

## **Embodied Identities: Toward an Organizational Research Agenda in a Material World**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Recently scholars have begun to explore the influence of materiality on organizations. For example, Gagliardi (1996) notes that the physical setting cultivates human senses and Gieryn (2002) asserts that buildings are a stabilizing influence in social life and are objects of (re)interpretation, with meanings or stories flexibly interpreting the walls and floors they describe. As a counterpoint to the materiality of organizations represented by places and spaces, the materiality of worker identity is noted in embodiment. While organizational studies address a plethora of individual constructs (e.g., motivation, self-efficacy, personality) the embodied identity of workers is a topic largely absent from the field. As individuals manufacture identities in organizational life, what role does the materiality of the body play? The embodied-self influences cognition and emotion (Varella, Thompson, and Rosch, 1991). This paper explores the influence of embodiment on individual identities, actions, decisions and experiences. Examples from a case study highlight issues of embodied selves at work, illuminating the significance of embodiment in workers' processes of manufacturing identities.

### **Introduction**

Recently, scholars have begun to explore the influence of materiality on organizations. For example, Gagliardi (1996) notes that the physical setting cultivates human senses and Gieryn (2002) asserts that buildings are a stabilizing influence in social life as meanings and stories flexibly interpret objects (e.g., the walls, desks, and floors that stories describe). As a counterpoint to the materiality of organizations represented by places and spaces, the materiality of worker identity is noted in embodiment. We argue the embodiment of the self is central to the aforementioned cultivation of human senses as the embodied self interacts with the material settings of work.

While organizational studies address a plethora of individual constructs (e.g., motivation, self-efficacy, personality) the embodied identity of workers is a topic largely absent from the field. When organizational

scholars do mention the body, it is the *symbolic* rather than *material* nature of the body that focuses organizational theorists' efforts. When the material body is considered, the interaction between a body as an entity and a physical work setting is often the focus, as in ergonomics. Current trends toward understanding the 'virtual' nature of the 'brave new workplace', such as virtual work teams, offer an opportunity to focus on the embodiment of work experiences as the change from conventional working conditions highlights the *body as absent* from the traditional material work environment. However, organizational studies scholars have aligned efforts to examine the individual in virtual work settings with a traditional organizational studies gestalt, often foregrounding cognition and largely ignoring the embodied nature of the worker. Yet, as organizational members are increasingly mobile and nomadic, and organization spaces are increasingly loosely defined (favouring

open-landscapes and eschewing closed-cell offices) the material nature of organizations, and corresponding material embodied identity of individuals in organizations, cannot be ignored.

Workers exist in a material (corporeal) way that has been largely ignored by organizational scholars. As individuals manufacture identities in organizational life, what role does the materiality of the body play? The embodied-self influences cognition and emotion (Varella, Thompson, and Rosch, 1991). How can organizational scholars include the influence of embodiment on individual identities, actions, decisions and experiences?

This article unfolds in three parts. First, the social construction of the self is explored and the nature of embodied identity is outlined. Second, examples from a case study highlight issues of embodied selves at work, illuminating the significance of embodiment in workers' processes of manufacturing identities. The organizational site of this case study is a highly technical, mobile, nomadic work environment that includes both virtual work and work conducted within an organizational space; an open-landscape environment where the space is intended to be 'communal', not individual: in this space, visibility and mobility of workers is primary to the design of the workplace. Third, we propose a research agenda for organizational studies, listing aspects of *material embodied identity* worthy of further examination in organizational studies and suggesting theoretical lenses that may prove useful in pursuing this research agenda.

### **The Communicative Construction of Identity of the Corporate Self**

*Identity*, or individuals' evolving perspectives of themselves, has been understood as an ongoing process that develops through language and social interaction (Gergen, 2000, Lifton, 1999, Kenyon & Randall, 1997; Kondo, 1990; Mead, 1934; Parry & Doan, 1994; Taylor, 1991).

According to Eisenberg (2001), emerging perceptions of identity that are more flexible reflect the lived experience of an increasingly fragmented and pluralistic world and reject the idea of identity as singular, isolated within a physical body (e.g., Gergen, 2000, Lifton, 1999, Varela, Thompson, & Rosch, 1991). Models of the self acknowledge identity as a narrative construction, influenced by context and dominant (canonical) narratives (Kenyon & Randall, 1997; Parry & Doan, 1994). Kondo (1990), drawing upon her study of identities in Japan, described the communicative foundation of identity as follows:

Rather than universal essences, selves are rhetorical assertions, produced by our linguistic conventions, which we narrate and perform for each other. Identities on the individual level resist closure and reveal complicated, shifting, multiple facets. And selves were never separable from context: that is, from the situation in which they were performed, the audience to whom the narrative production of self was addressed, the exclusions implicit in any construction of "self", the historical and political/economic discourses, and the culturally shaped narrative conventions that constructed "the self." (p. 307)

Similarly, Charles Taylor (1991) described identity as being created and sustained in dialogue throughout our lives, suggesting that both continuity and ongoing development in social interaction form individual identity. Moreover, proffering the notion that stability and change co-exist in human identity, Lifton (1993) described "the Protean self" as one with the ability to be both a shapeshifter and a "*preserver of values*" (italics in original) (p. 5). Gergen (2000) offered the notion of a fragmented self that he termed, "saturated"; the multiplicity of selves saturates the being.

Individual identity, thus, is the rule- and resource-dependent emergent process of creating and sustaining a concept of self in the domain of signification. The relevant rules and resources include the domains of law, social order, power, and politics. The roots of

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viewing identity as a social construction are found in Mead's (1934) work, in which individual identity operates as a structure in the domain of signification. Proffering a distinctly social view of self, and noting that communication is necessary to being in our world, Mead contended that selves arise in experience.

This concept of self is aligned with, and built upon, Charles H. Cooley's "looking glass self," a notion that one understands oneself as that self as understood by others (Adams & Sydnie, 2001). Mead explained the self as arising in society. In short, he illustrated that individual identity is co-emergent with a society, and society emerges from individuals' actions. The two, self and society, are thus intertwined in emergence, each forming the other. Moreover, Mead highlighted the social nature of the self, saying: "Consciousness as such refers to both the organism and its environment, and cannot be located simply in either" (1934, p. 332). As Mead noted, identity is socially constructed through symbolic interaction. What Mead left out, however, was the myriad of bodily messages that form identity at a non-discursive, physical-social interaction level. Mead's conception of self therefore omitted the biological/emotional domain of interaction from the meaning-making process of symbolic interaction.

### **The Obdurate Identity of the Corporeal Corporate Self**

Identity, as a social construction, is skewed by the ongoing, constant, and inescapable experiences that the body registers in memory. Just as organizational culture is comprised of two parts that operate in the domain of signification, which is thus skewed towards flexibility, the social construction of the self operates in multiple domains, but the physical embodiment of the ego-self skews this structure towards inflexibility. Eisenberg's (2001) notion of identity addresses the social component while preserving the material: Identity is a source of embodied ontological security and is threatened by a sense of vulnerability in

relation to others, "which can be physical, emotional, economic or psychological" (p. 542). The concept of identity in Western culture is dominated by the concept of individual ego. Separate from, and thus in ontological opposition to, our environment we strive for control over our surroundings (Watts, 1989). As individuals, we "cling to ourselves and our lives in chronic anxiety" (Watts, p. 38.).

Understanding memory records of our sensory experiences of the world as indispensable to ego-sensation, embodied experience gives the impression of a stable self, one that changes slower than events outside or inside the body and reinforces the perception of separateness (Watts, pp. 55-56). Embodied experience, in memories made by patterning experience for categorization and storage, is central to identity as an individual's evolving perception of oneself (Watts, 1989).

Eisenberg (2001) offers a model of identity based upon three processes—personal narrative, mood (as an embodiment of cognition and emotion), and communication—in which "self" interacts with an environment that envelops the identity process with pre-existing elements, such as "language, relationships and social networks and culturally prescribed patterns of behavior" (p. 543). Unique to human identity is the influence of physical embodiment. Individual identity is viewed as less malleable than organizational culture, given the stabilizing and inertial forces are associated with individual identity (Bateson, 1994; Eisenberg, 2001), primary among which is the self's physical embodiment. The senses, as filters of perception (Watts, 1989), interact with somatic markers to influence action towards possible future outcomes favoring the individual's future positive emotional and physical well being (Damasio, 1994). Somatic markers stem from cultural, embodied experience; they are emotional, bodily signals that influence decisions and actions (Damasio, p. 174). Varela et al. (1991) situated cognition and experience to form an

embodied sense of identity.

Speed and ease of decision-making are fostered by stability in identity. As such, that stability is advantageous in supporting action. Emotions that register as bodily responses often are referenced as “gut feelings” (Damasio, 1994, p. 173) that ease and speed decisions. One set of meanings prevails over another due to this reliance on the bodily responses influenced by prior embodied experience (Damasio, 1994; Luhmann, 1984). These are the inertial forces in identity that support social action. Thus emotions, registering as bodily responses, filter human choices that affect identity more directly and immediately than any other social order.

Habitual behavior has an emotional basis and is a necessary link between social structures and social actor (Barbalet, 1998). Explicating this link, Barbalet explained: Somatic markers are those emotionally borne physical sensations which “tell” those who experience them that a circumstance or event is likely to lead to pleasure or pain, to be favorable or unfavorable. This is because emotion has a necessary physical component, as the conventional view correctly insists.

Impediments to change are inherent in the stability found in embodied identity. The inertial forces commonly linked with identity can be explained by the advantages gained from gut feelings (somatic markers) generated by memory traces of a form not yet codified, classified, or measured. Self-referential reliance upon these bodily memories increases the speed and ease with which decisions and actions can be taken. To illustrate this idea, imagine having access to another human's memory to draw upon directly to ease and speed decisions. Alternatively, imagine a scenario in which one's body could experience and employ another human's (or other creature's) “gut feelings” created by another body's worldly experience. That person would thereby inhabit a very different experience of the

world.

The social construction of identity takes place in the interaction between embodiment and discourse. At the physical level, experiences register in memory in the form of somatic markers that exert a powerful force upon the social construction of human identity. Aspects of embodiment, as has been noted in race and gender research, resist effective discourse.

Further, our understanding of the body is discursive, and so always partial. As Damasio (1994) wrote, “What worries me is the acceptance of the importance of feelings without any effort to understand their complex biological and socio-cultural machinery” (p. 246). Varela et al. (1991) began to explore the complex biological and socio-cultural machinery in articulating an “embodied mind”. Eisenberg (2001) refers to the interaction of the biological set of rules and resources-with its genetics and brain chemicals-and language (Lakoff, 1987; Lakoff & Johnson, 1999) as mood.

The patterns created through moment-to-moment embodied interactions are posited as somatic markers that create a type of non-discursive, taken-for-granted reality that, like practical consciousness, provides ontological security as a set of rules and resources that form individual identity. Challenges to the taken-for-granted reality in the biological/embodied domain register as gut feelings, bodily responses, and emotions. In addition, discursive and non-discursive social interactions, operating in the domain of signification, register as memory traces. The social structure of identity inheres in both somatic markers and cognitive memories of embodied experience.

These traces provide the stabilizing forces of identity, and are most likely relevant to sensemaking during Identity, as a social construction, is skewed by the ongoing, constant, and inescapable experiences that the body registers in memory. Just as organizational culture is comprised of two parts that operate in the domain of signification, which is thus skewed towards

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flexibility, the social construction of the self operates in multiple domains, but the physical embodiment of the ego-self skews this structure towards inflexibility.

Acceptance of the inflexibility of the body is inherent in studies of ergonomics, in which the relatively more adaptable physical environment is adjusted to the limitations of the embodied self in order to maximize worker ability. Failure to recognize physical limits risk bodily harm with its potential costs of increased insurance premiums, workers compensation, lawsuits, OSHA fines, etc. And apart from the “drug free workplace” initiatives, studies on the effect of pharmaceuticals and other chemicals, even caffeine, on workers are scarce in organizational studies.

What is the “place” of the body in a material organizational life, and particularly, in organizations increasingly changing to emphasize the *mobility of workers (bodies)*? On the one hand, we could surmise that it is a stabilizing influence to effective decision-making, and thus a support to productive change efforts. On the other hand, identity as an organizational member is likely to lag behind proposed changes in strategic design and culture, and so it would impede change. In order to test the value of these alternative propositions regarding the body in organizational change, we look at the experience of an organization that moved to a flexible, mobile and nomadic work mode.

### Obdurate Embodiments in Changing Corporate Spaces

Organizational change requires an understanding of organizations as dynamic (Tsoukas & Chia's, 2002), dependent upon “how organizational members reweave their webs of beliefs and habits of action in response to local circumstances and new experiences and how managers influence and intervene into the stream of organizational actions” (p. 565). We adopt a view of “organizations as quasi-stable structures (i.e., set of institutionalized categories) and as sites of human action in which, through the ongoing agency of

organizational members, organization emerges” (p. 566). In order to assess the influence of embodiment on both communicative relationships and emergent organizational identity, we gathered the performative accounts shared by those experiencing organizational activities. This approach follows Eisenberg (2001) who notes a recent resurgence of interest biological influences on communication and relies on foundations based in Lakoff and Johnson's notions of thought patterns flowing from embodied experiences as shaping language and metaphors.

One situation where the importance of understanding the embodied self in relation to work comes to the fore is that of changing physical work environments. While traditional offices have isolated bodies into individual offices, new work settings embracing open landscapes change one cultural mechanism - physical setting - that has traditionally encouraged a focus on the bounded sense of self. So called 'virtual' work may be considered in organizational-centric views to be disembodied; however, the worker as an embodied self still exists, and is subjecting that body to different influences in terms of the internal subsystems (e.g., by sleeping, waking, working, eating, imbibing, and so on in settings that constrain and enable differently than the organizations physical setting) as well as different settings in terms of the context of the larger system or systems in which it finds itself.

### Methodology

The sensemaking (Weick, 1995) stories included here stem from the first author's dissertation research at Telnor, Norway's premier telecom company. The ethnographic research included interviews, document review and participant observation (as well as auto-ethnographic observation of the researcher participation, to acknowledge the co-construction of interpretations inherent in the research process). Fieldwork was conducted during 2002-2003 while workers were transitioning from traditional officing to a flexible mode of work including open

landscape and 'virtual' work opens for workers. Telenor's adoption of nomadic work encompasses every form of mobile work, emphasizing work without an assigned office and emphasizing flexible work. Supported by a technology infrastructure that enables mobility both within and away from the new corporate facility, most Telenor employees left a traditional office arrangement to work with no assigned office or desk, like tethered workers, in this change implementation.

Telenor research and development employees coined the term "nomadic" to describe the desired behaviors of workers to me, and to depict the behaviors desired as the firm strives to become the Nordic region's most innovative workplace. Unlike other tethered workers, who typically can reserve a company-provided work space for the day, Telenor's nomadic workers are expected to consider all company-provided space as communal and to work in a common area if no individual workstation is available when they arrive at the company's facility. Telenor employees are encouraged to become mobile within, near, and away from the physical location of the company's headquarters.

Beyond the mobility required, nomadic workers are expected to alter their habits to accept a paper-less operation. Pervasive use of laptop computers, mobile telephones, and wireless technology is expected, as well. Presented with flexible work hours and open work-spaces rather than walled offices, and obliged to adopt a communal stance toward use of the space within the new corporate facility, Telenor's nomadic workers face a plethora of choices and decisions not required of them in traditional offices. The narratives of newly nomadic workers described their struggle to make sense of the relationship between their flexible work arrangement and their unitary, embodied identity. Situating events sensibly in order to develop new meanings provided the motivation to construct the story.

In order to assess the role of the body in the materiality of organizational life, we present the following stories gathered during

Telenor workers' experience of a significant change in the material setting for work. Instances and interactions of/among the physicality of the body and the materiality of the workplace are evident, as are hints of individual identity threat, change, and formation. The stories raise question about whether organizational change is fostered/impeded by embodied aspects of knowing and physical adaptation as well as issues of whether/how sensemaking is influenced during times of adaptation to new bodily experiences at work. In addition, confusion of roles and norms in the new space/material configuration are noted. The stories are reported here in the first person -- as collected and co-constructed with Telenor employee participants by the first author of this manuscript (Bean, 2003). The stories also include autoethnographic, embodied accounts of the fieldwork experience in the nomadic workspace.

### **Stories of Obdurate Identity: The Corporeal Corporate Self**

"I Pulled Down the Curtain on Change"  
Trude invites us to go to the coffee bar and sit. She asks me how I like my coffee and I respond. With a sweep she scoops up a tall, clear glass from several on the countertop and centers it below the coffee machine's spout, while deftly punching buttons on the machine's face. She swirls around to serve me a steaming, tall, clear glass filled to the brim with *café au lait*. It is hot to the touch, and I wonder if this is meant to be something trendy in coffee drinking, using cold-drink glasses for the hot liquid, but I do not say anything. Trude then repeats the hostess ritual with my colleague from Telenor Research and Development who has brought me here to meet her, who is also meeting her for the first time. She perches opposite me on a stool, across the tall coffee bar, with her own coffee in a tall, clear drinking glass, too. Launching into an explanation in response to our tenuous attempts to lift the hot vessels to our lips, Trude is laughing, but is also a little agitated. It turns out that we must drink coffee from these glasses because no one is taking

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responsibility to wash the dishes! With these coffee bars in each zone comes a small kitchen counter complete with a large, stainless steel sink, dish cupboards, and a dishwasher.

Common ownership of the space means that this is a communal kitchen. It isn't working out too well, she reports, in terms of communal responsibility for washing the dishes. So, when the coffee cups run out, she just takes coffee in a glass intended for cold drinks. Everyone does. They sorted out the kitchen in this zone by public agreement, similar to other Telenor worker practices. However, individuals are not taking responsibility for tidying up. After this explanation, and advising us to let the coffee cool a moment, Trude invites us continue our conversation.

"Shall we move into one of the small meeting rooms?" she queries. So we do.

It is another *stillerom*; this one is furnished with tall, stainless steel bar stools with saddle-style seats and a small, tall, formica-topped table. I shuffle into the small space, following Trude, with my notebook, pen, and glass of coffee. I do not have my mobile phone, a sure sign that I am an outsider. I am clearly not as attached to the device as most of these workers. At least without the burden of my tape recorder, I am not as weighted-down as usual. Still, since Trude has only her phone and her tall glass of coffee, by comparison, I am made aware of going against the grain in this nomadic work mode once again. Being only five feet, two and a half inches tall, I find these particular bar stools a bit too high. Either I need to "perch" on the edge of the seat with my toes on the ground, or I can actually sit in the stainless steel seat shaped like a saddle seat on an old fashioned bicycle, one with more curves to settle into. If I do the latter, I have to dangle my feet a few inches from the floor like a small child in an adult size chair. I choose to dangle my feet, and find the bar stool has no convenient lower rung for my feet, like some do. At least if they have those rings around the legs of the stool, there is some place to hook your feet. I try to steady my feet against

the legs of the stool.

Trude offers comment on, and laughs about, the features of this *stillerom*, "These tall seats and glass walls. . . . I think the men like it this way. Gives them something to look at." Trude is about forty, and stands about five feet, four inches tall, very trim and fit. It is likely that her feet won't reach the floor from these tall stools either. In a moment, she hoists herself agilely into the saddle of one of the tall, stainless steel stools and crosses her legs, winding her right foot around one of the stool's legs, wiggling her left foot in the air. With her short skirt, in the glass room, sitting this way in the *stillerom* is a bold move. This glass room offers the entire surrounding workforce an opportunity to gaze upon the bodies within, as she is well aware.

She does not linger on the details of this room, nor does she expand upon how her peers may feel about the bodily displays that *stillerom* users intentionally or unintentionally create for the surrounding workers

She tells the story of her experience of this change.

A few years ago, I joined Telenor Business Solutions. I have market research experience and a business degree with also some higher classes at BI [the Norwegian Business school nearby]. In the Fornebu project, there was some focus in the firm on design, function, health, and noise. I came to Fornebu from a pilot of this flexible workplace idea, but before that I had a large office. Then, most people would tell you I was tidy and organized. I am a tidy and organized person. The shock began with that pilot at Pier C.

In my old office, my office was filled with papers and books and I knew where things were fairly well. I was competent, a competent worker. The office, the new way of work at the pilot at Pier C, which was a pilot for this place, it made me not finish things. Before, unfinished things were always there but I could always come back to it in the old way of work. However I didn't know this at the time. But now I'm more organized in this new way of working. I finish

one thing, then go on, I think. This new way of working can be both good and bad and for me it was good because I actually now feel that I have become aware that I had a lot of this unfinished stuff before. Now I finish things.

I recognize Trude's claims to competence and orderliness as identity claims she wished to retain. The new way of work, it seems, made Trude face her work habits and created identity difficulties for her when the inescapable, unfinished projects did not align with her competent worker identity. I begin to wonder if constraining workers to complete tasks by using the small lockers and paper-less mode of operation makes them more or less efficient and effective. In any case, it is her interpretation of events that will drive her enactment, and that is what I am trying to understand. She was among the first occupants of Fornebu, so she has been here for four months now. I wonder how she has managed these changes. I try to get a bit more information, and Trude, indeed, has more to say.

I have a tendency to spread myself; I'm interested in too many things; I'm very engaged. Now I need to focus. I need to restructure myself, which is good for me because I finish things. I concentrate and I finish. But it was not comfortable. I moved into a pilot and I used the little box, the little locker that they have for keeping papers. But the locker was too small. The little box was too small because I would print out things and be working on projects and not finish them and so the pile got bigger and bigger. I saw that I didn't finish things. I was carrying things over day after day after day and all these papers weren't fitting in this little box. I was really feeling bad and I had so much to do. I got more and more and more and this pile of stuff kept getting bigger and bigger and bigger. I thought I'd manage change better, but it was not so good emotionally. And, I began to be overwhelmed. Here's another example. I had an electronic calendar that I'd used for 5 years and I was proud of that because I'm not so innovative, normally.

But with that, I was. And then a new electronic calendar device came along during this change in the way of work. I had to learn another process to use this new electronic thing and suddenly with all the other change it was too much and I didn't have enough guts. . . . So I said, "Thank you" when they gave it to me. Then, I put this new electronic calculator in my locker and I found an old paper calendar. I was going backwards, using paper that I hadn't used for 5 years and I reverted all the way back to paper. This small change of this device jumped me back 5 years and I still now use paper today. I am not even using my old electronic one that I knew how to use. Isn't that a stupid thing? I stopped even using the old electronic calendar. I went all the way back to paper. I pulled the curtain down on change.

I think I am open, so open for changes, but when I pulled the curtain down, it made me think. I think it must be difficult for a lot of other people. Everything was difficult. I thought everything was difficult. I knew something about where I should be in one year, but no clue how to get there when I took on the role of being a change agent at some level in this Fornebu project.

Trude is anguished, and I actually worry that talking makes her relive these difficult times. I ask Trude what she did as she went through this change, in terms coping with or managing the process. Reading desperation in her voice, I make a crying face, squinting my eyes and turning down the corners of my mouth in an exaggerated fashion, as I make sign of wiping tears away. Trude continues, indicating that was part of her response.

Cry, yes. I did cry. But I realized that I needed some help. I got burned out, but then I got some help. I am a very devoted person, so open to things very much and a passion for things, for my job and for my kid. Also I have difficulties with limits. It is difficult in Fornebu and nomadic work 'cause [there is] no one . . . stopping you from anything. So at



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the move to this way of work, I lost my personal structure. I used to come in at 9:00 and go home at 5:00. But now nobody cared, it didn't matter. I could come and go, as I like. The structure was too loose. I lost the routines in my life. I was used to 9:00, coming in, saying hello to my boss and friends and colleagues, but now I had to create new routines. So I decided a schedule not to come in any later than 9:30. But so I did that, but I didn't manage to stop myself at the other end so I seldom left any earlier than 8:00 p.m., and I worked a lot on the weekends.

I started trying to work at home; it did not work too well. Then I started to go to work because I needed for myself to have those be separate spaces. It was disturbing for me as a person. It ruined my family life; it was depressing. So in my own experience I need separate physical spaces for work and home-even with this space difficulty and difficulty saying no. My son thought as long as I was home I should be home and be able to be with him, and if I was working at home it didn't work out too well. I don't like to work at home because I felt I didn't get my work done, and also felt bad 'cause I really wasn't with my family, and bad 'cause I wasn't really caring for myself, so I really was feeling bad all around.

While she describes activities, many of Trude's statements open with "I am this," suggesting that she is framing the experience primarily from her identity. The "I am" or "I need" or "I tend to" are very personally affixed to who Trude is, and wants to be as an embodied self in the organization. Her work habits and the challenges to them are also linked to embodied aspects/material aspects of accomplishing work.

I nod and take notes, trying to sneak a look at my watch without being too obvious. I have another interview scheduled, so I weave away from Trude's stories and ask if I can come by later in the day to talk with her more. She agrees.

Later in the day, about 4 p.m., when many Telenor workers are going home, I make

my way back towards the Building A and phone Trude while in the elevator. She tells me she is in a meeting room near the elevator, and that I would see her when I reached the floor of her zone.

I find her there working alone in a large meeting room. The lights are dim all around, but the bright, fluorescent-style meeting room light casts an eerie glow. Sitting in a room designed for a dozen or more meeting participants, Trude looks small and forlorn sitting there alone. She looks very tired. Her clear complexion and stylish cosmetics that gave her a radiant appearance when I met her early in the day now seem dulled by stress and the effects of a long workday. The big smile that had greeted me at our first meeting is now merely a small upturn of the lips. Her short, dark hair is more disheveled than even the current styles call for, and while I am there, she runs her hands through her hair wearily, expressing fatigue.

Trude is getting her mail. She had connected her laptop to the ports and plugs in the center of the meeting room table, as nomadic workers at Fornebu using meeting room space commonly do. She tells me she hopes her husband will pick her up from work soon. We visit and chat informally, and I hear her repeat the same stories. We agree to meet again another day, as she is interested in the research, both personally and as a consultant. I leave her there about 5:15, and notice that there is scant activity in the building on my way out.

After many weeks without contact, I called Trude again and we visited. She had been working a lot of nights and weekends and was very tired. She had not really had time to enjoy the recent nicer weather. One day we were able to meet for lunch. We enjoyed an after-lunch cup of tea and talked about common interests in books, cooking, and gardening.

I made several attempts to meet again with Trude but our schedules never allowed for it. On my very last day in Norway, I called

to say good bye. She answered her mobile at around noon, telling me that she was in her car, just arriving at Fornebu. She needed to prepare for a big meeting at two, and I could tell from her voice that she was stressed. She told me she had been up until three in the morning working. She was not ready for her 2 p.m. meeting, and so she would not have a chance to say goodbye in person. I thought about Trude's first statements. She had said she was tidy, organized and competent, and also that she lost her personal structure and had difficulty finding a boundary to end her workday. I felt concern for Trude. Although I knew she was successful at her job at Telenor, it seemed to be taking a toll on her. I often thought about Trude when talking with other Telenor employees. If they seemed to be experiencing shock and distress, I tried to carefully note their self-descriptions and identity claims and compare them to Trude's statements. Sonje told her story in a similar fashion and vividly matched the pattern I first noted in Trude's stories.

"I Need Space to be Creative"

I suspect that the attention to environment, health, and balance in life is far greater than the attention typically paid to these issues in the United States, and this contributes to what I see as a wholesome and enviable life here in Norway. I wonder how this influences them as workers, as embodied selves at work. My rumination is halted by the sound of Sonje clearing her throat. She asks a few questions about my research. I know we have established rapport when she tells about a family wedding, and about some recent travel and some other family history that interweaves with career history, so I move into some more direct questions. Sonje is direct and forthright in her response.

To get here last week was a shock. I was, you know [at] this big, high building in Oslo . . . the high rise, the headquarters. We were sitting [on] a high floor actually for many years. What I've been reflecting on around here is, "How big can you have this sort of thing like this and feel that you belong

somewhere?" Because this is, this is too much I think. We don't really. . . . People here . . . you don't know who [they] are, you don't have anything to do with them. If you're fewer somehow it's more natural. Here you have a feeling of disturbing [other] persons [sic]. That's my personal conclusion after one week.

Wow! I am now alert to this developing story. I glance down to see my the tape spinning in the little black plastic case, almost an instinctual response when I hear something that I have come to recognize as essential to my research. In keeping with expectations about what triggers sensemaking (Louis, 1980; Weick, 1995), I have become attuned to listening for statements of shock in my exchanges here.

Yeah. It was a shock. I think several things. First, I'm not sure I like this architecture in here. I don't like the colors, I don't like the material [laughs] . . . well, I'm very direct now. I'm, I may modify myself in some time but it's, it's cold, it's a little bit hard, it's a little bit too much steel. I said, you know, I know it's very modern, I said to a friend last week and that after one week here I think I've had steel enough for the rest of my life. I will never have that in the kitchen. Never! It's like coming from, you know, red and green. Lots of plants and, and, and more color somehow, more life. The plants just came here today by the way. This is very functional. And it's in a way, you know, I'm reflecting around the, the change because you're used to in. . . . My generation was used to working in, you know, so . . . sort of big offices. The bigger, you know, the more advanced you get in years in profession. And then, you know, there is sort of strict eating areas. You know, you eat your little pack here and your little, you know, bread and butter . . . usually you have seen that . . . when you have been here. The people come to these. . . . Actually it says I think in our employment papers 20 minutes is supposed to be, be the time you eat. Yes. And here they turn it all around, you know? You have [laughs]. . . . You're sitting very tight. You have absolutely no room for your, for physical or mental. . . . You can't really

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walk around and think and be creative. You have to sit there and be creative with the machine and then you go down and eat with these red sofas and God knows what! It's sort of, you know, to me it's a little bit crazy. To me, my generation and my sort of standard. But I see that it's necessary . . . perhaps to turn it totally around. If it had been a little adjustment, people wouldn't have changed I think. They would just have done what they did before. Now they have to sort of relate to that it's all totally different. Might be a good thing in the long run; I'm not so sure. I think people find strategies for surviving for themselves. I have a feeling. I have a feeling.

I am taking it all in, and realizing that Sonje is in ante-narrative mode, jumbling a variety of responses together in non-linear fashion. She is offering a very fresh response to this change, having been here just a week. Some others I have met who also just made the change have similarly responded in ante-narrative form. Sonje, however, is expressing more shock than the some others. She has offered her response and immediately countered it with a company perspective, another frame: that the company may have chosen well to make a big change that will reorient workers to new ways of thinking. I recognize this as antenarrative (Boje, 2001); she has not yet formed a coherent, linear story. It is retrospective sensemaking that will eventually provide her with a plausible narrative explanation. She continues with a new thought, reporting an experience with an external consultant. She reports that he described people's response to organizational change as taking the attitude that they need to just deal with it - "here it comes again". So, people are Sonje says, just leaning a little bit to the side - ducking the blows of change.

I am smiling. The American version of what she intends is clearly "duck," as she is indicating with her gestures. The phrase is intended, I think, to amuse but also to inform. The idea that companies create change and workers just keep dodging it comes through loud and clear in this phrase, and in her

demonstration of ducking. It is an embodied metaphor that illuminates the worker not re-orienting to a new order, avoiding change. This is a different effect from the embodied reordering that others had used successfully managing change efforts but, in the same fashion, the embodied metaphor articulates the worker in relation to this change. I ask what Sonje has done in terms of changing her ways of work, or not changing, during the months of preparation for this change, and in this first week here at Fornebu.

First I've sort of thrown out a lot of papers. I took also a few of them home-I'm not the only one. And that was the way I worked to be creative. I, I worked with papers and I worked with models that were on paper. I know I these things [she picks up her phone and waves it towards the nearest computer workstation] is the additional thing for me. You know, I'm not a generation that was brought up with that way of thinking. That is something I have to learn afterwards. And my, the way I function, with that [pointing to a computer] is that I do it when I have to do it-I don't do it because it's natural [for] me to do it. So it has good things of course, and I'm, I'm used to it now, but that's not the way I'm creative. It's not good for opening up things. So when I stopped doing the opening up, developing new programs, sort of work and doing what I'm doing now, it was easier to just let the paper go 'cause I didn't. . . . This is not what I do anymore. So that part of life was easier, I think.

Here Sonje has come back to identity and expresses the lack of fit for her at Fornebu. She is talking about what she does in terms of creative activity, and her creativity requires paper. A creative worker identity requires space, too, for her. This embodied response is one of the most vivid accounts I have heard from a Telenor worker. But Sonje jumps frames. She tries on different views, and I am not sure what direction she is taking now. I am confused about just what is going on here. She is continuing and I feel a need to be patient and let his story develop. She is so intent and has so much energy to tell me about this. She is emphatic as she continues.

I'm not so sure I do things so very much differently than before. What I did differently, I did something different, yes. For instance, I'm much more regular in terms of time now when I come in here than I used to be. Yeah. I think that's testing out something. It's, it's like when you, when I had my own area of means and goals, what do you say, responsibility . . . and knew what I had to do, when I had to do it, who to report to. It didn't really matter to me whether I was having this meeting at up there or in Oslo center or in my office or whatever. I knew I had to deliver the result there and there and, and how I, you know, as long as people knew where I was and how to get hold of me that was okay. But now I found out that it's not so clear. I'm working much more in what's happening everyday. It's good to be earlier than most people. So I'm, I've been actually coming to work at half past seven in the morning so I'm down there . . . the first person in that little room. Here I'm number 4 or 5 or something and I sort of learned, you know, try to find out what's happening out and be available, physically available. Which is it, it's in a way a little bit strange because you would think it would be the other way around. But I can see that it's very easy here to just disappear in the floating . . . somehow. You don't sit the same place everyday. You know, your boss doesn't know how to get a hold of you except for this one [bangs mobile phone on the little table], the colleagues don't know where the others sit, so I've just sort of taken my, my, the same place every day. [Slightly laughs.] Yes. Yeah. Sitting there. Well, why not? I mean, why should I move around every day?

This has been an interesting topic in many conversations I have had with workers. I have had the experience myself of sitting at what I thought was an open workstation, only to have a research colleague in the zone tap me on the shoulder and tell me, "That is Kjell's desk. He will be here soon. Perhaps you could move to another workstation over here that no one uses."

Thinking that I was in a communal space, I was a bit shocked by this request.

Naturally, I did not want to offend my hosts in Telenor and quickly complied. I was surprised, though, at the ownership protection that workers maintained for themselves and for one another. I had heard stories from people soon after occupying Fornebu that indicated this was, in fact, common. One man proudly showed me "his" desk where he had staked out his claim to a particular workstation, desirable for its proximity to a window with a view, and isolated from all but one other workstation. Since he had one close colleague with whom he often worked on a day-to-day basis, this was ideal; his closest colleague was nearby, they had some semblance of privacy, and he had a nice view. He was the senior of the pair, and the colleague's designated station in this arrangement did not face the view.

This is a clear reification of existing patterns in organizations, I think, and one that I supposed the leadership of Telenor wanted to move away from with its implementation of nomadic work. During the time I spent cruising the open spaces, I saw many workstations that collected everyday artifacts: empty coca-cola bottles, coffee cups, loose papers, an occasional soft stuffed animal toy, or a silly hat. Day after day these same artifacts were stationed at the same workstations. Although I had been told by many that the walls and surfaces were to be cleared daily, some walls were adorned with paper diagrams or magazine pages that were securely scotch-taped into place, and these same artifacts marked workstations as either unused, or used by the same person every day.

All of this has run through my mind in a flash, and now I am hearing Sonje continue to describe her reasoning for not moving from workstation to workstation, so I quickly refocus in the present. She is describing her embodied responses. This work place forces a tension: either you are here working in an embodied way at Fornebu with your body on display and interacting in a heightened way, or you are working in a disembodied way, digitally connecting to your tasks and your colleagues. The embodiment here at Fornebu

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was the immediate shock for Sonje.

We are 12 people in our little staff. . . . We have six places and we are managing, but not well. You know, that's part of the rules we have that we have to sort of limit the papers and, and . . . clear our desks . . . and we also tell each other that you know, "Now I'm going home," or "I'm going to a meeting," and, you know, "Take my place," or. . . . That's I think, it's good that we're good friends; otherwise this would have been difficult. What happened last week was that I felt that I had headache at 2:00 in the afternoon. I felt sort of confined . . . . But I sort of, it's like, you know, you have to shrink a bit. You can't . . . I think that has to do for me, at least it has to do with [the] physical room. You get somehow restricted by this way of sitting and my hypothesis around this is that the creative thinking, and no . . . not, not, not, not the project creative thinking 'cause if people need each other to develop things this is, this is good, this is good. But if you need space and room and reflection you won't be here. I took half a day at my home office last week because I couldn't concentrate. It was absolutely incredible. I had no control over-this was ringing you know, endlessly, and people were talking louder across the ro... [corrects herself] little space. You see behind there, and I just couldn't concentrate, so I said to my boss, "I'm taking half a day home now." And I thought "Whhooo" [exhales loudly]. It [snaps fingers?] gave me freedom. I felt, you know: What do you say when you have this feeling of being afraid of a closed room? A phobia, I felt totally claustrophobic. How can I go. . . .

Because there was so little room for me and my thoughts and my way of things. So just giving yourself that kind of, you know, alternative . . . that you can take your thing with you and go to the beach and sit there for a few hours, or go home for half a day or whatever.

And I would think that others think that same way. And what I do differently is that I, I'm. . . . One of the things that was difficult

with working together with other people was I, I don't like people to hear me when I'm talking to the phone, in the phone. And I still don't. Well, I still take it when I'm sitting like this for messages.

This embodied experience resonates with me. I have heard some people mention this reaction, but none had described the experience as intensely as Sonje does. And the notion of what to do about all these mobile telephone calls coming and going from open landscape situations, well, it does seem to create a lot of movement. I have noticed that people answer quickly, so as not to have the ring tone from a mobile phone disturb neighboring workers, and then move about while establishing the nature of the call. Some head directly for a *stilleroom*; others wander about.

This conversation has had many twists and turns. I want to go back to the beginning to explore further, now that Sonje has loosened up even more and is talking so freely. "So you actually said it was a shock when you came here?" I query.

It's because of expectations. We had so high expectations. We had, you know, we had, had this little pilot in our other floor, and everyone said, "Oh, this is nothing," you know. "This isn't functional"; "It will be so much better out there"; "It's so you know much better architecturally, the space, light and sun, everything." So we were expecting something . . . more open 'cause we were sitting where, you know, all this is tight. I wonder whether I should give you a phone call one of those days where it's really crazy.

So you could see that.

One of my colleagues said, "This place is turning into a place for the senior consultants between 23 and 27 years old." Because I think this is very functional for the consultants here in the organization, project organization for selling, market selling . . . so important to the organization. [Loud conversation is apparent in the background, but Sonje only glances that way, and doesn't stop talking.

She is on a roll.] I don't think it's so functional for, for this kind of work, or, you know, for researchers perhaps, for people that . . . are [working on] . . . regulatory topics. Which takes some concentration.

Hmm, I wonder aloud what all this means for Telenor, trying to establish for myself what this all means. Sonje pauses now, and starts laughing. She is watching someone walking by outside the little glass room.

This is crazy as well. They are so curious who these shoes and trousers belong to. . . . We sat like this the other day. This is Birgitte. I know her trousers. And another thing, is, you know it's absolutely . . . and if you're doing confidential things, you can see it from the outside what's on the board.

With little prompting, Sonje returns to explaining her views on this change to nomadic work. As she speaks, I nod, murmur, and occasionally enter into conversation, but mostly I just try to let Sonje's ideas emerge:

So I got here and my expectations were high and [then] I saw this. I don't like glass, I don't like steel, and I don't like big heights . . . and I certainly don't like the glass elevators so I thought, "Why did they put me in this physical place? I hate it!" Everything in me hates it, you know? And I was angry. I was angry. Yes. Yes. That's why I felt, felt confined and angry and sort of squeezed into something where, you know. And, and I could pick up [people's feelings] because I'm most. . . . I been working with [these] people so I was pretty sensitive. I could feel people being like this, you know? Everyone [had] the same excitement and, you know, there wasn't place in here. Half past 8:00 in the morning people were running around [laughter in her voice] looking for a place to work and had to sit . . . just plug themselves into somewhere, you know.

There is loud walking/thumping in the background. I strain to hear over the commotion of people buzzing around outside the *stilleroom* in the open areas.

A clear sense of embodiment comes

through each time Sonje returns to describing physical, somatic symptoms.

So I, I woke up awful on Monday morning and on Tuesday I was home half a day and then I started figuring out, "How can I go about this?" Yes. I can come or come, still come early everyday. Then I'll be sort of you know relaxed . . . and have done the newspaper and, ahhh. . . coffee and everything before people come, and I can walk from this up to here, which is wonderful walk for 20 minutes, which is a good thing. I will slowly I think go and look at the beach for 20 minutes when the spring is a little bit more forward.

The conversation is intense, and although there are many distractions around us outside the glass walls, neither of us breaks eye contact. I sense her distress and recognize the importance of providing my full, undivided attention. She moves into explaining the social interactions of embodied selves in the nomadic work mode - particular aspects of this change. For her, the exchanges with others have helped to ease this transition. This thought flows into the notion that commitment is required to make the change.

The people around me is I, I like them. I mean I, there is, I have been in situations in my life where you really had . . . not conflicts but . . . tense relationships with your colleagues . . . which happens. I mean. . . . Then it would have been nightmare to be here, but, it is not like that for me now . . . but we laugh together, we have fun, we are generous with each other. It's, it's, they're good people. I like them. Then it's okay.

We have had a lot of fun lunches, you know, and we'll be laughing loud and, and talk to people here and there-not with everyone of course, but. . . . I, I think in a way we experience pretty much the same. That was not happening, the sharing, last week, you know, that probably everyone thought it's just me, but as we've shared feelings it gets easier.

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Once again Sonje returns to speaking from the embodied sense of distress this way of working causes her. She exclaims about the openness and emphasizes that there is no backstage in Fornebu, and at the same time there is no place to stand out from the crowd. A paradox surfaces in this story. There is a paradox of display: too much in the open landscape or too little when working 'virtually'. Either way, the extremes are emphasized as taking away something that was available before: privacy or status markers. In each case, there is a link to identity issues for Sonje. She says:

You, you're sort of pushed into an openness that isn't for everyone. So personal things are very difficult in this place. There's no, there's no place to hide, there's no areas at all. That's what you say about, you know. . . . And I didn't. . . . In leadership training there was a couple of [these] sayings and, "There is no place to hide," and "You have to stand out from the wall." And that's very much the things that happen here also, because you know leaders and whatever. They are all on the same level. We have a couple of people that are the corporate management sitting over here.

And you know in, in order to have. . . . If your identity is connected with your . . . position, you have to fight for standing out from the wall all the time now. Because there is no, you don't have any symbols in any, any way. Then you know where you can sort of relax a day because you know you're [laughter in her voice] still the boss.

Now you have to prove it every day. I think for middle managers this situation might be very difficult. Or people that, you know, are ambitious and, and there is no place to hide. So if you want to hide you just have to leave, go out, and find an excuse. And then when you come back you still have people asking you what's wrong or where were you and all those things. So . . . that is-I hadn't even thought about that at all. That's very interesting.

So, so you have to, you have to be wise with how you interact with people, you have to be conscious about that.

I know other researchers are studying the influence of the architecture upon work, but -- is there any research into the influence on the embodied self of changing work modes, or of work modes on the self-understanding - is there an opportunity to explore other aspects of the trinity of identity for these workers?

Identity, a source of embodied ontological security, is threatened by a perceived vulnerability in relation to others (Eisenberg, 2001). Identity attachments were primary to the framing of this change to nomadic work for some of the Telenor workers I met. Memories of embodied experience pattern that experience. It is this patterning that allows for categorization and storage, and forms the concept of self-identity as an evolving perception (Watts, 1989). A narrative construction of identity, influenced by context and dominant narratives (Kenyon & Randall, 1997; Kondo, 1990; Parry & Doan, 1994) can be altered and adapted if the rhetorical resources are available. In the individual stories reported here, the struggle to maintain identity claims in the new work mode was apparent both immediately after the change implementation, and several months later. The struggle was especially salient for Sonje, whose initial reactions were rife with links to somatic markers, the bodily signals that stem from cultural, physical, emotional, and bodily experience (Damasio, 1994). While others reported sensemaking stories that relied upon identity for framing their experience of this change, we chose to report the stories of just a few workers here, as those that most vividly illustrated the reliance on embodied identity taken-for-granted reality along with my own autoethnographic story of experiencing the nomadic work mode at Telenor, Fornebu.

### Toward a Research Agenda: The Trinity of Embodied Selves at Work

The trinity of selves as systems, with

emphasis on embodied selves at work, is ripe for exploration. Based on the premise that the embodied self is a system, and a trinity: (a) an entity unto itself with a purpose of its own, (b) composed by yet greater than the process/product of the purposeful interaction of its “sub-systems” or members, and (c) only understood in the context of the larger system or systems in which it finds itself (Durant, 2002). Some questions we pose stemming from our reading of the stories of Telenor workers presented here, and from our exploration of the literature presented, follow:

1) Focus on the organization and the embodied self as an entity unto itself: How does the trinity-self comprised of 1) embodied self, 2) biological/other sub-systems and 3) context(s) for interaction influence the nature of “organizational becoming” per Tsoukas and Chia (2002) who proffer that organizations are dynamic, built upon “how organizational members reweave their webs of beliefs and habits of action in response to local circumstances and new experiences and how managers influence and intervene into the stream of organizational actions” (p. 565). How do relationships between embodied unitary identity, biological sub-systems and contextual larger systems unfold in organizational life? What is the influence of age of body, and the biological sub-systems of the variously aged body, in relation to different work settings?

2) Focus on the biological sub-systems of an embodied self: How is the trinity-self comprised of 1) embodied self, 2) biological/other sub-systems and 3) context(s) for interaction influenced by a host of cultural and material influences on the biological sub-systems? For example, how does menopause/andropause influence worker interactions and organizational goals? How do hormonal fluctuations at all ages in embodied selves alter the interactions of those selves with larger sub-systems and how do they influence the self as an entity with a purpose of its own in terms of organizational life? Similarly, sleep or lack of

it, physical settings as the influence bodily chemical processes, and ingested/inhaled substances influences on the worker-self offer areas for exploration in organizational studies.

3) Focus on the interactions of the embodied self with larger sub-systems: How is the trinity-self comprised of 1) embodied self, 2) biological/other sub-systems and 3) context(s) for interaction shaped material context beyond ergonomic considerations? How is language and meaning shaped by the embodied experience/materiality of organizational life (whether that materiality is traditional workspace, emerging more fluid and flexible work space/place options or so-called virtual work options that place the embodied self in quite separate contexts from other organizational embodied selves).

We offer this paper as an exploratory attempt to engage notions of the embodied self as a system in organizational studies. As a first pass, and offering limited empirical data for examination, there are doubtless omissions and opportunities in the presentation of our ideas here. Our overworked, stressed, tired, middle-aged, early tenure track embodied selves - in interaction with our biological systems boosted by vegan and vegetarian diets along with some coffee, and some technology and a variety of cultural influences have created this product in interaction with societies, physical settings. We open this to our audience in an attempt explore our selves part of a larger system of interaction with other embodied selves in a material and social world. We wonder what the presentation of our ideas might have looked like if we had allowed our embodied selves a bit more sleep and a bit less coffee and perhaps even imbibed in some chocolate and a walk on along the shores of the ocean as we formulated our ideas. We suggest our embodied selves would have produced a different product for your reading pleasure as the bodily responses would be shaped by, and shaping, the other systems in the trinity of identity.



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