Identity Elasticity: Studying Process & Content Together

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Process PDW

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Both/And Approach

- Most identity research emphasizes identity as content

- Emerging perspective – identity as process

- In our data analysis we saw how people in organizations experience identity in <u>both</u> ways

The Catalyst Event

- Election and consecration of the first openly gay bishop in The Episcopal Church
  - Rev. Gene Robinson (Summer & Fall 2003)
- First mainstream U.S. religion to elect openly gay person to such a high leadership position
- Diverse reactions
  - Conservatives
  - Middle way
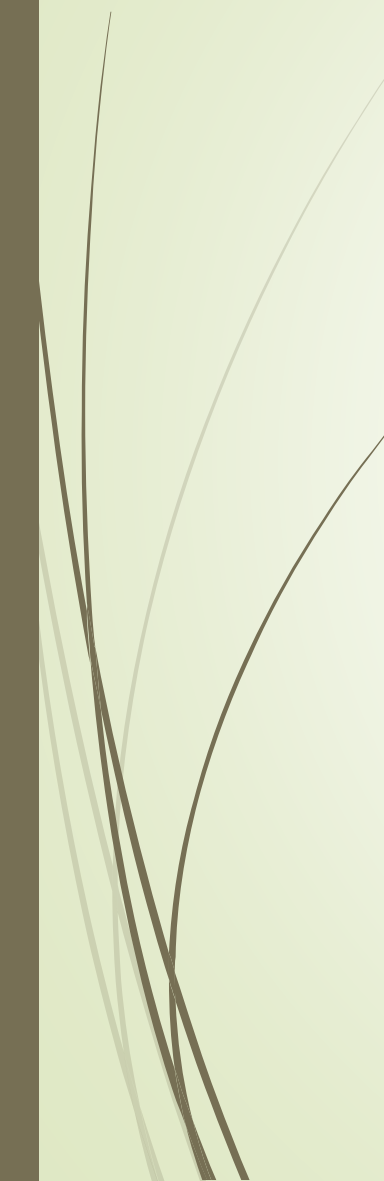 - Liberals

Why did so many conservatives stay?

Our Research Process

- Blend of case study, grounded theory, ethnographic methods

- "Tabula Geminus" – drawing on both data and theory throughout the process

- Coding dictionary includes codes on content <u>and</u> process

- 76 Interviews

- Participant observation/field notes from wide variety of events

- 100s of secondary data sources

- Multi-year investigation/engagement

The Discovery Process of Our Process Research

➥ Research team: Diverse religious and methodological backgrounds

➥ Research context: Relationship vs. research site

➥ Field observations: *Illustrations* of ongoing tensions

➥ Review process: Connecting and expanding the dots

➥ Emergent finding: Elasticity

Preview

- Individuals faced significant dialectic tensions embedded in their social constructions of identity

- Tensions emerged as members discussed identity, often using "thing-like" labels, but imbuing those labels with widely varying *features* and *tensional descriptions*

Basic definitions

- *Identity elasticity:* the socially constructed capacity for an organization's identity to expand or contract while still maintaining its core meaning;

- *Identity inelasticity:* constructing an organization's identity as unable to expand, manifest as a pushing apart or fragmentation of perceived identity

# Overarching Elasticity Dialectic: "Hold Together vs. Push Apart"

- A socially-constructed tension between holding identity together *while* simultaneously pushing identity apart

- Expressed often in our primary and secondary data as: "creative tension" and "the diverse center"

- The organization should strive for "unity, not unanimity"

Overarching Elasticity Dialectic: "Hold Together vs. Push Apart"

- Elastic response: "The great thing about our heritage is… that we seek not compromise for the sake of peace, but comprehension for the sake of truth. That's not an easy thing to understand, but that comprehensiveness is about holding together things which need each other and not letting ourselves be torn into different subgroups or sub-identities."

- Inelastic response: "I think [our identities in the Church] are incompatible…I think we embarrass each other. We're like a couple that live together, you know, and they were married and they live together, but every time they see each other, they throw up."
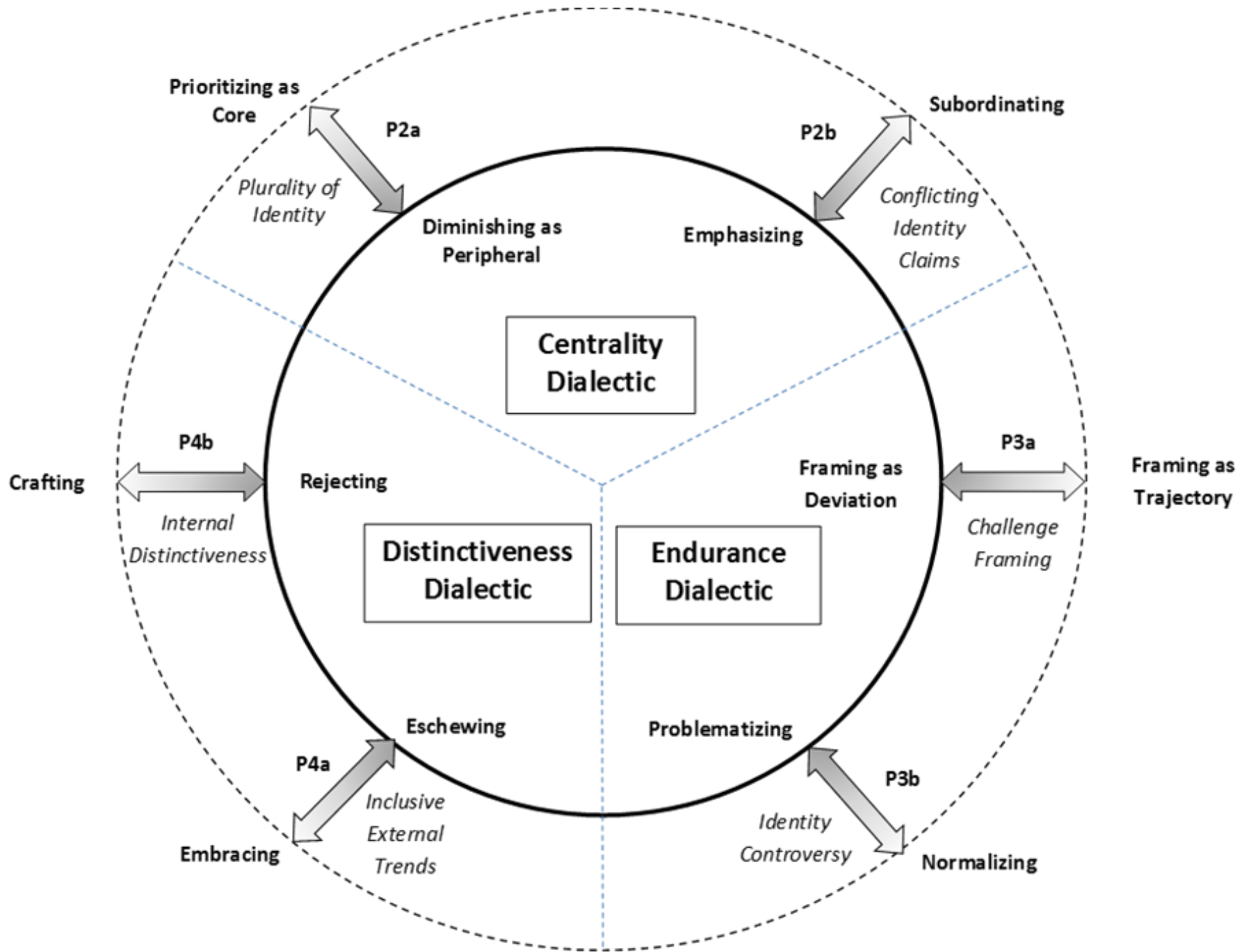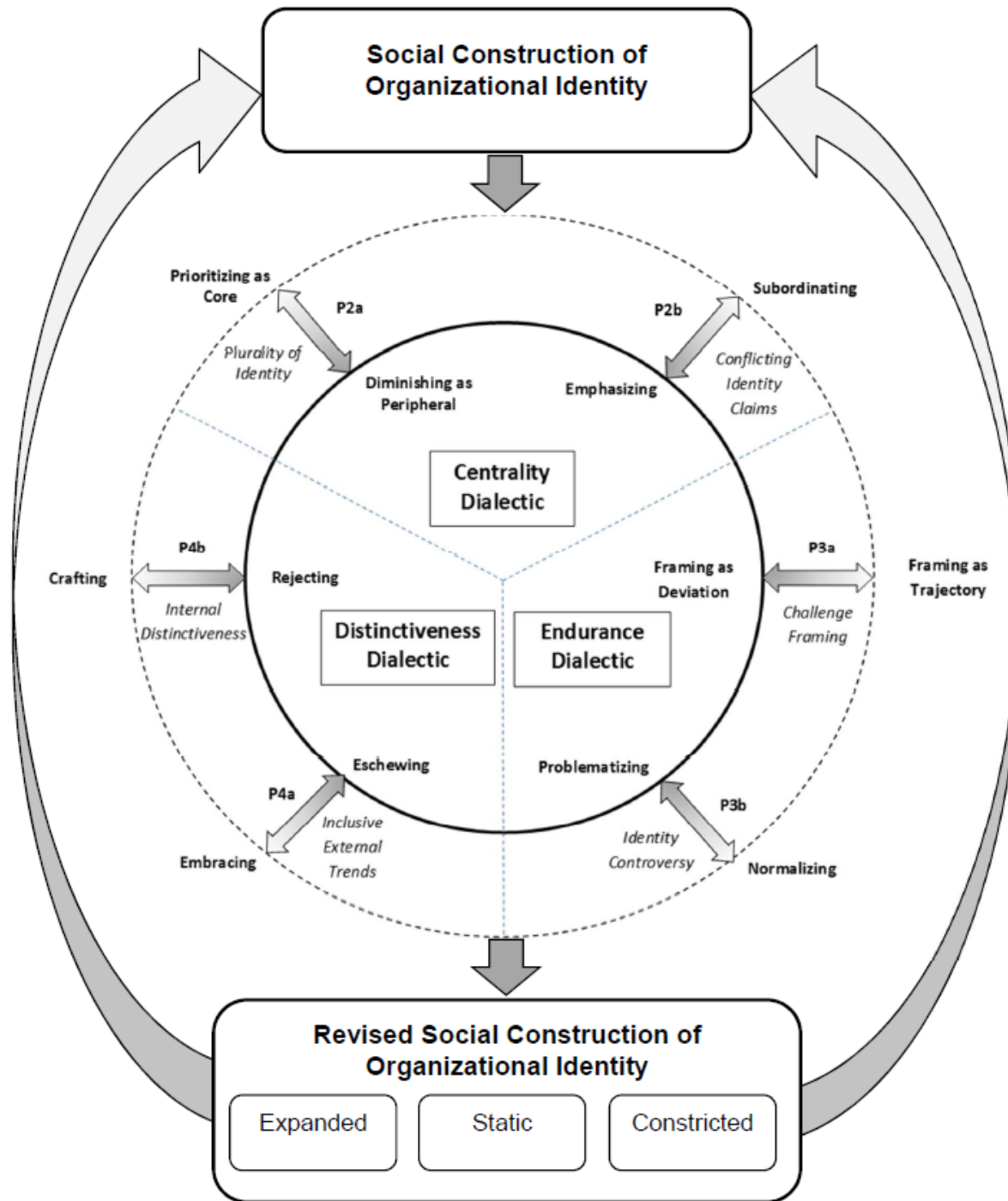
Kreiner, Hollensbe, Sheep, et al. (2015)

Centrality Dialectic: "Core vs. Peripheral"

- Is the contested issue framed as central or peripheral to the identity?
- Deals with the *priorities* of identity aspects
- Directly affects elasticity in at least two ways:
  - it frames the "center" that holds together what is core to organizational members
  - and it marginalizes other aspects of identity as highly negotiable and/or insignificant.

Endurance Dialectic: "Continuity vs. Change"

- Is the identity change framed as a continuity of the past or a departure from it?

- To facilitate elasticity, controversy or objections to a contested identity, and labels referring to it, are positioned as *consistent* with identity rather than as a true identity *change*.

Distinctiveness Dialectic: "Enhancement vs. Loss"

- Is the identity change framed as enhancing our distinctiveness or a loss of distinctiveness?

- To what degree do we allow outside influences to change our identity?

- Episcopal Church:

  - Liberal side: Distinctiveness comes by being different from (more progressive and inclusive than) other churches

  - Conservative side: Distinctiveness comes by being different from secular institutions

Contributions - Identity

- Identity as content <u>and</u> process
- The triparate "central, enduring, distinctive" mantra of organizational identity – which reflects a content emphasis – is manifest as a series of tensions in ongoing interplay, both individually and collectively
- Identity <u>work</u> reflects the ongoing process of "constructing" identity
- The content of identity – though fluid and changing – is often represented as stable/thing-like through discourse

Contributions – Process Research

- Elasticity is an <u>example</u> of a tension that organizational members and leaders experience

- These tensions represent <u>ongoing processes</u> and yet are manifest through discourse that reflects <u>content</u> issues

- Our work suggests a path for future process research – don't be afraid of content, but see how content and process are intertwined

- Data analysis process should reflect sensitivity to content and process (e.g., coding dictionary including both; asking research questions that unpack both)

Thanks!