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# Conceptions of Process in Organization and Management

## The Case of Identity Studies

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**Abstract:** Despite the increased use of process perspectives in management and organization studies, what “process” stands for remains highly ambiguous. This chapter develops a typology of the different meanings of the term process using the area of identity studies as the empirical context. In contrast to the “weak” and “strong” views of process within management and organization studies, the typology shows that there exists a continuum of process perspectives in between the “weak”/“strong” views, namely from process as (1) a transition state, (2) sliding, (3) narrative co-production, and (4) an ongoing accomplishment, to regarding process as (5) all-there-is. Several constitutive features of process that have not been previously illuminated are identified, including: ontology, time, space, and agency. Finally, the chapter discusses how the identified process views and their constitutive features can advance not only process research within the area of identity studies but also within management and organization studies more broadly.

### 12.1 Introduction

While process perspectives have been commonly used in management and organization studies (hereafter MOS) (e.g. March, 1994; Pettigrew, 1990;

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Weick, 1979), they have recently gained renewed popularity in areas such as organizational identity (Alvesson, 2010; Ybema et al., 2009), organizational change (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002), strategy (Chia and MacKay, 2007; Whittington, 2006), organizational learning (Clegg, Kornberger, and Rhodes, 2005; Gherardi, 2006), and design (Youngjin, Boland, and Lyytinen, 2006). Some even claim that a “process turn” is taking place in organization studies (e.g. Hernes, 2008).

A core idea underpinning most process perspectives is that organizational and management phenomena such as strategy, identity, decision-making, and knowledge are better understood by conceptualizing them as processes of becoming rather than as stable entities with specific properties (Hernes, 2008; Langlely and Tsoukas, 2010; Nayak and Chia, 2011). However, despite the increased use of process perspectives and a more deliberate explication of them (Langlely and Tsoukas, 2010; Nayak and Chia, 2011), what “process” stands for appears as highly ambiguous in the literature. As Hernes (2008, p. 23) notes in his extensive review of process studies, although there exist “a number of works that debate the nature of process views [ . . . ] there is seldom a clear cut line between the understandings of process. With some exceptions (e.g. Bakken and Hernes, 2006; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002; Van de Ven and Poole, 2005) the word process is used merely to emphasize that movement and flux are taken into consideration.”

In this chapter we try to provide a clearer articulation of what process stands for within MOS by investigating the different ways in which the term is applied in the area of identity studies. Specifically, the overall aim of the chapter is to identify and develop a *typology* of the different meanings and conceptualizations of the term process within MOS, using the area of identity studies as the specific empirical context. Such a typology is likely to provide a sharper lens for how organizational phenomena can be understood and studied from a process perspective. It may also facilitate communication and clarify analytical options as well as epistemological, ontological, and methodological stances and choices. In particular, typological theorizing potentially enables the development of theoretically meaningful categories of process, facilitates distinctions between different conceptualizations of process, and avoids simple correlational process thinking (Delbridge and Fiss, 2013, p. 329).

The chapter is structured in the following way. First, we provide a brief review of how the term process has been defined within process organization studies. Thereafter, we investigate how the term process has been used within the area of identity studies through a review of eight leading

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MOS journals between 2006 and 2012 together with a more targeted review of identity studies within MOS. Based on that review we identify and elaborate a typology of different process views and their key features. Finally, we discuss how such a typology can advance not only process research within the area of identity studies but also within MOS more broadly.

### 12.2 Process Studies

#### 12.2.1 The “Process Turn” in Management and Organization Studies

Although the term process has been used frequently in MOS, its popularity has increased significantly during the last two decades. Simply running a search in Google Scholar on the term process in the title field of four leading MOS journals (*Academy of Management Journal*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Organization Science*, and *Organization Studies*) resulted in more than 400 hits. The search revealed that the term process has been applied to almost every area of MOS, such as strategy process, communication process, sense-making process, organizational change process, systems development process, production process, work process, and identity process. This interest in process research has generated several special issues (*Academy of Management Journal*, 2013; *Organization*, 2002-1; *Organization Studies*, 2011-9; *Strategic Management Journal*, 1992), a specific standing conference (International Symposium on Process Organization Studies, <<http://www.process-symposium.com>>), a process website organized by AoM (<http://www.processresearchmethods.org/index.html>), special interest groups in EGOS and AoM, special book series (Perspectives on Process Organization Studies, Langley and Tsoukas, 2010), and several extensive reviews (e.g. Hernes, 2008; Nayak and Chia, 2011).

A central question for all process research is what “process” stands for. This is because how we understand “process” informs what to investigate, the design of our research, what empirical material to collect, and how to analyze and theorize organizational phenomena. However, the notion of process is far from clear within MOS. Nayak and Chia (2011, p. 292), point in their review to “the indetermination of process” and Langley (2008, p. 2) observes that “process research addresses dynamic questions about temporally evolving phenomena. Beyond this elementary idea, the definition of precisely what process research is or is not can however sometimes seem rather muddy.” Moreover, as Cooren et al. (2011) aptly note

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in relation to process perspectives in communication studies, “a problem in making these [process] views amenable to the broader organization studies field is that, because of their sophisticated conceptions of communicative processes, they often become mired in complexity, immersed in abstract language and unable to articulate similarities and differences among perspectives.”

There are several possible reasons for the high degree of ambiguity revolving around the term process. One is that the term has a long and complex philosophical pedigree, ranging from early process philosophers like Heraclitus, James, Whitehead, and Bergson to leading contemporary philosophers and social scientists, such as Deleuze and Guattari (1987), Giddens (1979), Ingold (2000), and Weick (1979) which, taken together, have created a melting pot of different and highly complex views of process (Rescher, 1996; Schatzki, 2010). Another likely reason is that the increased use of process perspectives may have resulted in less reflective applications of the term process. For example, many researchers replace nouns such as “design” and “strategy” with “designing” and “strategizing.” But, as Hernes (2008, p. 23) notes, “adding ‘ing’ to a noun, however much it turns the noun into a verb in linguistic terms, does not much influence either how we conceptualize process or how we formulate all the important questions that come with that conceptualization.” A third and related reason is that the process term is not only used by advocates of distinct process perspectives but also by many scholars within MOS that do not necessarily see themselves as process scholars.

A confused and muddled conceptualization of process can be seen as problematic, as it may provide an unfocused and perhaps even sometimes misguided framework for studying organizational phenomena. It is of course important not to exaggerate the need for clarity because, as Langley (2008, p. 2) notes, too much clarity may “misrepresent the richness, eclecticism and variety of [process] research practice.” However, given the current ambiguity of the term process it seems important to further articulate its meanings and uses in order to advance organizational process studies.

### 12.2.2 Attempts to Define Process

The confusion over what process stands for does not mean that no attempts have been made to clarify its meaning. An often-cited clarification is Mohr’s (1982) distinction between variance and process theories. As Langley (1999, p. 692) eloquently describes it, “whereas variance theories provide explanations for phenomena in terms of relationships

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among dependent and independent *variables* (e.g., more of X and more of Y produce more of Z), process theories provide explanations in terms of the sequence of *events* leading to an outcome (e.g., do A and then B to get C).” To take a concrete example, variance theory tries to explain organizational change by investigating the extent to which a set of independent variables such as the environment, leadership, and technology *causes* organizational change. In contrast, process theory tries to explain organizational change by investigating what Mohr (1982, p. 45) calls “probabilistic rearrangement,” that is, the processes in which specific events, activities, decisions, etc. coalesce into particular constellations that are likely to create organizational change. Although this distinction is useful in that it highlights the key differences between the prevalent variance theory and process theory, it does not say much about the different meanings and uses of the term process within MOS.

A common way to further clarify its uses is to distinguish between a “weak” and a “strong” process view. This distinction was first made by Chia and Langley (2004) in the call for the First Organization Studies Summer Workshop, focused on process organization studies:

The “weak” view treats processes as important but ultimately reducible to the action of things, while the “strong” view deems actions and things to be instantiations of process-complexes. The first perspective appears dominant in much of organizational and social scientific research, and tends to be pragmatic, empirically grounded, and analytical in orientation. The latter perspective has been primarily conceptual, strongly informed by strands of process philosophy, theology and the humanities at large, following especially the lead of philosophers such as James, Whitehead, Bergson, and Deleuze.

As a way to further clarify the difference between the “weak” and “strong” conceptions of process, process scholars often try to articulate their ontological assumptions (Langley et al., 2013). The “weak” process view is seen as underpinned by a *substance* ontology, which stipulates that entities (individuals, organizations, etc.) are supreme, and process secondary. An organization is ultimately seen as a more or less stable entity with particular properties. However, at certain times, such as when the external environment changes significantly (e.g. driven by new technologies, regulations, or competitors), the organization may move from one stage to another and, thus, transforms its properties somewhat, as a way to adapt to the changes in the external environment.

The “strong” process perspective is underpinned by a *becoming* ontology and proposes that process, rather than substance, is the basic ontological

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category. According to the well-known process philosopher Whitehead, a becoming ontology postulates that “the actual world is a process, and that process is the becoming of actual entities [ . . . ] *how* an actual entity becomes constitutes *what* that actual entity *is*” (in Nayak and Chia, 2011, p. 289). This means that advocates of a “strong” process view conceptualize organization as something emergent and always in the making. As Hernes (2008, pp. xvii–xviii) expressed it, organizations “are ongoing in the sense that they are always in a state of creation, of emergence, of becoming. They are also accomplishments in the sense that they are forged with historical processes that could have turned out quite differently.” Therefore, as Nayak and Chia (2011, p. 284) argue, “to understand individuals and organizations processually is to regard them as temporarily assemblages of organizing that are abstracted from an underlying sea of ceaseless change.”

Implicit in the distinction between a “weak” and a “strong” process perspective, at least for most advocates of the “strong” one, is that a “strong” process view is superior in that it “is truer to the essential meaning of change (and process) than the ‘weak’ view” (Van de Ven and Poole, 2005, p. 7). This is for example evident in Nayak and Chia (2011, p. 292) who describe “weak” process views as quasi-processual in that their focus on “how things and events unfold over time is [ . . . ] not radical enough when it comes to process perspective. A genuine process perspective insists that reality *is* change” (see also Hernes, 2008, pp. 23–24, for a similar argument). However, other process-oriented theorists more closely associated with a “weak” process view, such as Van de Ven and Poole (2005) and Langley (2007) tend to regard the “weak” and “strong” views as different but do not necessarily assume that one view is superior to the other.

### 12.2.3 A Critique of the “Weak”/“Strong” Conceptualization of Process

While the “weak”/“strong” distinction further clarifies what process may signify, it is also problematic in many ways. A major problem with such a bipolar conceptualization is that it overlooks the possibility of a greater variation of process views. Such negligence prevents the development of a more nuanced and richer understanding of what process means and how it is used within MOS. This becomes particularly salient in that several potential key features, which in various ways make up process, such as “time,” “space,” and “agency,” are even less thematized and articulated within existing dichotomic conceptualizations of process.

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One of the central features that make up process is *time*. Process is constantly described as something dynamic, ongoing, and evolving. As Langley et al. (2013, p. 1) say, “process studies address questions about how and why things emerge, develop, grow, or terminate over time.” However, it is far from clear what time means in both the “weak” and the “strong” process view. In most instances, process seems to be portrayed as a temporal sequence. For example, in her review of process research, Langley (2007, p. 10) portrayed the temporal orientation of process studies as “process researchers may study their phenomenon by tracing it backward into the past (historical and retrospective studies) by following it forward into the future (ethnography and longitudinal case studies), by examining how it is constituted, or possibly by doing all of these at the same time” (see also Langley and Tsoukas, 2010, p. 11; Langley et al., 2013, pp. 1–4).

Drawing on Bergson’s philosophy, Nayak and Chia (2011, p. 295) try to provide an alternative description of how “time” defines process. They claim that “the challenge of the processual approach is to think in time, where time is not the counterfeit movement from point A to B . . . represented by  $t_0$ ,  $t_1$ ,  $t_2$  and so on . . . [instead] to think processually is to recover the continuities and to view the process of transformation as a whole indivisible movement.” Yet, it is not clear to what extent the assumption of process as a temporal sequence changes if we regard time as an indivisible movement (as duration in Bergson’s terminology) rather than a stream of infinite points.

*Space*, which is intimately related to time in that “every movement describes a space [and] that at every point of this space the moving body *might* stop” (Bergson, 1911, p. 251, in Nayak and Chia, 2011, p. 294). The quote from Bergson suggests that space is a central feature of process, something also supported by Schatzki (2010, p. 10), who notes “process is at once temporal and spatial.” However, as space has been rarely discussed and thematized within process studies, especially not on its own, it is not clear how space defines process in either the “weak” or “strong” view. For example, does process occur in space in a similar way as it is assumed to occur in time? Or is process seen as constitutive of space or perhaps vice versa?

*Agency* is another central feature of process that is rarely thematized in current conceptualizations of process within MOS. In the “weak” process view, agency is typically highly salient in that individuals and organizations are seen as discrete entities, endowed with autonomy and freedom to make deliberate choices (Nayak and Chia, 2011, p. 285). Yet, as population ecologists have argued for a long time, process may also be strongly

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determined by external events or constraints rather than human agency. However, what agency implicates in the “strong” view is considerably harder to see. This is because in the “strong” process view individuals and organizations are no longer conceptualized as discrete entities but “as temporarily stabilized event clusters abstracted from a sea of constant flux and change” (Nayak and Chia, 2011, p. 281). In a similar vein, Hernes (2008, p. xv) argues that from a process point of view, organization is “a unique product of circumstances and a unique producer of circumstances.” Drawing from the above quotes, agency in a “strong” process view seems at best to be portrayed as “specific circumstances” rather than as human intentions and purposes. Are processes perhaps seen as self-going perpetual, universal motion machines? More recently, however, MacKay and Chia (2013) elaborated a moderated view of human agency, which seems to fall somewhere between the above views by introducing the notion of “unowned” agency. According to them, unowned agency “give[s] primacy to either managerial choice or environmental determinism by elevating the interactive role of choice, chance, change, and unintended consequences in shaping strategic outcomes” (MacKay and Chia, 2013, p. 210).

In conclusion, even though the “weak”/“strong” distinction provides some clarification of what process stands for within MOS, its meaning is still ambiguous in that (a) the “weak”/“strong” distinction overlooks the possibility of a greater variation of process views, and (b) several potential key features of process such as time, space, and agency are rarely thematized and articulated, which exacerbates the problem of understanding what process signifies and how it can be used within MOS.

### 12.3 The Case of Identity Studies

The aim of the remaining discussion is to provide a clearer articulation of what “process” may signify by investigating how it has been conceptualized and used within the area of identity studies. Studying how process has been applied across several MOS areas would undoubtedly lead to greater breadth and, thus, increased generalization but at a potentially high cost, namely, reduced depth and sharpness in the descriptions of the various meanings of process. We contend that identity studies offers a suitable empirical context for articulating the various meanings of process. First, it is one of the larger areas within MOS, which provides the necessary breadth for capturing the meanings and uses of process in a rich and nuanced way. Second, comparable to many other areas, it



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is increasingly common to emphasize the processual nature of identity within identity studies (Ybema et al., 2009). Third, similar to most other topics within MOS, it is not easy to grasp what “process” stands for within identity studies, judging from the ongoing debates as to whether identities are primarily fixed, coherent, and unified or changeable, fragmented, multiple, and diverse (Alvesson, 2010; Clarke, Brown, and Hailey, 2009; Collinson, 2003).

### 12.4 Methodology

In order to investigate what process means and the different ways in which the term is applied in identity studies, we conducted a database search (in the databases Ebsco and Sage) of eight leading journals in organization and management studies between 2006 and 2012 (*Academy of Management Journal*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, *Human Relations*, *Journal of Management*, *Journal of Management Studies*, *Organization*, *Organization Science*, *Organization Studies*). The main reasons for choosing those journals are that they (a) provide a good representation of both leading European and US journals, and (b) publish a wide range of different identity studies. Taken together, they are likely to offer both the breadth and depth needed to identify the potential range of process views within identity studies as well as being able to articulate these process views with high precision and clarity.

In order to identify articles to be included in the review we searched for the term “process” in the title, abstract, or as a keyword in the entire database for each journal. Through the database search we identified 87 identity studies. Apart from a handful of conceptual papers (e.g. Bardon and Josserand, 2010; Brown, 2006), the review consisted of mainly empirical identity studies. In addition to the article review, we carried out a more targeted review of identity studies outside the time frame of 2006–2012 as well as outside the eight journals included in the database search. Here, we also considered a few books and book chapters that explored identity questions from a process perspective (e.g. Munro, 2011; Pullen and Linstead, 2006). The purpose of the more targeted review was to find identity studies that enabled greater depth and precision of the different process views initially identified through the main database search (e.g. Sims, 2003; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Taken together, we reviewed in total about 100 research texts within the area of identity studies.

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In the review we focused on how authors conceptualized process but, more importantly, how these conceptualizations were used throughout the paper and/or study. As Wittgenstein and ethnomethodologists have pointed out, what a term means is inextricably linked to the way it is applied in a specific context (Braver, 2012). Although we investigated each paper in full, we mainly focused on the theoretical and, where present, methodological part of the paper as well as on its discussion section, as those parts most clearly highlighted how the authors used the notion of process in identity studies.

Interestingly, of the identity studies we analyzed, only a few explicitly emphasized that they took a “process perspective” on identity. The large majority did not use the term process deliberately but applied it in a rather non-thematic way. Moreover, different process identity notions were frequently composed and applied within one and the same study or analysis. This is for example evident in Brown and Lewis’ (2011, pp. 871–874) study of the identity work of professional lawyers. On the one hand, they consider identity to be “multiple,” “in flux,” “improvisational,” and “in-progress.” However, as they claim identity work to be an expression of both agency and power, they also emphasize the constraining, normalizing, and disciplining effects of work- and profession-related discourses, striving to define and fix identity in a very particular way.

Nevertheless, even if most papers reviewed follow, as alluded to, a rather variegated understanding of process, we tried to identify the central or dominant process meaning from each of the identity studies articles by closely investigating how the term process was applied throughout the paper. On that basis, we finally identified five, more or less explicitly articulated perspectives on process outlined in the typology below. However, given the constructed, not to say artificial, nature of typologies and the arbitrariness of the labels put on whatever position one wants to represent, propose, or invent, there are good reasons to remind oneself and the reader that the proposed typology is not the only possibility of making sense of the ways in which the term process is used in the identity field. As Locke and Golden-Biddle (1997) point out, how we integrate and differentiate earlier research in literature reviews is as much a matter of rhetorical moves as of objective mappings. Therefore, rather than being too worried about whether everything important about “process” in the reviewed texts is exactly mirrored in the typology, it is perhaps more important to consider the productive-functional aspects of the typology and its vocabulary.

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### 12.5 A Typology of Process Perspectives in Identity Studies

We identified a continuum of process perspectives within identity studies, ranging from process as (1) a transition state, (2) sliding, (3) narrative co-production, and (4) an ongoing accomplishment, to regarding process as (5) all-there-is. Furthermore, the typology proposes that each process perspective is constituted by a specific ontology, time, space, and agency. The continuum of process perspectives and their constitutive features are summarized in Table 12.1 and elaborated below.

#### 12.5.1 Process as Transition State

When process is seen as transition state, it tends to be subordinated to substance in that identity is mainly seen as something relatively fixed and accomplished and only “in process” during a specific period of time

**Table 12.1** Summary of process views within identity studies

Constitutive features	Ontology	Time	Space	Agency
<i>Process perspective</i>	The ontological status of process	How time defines process	Where process takes place	What has agency and how it drives processes
<i>Transition state</i>	Becoming subordinate to substance	Linear and episodic	In transitions between specific life stages or unexpected changes	Mainly individual and passive
<i>Sliding</i>	Becoming more prominent but still subordinate to substance	Often episodic but less linear	In between sites	Mainly individual and active
<i>Narrative co-production</i>	Becoming and substance equal status	Continuous and discontinuous (backward and forward)	In narrative co-production	Social-personal interaction
<i>Ongoing accomplishment</i>	Becoming more emphasized than substance	Continuous	In everyday practice	Social-material interaction
<i>All-there-is</i>	Becoming	Continuous and discontinuous (backward and forward)	Everywhere, boundary-less	Process is self-driving, perpetual motion

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(e.g. Goodrick and Reay, 2010; Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann, 2006). Process as transition state is thus mainly seen as a temporary in-between state that connects instability and stability of organizational or individual identity (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010).

In this type of process perspective, identity studies typically refer to more or less well-known development stages, such as when people are going through specific life stages or passing through important steps in their working life (Pratt et al., 2006, pp. 258–259). In these situations people often transform their sense of themselves. For example, a common situation in which people change their self-identity is in (job) transition phases (Ibarra and Barbulescu, 2010). Similar to individuals, “organizations undergo transitions in their life cycles” (Clark et al., 2010, p. 430) and are, therefore, occasionally asked to recreate and adapt their identity to modulated institutional environments. Identity transformations are also seen as taking place during unexpected changes, which call into question “who, what I am, and what is distinct about me.” For example, in their study of a merger of two health care organizations, Clark et al. (2010) show that organizations adapt their identities to changed institutional or organizational conditions in order to resolve conflict and cognitive dissonance.

Within these temporary in-between processes identities are debated and negotiated until a new organizational and/or individual identity is formulated and restabilized. However, in between and at the end of these transformational stages, whether they are expected or not, people and organizations are seen as fairly steady in their self-identities, calling for little interest in transition. It is also important to note that in process as transition, individuals or organizations are seen as primarily passive as their agency is mainly activated by external circumstances, such as changes in the environment or what follows from the transition of time, e.g. going from subordinate to manager or retiring.

### 12.5.2 *Process as Sliding*

When regarding process as sliding, neither identities nor identification targets are considered as particularly stable or fixed (Staber, 2010, p. 154). It is rather assumed that individuals are part of different sites and contexts, which promote and constitute various identities and identification targets. Individuals can move amongst these multiple identity sites, but also have to move and switch, such as when former identification sources dissolve (Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley, 2008;

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Bowles, 1990; Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail, 1994; Haslam, 2004). Individuals are therefore endowed with more active agency, as they are often the ones who initiate, or at least regulate, the moves between various identity sites.

The processes of sliding from one identity to another are particularly evident in environments where multiple sources generating and shaping identifications are presumed (e.g. Knights and McCabe, 2003, p. 1589; Kosmala and Herrbach, 2006), such as in team-, project- and short-term oriented work. Such forms of work do not simply define individuals, they also enable them to draw on, interpret, and identify with particular identity sources in a rather flexible way. Identification resources are thus not considered as being essentially universal or durable (Staber, 2010); depending on the particular social and discursive context, certain sources or scripts might “fit” better or be considered as more appropriate than others (Musson and Duberley, 2007, pp. 160–161). Yet, on balance, the view of process as sliding is somewhat limited as it is organized according to the possible set of identification targets and identity resources available at a given moment and site. Process comes into play mainly as a link between organizational and individual identification resources (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003, p. 1164).

### 12.5.3 *Process as Narrative Co-Production*

When regarding process as narrative co-production, identity is seen as a relational, multi-voiced, linguistic construct that is recreated and positioned through narrating and negotiating the self across time, different sites, and discourses (Brown, 2006; Down and Reveley, 2009; Ybema et al., 2009). Ontologically speaking, therefore, becoming and substance are more on an equal footing in this perspective than in the previous two. This is because identity is seen as less stable in that its formation is regularly taking place in a narrative co-production between others and ourselves. Moreover, in contrast to the two previous process perspectives, identity is here seen as more strongly socially achieved, that is, as something generated in interaction with others. It is when we are asked or feel encouraged to tell stories about ourselves and when others question our stories about ourselves that identity as process enters into the picture (Sims, 2003). Identity construction is thus understood as a “continuous process of narration where both the narrator and the audience formulate, edit, applaud, and refuse various elements of the ever-produced narrative” (Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994, p. 198).

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However, within process as narrative co-production there is a continuum of scholars: from those who regard identity narration processes as more coherent and linear to those who regard them as more multi-faceted and fragmented. The former often see self-identity as assembled out of cultural raw material: language, symbols, sets of meanings, values, etc. derived from countless numbers of interactions with others leading to “a coherent and vivifying life story [which] provides the modern adult with that quality of selfhood that goes by the name of identity” (McAdams, 1996, p. 299). However, for those who regard identity narration as more multi-faceted and fragmented, life stories are not seen as fixed and necessarily coherent products (Boje, 1991), but as something accomplished between actors over time (see also Ybema et al., 2009, p. 303). In this view, identity work can thus be seen as “complexes of in-progress stories and story-fragments, which are in a perpetual state of becoming” (Brown, 2006, p. 732) and also “suffused with power.”

### 12.5.4 Process as Ongoing Accomplishment

In process as ongoing accomplishment, becomingness has overtaken substance as the supreme ontological category in the sense that identity is never given but continually produced and reproduced through our everyday practices. Process as ongoing accomplishment refers to the concrete transitions of individuals, information, or material objects in and across time and—physical or virtual—space, giving rise to a largely decentered agency (cf. ANT), generated through the social–material interaction between ourselves and other people.

West and Zimmerman’s (1987) classic work *Doing Gender* can be seen as a paradigmatic example of the process as ongoing accomplishment perspective on gender identity.<sup>1</sup> According to Butler (1999), doing gender identity involves a wide set of social interactions and meaning recreations producing gender effects and gendered identities. Without these ongoing activities gender identities would, in principle, not exist anymore as gendered distinctions and would thus lack social significance and be marginalized and crumble.

Identity work in this process perspective calls, therefore, for constant engagement in forming, repairing, strengthening, or revising the identity constructions that are “enacted and played out through interactions” (Clegg, Rhodes, and Kornberger, 2007, p. 497). To put this idea in Sturdy et al.’s (2006, p. 846) words: identities and identity performances are “built on shifting sands.” It is “in the context of the *negotiation, presentation* and

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*structuring* of identity through knowledge and discourse” (Sturdy et al., 2006, p. 846) that different aspects and versions of identity are affirmed, denied and redefined in everyday performances and interactions as well as in the context of “larger struggles for identity and power” (Munro, 2011, p. 142; see also Beech, 2008).

Hence, within process as ongoing accomplishment, the modes of doing and performing identity can hardly be understood as being self-identical, stable, and linear in different scenes and contexts, as there seems to be no “I” that can stand apart from the particular conditions of its emergence (Butler, 2005). Yet, even if the process as ongoing accomplishment perspective puts a strong emphasis on the ongoing and fluid nature of identity, it does not necessarily assume that identity is exclusively in motion. To argue that “the appearance of stability in any given ‘identity’ is [ . . . ] a transient accomplishment” (Ybema et al., 2009, p. 301), also suggests that temporary identity stabilization, as an effect of certain ordering processes, is in part acknowledged.

### 12.5.5 Process as All-There-Is

In the process as all-there-is perspective, all forms of temporary identity stabilization are gone and identity is seen as entirely fluid. Process shapes all other categories—such as social/material world, discourses, organizations, individuals, or identities. In this perspective, process can therefore not be reduced to a particular space, agency, level, or plane (such as discursive, cognitive, or emotional), as it is ongoing and everywhere. On the whole, the notion of process in this perspective is best understood as an ontological category deeply shaping the multiple visions and orders of knowledge, truth, social realms, and relations (Bardon and Josserand, 2011, p. 502). As a particular “Weltanschauung,” process as all-there-is becomes a fundamental principle of the organization of life, and identity.

Hence, “rather than being ontologically secure” (Clegg et al., 2007, p. 497), it is here assumed that identity emerges from multiple relations and processes of organizing. As a consequence, identities in this perspective are not seen as sovereign, a complete substance, or a core element of personality that is to be discovered. For instance, in her study of multiple, ongoing identity (de)constructions in interview situations, Harding (2007, p. 1771), notes that “the sense of a unitary ‘I’, is never fully present, never fully achievable, but is always engaged in a complex interactional process of becoming-ness.” Similarly, in their study of the identity constructions of middle managers, Thomas and Linstead (2002, p. 75) argue

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that identity is in a permanent state of flux “as various social and linguistic constructs (or discourses) vie with another for supremacy.”

### 12.6 Discussion: Towards a Typological Theory of Process

The typology developed and elaborated above provides a description of the different process perspectives and their main constitutive features within identity studies. In that regard, the typology can be seen as a contribution to identity studies in that it offers a range of different ways in which identity can be understood and studied from a process perspective. However, the typology does not only advance process understandings within identity studies, but also the process perspective within MOS more generally. It does that in two main ways. First, it extends the “weak”/“strong” definition of process in that it identifies a whole range of other process perspectives in between the “weak” and “strong” perspectives. Second, it goes beyond the “weak”/“strong” definition of process in that it reveals several constitutive features of process that have not been previously illuminated. These contributions are further elaborated below.

#### 12.6.1 *Extending the Range of Possible Process Perspectives within MOS*

Although the typology suggests a continuum of different process views within identity studies, a central question is to what extent the identified process views are also evident in other areas of MOS. Two questions are important to ask here: (1) how well are the process views within identity studies reflected in, and can be applied to, other areas of MOS, and (2) to what extent do they relate to existing “process theories” within MOS? As both questions concern the more general relevance of the process views articulated in the typology, we consider them simultaneously.

*Process as a transition state* corresponds with the “weak” process perspective within existing process theories. Looking more specifically, process as transition state seems to map quite well onto those process theories that employ or develop particular time-specific process models or life-cycles, including both predictable or unexpected stages of transition, as well as stages of more steadiness. Here process often comes in as a necessary mediator in sequential or recurrent phases of transition and adaptation (Gioia, Schultz, and Corley, 2000). Process is thus generally considered as a temporary, transient and episodic phenomenon that assists in developing and



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transferring diverse social or organizational phenomena from instability to newly found stability and constancy (e.g. Clark and Geppert, 2011). Process as transition state also seems to have strong affinities with the hugely popular sense-making theory originally developed by Weick (1979, 1995), in that sense-making theory is confined to specific episodes “that occur from the moment some ongoing organizational activities are interrupted until they are satisfactorily restored (or in some cases permanently interrupted)” (Sandberg and Tsoukas, 2014. See also Maitlis and Christianson, 2014).

Although this process view is reflected in many areas within MOS, such as strategy (Mintzberg and McHugh, 1985) and organization design (Glick et al., 1990), it is perhaps most notable in the area of organizational change, where it is common to study change processes in terms of how an organization moves from one phase to another (Langley et al., 2013; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). As almost every aspect of organization and management (leadership, strategy, motivation, structure, etc.) goes through transitional phases of various kinds or is drawn into unexpected changes, this process view can be (and is frequently) applied within MOS.

*Process as sliding* acknowledges multiplicity, and the situational precariousness of identification resources (Alvesson, Ashcraft, and Thomas, 2008, p. 13; Collinson, 2003). This process view seems rather specific for social identity theory and, therefore, potentially harder to map onto other areas within MOS. It is, however, likely that process as sliding may also be relevant for understanding movements between institutional orders and practices. Here the organization hypocrisy idea can be exemplarily mentioned—where the organization moves between talk, decision, and action in order to satisfy diverse interests (Brunsson, 2003). The sliding view may also be used in conjunction with various discourse analytical frameworks, which often explore how people and collectives participate in and move amongst multiple discourses (e.g. Thomas and Davies, 2005). One could also imagine that the process as sliding view can be productively combined with institutional theories in the sense that organizations are switching between different institutional logics in the performance of their tasks, e.g. to attain legitimacy and being productive (Meyer and Rowan, 1977; see also Clegg et al., 2007).

*Process as narrative co-production* belongs to a broad literature in which the exploration of narratives and stories allows understanding a variety of processes and phenomena suffusing contemporary organizational life, social orders, and relations (Boje, 1991; Brown, 2006, p. 732). Generally, both stories and narrations have a tendency to create “facts” as experience

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rather than representing facts as information. Working mainly on a symbolic plane, they evoke and communicate images, emotions, fantasies, or tales (Gabriel, 1991, pp. 857–858). Storytelling and narrations are discursive devices that generate various kinds of knowledge and meaning and, in this vein, promote temporary truths and realities (Boje, 1991; Brown, 2006). Process as narrative co-production appears to have a fairly broad application range in MOS. As demonstrated by “the narrative turn” in MOS (e.g. Brown, 2006; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994) it can be connected to all themes within MOS. However, a note of caution is warranted here, as a focus on narratives tends to de-emphasize more substantive aspects of MOS, such as in areas of strategic changes and mergers and acquisitions, which involve massive material changes.

*Process as ongoing accomplishment* in identity studies pairs closely to process theories based on or inspired by Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology. From an ethnomethodological point of view, process is seen as productive and immanent in every performance, thereby constituting both “the doer” and “the deed” (Butler, 1999). As process is ongoing, it involves cycles of actions and reactions, which unfold in different stages, scenes, and discursive or social contexts (Ybema et al., 2009). Here process goes beyond indifferent or distanced practice and conduct; it is about constant enactment, formation, and crafting of organizational knowledge, careers, relations, and identities (e.g. Cabantous and Gond, 2011). Even though ethnomethodology has been applied across several MOS areas (e.g. Llewellyn and Hindmarsh, 2010; Samra-Fredericks and Bargiela-Chiappini, 2008), its micro focus makes it somewhat limited in its applications, particularly if it is linked to conversation analysis. Ideas of process as ongoing accomplishment, however, can be employed in other ways to study a range of different areas within MOS, such as managerial work as consistently adaptive and situational, and strategy as a more or less permanent construction and reconstruction of future directions and how to get there.

Finally, *process as all-there-is* relates closely to those process theories that take a “strong” view of the processuality and becomingness of the world, leaving almost no space for anything outside or before process (Harding, 2007; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). Advocates of process thinking plea for a “primacy of process over fact” (Chia, 1996, p. 34). Focusing on process and relations is here seen as more real and more important than focusing “on the things which they relate” (Chia, 1996, p. 50). Acknowledging a “fallacy of misplaced concreteness” (Whitehead, 1926/1985), it is strongly questioned whether there is a “world out there” (Goodman, 1978), and “that reality pre-exists independently of observation and as static, discrete

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and identifiable ‘things’, ‘entities’, ‘events’, ‘generative mechanisms’ etc.” (Chia, 1996, p. 33).

Process as all-there-is also largely overlaps with those process theories that regard the social world as being driven by flows, networks, and connections (e.g. Castells, 2001). These scholars, emphasizing process and unsteady practice instead of stable structures, places, fixed subjects, and objects postulate a “world on the move.” In this perspective, hardly anything that is stable and non-processual can be imagined; mobilization and movements of people, things, and relations are most prominent and considered as central to contemporary institutional, organizational, and individual life and order (Urry, 2007, p. 6; Elliott and Urry, 2010).

### 12.6.2 Revealing Constitutive Features of Process

Extending existing process perspectives within MOS is, however, not the only contribution the typology makes. Its second contribution is that it points at several constitutive features of process that only marginally have been highlighted by existing process theories within MOS, namely: ontology, time, space, and agency. These features further sharpen the distinctiveness of each of the identified process views in important ways.

Although *ontology* has been frequently described as a constitutive feature of process in existing literature in the sense that the “weak” process view is defined by a substance ontology and the “strong” process view by a becoming ontology, the identified typology suggests that ontology defines process in a more complex and nuanced way. As shown, substance ontology dominates in the first two process views (transition state and sliding) in that substance is seen as the basic condition and becoming is a deviation from it. The dominance of substance ontology weakens gradually, so in the third process view (narrative co-production) substance and becoming have similar ontological status. Thereafter, in the remaining process views (ongoing accomplishment and all-there-is) the becoming ontology gets gradually more dominant in that becomingness is seen as defining substance rather than the reverse.

The typology suggests that *time* is one of the most defining features of process. In the first two process views (transition state and sliding), time defines process mainly as linear and successive, such as when going from one stage to another. But sometimes, it also defines process in a less linear fashion (process as sliding) in that individuals are part of multiple processes (that are taking place) simultaneously. In the remaining views, particularly in process as ongoing accomplishment and all-there-is, time

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seems to define process more significantly in that process is seen *as* time rather than something that takes place *in* time.

A highly related constitutive feature of process revealed in the typology is *space*. In the first two process views, space defines process as that which takes place between specific stages (transition state) or between specific sites, such as between different groups of people (sliding). In “narrative co-production” space defines process as that which happens in a symbolic space (e.g. in narration). In “ongoing accomplishment,” space delineates process as that which takes place in everyday practices in which we are constantly involved. In “process as all-there-is,” space defines process as taking place everywhere.

*Agency* appears as another important defining feature of process. In the first process view (transition state), agency defines process as something mainly passive and reactive, in that agency is primarily activated by external events that individuals or collectives need to respond to. In the second view (sliding), agency defines process as something more active in that individuals or collectives are seen as those initiating moves between different (identity) sites. In the narrative co-production view, agency defines process as social–personal interaction. However, in the next two views (ongoing accomplishment and all-there-is) human agency is replaced or, more precisely, decentered into a fluid network of people, materiality and events that constantly create and reproduce process. Agency then almost disappears into what may be described as “hyper-process” reductionism in that process seems to be driven by a driverless perpetual motion machine.

### 12.7 Concluding Remarks

Despite the significant increase in using a process perspective within MOS—some people even claim that a “process turn” is taking place—most authors use the term process without careful consideration of what it means. The prevalent “weak”/“strong” definition offers some clarification of what process stands for, but its meaning remains highly ambiguous and rudimentary. There is therefore a need to move beyond the “weak”/“strong” dichotomy and unpack and clarify the notion of process in a way that encourages more nuanced views and more precise thinking of how organizational subject areas can be studied from a process perspective.

In this chapter we have proposed and elaborated a typology of the different meanings and conceptualizations of the term process. We have focused on the application of the term process in the area of identity

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studies and pointed at some basic meanings of process in this specific area: (1) transition state, (2) sliding, (3) narrative co-production, (4) ongoing accomplishment, and (5) all-there-is. We have also argued for their relevance for understanding process views within MOS more broadly.

Taken together, the different process views and their constitutive features advance the existing “weak”/“strong” definition of process within MOS significantly. First, the typology offers a broader range of process views, which can be used to study organizational phenomena. Second, the constitutive features of the different process views sharpen the boundary conditions for the different process views identified. They work as boundary conditions in the sense that they form the boundaries of what each process view stands for and, thus, both enable and constrain the application of the different process views. The constitutive features of each view are therefore important for understanding how the different process perspectives can be applied and used within MOS. Furthermore, the features offer a platform for both further clarifying existing process perspectives and for developing new process views that potentially open up a range of new areas for inquiry into process perspectives in MOS. A typology such as the one presented can therefore be seen as critical for being able to further advance organization process studies, not only in the area of identity studies but also in MOS more broadly.

### Note

1. Note, however, that gender identity is constructed in social interaction. The philosophical/theoretical root to this view is Garfinkel’s ethnomethodology.

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