Abstract: The three criteria proposed by Albert and Whetten (1985) for organizational identity were summarized as (a) central, (b) distinctive, and (c) enduring. They reinforce a traditional image of identity as (a) unparalleled, (b) unique, and (c) unchanging over time. Ashforth and Mael (1989), representative work of social identification, understand this to be the case. However, Albert and Whetten (1985) expanded (a), (b), and (c) and asserted that (a') if identities are stated, several identities may exist and not just one, (b') if a comparison with others and self-classification can be performed, then an identity need not be unique, and (c') if an identity has continuity, it may change over time. Based on this, the range of application for the concept of identity can be extended to organizations, enabling an analysis of organizational identity, particularly an analysis of organizational identity change.

Keywords: organizational identity, central, distinctive, enduring
Introduction

Organizational identity is a self-awareness in the face of the question “who are we?” Albert and Whetten (1985) published a study that incorporated the concept of organizational identity into the field of business management, and showed that among the countless characteristics of organizations, there are three criteria for organizational identity. The three criteria proposed by Albert and Whetten (1985) are often expressed using one word for each criterion: (a) central, (b) distinctive, and (c) enduring.

Table 1 summarizes how the three criteria suggested by Albert and Whetten (1985) are expressed in a well-known paper by Sato (2013a) that cited Albert and Whetten (1985) in a research review on

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<td>Kreiner, Hollensbe, &amp; Sheep (2006)</td>
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<td>organizations also may develop more than one identity or multiple aspects of identity over time</td>
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Source: compiled by author
organizational identity. Albert and Whetten (1985) used the words “central,” “distinctive,” and “enduring” (Albert & Whetten, 1985, p. 265); hence, the same set of expressions is often used in other papers.

The expressions (a) central, (b) distinctive, and (c) enduring reinforce the traditional image of identity as being (a) unparalleled, (b) unique, and (c) unchanging over time. For example, the representative work on social identification by Ashforth and Mael (1989) cites Albert and Whetten (1985) as follows. “Albert and Whetten (1985) argued that an organization has an identity to the extent there is a shared understanding of the central, distinctive, and enduring character or essence of the organization among its members.” (Albert & Whetten, 1985, p. 27). Ashforth and Mael (1989) intentionally use the singular forms of “an identity” and “a shared understanding.” Thus, Ashforth and Mael (1989) understand organizational identity as a single thing in the theory of organizational identity explained by Albert and Whetten (1985), following a traditional image of identity.

However, the true assertion of Albert and Whetten (1985) in regard to organizational identity is (a′) claimed central character (if identities are stated, several identities may exist and not just one), (b′) claimed distinctiveness (if a comparison with others and self-classification can be performed, then an identity need not be unique), and (c′) claimed temporal continuity (if an identity has continuity, it may change over time). This means that (a) central, (b) distinctive, and (c) enduring are an expansion of the traditional criteria, and by using the expanded criteria, the concept of identity can be extended to organizations. This should be understood as an attempt to enable the analysis of organizational identity, in particular the analysis of organizational identity change.

As is shown in Table 1, it may be convenient to express the three criteria for organizational identity demonstrated by Albert and
Whetten (1985) by using one word for each criterion. However, even if we assume that later researchers had a proper understanding of the assertions of Albert and Whetten (1985), because these criteria are cited using just one word for each, the original meaning of these criteria are left described in the most abstract terms. In some cases, it may be possible that they are misunderstood, as they overlap with the traditional definition of image (i.e., unparalleled, unique, and unchanging) to identity.

For example, while “claimed distinctiveness” in Albert and Whetten (1985) includes the concept of self-classification, the single word “distinctiveness” does not connote self-classification. In addition, Albert and Whetten (1985) assumed that organizational identity may change over time, and they explained the continuity of change as “claimed temporal continuity.” The single word “enduring” carries no such connotation of continuity.

In this study, we reconsider the examples used by Albert and Whetten (1985) and confirm in what manner the three criteria of organizational identity have been expanded upon.

Claimed Central Character

One criterion of organizational identity is a “claimed central character.” This refers to characteristics that are critical to making an organization different and are fundamental statements. Depending on the situation, a focus is placed on the distinctive character of an organization, and a distinctive identity is stated.

To explain “claimed central character,” Albert and Whetten (1985) use the example of a company attempting to acquire a subsidiary to become exempt from taxes. This example portrays an organization claiming contrasting identities. When purchasing a subsidiary, a company considers how its product mix, finances, and strategic goals
will be influenced by the target company’s business. However, in legal disputes over taxes, the acquiring company will be scrutinized with regard to the humanness of its corporate activities, its sources of income, and how that income is used. This is an example that shows that different aspects of an organization are emphasized depending on how its identity is examined and how a different identity is stated. Thus, the same organization can state multiple identities. These identities are sometimes balanced and reinforced, and sometimes unrelated to, or inconsistent with, each other.

Later research uses the expression “central” when discussing this criterion. However, organizational identity is not defined objectively but rather stated subjectively, and we cannot escape the fact that there may be multiple organizational identities included within this criterion.

**Claimed Distinctiveness**

The second criterion of organizational identity is “claimed distinctiveness.” Claimed distinctiveness allows for comparisons that distinguish one’s organization from another. The main point in claimed distinctiveness is self-classification (Albert & Whetten, 1985, p. 268). An organization makes a classification scheme, and positions oneself within that scheme. There is no need to claim uniqueness in regard to other organizations, “since all essential characteristics need not be unique and vice versa” (Albert & Whetten, 1985, p. 276).¹

An organization’s organizational identity is reflected in its self-classification. However, depending on time and circumstances, the scheme of classification may differ. On this point, Albert and

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¹ Sato cites the state of claimed distinctiveness as “uniqueness.” We must specifically differentiate between uniqueness and distinctiveness to avoid confusion.
Whetten (1985) use the example of the nature of a company with an abundance of entrepreneurial spirit. Most might think that the defining characteristic of this company would be its willingness to take high risk. However, the scheme of classification would differ by person, with different people attaching different characteristics to that company. This example shows that the results of self-classification may differ depending on who characterizes the organization and from what angle. Furthermore, it shows that there is no fully correct, single claim of identity.

From the above examples, Albert and Whetten (1985) came up with a hypothesis that an organization may have a single or multiple identities. They also proposed that an organizational identity is a hybrid containing multiple identity types. This is the concept of “dual identity.”

Later research used the expression “distinctive” in regard to this criterion. However, note that this criterion means that organizational identity is to be subjectively self-classified, though there is no need to be completely unique compared with other organizations.

**Claimed Temporal Continuity**

The third criterion of organizational identity is “claimed temporal continuity.” This is the characteristic of possible change over time. Albert and Whetten (1985) stated that this means there is “some degree of sameness” or “continuity.” In other words, the criterion means whether the characteristic of an organization is persistent or has continuity despite change. Changes are acceptable as long as they are not characterized by discontinuity.

Albert and Whetten (1985) demonstrate claimed temporal continuity by proposing the path hypothesis (Albert & Whetten, 1985, p. 276, Figure 1). As with organizational life cycle, this hypothesis informs how organizational identity is “maintained” and “changed.”
The vertical axis of Figure 1 in Albert and Whetten (1985) is organizational identity, with the upper half being purely normative, and the lower half being purely utilitarian. Albert and Whetten (1985) use normative and utilitarian as opposite poles on the vertical axis because they need to select the fittest two characteristics to analyze changes in the organizational identity of a university organization. They note that other characteristics can be chosen instead of these two. “Utilitarian” may be thought of as an identity commonly ascribed to for-profit corporations, while “normative” is an identity that can be applied to churches. The “dual identity” lying between utilitarian and normative has been discussed above. The horizontal axis shows the organizational life cycle. From left to right: birth, growth, maturity, and retrenchment.

Path 1 is maintained through an organizational life cycle as a single, normative identity. Path 2 was made to change from normative to utilitarian, though the organization still maintains a single identity at any one time. Path 3 is of a normative organization that attempts to acquire a utilitarian identity, but in the end reverts to normative, maintaining a single identity throughout. Path 4 is of a company changing from a single to dual identity over a long time period. Path 5 traces an organization with a normative identity that had to take on a utilitarian identity after experiencing financial difficulty and ended up with a dual identity. Albert and Whetten (1985) assumed that most organizations were on either Path 4 or 5, followed by Paths 2 and 3, and that Path 1 was the rarest of the five.

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2 Figure 1 in Albert and Whetten (1985) shows five path hypotheses. This demonstrates the case of organizational identity at the time a normative organization is created. In the case of for-profit organizations, the figure would have a completely inverse shape.

3 When an organization attempts to acquire a new identity different from the one with which it started, that change takes an extraordinarily long time. Thus, until an opportunity comes that exposes that identity to threats, organization members find it difficult to be aware of the change in identity.
Based on their proposed path hypothesis, we can see that Albert and Whetten (1985) understood organizational identity to have characteristics that could change with time, and that these characteristics are either maintained or have continuity regardless of change. Based on the fact that the lines followed in the five path hypothesis, as shown in Figure 1, are connected with no breaks, we can see that Albert and Whetten (1985) emphasize that organizational identities have continuity despite change.

Later research used the word “enduring” for this criterion, which has the connotation of maintaining or continuing for a long time. However, Albert and Whetten (1985) asserted that for this criterion, an organizational identity could change as long as it had continuity.

**Discussion**

We have reviewed three criteria used to determine, among all the characteristics of an organization, which characteristic constitutes an organizational identity. We confirmed that just as suggested by Albert and Whetten (1985), in regard to the three criteria of (a’) claimed central character, (b’) claimed distinctiveness, and (c’) claimed temporal continuity for organizational identity, an organization can have not just one but several identities, that an identity need not be unique if an organization can self-classify the identity in comparison with other organizations, and that an identity may change over time as long as it has continuity (Table 2).

Sato (2013a) and other papers state the contribution of Albert and Whetten (1985) as having shown the three criteria of organizational identity. We have no objection to that. However, the novelty of Albert and Whetten (1985) lies in their expansion of the traditional general interpretation of identity (i.e., unparalleled, unique, and unchanging), and their application of the theory to organizational identity.
Accordingly, we must not lose sight of the original meaning of the expanded concepts in Albert and Whetten (1985). Later research caused misunderstanding due to the difficulty in succinctly expressing the concepts proposed by Albert and Whetten (1985) using appropriate words. Consequently, these researchers could not distance themselves from the traditional general interpretation, as was the case with Ashforth and Mael (1989); many papers have taken a mistaken interpretation of Albert and Whetten (1985). As stated above, when citing the original research of Albert and Whetten (1985), one must understand the original meaning of their concepts.
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References


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