of processes at both levels during the crisis. Table 3 provides additional supporting first-order data for the second-order themes and dimensions associated with the crisis.

Perhaps the most proximal reason for the crisis itself derived from the interplay between member- and collective-level identities. Although member-level processes most directly created the conditions for the crisis, collective-level processes triggered it. The germane processes were as follows.

Reconfiguring Local Identity: Dimension 5 (Member Level)

Joining the emerging field brought with it the need for significant additional adjustments to members' organizational identities beyond those described in Dimension 4 (see Figures 1 and 2 and Table 2). Three prominent themes were integral to this process: (1) reconciling legacy identity, (2) bal-

FIGURE 3
Collective Identity Crisis Data Structure



* First-order codes include data from archives and interviews with informants.

ancing nested identity, and (3) emphasizing local optimal distinctiveness.

Reconciling legacy identity. Although member schools had adopted the iSchool label, they still had to define for themselves what the claim of being an iSchool meant at the local level. Member schools soon began to imbue the iSchools label with meanings that emerged via interactions with local university members, thereby arriving at a revised organizational identity. A salient issue was the perceived need to maintain continuity and therefore some semblance of their legacy identity (the historical identity supplanted by a new iSchool identity). The influence of legacy identity could be traced, in part, to members' arguments for "building on current strength" and "reaching critical mass," and their desire "to look similar to established disciplines in order to legitimate itself in the academy" (King, 2006:14). Further, while embracing a new identity and choosing new referents,

member schools had to maintain long-standing ties with stakeholders. By shifting their identity label abruptly from a "library school" to an "iSchool," for instance, such schools especially risked estranging their donors, so they had to limit the extent to which they could align themselves with the iSchool identity without alienating their supporters. At times, managing members' historical ties superseded the interests of the field. The dean of a school with LS legacy recalled:

> The first dean of this place was kind of dismissive and basically said, "We're not about libraries, we're about the information world." So, essentially, when I came in, I had to spend a lot of time with our alumni telling them that we were not giving up on the library science side of things. The plural said there was a broad range of information sciences of which library science is one. They accepted it. So I think many schools did.
>
> (Dean 6)

Schools with LS legacies also continued to seek American Library Association (ALA) certification, even though deans in the iCaucus strongly questioned its value.

With the exception of two "greenfield" schools, all other schools had such legacies and therefore imbued their new iSchool identity with retained elements of their former identities. As one dean noted, "[the] iSchool is really a product of local history—rather than of carefully reasoned logic" (Dean 12).

Balancing nested identity. Another major contributor to the crisis was that each iSchool was embedded within larger institutional contexts (their local university as well as the emerging new field), thus requiring a balancing of these nested identities. Although member schools reshaped their identities with regard to their academic discipline upon inclusion within the iSchools domain—for example, now being devoted to IS rather than LS or CS—their affiliations continued with other institutions (e.g., the university and local community) within which they were embedded. Member iSchools therefore tried to configure their local identities in ways that enabled them to meet identity-related expectations of their wider ongoing institutional associations. For member schools, the problem of managing nested identities was highlighted when they attempted to rename themselves as "iSchool at [university name]," only to have their renaming attempts denied by university administrators. Nesting challenges were most salient to those responsible for communicating with external stakeholders. When the marketing consultant came up with the *Brand Identity and Graphic Style Guide*, which suggested "the correct way to implement the iSchool signature," implementing this at the university level turned out to be contentious. An iSchool communications director explained: "We're wrestling and struggling . . . the university is pushing us in one direction—'Oh, we want you to use this logo'—but the iCaucus says, 'No, we want you to use this logo'—and we're trying to meld the two." Such challenges extended to the institutional context of the region in which the member school was located. As one dean noted:

> We're a land-grant institution, so we have a strong public service orientation and we're in [a state] that has a tremendously changing population by race and ethnicity, by immigration, language, status, all those things. So we can't be the standard iSchool.
>
> (Dean 17)

These challenges were further complicated for international member schools that had to manage identity-related expectations stemming from operating in diverse geographical, national, and cultural contexts.

Emphasizing local optimal distinctiveness. There was a theoretically interesting variation on the theme of balancing nested identities in that identity reconfiguration in member schools not only manifested in efforts to carve an optimally distinctive niche within their own universities, but also in efforts to be optimally distinctive from other iSchool members. One member iSchool claimed: "The School of Information Studies is The Original Information School in the nation" (member iSchool's website). An entrepreneurial member dean hoped to differentiate her school by taking an active part in shaping the field of iSchools. She explained: "We were trying to build an identity for our school, but we were also intent on building an identity for our field, our academic community . . . and we wanted to play a leadership role in defining the field." Overall, from 2005 to 2008, the member iSchools managed to shift their organizational identities to reflect their new collective iSchool affiliation, which had implications for their presentation of themselves within their own local universities. While reconfiguring their local identity by imbuing field-level labels with local-level meanings (derived from legacy identities and nested identities) helped them in their local contexts, it contributed to a crisis at the collective level—when

the collective began to actively pursue a consensual identity.

Pursuing Identity Consensus: Dimension 6 (Collective Level)

For the collective, formalization and the attendant deliberations about eligibility criteria and boundaries ("What constitutes an 'iSchool?'") had made the absence of a consensual self-definition conspicuous. The need to go beyond diffuse claims of being "information based"—which could be interpreted in many ways—and arrive at a more precise identity motivated explicit attempts to arrive at a consensus on an identity for the budding field. Two prominent themes were associated with pursuing identity consensus: (1) seeking consensus on identity claims and (2) seeking consensus on the meanings of those claims.

Seeking consensus on identity claims. The first iConference in 2005 was pivotal in the iSchools' trajectory because it offered a forum for discourse for the 19 schools attending the conference. Discussions about the nascent field's identity dominated the conference, beginning with the official welcome note that affirmed: "Over the next few days, we will seek to define our identity as iSchools—who we are and what makes us unique." Recalling an incident that occurred before the conference, Dillon and Rice-Lively (2006: 22) observed:

> The purpose of the conference was set for the group from the University of Texas during the taxi ride in from the airport . . . Revealing more than a passing knowledge of management and business from his own undergraduate days, [the taxi driver] . . . remarked, "I'm not sure I know what that is," when we spoke of the iSchool idea. The exchange encapsulated a very real concern—that the information field must forge answers that pass the "taxi driver test" about who we are before we can be sure we have arrived.

Discussions at the conference were "open-ended, eclectic, exploratory, non-territorial, inclusive and driven by curiosity and questioning" (Debons & Harmon, 2006: 19). Participants agreed on the "essential attributes of an information school": "information as the primary object of study," engaging with issues at the intersection of "information, technology, and people," faculty with "broad-based, inclusive, multidisciplinary mindsets," and "an independent school or college within its institution" (Bruce, Richardson, & Eisenberg, 2006). Consensus on claims therefore was unproblematic, and they invoked these claims as a basis for arguing a distinctive identity and projecting an optimally distinctive image differentiating the iSchools from other related fields. The consensus-seeking process on claims was significant because the relative ease of agreeing on them set up a marked contrast with more problematic attempts to arrive at similar agreement about the meaning of those claims.

Seeking consensus on the meanings of identity claims. Despite the agreement on identity claims, there was spirited debate about the meanings of even fundamental terms such as "information oriented" and "interdisciplinary." Members' idiosyncratic interpretation of these terms to suit legacy and nested identity demands implied fewer possibilities of consensus at the collective level. The host of the iConference declared:

> A consensual identity is key to us becoming a legitimate field; if we can't agree on who we are, we're nobody. We need to reach agreement on what we mean when we say we are an interdisciplinary, information-oriented school working at the intersection of people, information, and technology.
>
> (Dean 5)

These catchy terms attracted resources within members' own universities, but became grounds for disagreement during the conference. Even as they approved an iSchools charter in 2005, differences in the meaning of core descriptors made explicit the previously tacit disparities concerning identity. At the conference, "[t]here was a genuine quest for common ground and identity . . . During plenary sessions, there were a number of attempts to define the key parameters of common identity among I-Schools" (Debons & Harmon, 2006: 19). None succeeded, however. The conference ended with pronounced disagreement on common meanings for the core terms, thus marking the initial manifestation of the collective identity crisis. The disagreement resurfaced during the branding exercise. As one dean commented:

> The problem is that we don't know what to market. I think we have an emblem. We have a label. But we don't have a can and we aren't quite agreeing on what's in the can yet. So it's hard to put the ingredients on the label.
>
> (Dean 18)

Members expressed frustration over the identity question and began to use the phrase "identity crisis" to each other (field notes). These events are theoretically significant because they demonstrate

that agreeing on claims was not deemed by the key players to be adequate for declaring an identity, and that agreement on meanings was necessary but elusive—thus becoming a key factor in the emergence of the crisis. Here, reconfigured local identities of members contributed to the manifestation of the collective-level identity crisis because local identity demands implied less flexibility with regards to achieving consensus at the collective level.

Confronting the Identity Crisis: Dimension 7 (Collective Level)

The failure to reach consensus on identity in the wake of the first two iConferences led to an overt identity crisis revealed in three themes: (1) framing the discourse overtly as an "identity crisis," (2) (re)contesting field membership boundaries, and (3) coping with the absence of a common core.

Framing the discourse as identity crisis. Although the characterization of an identity crisis had surfaced in the wake of the first iConference, following members' subsequent inability to resolve differences about the branding exercise, the phrase "identity crisis" now dominated the discourse (as exemplified by the quotes featured at the beginning of this paper). Many deans now overtly characterized the situation as an identity crisis—for example, "the marriage of these two disparate programs [LS and IS] has led to this identity crisis" (Dean 11). Similarly, Wobbrock et al. referred to this period in terms of the "identity crisis facing the iMovement" (2009: 70). Framing the discourse in crisis terms had the effect of making identity disagreements even more salient, thus exacerbating anxiety about the burgeoning new field's identity. After 2007, the identity-crisis language was pervasive, which indicated that the act of constructing the discourse as a crisis encouraged the treatment of the situation as a bona fide crisis.

(Re)contesting the common core. In the period before the identity crisis, the emerging field had been defined largely by declaring what it was not. In 2006–2007, the deans explicitly worked to agree on what it was. One dean explained, "I think we need to have something more than negative to say . . . something more than 'I'm not X, not Y, not Z'" (Dean 11). Despite "a number of attempts to define the key parameters of common identity among I-Schools" (Debons & Harmon, 2006: 19), at the first iConference, there was pronounced disagreement over what should constitute the core. With member schools typically arguing for a core that was more often than not aligned with their local identities—especially legacy identities—fault lines appeared over the issue of defining a common core. "Our common identity is around information, but the way we interpret it for our curriculum and research is quite different . . . We just don't match up" (Dean 16). The interdisciplinary focus also brought with it identity challenges.

> The perceptions and values of social scientists differ from those of designers and engineers. What constitutes rigor and achievement in both fields also differs . . . Most iSchools also have faculty from the humanities, and so the challenge grows even larger . . . The questions for the iMovement are ones of identity and community. How shall such diverse traditions be brought together to define scholarship where people and technology meet? It is difficult to conceive that, methodologically, these camps can converge, or even that they should. From epistemology to pragmatics, they are simply too different.
>
> (Wobbrock et al., 2009: 70)

Apprehensive that member schools with humanities and LIS orientations would have an overwhelming influence on the field's identity, technology-oriented schools insinuated that member schools with humanities and LIS orientations had merely "relabeled" themselves, rather than having embraced the iSchools agenda in the "true" sense. Ironically, as CS schools exerted influence, there was subsequent concern that the field was becoming more "technical" in its approach, further exacerbating the inability to arrive at a consensual identity, and contributing to the identity crisis. At the 2010 iConference, reflecting on the fault lines that had emerged in the nascent field, Toni Carbo, professor at Drexel University's iSchool remarked:

> Our field and profession are splintered more than they should be, and I think we should find ways to work together to strengthen our field across organizations, disciplines, and cultures. Also, while technologies are a critical part of what we do, they are only one part. We are not T-schools; we are iSchools, and perhaps we need to remind ourselves of that.
>
> (Carbo, 2010)

These issues, taken together, meant that member schools still could not agree on the core of their collective identity. One dean noted that "this field has continuously struggled to identify its center" (Dean 2). Yet another said, "I think the need to have a common identity is still a concern for all of us" (Dean 5). Consequently, they had difficulty conveying a consistent image externally. As one dean re-

marked, "If we do not agree on who we are, how do we decide how others should perceive us?" (Dean 23). This concern became so pervasive that the branding exercise was called off midway by the iCaucus members. The anxiety over the lack of a common core indicates that these key players continued to believe that there needed to be a common core before there could be consensus on identity.

(Re)contesting field membership boundaries. Another key manifestation of the crisis was a renewed inability to agree on field boundaries. This issue, which had been left unsettled earlier, now re-emerged in a more contentious form. The dynamism surrounding the concept of "information" rendered it difficult to commit to an identity without the risk of it becoming less relevant in a few years down the line.

> What is happening—I feel—is that the wave of technology is fast exceeding our ability to understand what's happening. There is a whole set of phenomena we do not know how to deal with. It is sociological, psychological, technological, computing—it's all of it. I find it fascinating. I think it is a transformation where we simply can't predict what the consequences will be.
>
> (Dean 16)

The tenuous and ambiguous boundaries implied by the label "information school" led to fresh debates about how wide to cast the membership net, and whether a wider net would enhance or dilute the viability of the emerging field.

> One of the main things that came out was the risk of drawing too tight a boundary around this field, because, within a very short time, given its dynamic nature, there will be constituencies that we would want within the boundary outside it, because we drew the boundary too close. And I think that has played out very true.
>
> (Dean 7)

Member schools believed the very purpose of iSchools would be lost if they defined themselves too rigidly. Consequently, they had originally embraced a wide variety of disciplines (as diverse as museum management, education, cultural studies, etc.). Arguing for including "telecommunications" under the iSchools rubric, one dean said:

> If an iSchool's turf is bounded by People and Information on the left and right, and by Techniques and Technology on the top and bottom, then telecom fits on this turf just as nicely as information science or library science.
>
> (Dean 8)

Although keeping the boundaries flexible offered scale to the iSchools movement, in what seemed like a "Catch-22" situation, it also brought with it the risk of undermining the field's "distinctiveness" and legitimacy.

> I think the biggest risk for the group is we just think we are everything. Sometimes, when you go to these iConferences and people say, "Well you know, we do social things. And we do ethical things and we do . . ." I mean it just becomes so unbounded that you kind of want to say, "Just a minute; we have to have something that's a clear agenda that's not like other people."
>
> (Dean 12)

Observing that "[w]hile most other academic disciplines—at least those claiming to be part of the sciences—have concrete objects of study in the world, information is simply too everywhere and yet nowhere," some went so far as to suggest dropping the term "information" itself (Wobbrock et al., 2009: 69). The boundary debate became further aggravated when, to accommodate some prestigious international schools, the iSchools had to relax some of their eligibility criteria because of the different type of research these schools did, as well as the different academic hierarchies in European and Asian schools. Finally, as the field boundaries became more tenuous, membership decisions became highly contested, and, eventually, resulted in a stalemate. A visibly annoyed dean remarked:

> We seemed to spend most of our meetings looking at applications from schools we didn't really want to include and then finding reasons why we didn't want them inside the tent, without hurting their feelings. And it became a movement about who belonged and who didn't belong.
>
> (Dean 9)

This reprise of concerns about boundaries is theoretically informative because it shows not only that boundary debates inhibit consensus and thus help to fuel the sense of crisis, but also that boundary definition could be more contentious and important at the meta level than at the organization level. Confronting an identity crisis at the collective level influenced the process of reconfiguring local identity because it prompted individual iSchools to identify more with their legacy fields and/or larger institutional context of their universities.

Pursuing a Coherent Identity: Dimension 8 (Collective Level)

By 2011, when we conducted the last phase of interviews, members were looking for a way out of the identity crisis resulting from the frustrating search for a common identity. They arrived at a resolution, not because of the emergence of a consensus on meanings,[2] but, in part, because of a shift in collective thinking about identity and reframing of the character of collective identity per se. Three themes were germane: (1) changing the focus of the identity discourse, (2) casting ambiguity and crisis as normal, and (3) benefitting from generational effects.

Changing the focus of the identity discourse. Perhaps most importantly, whereas in the past member schools appeared to believe that achieving consensus on identity was a precursor to collective action, later interviews, iConference discussions, and field notes revealed that they now preferred to redirect the consensus-on-identity issue. In 2011, one of the deans said, "[L]et's get beyond the squabbles of the meaning [about who we are] . . . and get to a point where we have a common mission and common objectives . . . in terms of setting research agendas, etc." (Dean 24). Another dean remarked, "I think the concern should be more about creating the core instead of arguing what the core is" (Dean 8). An avenue out of the identity crisis came in the form of entrepreneurial efforts by a few deans to reframe the identity discourse itself. They now portrayed collective identity not as a process of "discovering common meanings" through deliberation and consensus seeking, but as a process of "creating coherence" via shared practices and continued interactions. Consequently, rather than trying to agree on common meanings for core identity elements, they agreed to focus on pursuing mutual interests, problems, goals, and actions. The apparent operating assumption was that, over time, in the course of working together on a common agenda—although in distinct ways—field members could develop new connections and arrive at a shared sense of "we-ness." Our analysis suggested that this significant shift constituted a focus on achieving a *coherent identity,* rather than a *consensual identity*. In other words, collective identity would be achieved in the course of working together with shared aims, in lieu of common meanings for core identity elements. The term "coherent identity" connotes an identity in which beliefs and actions that, at times, may seem individually to be at odds, in the aggregate, are mutually compatible and fit together collectively. This re-orientation was not so much intentional as emergent, but it provided a way out of the trap created by trying to achieve consensus—especially in a nascent, interdisciplinary, meta-level collective.

Even as the chair of the iCaucus released a statement in 2011 declaring that the iSchools did not have a well-defined identity, interviews and data from websites of member schools indicated that, by this point, there was documentable convergence in the way they saw themselves. One dean remarked: "Most of us agree that we are best defined in terms of the problem space we inhabit, and that space is defined by problems that necessarily involve interaction between people and information and technology to understand and solve" (Dean 19). By 2012, aided by the reframed identity, references to an "identity crisis" were notably less prevalent in the documents and commentary of iSchool members. This key finding is theoretically significant because it shows how a change in understanding the character of identity at the meta level of a collective of organizations not only resolved the crisis, but contributed to a revised understanding of collective identity itself.

Portraying ambiguity and crisis as normal. Consonant with the idea of pursuing a coherent identity, where deans had previously expressed frustration that the iSchools did not have a well-defined identity, they now characterized identity as a work in progress (Dean 12). The deans re-emphasized that the field was still "nascent," that it was "premature" to expect a well-defined identity, and suggested that identity would "emerge" in due course. They drew analogies to other established fields that had gone through a similar phase of identity-related anxiety:

> It was the same with computer science. Computer science borrowed from electrical engineering, formal linguistics, and so on when it was being established as a scientific field. So the question was, "Is it so important that it merits a discipline in its own right?" So there was an identity challenge right there.
>
> (Dean 15)

[2] In fact, a mission statement for the iSchools, released by the chair of the iCaucus in 2011, noted: "In spite of these successes, a clear identity statement marketing and communicating the value and purpose of iSchools remains a key challenge." (Dean 14)

Deans described the ambiguity surrounding iSchool identity as useful. One of the founding deans explained that "a key part of the school was built around the idea that ambiguity was a core feature" (Dean 3). These findings are notable because they imply that reframing problematic situations can help to create a context for altering ways of thinking, talking, and acting. They also demonstrate the key role of some of the more prestigious, founding members in this sensegiving effort, which contributed to the legitimation of this discourse.

Benefitting from generational effects. Another factor that contributed to resolving the crisis was somewhat surprising to the iSchool deans. The prevalent view among the deans was that, in a newly emerging field, given the pressures of publication, promotion, and tenure, junior faculty would find it more risky and difficult to embrace the new field than senior faculty. By 2010, however, junior faculty tended to identify with the iSchools as a field much more than did senior faculty (field notes), for two reasons: First, whereas most senior faculty perpetuated their legacy identities by continuing to maintain strong ties with their "home" disciplines, attending conferences, publishing in their journals, and collaborating with former colleagues, junior faculty members did not.

> The older faculty were worried about journals and prestige and other issues, but the younger faculty, if you met them on a subway, would say "I teach in an information school"—they don't say, "I am a computer scientist working in an info school."
>
> (Corporate partner, 2011)

Second, as the new generation of iSchool academics emerged, which included junior faculty who had launched their academic careers at iSchools or had obtained a PhD at an iSchool, they brought greater acceptance of and commitment to the iSchool agenda. The role of generational effects was important to resolving the crisis, in that it showed how the evolution of organization members in a collective affects the identity of, and identification with, an emerging field.

Summary

Overall, the grounded model shown in Figure 1 clearly indicates interplay between collective and member levels, and highlights the notion of an identity crisis at the meta level of a collective of organizations. Within the dimensions that pertain specifically to the identity crisis, there were several noteworthy themes with theoretical importance. First, the dimension of pursuing identity consensus—specifically, the underlying contrast between seeking consensus on claims versus seeking consensus on the meaning of claims illustrates that members of a collective may not view consensus on claims as sufficient grounds for a well-defined collective identity, and that arriving at consensus on the meanings of those claims can be problematic and contentious. Second, the dimension of reconfiguring local identity, and attendant themes of reconciling legacy identity and balancing nested identities, indicate how member-level factors can hinder consensus and deepen a collective identity crisis. Finally, changing the focus from consensual to coherent identity shows how reframing the understanding of collective identity can help resolve a crisis and suggests how meta-level identity may differ from organizational identity. Implications of these findings form the basis for our discussion.

DISCUSSION

To date, scholars have done an admirable job of investigating the emergence of collectives—be they social movements, organizational fields, or new categories/markets—and some of these works focus on collective identity and its role in the legitimation of a newly emerging field (e.g., Navis & Glynn, 2010). Because these studies typically come from an institutional perspective, however, they tend to focus mainly on the claims that actors or entities make about who they are as a collective. We adopted a social construction view of identity formation to understand some of the deeper processes involved in the emergence of these claims, asking the initial question: *By what processes do organizations in an emerging field develop a collective identity*? In the course of answering this question in the context of a newly emerging collective of iSchools, via access to insiders and backstage conversations over a period of seven years, we found a pervading discourse of ambiguity, debate, and disagreement about identity. Existing depictions tend to underplay the contestation involved in collective identity formation, but, in the case we studied, such processes were prominent and led to a meta-level "identity crisis" that needed to somehow be resolved before the development of a new field could proceed. Overall, these findings suggest that a claims-based, outside-in perspective on collective identity formation is indeed informative, although incomplete, and that a meanings-based, inside-out

viewpoint offers additional understanding of identity-related processes.

Perhaps the study's most general contribution lies in the cross-level grounded model and its depiction of how and why this identity crisis occurred. The model not only helps to illuminate processes involved in collective identity development, but also shows that organization- and field-level identities evolve in tandem—with identity development at each level influencing, and being influenced by, identity development at the other. Not all the processes and themes revealed in the model are theoretically revelatory and require commentary, so we highlight three of the most notable findings with implications for theory and future research: (1) explaining the collective identity crisis itself, (2) the cross-level identity dynamics between the super- and subsystems involved in the co-evolution of organizational and meta-level collective identities, and (3) the emergence of a "coherent" rather than a "consensual" identity at the collective level.

A Meta-Level Collective Identity Crisis

The most salient finding of this study was the occurrence of an "identity crisis" in the course of the iSchool's attempt to form a collective identity. The manifestation of an identity crisis at this level of analysis itself constitutes a theoretically interesting discovery because an identity crisis is typically presumed to pertain to the individual level. Erikson (1970) coined the term to describe the process of identity formation among individuals, particularly at the stage that marks a transition in identity during adolescence. His conceptualization of identity crisis as a "normal phase of increased conflict" resonated with the iSchools deans' reframed discourse on identity crisis in emerging fields as "natural and inevitable." Our findings on identity formation at this level, however, resonate with other portrayals of the early stages in the formation of collectives, some of which have alluded to the potential for "differences" (Clegg et al., 2007), "contention" (McAdam & Scott, 2005), and "disagreements" (Garud, 2008). An insight derived from this study is that, in the case of the iSchools, these differences centered on disparities in meanings, which precipitated the crisis. The informants' frequent allusion to a crisis led us to "zoom in" on this pivotal episode in the iSchools trajectory and focus on the "identity work" in which the informants engaged to try to resolve the crisis.

Pearson and Clair (1998: 63) described an organizational crisis as marked by "breakdown in shared meaning, legitimization, and institutionalization of socially constructed relationships" and an attendant sense of "disillusionment or loss of psychic and shared meaning" and "threat" to an entity's viability—a depiction that converges with our informants' description of their experience. Further, in distinguishing the notion of identity crisis from the related notion of "identity ambiguity" (Corley & Gioia, 2004), we find that, in emerging fields, the anxiety over the field's identity is experienced intensely (i.e., as a bona fide "crisis") because it encompasses elements of both ambiguity and "identity conflict" (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Fiol, 2002; Foreman & Whetten, 2002; Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997). Although similar contestations and conflict are also likely at the organizational level, we expect organizational identity crises to be resolved more expediently because of operational imperatives and the significant sensegiving efforts of top managers (e.g., Corley & Gioia, 2004; Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991). Given the structural characteristics of the type of emerging field we studied, however—that is, the absence of a common hierarchy and goal system and a low task interdependence but high sense of shared fate—sensegiving and sensemaking are more likely to assume a horizontal rather than a vertical or top-down form. Consequently, at this level, resolution of such a crisis is not only likely to be precarious and demanding but also dependent on informal—rather than formal—influence.

The likelihood of an identity crisis in emerging collectives beyond the specific context of this study finds support in references to crises in the emergence of the fields of strategic management (Thomas, 1984) and organizational behavior (Miner, 2006). The notion of discord also finds support in literature on nascent fields. Garud (2008), for example, demonstrated that conferences in newly emerging fields are "not necessarily driven by agreements and consensus" (2008: 1080). Purdy and Gray (2009) showed that, in emerging fields, multiple, conflicting logics are not only common but also persist and co-exist. We might note several boundary conditions to the likelihood of identity crisis in emerging fields, however. We would expect the incidence of a crisis to be particularly high in (a) fields or collectives formed by members from breakaway groups where the influence of legacy identity is marked, and (b) collectives exhibiting high interdependence by virtue of shared destiny (e.g., industries, professional or

trade associations) rather than shared task (e.g., organizations, work teams). An identity crisis is significant in a field's formation because concern and conflict about identity in the emergent phase can threaten a new field's legitimacy, weaken members' identification with the new field and potentially lead to the demise of a budding field. The absence of familiarity and shared experience among members offers fewer grounds for developing shared understanding. What key processes, then, are likely to be involved in the generation of a collective, meta-level identity crisis? Our findings suggest that one of the main factors is the notion of heterogeneity in local identities, which can be traced to the influence of both (1) legacy identities and (2) nested identities.

Legacy identities. A significant factor in the development of the identity crisis was the influence of members' legacy identity. Extant studies of identity formation at the collective level portray a more or less sequential and linear development—such that, in the early phases of a collective's development, firms mute their individual distinctiveness and espouse a collective identity, while, in later phases, firms highlight their optimal distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991) from one another (Navis & Glynn, 2010). Our study indicates that the collective identity formation process may not be quite so clear-cut because such identity is unlikely to form from a *tabula-rasa*. Emerging fields, although appearing to be new, are often seeded by older institutions and initiated by breakaway groups from preexisting fields (Rao et al., 2003). Although members come together to form a new type of collective, identity influences from the legacy fields affect the newly emerging collective. Importantly, the identity drawn from the legacy field acts as a double-edged sword. Although members' legacy identity helps route resources into the nascent field, it also casts a shadow on the newly emerging identity—typically leading to problems of distinctiveness ("How is this new field markedly different from our previous field?"). The issue of legacy identity is complicated even further when we consider that new fields are often formed from multiple pre-existing fields. As much as the diversity in legacy identities serves as a reservoir of meanings from which to draw in carving a unique collective identity, it poses high potential for conflict over those meanings. In the absence of a well-defined collective identity, and wanting to have a well-formed local identity for local action and legitimacy purposes, members tend to rely on what is familiar.

Nested identities. Existing studies on collective identity formation tend also to underplay the embeddedness of members in multiple institutional contexts—and the implications of this phenomenon for the emergence of a collective identity. Despite early efforts to distinguish a newly emerging collective from preexisting, adjacent categories, collective identity is unlikely to form in isolation because member organizations also hold membership in multiple collectives. Our data suggest that, while members of a given collective signal their primary association with the focal collective group by adopting the symbols and labels of that group, they imbue these labels with meanings that are in sync with the identity imperatives of the other institutional environments within which they are also embedded. This is akin to what Glynn (2008) referred to as "institutional bricolage." Although such bricolage identity work at the member level helps create optimal distinctiveness, it can also impede the identity formation of the larger collective as members fail to converge on common meanings even as they agree on common labels. Identity differences coupled with an awareness of the limits to the flexibility of their local identities thus contribute to a sense of identity crisis at the collective level. Although legacy and nested identities help produce conditions for an identity crisis at the collective level, they also raise a question about how member-level features eventually translate into a crisis at the collective level, which leads to another finding with theoretical implications: the co-evolutionary identity dynamics across different levels in a nested structure.

Cross-Level Identity Dynamics

Although recent studies have examined organizational identity formation (Gioia et al., 2010) and field-level identity formation (Navis & Glynn, 2010), the current study examines the interplay of both levels in the formation of an emerging field's identity. Understanding the role of cross-level dynamics in collective identity formation becomes even more significant when we consider that it is the intersection of the member and collective levels that precipitated a meta-level crisis, a finding that has theoretical implications for understanding identity dynamics across two levels in nested structures. Our findings suggest that, in an emerging collective, the supersystem (i.e., the nascent collective) and the subsystem (i.e., the members nested within the collective) are interdependent and co-

evolve—with members deriving their primary identity and legitimacy from their association with the collective, and the collective identity emerging from the efforts of the members. This symbiotic relationship is strained by members' need to be "optimally distinct" (Brewer, 1991) from one another. Members' attempts to highlight their differences (for distinctiveness) even as they seek to mute them (for collective identity) render the subsystem as a site of dichotomous forces of competitive and co-operative dynamics. These dichotomous forces precipitate a crisis when members draw from their unique local identities to assert their distinctiveness. Although displaying such idiosyncratic elements helps members distinguish themselves from one another, it increases the diversity of meanings at the collective level and undermines attempts to create a collective identity. Heterogeneity stemming from nestedness in multiple institutional contexts also tends to weaken collective identity because it threatens the basic "centrality" aspect of identity (Albert & Whetten, 1985). The growing concern about the supersystem's distinctiveness as well as its centrality helps to foment a crisis.

In contrast to prior works that have tended to demonstrate the strong influence of supersystems (e.g., industries) on subsystems (e.g., constituent firms—see Boulding, 1956; Polos et al., 2002), this study shows the strong influence of subsystems (member schools) on an emerging supersystem (the nascent iSchool collective). Our findings indicate that although collective- and member-level identities co-evolve in an emerging collective, there is some lag between the two, with the development of organizational (member) identity taking precedence. In the case of collectives based on shared fate but not on task or transactional interdependence, such as with the iSchools, there may be no strong imperative—in terms of timelines or deadlines—to arrive at a meta-level identity. In contrast, for member organizations, transactional interdependencies internal to the organization and the strong and routine imperative to perform and deliver can compel them to focus on reconfiguring a local identity—even before a discernable field-level identity emerges. In the absence of transactional interdependence, unless there is a serious threat that faces the field at large, organizational members have little incentive for focused collective action. Consequently, in an emerging field, a strengthening identity at the member level may impede identity formation at the collective level. This suggests that "identity regulation" efforts at the organizational level (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002) might have a profound effect on the supersystems in which organizations are embedded. Note that this finding is at odds with existing literature, which tends to assume that field-level forces usually dominate (e.g., Hsu & Hannan, 2005; Polos et al., 2002). The dynamics we found, however, do accord with Lok's (2010) depiction of the crucial influence of micro-level "identity work" on changes at the institutional level.

Focusing on Coherent versus Consensual Identity

Our findings indicate that actors' assumptions about achieving a collective identity and the processes by which it could be accomplished hold some significant implications for understanding the emergence of meta-level identity—and, thereby, perhaps also for the emergence of a field itself—as well as for the conceptualization of identity at different levels of analysis. In the present case, members' conception of collective identity as one constituted by common meanings led them down a path of deliberating, debating, and disagreeing over what elements of identity were consensually held. The attempt to arrive at consensus over the meanings of agreed-upon claims not only met with little success, but also frustrated the members because they construed the absence of common meanings as undermining the grounds for their existence as an emerging field. This critical issue implied a key existential question: "If we don't have common meanings for our claims, do we really have the grounds for a new field?" Seeking consensus on meanings relatively early in the field's existence and the pronounced failure to arrive at the hoped-for "consensual identity" helped precipitate the crisis.

As noted, an avenue out of this dilemma came in the form of efforts by some deans to reframe the identity discourse itself. They began to portray collective identity not as a process of "discovering" *consensus* through deliberation and agreement, but as a process of "creating" *coherence* concerning shared problem domains, mutual interests, practices, etc. Practically speaking, the desired outcome would seem to be the later achievement of some "implicit consensus" (Nag, Hambrick, & Chen, 2007) on identity that could eventually lead to greater convergence on shared meanings. This marked shift to a focus on trying to achieve a coherent identity, rather than a consensual identity,

was not only consequential pragmatically but also theoretically. Concern with coherence rather than consensus confers latitude in interpretation, in a fashion similar to that found by Donnellon, Gray, and Bougon (1986) concerning collective action and equifinality in groups. Newly forming collectives may benefit from creating enabling conditions for the emergence of equifinal meanings as well as practices, rather than attempting to force convergence on a consensual identity. This suggests that ambiguity may be one such enabling condition, and resonates with Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991) and Fligstein (1997) in that regard. The founding iSchool deans may have been (perhaps unintentionally) wise in adopting the rather ambiguous label "information" that could accommodate equifinal meanings and actions.

Contrary to previous studies that suggest that identity and legitimacy are sequential phenomena, such that consensual identity is less of a concern once an emerging field gains legitimacy (see Navis & Glynn, 2010), our data suggest that achieving consensual identity can be a concern even after a field gains a fair amount of legitimacy. In other words, our data lead us to speculate that legitimacy is not a binary phenomenon. Emerging fields seek different sources of legitimacy as they grow. In the earlier phases, cognitive legitimacy and therefore consensual identity appear important. In later phases, fields appear to derive legitimacy in part from size, and therefore seek an umbrella identity that allows for coherence.

Finally, the idea of a coherent identity comprising equifinal meanings as well as practices holds implications for our conceptualization of identity at the collective level. Unlike organizational identity, which comprises labels and closely associated meanings (Gioia et al., 2000), collective identity is likely to involve labels and a network of (sometimes disparate) meanings and practices. Consequently, the challenge of creating a collective identity is, metaphorically, one of constructing a tent big enough to accommodate a range of entities with diverse meanings and practices, but with enough commonalities that members see themselves (and have others see them) as belonging inside the tent. The idea that multiple meanings and logics need to be accommodated for field-level identity accords with Purdy and Gray's (2009) findings that, in an emerging field, diffusion of different logics enables multiple, diverse institutional practices to coexist. The concern at the collective level, then, is perhaps not that of identifying a stable core and boundary, but, rather, a fluid and permeable one. Thus, the perceived "absence of an identity" among emerging collectives could largely be an artifact of the expectation that an identity implies some sort of common core, when, in actuality, a collective, meta-level identity is likely to have more encompassing elements, with multiple paths and multiple meanings aimed at similar ends.

The pronounced shift from pursuit of consensual identity to pursuit of coherent identity might be relatively subtle, but is nonetheless theoretically significant because it suggests that collective identity at the meta level is likely to have a different character than identity at the organizational level. As noted, consensus on meanings is arguably imperative at the organization level. A collective of organizations is different. There is no common hierarchy, no transactional interdependence, nor agreement on shared means and meanings, so creating coherence around broader interests and a common problem domain may instead provide the basis for fashioning a workable identity. Meta-level collective identity, then, has a different character than organizational identity, which, in turn, has a different character than that of individual identity—and yet each set of central, distinct features at these different levels of analysis can viably be termed "identity."

Identity as Process

The dean's portrayal of crisis and confusion as "normal" and identity as "emergent," "over time," and in "constant flux" suggests that the deans' conceptualization of identity was less as a state of "being" and more as a process of "becoming" (Tsoukas & Chia, 2002). Their comfort with a diffuse identity and doubt over whether the iSchools would ever have a well-defined, consensual identity—given its focus on such a "promiscuous thing . . . as information" (as one of our interviewees described it)—reveals a preference to view identity as serving to orient the emerging field rather than anchor it. Our findings about the manifestation and the eventual resolution of the identity crisis indicated that the lack of agreement on identity and the consequent identity crisis was, in large part, an artifact of the deans' expectation that an identity implies some sort of "centrality" or common core, when, in actuality, identity is likely to be more fluid and fluctuating, perhaps especially at the collective level. After all, the manner in which we talk about identity is chiefly an artifact of

the way we think about identity, and vice versa. Because we are so inclined to conceive of and express identity as a thing, we both color and constrain the scope of how we consider it. Overall, the findings stemming from our process approach lead us to conclude that there might be additional insights gained from deeper study of identity as "a work in process" rather than as a "thing."

Trustworthiness and Limitations

As is usually the case with interpretive research, questions about the "trustworthiness" of the findings in terms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability arise (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), but we took care to address these issues. We have offered rich contextual information as well as thick descriptions to enable readers to assess the transferability of our findings and conclusions to other situations. We might also note that the study concluded before a definitive collective identity was achieved, but the fact that the formation of the iSchools as a collective was still a work in progress actually provided more insight into the evolutionary dynamics involved and the difficulties of negotiating a meta-level identity. We gained in-depth insight into the pivotal identity crisis, and, although it would be speculative to declare what the ultimate outcome will be, we nonetheless developed a good understanding of the processes involved, as well as the path out of the dilemma. The work-in-progress character of the study also contributed to interesting questions about just what constitutes identity at the meta level.

A possible limitation is that we studied an emerging "issue-oriented" field, whereas DiMaggio and Powell's (1983) definition of a field pertains mainly to "industry-oriented" organizational fields. Identity formation dynamics might conceivably be different in collectives in such fields. Similarly, identity formation processes might differ in collectives that constitute superordinate categories the features of which are more specific (e.g., automotive, computing) compared to those that are more abstract (e.g., information, nanotechnology), and therefore arguably require less frequent transactional interdependence. For these reasons, identity work might differ based on the type of collective considered.[3] Lastly, we studied an emerging field formed largely by breakaway groups with strong legacy and nested identities. It is possible that a new field formed entirely from greenfield organizations might involve somewhat different processes, but we believe the processes we identified have some obvious relevance, in principle, to other emerging-field contexts.

[3] We thank an anonymous reviewer for suggesting these last two points as limitations and/or boundary conditions.

CONCLUSION

Although recognition of a shared problem domain, shared interests, and shared fate may explain why organizations are attracted to collaborate with one another, it does not tell us how they work to develop a collective identity or a sense of "weness" considered essential for effective collective action. When such new collectives emerge, how do the organizations that must create an optimally distinct organizational identity for themselves also, simultaneously, create a workable, collective, meta-level identity? The findings of this study provide some answers. This longitudinal, cross-level study documented the processes by which a meta-level identity emerged; specifically, examining the dynamics between organization- and collective-level identities as they co-evolved. The study extends process research in the identity domain from an organizational level to a collective-of-organizations level and provides a dynamic, grounded theory model of how such an identity forms. It also delineates the concept of a meta-level identity crisis, and suggests that managing differences by achieving coherence, rather than consensus, aids in the formation of identity at this level.

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