

The constitution and the singular identity of the collective: who, ‘we’?

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Abstract Faced with problems of organizational belonging, it is necessary and relevant to approach singular collective identity: the ‘who, we?’ question as indexical. For this, approaches from social theory outside of the ‘organization’ field are employed in the analysis of three cases suggested as prototypical. First, the Narcotics Anonymous is seen to mystify its essential workings with a religious metaphor added to its appearance as a standardized civil society association. Second, a grassroots-based collective of social youth work is viewed as struggling for recognition through a performative branding hidden behind a radically situated self-conception. Finally, a web-portal is modeled as co-authoring counseling with art and research and as reflecting itself as at once concrete and universal. This casts a new light on the issue of organizational belonging, which could be sufficiently grasped neither in the dominant functionalist approaches, nor in the systemic, institutionalist, or post-structuralist theories that oppose them.

Keywords Identity · Singularity · Recognition · Collective · Organization

‘An organization’: the problem of singular collective identity

The time of the organization is out of joint. This diagnosis—the wording borrowed through Derrida (1994) from Shakespeare’s Hamlet—suggests itself when the truth about the depth of our collective identities dawns on us right at the moment when those collectives appear to us as arbitrary, and we begin to reshuffle them at will—or by accident. We now understand that our achievements and thoughts, our affects and

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hopes, are largely collective; even research is no longer attributable to the outstanding genius. Yet, nation states crumble traumatically or are ‘made great again’ in postmodern irony; universities (like other public institutions) are reorganized faster than logos can be designed; firms matter still less to the financial flows that were supposed to circumscribe them as property; and families become artifacts of biological and social network technologies.

In contemporary work organizations, the question keeps coming up: Who are we? Not only as the attempt to describe or understand various features or ‘values’ of the organization taken as given, but more simply and basically: who, “we”? *What is the relevant unit we index when we say “we”?* And, in practical terms, who exactly *should* “we” constitute or maintain as “us”, and why and how? This is the first challenge any newly appointed CEO (director, manager, vice-chancellor etc.), who wants to make a difference, must address; her employees have already long suffered the work stress that comes from the hassle of keeping pace with ever more frequent and ever less rational restructurings and fusions. Managers reshuffle their organizations, or subdivisions of them, simply *because they can*: It is their job to redesign the organization to optimize it, even if—and paradoxically more so because—criteria remain disputable and multiple alternative identities could be construed. We can object to this tendency, arguing for a sluggishness that might allow for a bottom-up relational agency (Edwards 2011) to emerge. But we cannot ignore the problem.

On a larger scale, the contingency of social units has been acknowledged for long in terms of statehood and citizenship, even if the ever more turbulent oscillations between neoliberal and neoconservative politics attest to the unresolved state of the problem. But with increasing sociocultural acceleration, reflexivity and flexibility, it achieves relevance at all levels and scales. And part of why the problem of organizational identity appears is that these other collectives no longer provide the solid identity basis, nor the necessary security or infrastructural resources, with which to engage in the turmoil of endless regroupings at work.

One would think that theories of organizational identity were the place to look for approaches to this. But these theories generally do not address the issue at this basic level—where the organization reflects itself as *singular*, that is, as an irreplaceable situated entity, an individual rather than as a kind or a type, however well specified.¹ For this, the functionalist impulse to theorize identity as an aggregate of abstract qualities that can be said to characterize a given organization (over time, in comparison, etc.), and the procedures and possible outcomes of that characterization (as in Albert and Whetten 1985), falls obviously short. Singular self-identity is not reducible to a more or less operational categorial definition.

To be sure, organization theory has long struggled to overcome the functionalism that caters to its immediate relevance. Much recent writing seems devoted to

¹ Singularity is a difficult term, since it is eschewed in an ordinary (Platonic or Aristotelian) logic preoccupied with universal/particular, so that the meaning of words to signify it tends to slip toward particulars as mere instances of ‘kinds.’ Thus, Germany is singular, as distinct from ‘country,’ which is a particular kind. Germany is an instance of ‘country,’ but it is much more. Angela Merkel is a singular person, and ‘German’ describes just one of her particularities.



this struggle. But perhaps the point needs to be made repeatedly because the argument is not taken to its full implications. It is not sufficient to supplant or replace the rational distribution and coordination of tasks with institutional reproduction, sense-making, or the autopoiesis of communication systems. The (neo-)institutionalist, constructionist, and systemic reactions to the limitations of functionalist organization theory still curiously take the organization for granted as always-already constituted and always striving to survive. More generally, focusing on the persistence of structure has been sociology's key tool for overcoming rationalist functionalism; this has pushed it toward the opposite, 'organic' or systemic functionalism. However, in addition to the wonder at persistence, we must add a reflection of mortality, if we are to understand singular identity. A step in that direction is to leave behind the issue of how form is sustained and instead address the processes and practices that constantly perturb or dissolve given forms. If we focus on organizing rather than organization, and view the organization as emerging event rather than as an "actually existing entity" (e.g., Stacey 2011, p. 41), then certainly we escape the concept of function. Again zooming out to more general trends, this may explain why social practice theory, complexity or process theory, actor-network theory, and Deleuzian poststructuralism all cherish the infinity of flow as against the finitude of existing entities. But we should move on. Fetichizing the negativity of the move beyond pre-given entities and their logics keeps us from asking how entities are constituted and reconstituted, *precisely as contingent*.

My approach to the issue is not as an organization theorist. I have worked on the general problem of the constitution of singular collectives, focusing empirically at the overlap of pedagogy with leadership in self-established project groups and collectives (Nissen 2012). To this, I have taken up some of the many contemporary philosophical discussions and theories of community that have arisen after the collapse of communism and the cold war state system (e.g. Balibar 2009; Esposito 2012; Derrida 2005), juxtaposed to contemporary theories of subjectivity (e.g. Brown and Stenner 2009; Stengers 2008; Žižek 1999; Balibar 2016). The general hypothesis I have pursued is that the formation of singular subjects occurs in participation and power, as they mutually constitute each other in relations of recognition; and that collectives are themselves among these singular subjects. We and I, us and me—and our relations to you, them, etc.—define and co-construct each other, *inter-individuate*, in collaboration and in struggle (see also Nissen 2013).

This providing my vantage point, I do not offer here a review of the literature on organizational identity, nor base my argument on the state of this art. Organizationalists will find the above statements insufficient as characterizations of the field. But my intention is not to diagnose and improve the body of knowledge on 'organization.' Rather, I take 'organization' as a case of a more wide-reaching problem that is central also to contemporary politics, ethics, education, therapy, and love. From this wider perspective, 'organization' seems a useful case to consider, precisely because of its unabashedly artificial nature. It is readily taken as point of departure that 'organization' is a collective of intentional human design. That may even serve as a definition of the concept, reflecting the practice of leadership for which it is posited as object. When, on the other hand, we discuss collectives such as states or families, let alone if we take up the question of how individual humans



are constituted as singular subjects, we face myriads of preconceptions to the effect that its constitution is taken as a given, following with necessity from its substantial nature (e.g. that geographic territory must index the state, that sexual reproduction in and of itself establishes family, or that singular subjecthood is given and fixed with the birth of the human individual). And that, since this constitution lies outside of the lawful social processes we study, it may be vital, but it does not deserve any further analysis.

So, the plan for this text is to render organizational identity as a case of the more general problem of collective subjectivity—of how to theorize ourselves as collectives that cannot be taken as ultimate or as premise; thus, in practical terms, yet terms that must pull the rug out from under us by asking, even of this text itself: “who, ‘we’”?

Method

I have introduced the problematic of this article by first referring to a simple set of collectives familiar to most academics: nation state, university, firm, and nuclear family. Yet, even as they are that, three of them are different from the organizations that are most prototypical of organization theory—the exemplars that people have in mind when they think of the abstract concept (like “bird” makes us think of a sparrow rather than an ostrich). These are generally rational hierarchies of coordinated tasks, or systems that reproduce by representing themselves as such. They are well-defined entities within an ‘environment.’ And most prototypically, they are private companies—or, perhaps state institutions, private clubs or charitable societies, but then viewed as equivalent to private companies (such as armies viewed in abstraction from valor, cruelty and violent death, or voluntary associations considered as commercial agents aiming to ‘sell’ their ‘values’). That prototype is not really problematized by bracketing it and focusing instead on process, practice, or event. So here, instead, we shall encounter collectives that are given proper names, are recognized, self-reflect and act as singular bodies, even as they are radically different from the prototypical ‘organization.’ The method in that is to work on the alternative prototypes in order to question and expand the concept. Consequently, in the following, we shall encounter some other ‘unusual’ organizations: 12 step fellowships, emergent grassroots youth work activities, and a collaborative project organized around an evolving website.

It is quite possible that some readers will prefer to still have the old prototype in mind, even if only to problematize it. Fair enough. After all, it not only promises relevance, and the consultancy fees that come with it, but also professional identity; with it, organizationalists meet up and confirm each other in what and who they are. But it is my hope that divergent narratives may become prototypical of expanded ways of designing, reflecting, and theorizing collectives.

More specifically: the examples we began with will remain in sight. The state and the family are classic examples of collectives, because they are, or have been taken to be, ‘ultimate’ each in their way: The territorial circumscription of a communal ‘everything’ by a sovereign power, versus the intersubjectivity that emerges from



below, caring for the ‘everything’ of individual life.² The university is close to us, and even *is* us; and the ways it resists being reduced to what we currently imagine to be ‘organization,’ before our very eyes, are striking and instructive.

When we take up 12 step fellowships, we engage in a number of paradoxically coexisting opposite absolutes, beginning with the participant’s free choice of surrender—to a collective that denies itself. Enacting these paradoxes is how the collective does its job, and how it perpetually and precariously defines itself and its participants. In a sense, a 12 step fellowship performs institutionalism as ideology. The standard view of it as a civil society association (in the classic meaning derived from Tönnies 2001) regulated with inflexible and unchanging rules, is how it prefers to talk of itself, much as a pious person, in all honesty, will call himself a sinner.

The grass-roots based communities of social youth workers that I and my colleagues studied from 1993 and on were becoming-state, in political processes of recognition. These were opposite to 12 step fellowships, not only with respect to how their explicitly political project identity coincided with their formation of participants, but also in that they claimed to reject any and all rules. Here, it appears to be all about process, practice, and event. The historical singularity that this brings to the surface highlights an opposite way in which my own position in relation to the collective appears inconsequential: whereas it bounces off a successfully enduring recipe, it seems irrelevant from the first instance in relation to a one-off historical event.

Yet, I will attempt to show how, in both cases, we are engaging in an inescapably intersubjective relation of critique and recognition. Critique, here, does not mean measuring those collectives, or some features attributed to them, against a standard that I claim as universal. Rather, it is the objectification implied whenever a subject deals with another subject, mediated by certain theoretical or otherwise culturally evolved concepts; and it is the subject-formation achieved thereby. Although this implies a moment of freezing living practice into artifacts—such as this text—this process is inherently creative. It expresses a hope for relevances that are at least partly not-yet-known in Ernst Bloch’s sense (1995). As such, it recognizes collectives by cocreating prototypes that articulate their potentials for taking us beyond what we thought we knew about organizations. This implies an expanded version of the concept of prototype itself, more akin to the industrial connotations of the term (Jensen 1987; Nissen 2009). Such prototypes are, and in a certain sense remain, not-yet-types; their historical singularity, and the hopes of relevance without which they could not make coherent sense, are visible. With Latour (1987), we could say that they have not been ‘black-boxed,’ or are not treated as such. Nevertheless, they carry, distribute, and pluralize meaning.

² The inescapable backdrop here is Hegel’s triangular social model: State, civil society, and family (Hegel 1968). The modern problematization of it, which began already with Marx’ exposure of the state as instrument of the ruling class and the bourgeois family as the seat of the ideological illusion of privacy, has not as yet come up with convincing structural alternatives; and so, this text is one out of many contemporary attempts to reconfigure it. Cf. e.g., Højrup (2003) and Williams (1997).



My third and last case will serve as a direct illustration of this. This is a project in which I am currently involved, an emerging infrastructure of art, therapy and research enmeshed with young drug users' public self-presentations at a website. We have ideas that make us keen to develop it, but we don't know exactly where it will lead, and so we don't quite know who we are. I invite you to help us explore.

Let me recapitulate the thrust of this argument in simpler terms. We shall discuss collectives that do not easily appear as 'organizations.' The point of this is to suggest concepts with which to reflect what it is we do when we constitute or dissolve singular collectives, some of which may be called organizations; when "who, we?" is meant to be taken literally and practically, as *who* we are, not just *what* we are. We cannot take the collective for granted; yet I am not out to explain how the collective persists. Not because I am indifferent to the existential question; quite the opposite: Rather than persistence, it is, as it were, mortality I suggest we pursue. This is useful at a time when we design, redesign, and unravel ourselves as collectives faster than ever, without paying too much attention, and often suffer from it.

The NA

We shall first lay the groundwork by considering organizational identity *ex negativo*: The 12 step fellowship. For the sake of simplicity, the Narcotics Anonymous (NA) will serve as our prototypical 12 step fellowship since that is the branch that best distills a heterotopia, a time-space slot that reverts and amplifies current cultural forms (Foucault 1986). 'Ex negativo,' because the first striking thing about NA is that it *renounces* collective identity; it is really the organization that is anonymous. This is written in the '12 traditions':

9. NA, as such, ought never to be organized, but we may create service boards or committees directly responsible to those they serve.
10. Narcotics Anonymous has no opinion on outside issues; hence the NA name ought never to be drawn into public controversy.
11. Our public relations policy is based on attraction rather than promotion; we need always maintain personal anonymity at the level of press, radio, and films. (NA 2008, p. 61).

Personal anonymity means that 'doing service' for the fellowship is not publicly announced or recognized; but it certainly does not include concealing, let alone denying, addict identity. Far from it: For NA members, the 'coming-out' as 'addict' is an important part of what they gain from membership. The identity of a 'recovering addict' provides a public framework of meaning with which to handle addiction, precisely as an ongoing crisis of selfhood that otherwise ends inexorably in "jails, institutions, dereliction and death" (NA 2008, p. 7). The self of an NA addict is first of all relationally defined and performed, continuously reconstituted, and maintained in acts of surrender to communal monitoring and communal ethics. Numerous NA procedures and proverbs assert this humility. "An addict alone is in bad company" is



one such motto; and providing the better company, within which the addict ‘using’ self is reborn as ‘recovering,’ is NA’s key to recovery—this is what “works” for those who “keep coming back” to “work it” (Keis et al. 2016).

But the NA itself seems to exist only as a *standard* that is taken on by participants. The artifacts (books, websites, etc.) merely describe it and the sponsorships (mentor/mentee relations) and group meetings merely execute it. This is also why it is easy for me to refer to the NA as a case: Anyone can visit their website, in any language, read their books, listen to their ‘speaks,’ or attend their meetings—or knows about it already from Hollywood movies and TV shows. The fellowship seems to be nothing but a brand, and one that is simple, extremely standardized, and stable, and, as such, breeds and spreads like a successful genome.

There is one thing about it, however, that strikes the modern, secular eye as peculiar: The ubiquitous religious references. This includes members performing the paradox of an absolute surrender to a “Higher Power” whom they claim to only believe in quite profanely (Valverde 2002). This can be explained historically, with reference to the Lutheran origins of the AA, and then to the reluctance of members to revise the given standard; comparable, then (again), to obsolete but enduring parts of a genome that prevails for other reasons. But this would be too simplistic.

Rather, as already Bateson (1972) hypothesized, the ‘Higher Power’ can be a name for the ‘community’—and my additional claim is that it refers to the collective as *singular*—to whom the participant submits her existence. To be precise, it is its *mask*—a placeholder for a repressed indexical reference. The professed profanity of the sinner’s approach to the icon does nothing to reduce the depths of her faith: One does not believe in a mask. Faith, however, is not a chosen or socialized agreement with certain propositions or procedures. The idealization of standards as unquestionable prescriptions—as eternal ideals—performs an act of *submission*. What truly matters about them is beside them—their particular contents are always only humble ‘human’ attempts to capture the essence, which is always ‘something else.’ This ‘something else’ could be the care and recognition given to the ‘recovering addict’ by the collective.

The ‘recovering addict’ is a subject who is *perpetually becoming*; the continuity with the previous ‘using’ addict is one of sacrifice: the ‘user’ gives herself over to the annihilating self-critique that allows the ‘recovering addict’ to emerge. Crucially, *in the same process, the collective emerges*, in the shapes of the group and the sponsor who accept the sacrifice and return the grace of recognition, based on an unquestioned premise of equal identity that implies and necessitates care: “We can only keep what we have by giving it away”. The ‘we’ here, as in all NA texts, is plural; it refers to each and every NA addict, in this case each member of the group, who can only perform recovery as caring sponsor and audience for others, and by providing a role model through ‘coming out.’ But the symmetrical becoming is not reducible to individuals; what emerges is always you, me, and us (Keis et al. 2016).

When this collective aspect is consistently tabooed in favor of the image of ‘us’ as an aggregate of individuals, plus the mythical supplement of the ‘Higher Power; this is not the usual cultural individualism. After all, this is an ideology that emphasizes submission as against individual autonomy. Rather, the taboo works in three ways. First, identifying the singular ‘we’ could be a hubris if this were to expand the



agency of the collective beyond the premises on which it was constituted; if it began to care for concerns beyond the recovery of its members, the process of symmetrical becoming could be broken. This articulation is close to the NA ideology of anonymity—and often referred to as one main reason why taking up 12 step standards in professional or state services is very different and allegedly much less beneficial (e.g., Mäkela et al. 1996). Second, the mask of the ‘Higher Power’ makes for a flexible, ‘postmodern’ approach to constituencies: The individuals who constitute the collective can be relatively interchangeable, even as the collective itself is existentially vital. Third, and crucially, the collective is ‘transcendent’ in the sense of its continuous becoming, reconstituted in recurrent moments as singular on a utopian horizon as a collectivity of hope (Nissen 2012, Chap. 7).

If this is so, what is the relevance of my analytic suggestions? If it works, why fix it? Because it doesn’t, quite; it only works for those who work it, as the NA tautology goes. The standard form of a civil society association freezes the pair of opposing absolutes: The life-saving submission to the ‘Higher Power’ is supposed to be chosen as freely as any commodity on the market—but, when it is *not* chosen, this is left unexplained as ‘disease.’ The ‘disease’ is the husk continuously left behind by the recovering addict, but it is also how the NA blames the victims of its limitations. The mystification of the other side of the equation: the becoming of the collective as singular—also obscures the resources this activates and the care it provides. The absence of an indexical reference to ‘us,’ to the collective as something more than a recipe and relations of exchange between individuals, makes it harder to face and acknowledge social facts—such as the very weighty presence of state power and state resources, as well as of friendships and couples. These are generally considered ‘dirty’ influences, profane, inauthentic and possibly disturbing, if not antithetical to 12-step recovery. It works to blind the fellowships to the cultural changes they address and those they express—such as therapeutic individualism, blurred boundaries between state and civil society, general medicalization and rapid pharmacological developments. And of course, it narrows any organizational change to the remedy of traumatic reconstitutions, locally as well as globally—to the forming of new local groups, or even new 12 step fellowships. These weaknesses are likely to grow in significance, even as they are covered by the blind mechanism of blaming their individual victims and compensated by the ongoing dependence epidemic.

The mask of the Higher Power, then, works smoothly to continuously regenerate hope and facilitate becoming subjectivity within the parameters of the given state of affairs; but it only achieves the strict standardization of its successful brand by separating the universal ideal from its situated conditions. In that sense, it works as an ‘abstract utopia’ (Bloch 1995) that mirrors and reverts the earthly present in the imagination and then returns to constitute the real sites as volatile heterotopia. The contradictory absolutes that keep resurfacing cancel out any problematic situations and conditions; they make for a way of tolerating these, that is, surviving them while relinquishing any hope of addressing them productively.

The question is, then, whether a 12 step fellowship could arise that could reconnect its hopes to its situated conditions; for whom the process of constitution need not be mystified as a Higher Power; where the flexibility of emergent collectives could do without their mask; where the process of symmetrical becoming could



itself take account of the resources, the powers, and the cultural and pharmaco-technological formations that anyway circumscribe its impact.

In any case, the example—which, to be sure, I could only sketch in the space of this argument—may help us distinguish between the organization’s brand as standard or as indexical reference to a singular collective. This distinction is presented by the NA’s concept of a ‘Higher Power,’ as distinct from (and in its relation to) the generalized individual identities characterized as ‘we’ and ‘us’ in the NA standard texts, and as distinct from (and related to) the specific experiences, shortcomings, and remedies that are attributed to and prescribed for those individuals. The persistence of this religious form well into a highly secularized and medicalized culture reveals how singular collective identity is at once vital and taboo.

This analysis resonates in many ways with ‘classic’ analyses of ideology as alienated expressions of state power—in so far as these move beyond Marxist sociology’s self-limitation to a critique of civil society that remains within the taboo against the issue of sovereignty imposed by that same civil society (cf. e.g., Højrup 2003; Žižek 2004); and, for breaking that taboo, it shares with these theories the fate of appearing as far-fetched as, I hope, somehow alluring.

The crew: the one and only

My second case, as mentioned, is opposite in many ways. First of all, since it was nonstandard, I must rely on my readers to accept my brief but condensed descriptions, if you do not wish to consult more comprehensive renderings (Mørck 2010; Nissen 2009, 2012). The Crew was what first sent me puzzling beyond the confines of ‘organization,’ when, in 1993, I was hired to understand and describe it, not only as a social youth work agency, but also as a new kind of fusion of Copenhagen City’s welfare services with a civil society ‘grassroots’ community, carried by a state development grant as an outreach project for ‘street kids.’ Since it worked by recruiting “socially excluded youth” as participants in an “organization to help” just those—as it described itself—it was generally considered part of the state’s enlisting of voluntary associations and self-help. But it was very different from the 12 step standard. It was defined with an explicitly political agenda. Most of its founders were (informally) trained in activism rather than youth work or counseling, and many of its activities took this shape—e.g. street happenings, public hearings, or giving interviews or lectures to students about the plight of a ‘street kid,’ representing The Crew and criticizing City services and policies. Branching off a ‘total theater’ youth project, The Crew used the mobilizing potentials in (sub-) cultural events, in direct continuity with what its activists had done as organizers in youth politics. My first fieldwork was watching a theater show that presented the story of a street kid through gang violence, drugs, and then the oppressions of bureaucracy and psychiatry, before finding his home at The Crew—to a mixed audience of the young participants’ friends and family, and various news media, social work officials, and decision makers.

The Crew’s brand was nonexistent as standard but ubiquitous as indexical reference to the singular collective. Participants would don ‘The Crew’ t-shirts that



signified their belonging with a logo, but no set of rules or statements of purpose or principle were ever written. In fact, the *absence* of rules was a defining and proudly declared pedagogical principle. In other words (since here, pedagogics and leadership coincided), the ‘organization’ was as ‘loosely coupled’ as one could imagine: The weekly common meeting was all about collective activities; the ‘we’ they spoke was always in the singular (as in “we have a problem”). Decisions were reached in consensus, but participants were only obliged by them to the extent they *wanted*. This form of obligation—called the ‘*principle of fancy*’—was a radical expression of the grassroots background, premised, for many activists, on a postcommunist legacy: The social sustainability that allowed them to recruit ‘street kids’ was only feasible through a complete rejection of the rational organization of the tradition of militant socialism.

One might think this ‘voluntary’ structure, after all, would bring The Crew on a par with NA as a civil society association continuously chosen by participants, but for two important facts. First, for many participants, The Crew served to a large extent as a substitute family with an all-encompassing and lasting, but personal and mutual intimacy. Second, the political agenda engaged The Crew in a quest for recognition that formed part of the struggles over Copenhagen and Danish social policies. Both qualities—the *becoming-family* and the *becoming-state*—were vital to The Crew’s identity as well as its ability to mobilize socially excluded young people. They might seem to push in opposite directions, and certainly they were often performed in separate contexts and activities; but in fact they presupposed each other. This point necessitates a little detour into the general sociology of family, friendship, and state.

Pushing friendship beyond its usual premise: that each person sustains her own everyday life autonomously, and on that basis regularly confirms the relationship—toward expanded care, intimacy, and forgiveness, and, not least, the *interference* that this implies—requires mandate, resources and will. In the traditional nuclear family, these are provided through the fact that members directly trace their origins as subjects within the family. The family is the belonging that represents who we always-already are as singular persons; through this, we identify strongly with each other, and we are among each other’s core concerns as singular persons.³ Outside of the self-grown nuclear family, the mandate, resources and will required for an expanded care and interference are provided only through the state. Civil society collectives (including commercial organizations) are limited to exclusion or exit as their ultimate power; they are ‘communities of choice.’ Each state institution may operate through the power of exclusion, too, but state sovereignty is expressed in the power and the requirement to care and interfere beyond each exclusion—on the whole range to the point of ‘bare life’ (Agamben 1998). However, even as democratic states can be said to be constituted in a mutual recognition between state and citizens (and even as the category of ‘citizen’ most recently has come to include

³ The weak link, it follows, is the couple—and in these times, we do witness a crisis of the nuclear family due to the decline of the cultural and institutional forces and resources that held together marriage (Giddens 2013).



inmates of prisons and mental hospitals), this ‘community of fate’ relationship is still very far from the mutuality that characterizes friendships or families. Friendships are based on the mutual recognition of privacy; and family relationships are mutual as vital carriers of identity. Both these relationships are personal, that is, oriented toward the other as singular person; friends and family members are irreplaceable. But the relations of state agencies and professionals to their clients, patients, inmates etc.—beyond the civil society association format implied in the concept of the ‘user’—are generally asymmetrical and impersonal. They even tend to be more so, the more resources and will to care and interfere are invested. The mandate derives from the state’s coercive powers, regulated by general (standardized) law.

On this background, the question of how The Crew could form family-like relations that went far beyond the commitments of friendship, in an organization governed by the principle of fancy and with no rules, is of some principle interest. The answer suggested here will take its departure from The Crew’s struggle for recognition. Characteristically, The Crew began (in 1991) with a public hearing where renowned experts, sympathetic politicians, and young people self-defined as ‘street kids’ declared the desperate need for a new approach to socially excluded young people in Copenhagen. The hearing, along with the many activist manifestations that followed, would powerfully impact the news media—as always, keen to ignite moral panics and blame government neglect—and place The Crew with a fashionable image, paradoxically at once in a ‘neo-philanthropic’ social policy trend (Vil-ladsen 2011) and as a postcommunist avant-garde. This political leverage fueled its organizational image and vice versa, and resources of many kinds began to flow into The Crew, culminating in the state grant that would pay for a handful of jobs (including half my salary) for a few years.

This story resembles that of many other social problems identified, struggled over, and institutionalized as part of the growing welfare states of the 20th century, except for two aspects of the situation and for The Crew’s way to handle it. *First*, the object identified as “street kids” matched a general policy trend toward identifying the ‘socially excluded’ in the broad terms of their exclusion itself (as ‘street kids,’ ‘homeless,’ or ‘socially excluded’ etc., rather than, say, as ‘drug users’ or ‘psychiatric patients’). The emphasis was on outreach and recruitment, and it included a reflexive questioning of the established services and their standard procedures. The result was a broad, holistic and subject-oriented work object that *resisted standardization*, not unlike what Philp (1979) described as the core of social work. This was additionally amplified by the theme of ‘youth’ which was recognized as implying mobility and unfinished identities. *Second*, the forces behind The Crew included a strong megatrend toward recognizing the voices of users of public services.⁴ The Crew accommodated and utilized those tendencies in a *performative* kind of social

⁴ Of course, most readers in the West would now identify this as ‘New Public Management’ and expect the recognition of the user achieved with a strict standardization of her ‘problems’ or ‘diagnoses’ and the ‘evidence-based’ procedures of their treatment, perhaps in a ‘customized’ version (cf. Nissen 2018). But the balance of forces was different in Copenhagen of the 1990s— and even now, the real picture is, fortunately, more complex.



work and politics. The ‘street kids’ ‘came out’ and displayed their social problem as part of their quasi-therapeutic identity work *and* as part of The Crew’s political activism: The ability to—not represent, but—*directly orchestrate* the voice of the socially excluded was The Crew’s principal power asset.

This all meant that the struggle for recognition would not take the form of demands for—nor result in a fixation as—provisions standardized in the name of equality, delivered by professionals in predefined institutions, as had been typical of the institutionalized social problems of the welfare state. Instead, what Balibar (2009) calls ‘worksites of citizenship’ existed in prolonged *moments of becoming*: The revolutionary, precarious moments of transcendent universalism, where at once politics and persons are shaped. The activists’ way of phrasing this was “meeting youth in movement and on neutral ground”. Organizationally, this was identifiable as a continuous process of establishing new ‘projects’ in a tinkering that crucially included both ‘outreach’ to new groups of young people and negotiations with authorities who provided funding and legitimacy ad hoc. In terms of power balances, this meant that the organization, its key participants, and its identified ‘users’ were all precarious, at stake as singular subjects. Structurally, this implied the mutuality and person-orientation that we asked for above, and which could be articulated as an absence of rules and a principle of fancy. And, given the relative success of the struggle for recognition (in the 1990s), we can see how this could coincide with commanding substantial resources with which to engage in difficult personal issues.

But the struggle for recognition included also a visibly utopian, transcendent aspect which was just as important here as in the NA. This is why I and my colleagues have analyzed The Crew and its later offshoots and heirs with concepts derived from Hegel’s dialectics of recognition (cf. Hegel 1977; see Nissen 2012, Chap. 7). The Crew would *interpellate* (Althusser 1994) its participants: Subjectify them by hailing and recruiting them as always-already embodying the human potentials defined by its struggle; a complex process that would imply a coexistence and alternation of mutuality and submission between collective and participants, and, vitally, a horizon of hope. These ‘worksites of citizenship’ were not only sites of structural fluidity or hybridity, but also constituted as incomplete realizations of the dream of a democratized and expanded welfare state. As with the NA, a utopian horizon fueled the identity of participant with collective.

Granted, such hopes could resemble what is known from organization theory as ‘visions’ etc., and come with a skepticism as to their real impact, as the organization’s ‘culture’ is only superficially scratched by ‘espoused values’ (Schein 2010). Now, my claim is not that program or vision statements simply shape subjectivities. But when they come to signify interpellation and open to a transcendent hope, they can be powerful symbols. Skepticism is often sound, but there is reason to suspect that ideological interpellation and transcendence are seriously underestimated when they are seen from a civil society/market-based perspective, for which subjectivity is always premised as given. The prototypical commercial organization of most organizationalists is founded in an almost absolute separation between profane interest and lofty ethics, neither of which is really capable of representing its practices as *meaningful*; meaning is then mystified as the substance of ‘organizational culture.’ The NA was a limit case in that it defined itself through the workings of



transcendence, but as a civil society association (of choice), which led to the alienated form of a ‘Higher Power.’ But we know from the NA, from the even more radical examples of certain religious sects and terror groups, and of course from patriotic and revolutionary struggles, that transcendent hope can trump individual self-interest, even the interest in survival. Defining myself in the struggle for recognition of a singular collective is literally *beyond me*, even as it reciprocates to interpellate me as subject, to transform me deeply and reshape my sense of myself.⁵ It was through such interpellation that The Crew could add a strong mutual identification to the structural flexibility, the loose coupling, and the empowerment that their political success provided; and this, in turn, made it possible to develop a pedagogical–organizational know-how concerning the tinkering of singular projects and groups within the broader collectivity of The Crew.

Singularity, performance, and symbols

Even though I have tried here—as in previous writings—to objectify and generalize The Crew’s ideological form of collectivity, its coincidence of pedagogics with organization and politics, the story is first of all about *singular events*. It was historical circumstance that allowed The Crew’s utopia to be ‘concrete’ (Bloch 1995), that is, latent as a continuation of sufficiently strong tendencies, rather than to be alienated as ‘abstract utopia’ like the NA’s ‘Higher Power.’ And The Crew’s approach and organization were radically opposed to the standardized format and self-image both of state agencies and of 12 step fellowships. So it appears straightforward to assert this historical singularity as the key finding and lesson that the reader should take home. Indeed, historicity *is* worth keeping in mind and often enough ignored. It is here that we should note the difference between the *standardization* that I criticized in the NA, and the way I describe The Crew as a *prototype*. The epistemology implied could be, and was, articulated with social practice theory (as in Mørck 2010). Rather than certain formal procedures and structures we have a community of practice; pitting ‘practice’ against ‘organization,’ one might hold up the ‘anti-method’ (Nissen 2003) of historical and personal singularity against the tide of standardization. This would be close to how members of The Crew and its derivatives would understand the form of knowledge they practiced. As expressed in the name and the practices of one derivative project, such ‘Wild Learning’ implies participating in the ongoing tinkering and expansion of collectives and projects under concrete circumstances that keep changing.

But this articulation would not be able to account for its own relevance. The emphasis on concreteness tends to conceal the fact that this emphasis is itself an abstraction—and so, install a paradoxical dualism. Further, this would deprive us of ways to address the *performative* aspects of The Crew itself, without which it could not have realized its struggle for recognition. For, even if The Crew did not ‘perform’ on predefined and ‘scholastically’ rationalized standards, they managed

⁵ This is one way to rearticulate Kierkegaard’s (1980) concept of selfhood.



to construct alternative but powerful venues and infrastructures of artifacts with which to model their image, their singular brand, and the identity of their participants. Far from a mute practice, The Crew was a laboratory for *the interchanges of doing, displaying and modelling* as key aspects of performance (cf. Nissen 2018). And the analyses that I and my colleagues made were deeply enmeshed and intermingled with these. In other words, any account of The Crew as prototypical would be incomplete without a reflection of the ways that such an account entered into intertextual relations with the many other model artifacts that carried and mediated The Crew's singular identity.

In the final case, we shall look further into that kind of relations. But let us first consider briefly how the limit case of The Crew speaks to the question of organizational identity. While the NA seemed to reduce identity to a set of standardized procedures, easily and universally replicable, thus tabooing the organizational singularity that was crucially implied in its way of working, The Crew revered that singularity even as it operated through a political transcendence that was made possible by public representations. These two radical cases help us identify limitations to varieties of 'symbolism' as an approach to organizational identity (e.g. Pondy et al. 1983). Against a functionalism that simply stipulates organizational rationality as defined by survival or goal-achievement in a given form—and proceeds to discover its conditions and operations—'symbolism' points to the relative multiplicity and contingency of such forms, which seem to imply that they are formed and held together by discourse and symbols rather than by practical necessity. Thus, in Hatch and Schultz (2002), it is mediated by such symbols that the organization defines itself in its interchanges with stakeholders, balancing between narcissism and over-adaptation; in Alvesson and Kärreman (2007), it is those symbols that define and control the aspirations of employees as they take them literally (more than the theorists do) in order to be able to deviate from them in practice, thus paradoxically reproducing them. Indeed, this does resonate with my claim that symbols that interpellate in processes of recognition can be powerful. But we need the context of the struggle for recognition and the broader ideological horizon of hope, if we want to take it anywhere useful. Without it, the power of symbols seems capricious, and its theoretical reflection becomes futile or nihilist. The irony of profane belief in arbitrary discourse means that anything beyond functionalism is reduced in a Nietzschean way, basically, to pure expressions of will. Once we have escaped the functionalist idea of necessity, we can approach standards as optional, as conventions with a certain internal rationality but whose match with any concrete situation and subjectivity remains to be determined. This opens to the oscillations between belief and cynicism, dogmatism and tinkering, that come with standardization: When we 'externalize' standards as discourse carried by symbols and model artifacts, we are left with nothing but a pure subjectivity—until we turn back and submit to those standards again.

With all the half-hearted 'profane belief' characteristic of NA members, at least their reference to a Higher Power points, however mystified and vainly, beyond that vicious circle, expressing the hope of breaking it. As for The Crew, all their symbols referred to The Crew itself as singular entity; this was taken seriously, not because it was seen to exemplify this or that specific virtue that matched the preferences of



certain groups of individuals, nor just for the pragmatics of everyday affairs, but because it realized the higher power, as it were, that came with political recognition; because the organization's public self-display with those symbols was a key part of that process. In its struggle for recognition, The Crew's identity was *at once concrete and general* because of its singular way of universalizing the predicament of socially excluded young people; and it was the symbolic practices and artifacts that carried and performed that unity. This is the final lesson to be taken with us to the next case.

We—who have read this text so far—have seen one collective in which the 'we' was always plural, and another in which it remained singular. All the while, we have implied the opposite logical forms as shadows. Even as anonymous, the organization NA was there all along, as was each of its local instantiations. The Crew kept defining itself as singular, but it did so through multiplying events, representations, practices, and through interpellating a multitude of participants and supporters. We have noted strong forces and valid reasons behind keeping those other aspects of organizational identity in the shadows. Yet I have suggested that we may hope to overcome them, in a kind of prototype identity that performs a self-reflection of the organization's singularity as *proto*, as well as its plurality as *type*. Finally, the only way I could propose for this to happen was to become aware of how these processes were part of struggles for recognition. The question "who, 'we'?" must be rearticulated as a practice of reconstituting 'us' within such struggles, continuously recreating the ways we perform and represent ourselves. This is what we will do in this last case. Indeed, "we": I do propose that the 'we' who will do it includes *you*, the reader, as we together consider the 'us' who call ourselves 'STUFF'.

STUFF

You can find us at <https://stuffsite.org/>. That is, of course, if that website lasts as long as this text; or if you go through the trouble of reconstructing it at a later date—assuming the persistence of the internet itself as the ultimate archive. But why worry about archiving? Haven't we left behind the idea that social theory is written for a definite but precarious posterity—since it now shares the fate of all other texts and works of art: That of immediately adding to 'The Great Flow' of cyberspace (Groys 2016), the current explosion of amounts of work that are going to be preserved but read by an accidental few, if by any at all? Everything is archived, so that we may still entertain the comforting image of a God's Eye, in which 'our' perspectives—those of writers and readers—can merge; but we know, too, how unlikely it is that anyone will ever look into any particular corner of that monstrous mega-archive. The transcendence achieved by collective objectification will not save us from mortality. Even we shall die—not only as human individuals, but as—any—collective. Mortality comes with singular situated existence, even if the mortality of a collective is different from that of a person. Yet, there would be no point in writing or reading this if it were not for the hope of a relevance that stretches, if not to eternity, then at least across time and space so as to form part of some human endeavor that unites us. We do not need a religious or deterministic teleology for this to drive our



work. All we must hope for is to be recognized as potentially contributing to some worthy project, which, in that recognition, joins us—writers and readers—with this text and with what we imagine it to refer to. Such projects are transcendent even if they are also mortal, continuously emerging and reconstituted in acts such as writing and reading.

This idea of a situated but transcendent community of authors and readers is our point of entry to this final case because it helps us keep in mind what constitutes “STUFF”. Of course, we could refer to ‘meetings’ of some of those people depicted in the ‘About’ section—real human bodies, in time and space, talking and drinking coffee—or, indeed, we could note how we have constructed ourselves accountably in applications to funding bodies, as collaborations between us as individual members of organizations. But the point of these meetings and collaborations is only realized as we reach out to audiences such as *you*, through artifacts such as *this text*: Your reading is one of the forms of the recognition we hope for. It is, however, only one form out of several, as it mostly defines STUFF as one of *my* projects, as a kind of empirical–practical *research*, as one of the things I do as professor at Aarhus University. But STUFF carries other constitutive concerns, projects, identities, too:

STUFF consists of researchers and counselors who are interested in how it is possible, in collaboration with young drug users, to use aesthetic means to document, produce and repair youth life. This is relevant at several levels: As a professional intervention, as research practice, and as social and cultural youth capital—in mutual exchange and movement. But also as a community in which collaboration and our common constellation achieves a particular meaning. In this way, it is our aim, on the one hand, to overstep given standards of treatment, by focusing on how self-presentation and identity narratives are relevant areas of intervention in psychosocial treatment; on the other hand to overcome traditional forms of collaboration and stereotypes, and invite to others kinds of community.

(October, 2018: <http://www.stuffsite.org/om-os/>)

It all began when in 2013 we presented our collaboration at a conference for researchers and counselors, partly in the form of a *gallery* (Nissen 2018). We realized that articles such as the present text could be regarded as *catalog texts*. With this turn of perspective, we had embarked on a project of creating an ‘infrastructure of information’ (Bowker and Star 1999) that joined us in a way that differed from those infrastructures known as ‘research projects’—with their data collections, interviews, ethics procedures etc.—and ‘courses’—with their syllabus, teachers and students, exams etc. This is transdisciplinary, not only by addressing issues in practices that do not match any given discipline, and by the reflexive distance to disciplinary knowledge that this opens up (Stenner and Taylor 2008), but also in terms of transforming the intersubjective relations, the power-knowledge formats, leaderships and selfhoods implied in ‘discipline.’

Further, this hinges on and is a vehicle for the professionals’ *transformation* of the standards of counseling. What they do together with their young clients is still accountable as counseling, yet in a form that reconstitutes counseling fundamentally, not least by connecting with these infrastructures of information—rather than



only with those of clinical records, tests, and evidence of therapeutic effect. If we study the accounts given by the professionals at their institutions' websites, in articles in professional journals, and in various kinds of meetings, teaching, supervision etc., we can clearly see the precarious nature of this accountability. On the one hand, what they do is barely recognized as professional counseling; on the other hand, the '*U-turn-model*', named after one of the institutions, has achieved some national fame and official recognition and funding. In the complex politics of this recognition, STUFF constitutes *one* form of 'documentation,' even as it differs radically from the language of 'effect' that dominates social policy governance.

As was the case with The Crew, this not only feeds into the objectivity of the artifacts, but also endows the collectives of professionals, researchers and clients with powers to interpellate.

Thus, if we direct our attention to the young *clients* who are thus interpellated, STUFF is a venue for recognition, not just of their efforts to overcome their own drug habits or marginalization, but of their *art* as valid contributions to an emerging culture and to addressing a social problem. Again, this should not be thought of in terms of the traditional hierarchies of the art world. These would clearly define STUFF as a collection of amateur products and thus the work as therapeutic or educational imitation. Mentioning the participation of a professional film director and a counselor with additional credentials as artist and curator only puts this judgment half-way into doubt. Rather, what shakes it is the development in contemporary art and in the general culture. According to Boris Groys, with "...contemporary means of communication and social networks" and "contemporary design",

...contemporary art has become definitively a mass cultural practice, and, further, [that] today's artist lives and operates primarily among art producers rather than among art consumers. (Groys 2016, pp. 110–111)

Modern art always included attempts to efface the institutional boundary between art and life. The self-presentation of the artist is perhaps the most widely performed version of this. One form this has taken throughout Modernity has been 'auto-fiction,' the deliberate paradoxical coincidence of autobiography with fiction.⁶ Obviously, this resonates with the rise of 12 step fellowships and the derivative cultural standard narratives performed on mass TV such as the Oprah Winfrey show (Illouz 2003). As medicalization marches on, self-exposure, even as addict, becomes a way of achieving recognition. Recognition is not simply given with the 'God's Eye' of the internet, just by posting a snapshot of oneself; but the key mechanism of being objectified and dealt with as 'one of us' of an emergent community is deployed, in ways that are hard to predict. This does not cancel, but it does contradict and mediate in new ways, the processes of social stigma. If Groys' rendering, preoccupied with the art scene, tends to occlude the problem of public stigma as the shadow side of recognition, Illouz points to the sociological forces that forge powerful "glamour of misery" communities around the technosocial networks of the TV shows, as they interact and meddle with other

⁶ Incidentally, the problem of addiction is one of the themes that have been treated in such a way the earliest and most consistently, from Coleridge through Ditlevsen to Burroughs and Bukowski (Plant 1999).



genres and other networks such as political venues, women's magazines, etc. Thus, the stigma/recognition-tension is basically *undecided*, as the young drug users collaborate with counselor-artists, bringing in their various subcultural references and forms of expression.

This implies the 'worksites of citizenship,' the 'meeting in movement and on neutral ground,' which we saw above in the case of The Crew. The creativity inherent to art, the openness of its artifacts and events to multiple semantics, achieves a *potential for recognized objectivity* as the 'relational aesthetics' (Bourriaud 2002) intervening in the social problems and the self-performances of the young drug users and their friends, relatives, and networks of professionals. With Rancière (2004), we could refer to this as a *dissensus* crafted, a clash of different regimes of sense, and the political reconstruction of community in the process. In conjunction with the struggles for recognition as innovative (post) therapy and as research, aesthetics thus implies a kind of openness that is very different from the individualizing mirror provided by the 'neutrality' of traditional psychotherapy. STUFF provides an infrastructure of dissensual artifacts, which does more than bracket, mix or open up standards. As it is rendered here, in this text, it carries and expresses the 'blues hope' of a welfare state that addresses the social problems currently labeled 'addiction' in ways that include but transform the individualized self-care of our medicalized culture, into a reflective performance of collective care. It embodies a policy vision or utopia that provides an alternative to the currently dominant neoliberal and communitarian trends (cf. Nissen 2014).

More generally, sites such as STUFF invite a recognition of the ways that the spaces of the exhibition and the stage may, at this historical moment, converge with 'worksites of citizenship' and with scientific experiments, as transformed and expanded classrooms and counseling spaces (cf. Bank and Nissen 2017). The point is not to claim that 'the organization' or 'the collective' should be, finally, reduced to a space or a commons. But if we want to understand the singularity of any collective as performing universalizing aspirations, we must address how it is indexed. The concept of a 'site' captures the uncertain location of the collective as embodied, instantiated, and emplaced in either time-space or metaphorical spaces constructed with (cyber) artifacts, or both. As we have seen, this double indexicality implies a complex mortality. 'We' first exist for as long as each of us (given our various concerns, in our material and finite lives) prioritize 'us' by meeting up, writing texts like this, etc. 'We' then linger on, incessantly reconstituted (or so we hope), in the great flow of the internet and the other infrastructures of information that increasingly connect to it, and through it, such as the academic library system. And these individual priorities and transtemporal network artifacts mediate and transform the recognition of the collective also by other collectives, such as in this case Aarhus University, Elsinore Municipality, City of Copenhagen, and, of course, *Subjectivity*.

Conclusion

The cases chosen here could be read as examples of a set of issues that are relevant to a specific field of social work organizations, where the interdependence and overlap of leadership with pedagogics/therapeutics with welfare state politics are, if not



always obvious, then at least arguable. And the problem of mediation through the internet that is highlighted mostly in the third case is perhaps at issue only at this point in time. But the thing about prototypes is that their singularity does not rule out their potential generality.

Could it be that they tell a story, too, about what readers will recognize as ‘organization’ as intentionally designed collectives in other times and places? The analyses I have offered suggest this to be the case by claiming general concepts as relevantly questioning or characterizing singular events, practices and collectives. My readers will of course question these claims, both in terms of the meaning of those concepts and in terms of their power to address those events. And their recontextualization to other events is entirely in your hands.

But the time has come to reflect singular collectivity. The *who, we?*-question is pertinent since collectives (including those we call organizations) are contingent, precarious and mortal, while nonetheless vital and co-constitutive of whom we are as individual subjects. Our emancipation from the premodern and modern metaphysics that used to anchor collectives does not make them any less essential. This article has suggested some humble steps toward a language in which we might hope to engage with the ‘who we’-question when it cannot be postponed and cannot be taken lightly.

I have claimed that the nature of the question takes us beyond not only any functionalist organization theory, but also beyond the postfunctionalisms that either note the semantics and semiotics by which a given collective persists or cherish its dissolution into process or practice. We must address collective subjectivity, and the ways in which collectives are constituted as singular. This requires a transdisciplinary approach and a theoretical repertoire of diverse social units. It implies identifying processes of contingent recognition that co-constitute subjectivities (individual and collective). And it means analyzing the socioculturally evolving artifacts by which they are mediated—the symbols with which they are represented and the spaces by which they are indexed—in a complex temporality of which we are ourselves a part.

For, finally, I propose that, when we do that, we co-perform recognition as we engage in critique. We suggest concepts with which to build models of singular events and subjects for a general relevance—that is, prototypes—and such models (this text is itself one) are taken to constitute collectives in transcendence, as reaching beyond themselves, yet potentially reflexive of their mortality.

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