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# Imagining organization through metaphor and metonymy: Unpacking the process-entity paradox

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## Abstract

Within organization studies, Morgan's seminal book *Images of Organization* has laid the groundwork for an entire research tradition of studying organizational phenomena through metaphorical lenses. Within Morgan's list of images, that of 'organization as flux and transformation' stands out in two important regards. First, it has a strong metonymic dimension, as it implies that organizations *consist of and are constituted by* processes. Second, the image invites scholars to comprehend organizations as a paradoxical relation between organization (an entity) and process (a non-entity). In this article, we build on Morgan's work and argue that flux-based images of organization vary in their ability to deal with the process-entity paradox, depending on the degree to which its metaphorical and metonymic dimensions are intertwined. We also examine three offsprings of the flux image: Organization as Becoming, Organization as Practice, and Organization as Communication. We compare these images regarding their metaphor–metonymy dynamics, the directionality of their process of imagination, and their degree of concreteness. We contribute to Morgan's

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work, and to organization studies more generally, by offering an analytical grid for unpacking different processes of imagining organization. Moreover, our grid helps explain why images of organization vary in their ability to comprehend organizations in dialectical and paradoxical ways.

### Keywords

flux image, metaphors, metonymies, organization theory, process–entity paradox, processes of imagination

In the field of organization studies, Morgan's seminal book *Images of Organization* (1986) has laid the groundwork for an entire research tradition of studying organizational phenomena through metaphorical lenses (see also Oswick et al., 2004; Putnam et al., 1996; Tsoukas, 1991, 1993; Weick, 1989). A metaphorical lens is generally defined as a way of referring to and thinking of one term or concept (the *target*) in terms of another (the *source*), with the latter stemming from a domain of knowledge and language use that is not typically associated with the target (Cornelissen, 2005; Morgan, 1983; Oswick et al., 2002; Tsoukas, 1991). The force of Morgan's eight images (e.g. organization as organism, brain, or machine) lies in their ability to inspire creative analogical reasoning that allows us to perceive organizational phenomena (the *target*) in light of neighboring conceptual domains (the *source*).

Within Morgan's (1986) canonical list of images, one of them stands out in particular: that of the 'organization as flux and transformation' (hereafter, the 'flux image'). This image is special in two regards. First, while most of Morgan's images tend to establish an *entity–entity relation* by metaphorically comparing the organization, as an entity, to yet another entity (e.g. an organization is *like* an organism, a brain, or a machine); the flux image, instead, establishes an *entity–process relation*. By doing so, it invites scholars to understand organizations in paradoxical ways (see also Poole and Van de Ven, 1989; Smith and Lewis, 2011), that is, by drawing a relation between the objectified notion of an organization (an entity) and a process (a non-entity). Since Morgan's (1986) initial writings, the process–entity paradox in understanding organizational phenomena remains unsettled (see Demir and Lychnell, 2015). Weick (2004: 411) summarized the issue by stating that while 'researchers already have reasonable control of conceptual images that depict more stable, crystal-like texts . . . the problem is that we have less control over images that capture dynamics and flux.' Yet, as he had also mentioned in his earlier writings, '[i]t is the very fact that processes elude both researchers and managers that makes it more important for us to suggest ways in which people can gain at least intellectual control over this property of organizations' (Weick, 1979: 43).

Second, the flux image differs from Morgan's (1986) other images in that it can be seen not only as a metaphor, but also as a metonymy, its close sibling within the larger family of rhetorical tropes (see Morgan, 1996: 231). Metonymies are generally defined as 'figures of speech in which one expression is used to refer to the standard referent of

a related one' (Cornelissen, 2008: 82). The analogical reasoning of metonymy typically establishes a part-whole substitution (*pars pro toto*). As Manning (1979: 662) writes: 'Metonymy takes the whole (an organization) to be indicated by its parts (e.g. the number of levels in an organization . . .). The whole is thus represented by the parts; the essential features of a whole are reduced to indices.' We argue that, compared to Morgan's (1986) other images, the flux image is special in that it follows a different form of thinking. In considering how single instances or processes can be indicative of a larger entity, it strongly combines metaphorical and metonymic reasoning. In doing so, the flux image invites us to understand organizations as paradoxically *consisting of, and being constituted by*, processes of flux and transformation.

In this article, we follow the call by Hernes and Weik (2007a: 253) to further 'illuminate the subtleties' of this process-entity paradox. Tackling the process-entity paradox is important considering that, as Chia argued, organizational scholarship tends to privilege an 'entitative' conception of reality (2005: 115), thus neglecting the inherently processual and dynamic character of organizational phenomena (see also Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). Moreover, as Morgan (1986) emphasized, *how* we imagine an organization (either as an entity, a process, or both) makes a significant difference for the scholarly understanding and the practical management of organizations. In other words, the choice of any particular metaphor involves a process of 'seeing as', which grounds our understanding of organizations and excludes alternative interpretations and actions (see also Cornelissen, 2005). In line with these considerations, we posit that it makes a difference for the process of imagining organization to what extent an image invites a combined form of metaphorical and metonymic reasoning (see also Morgan, 1996). More specifically, we argue that the more closely an image's metaphorical and metonymic dimensions are interconnected, the better the image is equipped to embrace tensions, dialectics, or paradoxical understandings of organization (such as the process-entity paradox).

Accordingly, and following Morgan's (1986) analytical strategy, we explore three offsprings of the flux image that share an analytical focus and common ground, but differ in their explanation of how processes produce organizations: Organization as Becoming (hereafter OaB; e.g. Chia, 2005; Clegg et al., 2005; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002), Organization as Practice (hereafter OaP; e.g. Chia and MacKay, 2007; Schatzki, 2005, 2006), and Organization as Communication (hereafter OaC; e.g. Cooren and Taylor, 1997; McPhee and Zaug, 2000; Nicotera, 2013). These three images lend themselves particularly well to our inquiry as they all foreground a processual understanding of organizational phenomena while questioning the entitative character of organization. Drawing out the ways in which each of these images deal with the process-entity paradox, we discuss their implications for understanding processes of imagining organization.

Our article offers two main contributions. First, we add to Morgan's (1986, 1996) initial research agenda by further advancing our understanding of the *process of imagining* organization (see also Weick, 1989). We highlight that, in the process of imagining organization, metonymy is a prime activity that needs to be seen in close connection to metaphors. Accordingly, we propose an analytical grid that allows for cross-comparing

images of organization regarding (1) their inherent metaphor–metonymy dynamics, (2) the directionality of the process of imagination, and (3) their degree of concreteness. We argue that this grid is useful for analyzing images of organization in comparative form as it can help explain why some images may be better equipped than others to imagine organizations in paradoxical or dialectical terms (see Putnam, 2013; Smith and Lewis, 2011). Second, by applying our analytical grid, we contribute to one particular debate in organization theory (that is closely linked to Morgan’s image, 1986, of the ‘organization as flux’): how is it possible to imagine organization as both entity and process, at the same time (see also Bakken and Hernes, 2006; Hernes and Weik, 2007a; Weik, 2011)? Our comparative study of the three different process-based images (OaB, OaP, and OaC) sheds light on this issue by demonstrating how these images differ in their ability to capture the processual nature of organization, depending on their specific metaphor–metonymy relation.

### Connecting metaphor and metonymy

In this article, we move beyond a metaphorical analysis by showing the usefulness of looking at the close connection and interplay of metaphors and metonymies. Morgan (1996: 231) himself highlighted the importance of this shift in his later writings on the topic: ‘Metaphor and metonymy are always interconnected. You cannot have one without the other.’ While Morgan argued that ‘a metaphorical image relies on some kind of metonymic reduction, otherwise it remains thin air’ (1996: 231), he also suggested that ‘metonymy is entirely dependent on metaphor, for without a prefiguring image we have nothing to see’ (1996: 231). This assertion corresponds with Jakobson’s (1990 [1956]) argument that metaphors and metonymies provide the ‘bipolar structure’ of language; both are necessary for the development of discourse and meaning through statements of similarity (metaphor) and contiguity (metonymy), and both mutually implicate each other in actual instances of language use (see also Eco, 1979; Lodge, 1977). However, with a few exceptions (see Cornelissen, 2008; Musson and Tietze, 2004; Oswick et al., 2004; Riad and Vaara, 2011; Sillince and Barker, 2011) this line of thinking has not been developed in any great detail within management and organization studies. Furthermore, compared to metaphor, metonymy has received little attention, even in language-centered work in organization studies (Cornelissen, 2008; Oswick et al., 2004).

Following Morgan’s call (1996), we present a new way of seeing the interrelations between metaphors and metonymies. We do so by drawing on a linguistic approach to metaphor and metonymy and their interconnections. Specifically, we suggest an analytical grid that allows us to distinguish between metaphorical and metonymic forms of reasoning and see how specific types of combinations open up various possibilities of imagining organization.

Table 1 summarizes the three dimensions of our analytical grid to study the metaphor–metonymy relations of an image: (1) the type of metaphor–metonymy dynamics, (2) the directionality of the process of imagination, and (3) their degree of concreteness. In the following, we will present each of these dimensions in more detail.

**Table 1.** Analytical grid for studying metaphor-metonymy relations.

| Dimensions                                       | Definition  |
|--|---|
| (1) Type of metaphor–metonymy dynamics           | <p>The dynamics characterizing the relationship between metaphor and metonymy. Two types of relations can be distinguished (see also Goossens, 1995a):</p> <p>(1a) ‘Metonymy within metaphor’: the process of imagination starts with a metaphor and follows with the details of the metonymic interpretation.</p> <p>(1b) ‘Metaphor from metonymy’: the process of imagination starts with a metonymy and follows with a metaphorical interpretation.</p>  |
| (2) Directionality of the process of imagination | <p>Directionality can work both in the horizontal and in the vertical dimension. Within each of these dimensions, the movement can be either unidirectional or bidirectional</p> <p>(2a) Directionality of the metaphorical (horizontal) dimension:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unidirectional: Imagining the target domain in terms of the source domain <i>or vice versa</i>.</li> <li>• Bidirectional: Imagining the target domain in terms of the source domain <i>and vice versa</i>.</li> </ul> <p>(2b) Directionality of the metonymic (vertical) dimension:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unidirectional: The constitutive elements stand in for the whole (<i>pars pro toto</i>) <i>or</i> the whole stands in for the constitutive elements (<i>totum pro parte</i>).</li> <li>• Bidirectional: The constitutive elements stand in for the whole (<i>pars pro toto</i>) <i>and</i> the whole stands in for the constitutive elements (<i>totum pro parte</i>).</li> </ul> |
| (3) Degree of concreteness of the image          | <p>The capacity of the process of imagination and the resulting figure to represent an abstract idea or phenomenon in more concrete ways. Concreteness can work in two ways:</p> <p>(3a) Degree of concreteness of the source domain or constitutive elements: an abstract and larger idea or phenomenon is understood by referring to a more particular and concrete source domain (metaphorically) or to constitutive elements (metonymically).</p> <p>(3b) Degree of concreteness of the resulting figure: the resulting figure that connects source and target domains varies in the degree of concreteness, i.e. the extent to which it is accessible to direct and sensual experiences.</p>   |

### *Type of metaphor–metonymy dynamics*

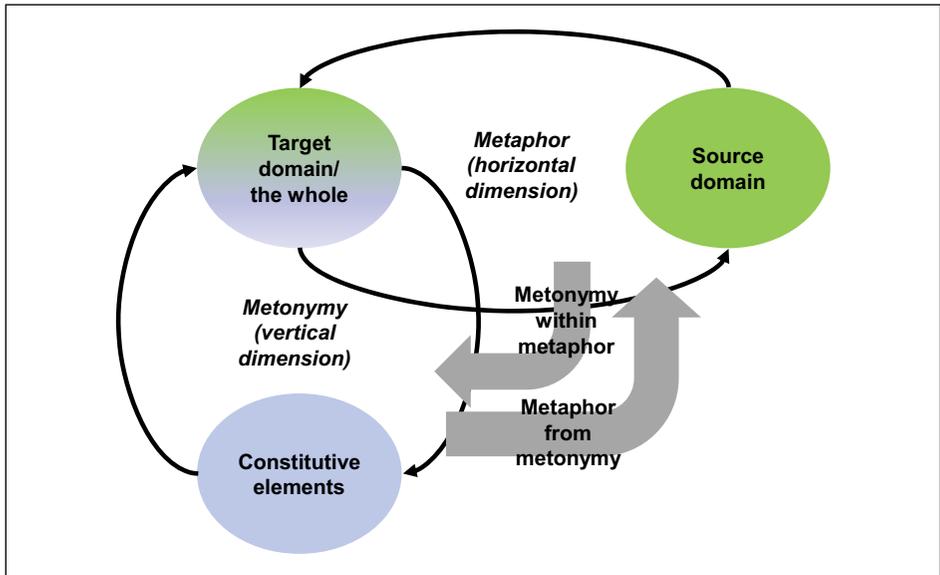
Our framework is based on the notion that a metaphor typically crosses conventional categories of understanding (Cornelissen, 2005) and draws analogies across socially familiar registers of language and categories of knowledge. Metaphors also typically combine

entire ‘packages’ of knowledge (Oswick et al., 2004) and thus involve a lateral, or *horizontal*, comparison between two concepts or terms from domains that are (at least initially) seen as distant from one another. In contrast, metonymies rely on an exchange between parts within the same domain of language use and knowledge. They involve a *vertical*, or contiguous, mapping between parts and elements of an entire category of thought. As previously mentioned, this exchange typically involves part–whole substitutions.

Building on these definitions, scholars from linguistics have argued that the predominant connection between metaphor and metonymy is one in which metonymy relies upon metaphor and thus should be seen as a subclass of metaphor (e.g. Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Searle, 1979). This understanding comes close to Morgan’s (1996) initial ideas about metonymy being part of a larger metaphor and supplying the broader metaphorical image with specific details or parts (such as tasks or procedures being parts of a larger ‘machine’ image). Goossens (1990, 1995a, 1995b) labeled this connection *metonymy within metaphor*, which occurs when ‘a metonymically used entity is embedded within a (complex) metaphorical expression’ (Goossens, 1995a: 172). For instance, Morgan’s (1986) metaphors of ‘machine’, ‘organism’, or ‘brain’ first of all involve the horizontal development of meaning: the projection of a broader metaphor is the primary heuristic for thinking about organizations. The imagination process moves here, in turn, from a static metaphor to metonymic details, which are treated as simple implications or ‘metaphorical entailments’ (Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) that provide necessary detail and hold the broader image together (e.g. humans are the ‘cogs’ of the machine; information is the ‘link’ between the organism and its environment).

Another relation between metaphor and metonymy involves a *metaphor from metonymy* (Deignan, 2005; Deignan and Potter, 2004; Goossens, 1990, 1995a, 1995b). In this relation, an expression or thought initially develops a meaning vertically through metonymy. This meaning is then metaphorically mapped onto another domain or cues a further metaphorical interpretation. An example of this relation is the idea of an organization as an institutional actor (King et al., 2010), which presupposes a metonymy wherein separate actions, materials, and actors are compressed into one entity, which is then metaphorically understood as a single acting agent. In turn, this leads us to see the whole (the organization) as directly implied in any specific activities or parts (e.g. a corporate advertisement or an executive decision), as ‘identity referents’ (Whetten, 2006).

The two types of dynamics between metaphor and metonymy are depicted in Figure 1. Metaphor involves a horizontal axis of similarity across domains of language use and knowledge. In contrast, metonymy involves only one category of thought because the connection between two phenomena is made within the same domain and so involves a vertical axis of contiguity. Together, the two axes suggest that the heuristics we use to study and understand organizations differ fundamentally, depending on whether we follow a ‘metonymy within metaphor’ or a ‘metaphor from metonymy’ dynamic. In this article, we aim to advance our understanding of the role of metonymy alongside metaphor in general, and also underscore the significant potential of the ‘metaphor from metonymy’ route. This route has been relatively neglected, with most work in management and organization studies repeating the classic argument, also found in philosophy and linguistics, that metaphor is the master trope while metonymy is a secondary figure (e.g. Green et al., 2010; Sillince and Barker, 2011).



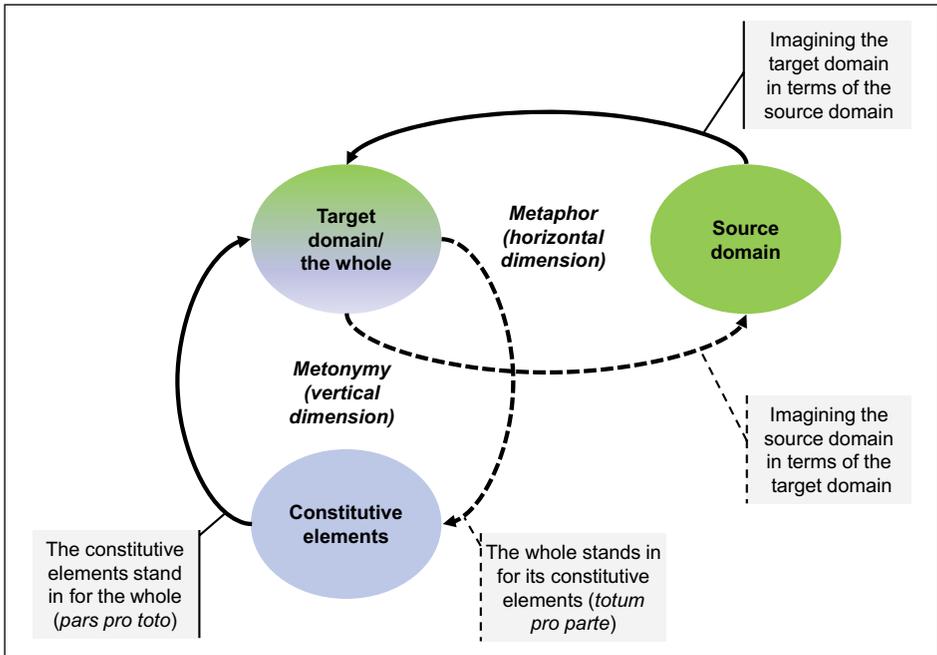
**Figure 1.** Types of metaphor-metonymy dynamics.

We argue that the ‘metaphor from metonymy’ heuristic has great potential for organization studies, as it requires us to think of organizations in contiguous and unitary ways – as something of a particular kind – before making any metaphorical leaps in our thinking. A good example is Morgan’s (1986) discussion of organization as ‘flux and transformation’. Morgan first operates metonymically by highlighting the importance of focusing on detailed interactions and changing patterns of organizational behavior that implicate larger structures and concepts such as ‘organization’, ‘environment’, and ‘society’. He then refers to a wide range of writings, from complexity science and self-organizing systems to ecology, that, as metaphorical ways of thinking, present possible means of finding patterns of causality and emergent effects. Importantly, these ways of thinking only flow from the initial metonymic focus on specific ‘patterns’ of action and interaction.

Another related advantage of the ‘metaphor from metonymy’ route is that it enables an analysis of the changing and unfolding process of organization by focusing on how parts and the whole interrelate – and thus on how organization (as an abstract, macro concept) is at the same time present, or implicated, in specific actions, communication events, bundles of resources, or any other particular set of details on the micro level. This recursive way of thinking about how the entity and process of organization are implicated in one another is a particularly insightful heuristic for process research in organization studies.

### *Directionality of the process of imagination*

Besides focusing on the relationship between metaphors and metonymies, we also propose to consider the *directionality of the process of imagination* in the metaphorical (i.e.



**Figure 2.** Horizontal and vertical directionality of the process of imagination.

horizontal) and metonymic (i.e. vertical) dimension. Wee (2005) emphasizes that rhetorical figures such as metaphors do not necessarily imply a ‘one-way street’ from the source to the target domain (p. 367). Accordingly, he proposes to look at the degree to which an image allows for bidirectionality, that is, the dynamic process of recursive and mutual recontextualization between the source and target domains. Wee (2005) links the bidirectionality of an image closely to its heuristic value. In line with his work, Schoeneborn et al. (2013: 438) argue that vivid images tend to establish a ‘dynamic [bidirectional] link between the source and target domains, through which the contextual complexity of one domain can be made available to the other in the form of a coevolutionary process’ (emphasis in original). Accordingly, within each dimension of our grid (i.e. horizontal or vertical), we can distinguish to what extent an image invites for unidirectional (one-way) and bidirectional (two-way) processes of imagination. For instance, a bidirectional relation in the metaphorical (horizontal) dimension is established as soon as one imagines the target domain (e.g. organization) not only in the light of a source domain (e.g. the human brain) but also the other way around (as shown by the dotted horizontal arrow in Figure 2 below). When this happens, an image sets up chains of back-and-forth associations (Putnam and Boys, 2006) between the source and the target domains that allow for building a richer and more dynamic picture of both domains (e.g. by understanding organizations in terms of the human brain and, vice versa, by understanding the human brain in terms of organization; see also Morgan, 1986; Spender, 1996).

In the metonymic (vertical) dimension, a bidirectional relation is established as soon as an image invites not only for comprehending the constitutive elements as representative of the whole (*pars pro toto*) but also the other way around (*totum pro parte*; as shown by the dotted vertical arrow in Figure 2). For instance, we can also consider the image of the ‘organization as brain’ (Morgan, 1986) as a metonymy, given that it invites not only for imagining organizations metaphorically *as* brains but also as *consisting of* brains as its constitutive elements. Bidirectionality in the vertical (metonymic) dimension is established if the ‘metonymic compression’ (Cornelissen, 2006) works both ways: for instance, the ‘organization as brain’ image allows for comprehending one specific ‘mastermind’ as the representation of the organization (e.g. Steve Jobs as ‘the’ incarnation of Apple) – or, vice versa, for comprehending the organization as one ‘collective mind’ where the system of interrelated actions stands in for the individual human actors involved (e.g. the study by Weick and Robert, 1993, on flight operations on an aircraft carrier deck as a form of collective mind).

### Concreteness of the image

In addition to the type of metaphor–metonymy dynamics and the directionality of the process of imagination, we propose analyzing a third aspect of images of organization: their degree of *concreteness*. An effective metaphor is often described as one in which an abstract target is represented through a more concrete, more detailed, and more easily understood source, such as imagining an organization as a machine (Tsoukas, 1991: 566). Similarly, metonymy works by making an abstract and larger phenomenon be understood through its more concrete constitutive parts. The concrete nature of a metaphor or metonymy is an important aspect of images of organization in that it influences whether the resulting image will be easily understood. In this respect, entitative images such as the ‘organization as machine’ metaphor are likely to present a greater degree of concreteness than processual images, such as the ‘flux image’, because of their capacity to convey an objective representation. We see the degree of concreteness as a particular challenge for dynamic and processual images of organization, which, as we will develop next, tend to be more abstract due to the philosophical and ontological stances on which they rely.

In the next section, we will mobilize our analytical grid to question the above mentioned three offsprings of the flux image (Organization as Becoming, Organization as Practice, and Organization as Communication) and explain why and how these three images differ in their ability to tackle the process–entity paradox of organization.

### The metaphor–metonymy relation in three offsprings of the flux image

We now have developed the basis for returning to Morgan’s (1986) image of the ‘organization as flux and transformation’. For Morgan, exploring the flux image is relevant to studying and managing organizations, as it invites researchers and practitioners to search ‘for the dynamics that generate and sustain organizations and their environments as concrete social forms’ (1986: 235) – a focus not developed in the other images of his

canonical list. Consequently, he called for studying organizational life through a close examination of 'deep processes of transformation and change' (Morgan, 1986: 235).

Morgan's starting point in discussing the flux image is the acknowledgement that organizations as entities are transformed by the inherent processes that constitute them. This argument is consistent with what Hernes and Weik (2007a) call *endogenous* process views, in which processes are considered to be 'actions which *form entities*' (Bakken and Hernes, 2006: 1604; emphasis in original). Over the past decades, scholars in organization theory have shown a growing interest in such processual notions of organization. Some of these views can be seen as offsprings of Morgan's (1986) image of 'organization as flux and transformation'. Most prominently, vivid streams of research have lately emerged under the larger umbrella of 'process organization studies' (for an overview, see Langley et al., 2013).

From the various perspectives on process found in contemporary organization studies, we focus on three theoretical streams in particular. Each of these streams is guided by a specific image. First, inspired by fundamental process ontologies (e.g. Rescher, 2000), organizational scholars have proposed the image of Organization as Becoming (Chia, 1995, 2005; Clegg et al., 2005; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). The image of becoming (as opposed to being; see Demir and Lychnell, 2015) implies that organizations are ongoing and ever-changing endeavors (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). Second, a closely related stream of theorizing is grounded in the image of Organization as Practice (Chia and MacKay, 2007; Nicolini, 2013). In the most explicit variant of a practice ontology of organizations, Schatzki (2005, 2006) suggested grasping organizations as bundles of interrelated practices and material arrangements. Third, scholars from the transdisciplinary field of organizational communication studies have mobilized the image of Organization as Communication (Cooren et al., 2011; Luhmann, 2003; McPhee and Zaig, 2000; Taylor and Van Every, 2000). The term 'communication' refers here to a specific type of practice, a complex and dynamic process of (symbolic and material) meaning negotiation that is fundamental to organizational existence (Ashcraft et al., 2009: 22).

We concentrate on these three images in particular because they each subscribe to an endogenous understanding of the process–entity relation (Hernes and Weik, 2007a). Furthermore, all three images entail strong linkages of the metaphorical and metonymic dimension and thus are particularly suitable for our inquiry. In the following sections, we explore in more detail (1) how these images evoke different metaphorical and metonymic forms of reasoning and their dynamic interrelations (by applying the three dimensions of our analytical grid) and (2) how these different processes of imagination contribute to our understanding of the process–entity paradox.

### *Organization as Becoming*

Within endogenous process views on organization (Hernes and Weik, 2007a), the most fundamental reconsideration of the process–entity relation has been proposed by scholars working with the image of Organization as Becoming (OaB; Chia, 1995, 2005; Hernes, 2014; Hernes and Weik, 2007a, 2007b; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). In line with more general trends in postmodern thinking, the proponents of this perspective tend to

question the existence of stable entities altogether: ‘What is real [in this view] are not so much social states, or entities, but emergent relational interactions and patternings that are recursively intimated in the fluxing and transforming of our life-worlds’ (Chia, 1995: 581–582). Tsoukas and Chia (2002: 577) relate these considerations to organizational phenomena and argue that these should not be ‘treated as entities, as accomplished events, but as enactments – unfolding processes involving actors making choices interactively, in inescapably local conditions.’

In this section, by drawing on our analytical grid (see Table 1 above), we examine the metaphorical and metonymic dimensions of the OaB image and their interplay. Regarding the type of *metaphor–metonymy dynamics*, we argue that the metaphorical dimension dominates this image which tends to follow a ‘metonymy within metaphor’ route. This is because the image draws a strong (horizontal) analogical comparison between two domains, inviting us to compare an organization (a supposedly concrete, stable, and fixed phenomenon) to something as fluid, loose, and ephemeral as ‘becoming’. In this regard, the OaB image radically breaks with conventional notions of organization by aiming ‘to avoid the risk of turning organizations into entities’ (Hernes and Weik, 2007b: 77).

However, the OaB image is also characterized by metonymic reasoning in that it presupposes part–whole relations. For instance, proponents of the OaB image suggest that an organization is ultimately an ‘aggregation’ or ‘assemblage’ of unfolding processes (Chia, 1995: 597). This idea, in turn, suggests that OaB can actually be decomposed in its constitutive processes and activities. Accordingly, Chia asserted that, seen from an OaB perspective, ‘the basic unit of reality is not an atom or thing but an “event-cluster” forming a relatively stable pattern of relations’ (Chia, 2005: 128). One empirical example of this metonymic reasoning is the recent ethnographic study of a South Korean credit card company by Bjerregaard and Jonasson (2014). The authors explored how this firm handled contradicting institutional logics in the aftermath of the Asian economic crisis of 1997. To study the actual work practices involved in handling these contradicting logics, Bjerregaard and Jonasson suggested turning to ‘ongoing micro-events, actions and interactions as the critical site of becoming’ (2014: 1531). In this example, the OaB lens thus allows for imagining an organization as the nexus that holds together various clusters of ‘micro-events’. These clusters, in turn, provide the organization with a more stable appearance – one that can be maintained even though the organization’s constitutive parts (the events, activities, and processes) are presumed to be ‘perpetually perishing’ (Hernes, 2014: 46). We can conclude that in this view, the organization’s existence is precarious in that it ‘comes into being and then vanishes; it never really is, except in the imagination’ (Hernes, 2014: 46).

In terms of the *directionality of the process of imagination*, we argue that the OaB image is primarily unidirectional in character. Scholars following this image tend to be mostly interested in examining organizational phenomena through a ‘becoming’ lens (e.g. Packendorff et al., 2014, who studied project leadership from a becoming ontology). However, the OaB image does not necessarily invite us to investigate in the opposite direction, that is, by asking what we can learn about the world’s continuous becoming through an organizational lens. Nevertheless, proponents of the OaB image note some form of bidirectionality in the horizontal (metaphorical) dimension, at least by emphasizing the inherently recursive relation between organization and becoming/change. For

instance, as Tsoukas and Chia asserted: 'While organization aims at stemming change, it is also the outcome of change' (2002: 570). To exemplify their argument, the authors (2002: 572) mobilized the image of an acrobat on a high wire. They argued that she maintains her stability by 'continuously correcting her imbalances'. The beauty of her act – what makes the spectators hold their breath – is the 'illusion of stability' that she creates through movement. What is true for the acrobat, Tsoukas and Chia (2002) argued, is also true for organizations: organizational stability is the result of movement, change, and continuous imbalances.

We furthermore scrutinize the *degree of concreteness* of the OaB image. While the idea of organizations being in a continuous state of becoming resonates well with the experiential basis of empirical studies that emphasize the fluid and inherently precarious character of organizational phenomena (e.g. Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015), the resulting figure ultimately remains somewhat abstract and generic. This is because the ontology of becoming is conceptualized to apply to the world as a whole and, accordingly, to many kinds of processualities, including questioning what is normally seen as an entity (see, for instance, Whitehead's notion of the mountain as process; Stengers, 2005). Hence, the OaB image leaves open *what particular kinds* of processes can be constitutive of organization.

Finally, let us look at how the OaB image allows us to deal with the process–entity paradox. The OaB lens is thought-provoking because it inspires organizational scholars (and practitioners) to radically rethink and question entitative notions of organization (Chia, 1995, 2005) by addressing the paradoxical constitution of organization (that which is stable) as becoming (that which is in continuous flux). However, ultimately, the OaB image does not directly tackle the process–entity paradox because, in its most far-reaching variants (e.g. Chia, 1995), it tends to reject the idea of 'organization as entity' altogether.

### **Organization as Practice**

The second stream of theorizing that we have chosen for this analysis is closely related to the previous one in that it also emphasizes processes over entities. Commonly associated with the 'practice turn' in the social sciences (Schatzki et al., 2001), Organization as Practice (OaP) perspectives highlight the situated, embodied, and unfolding character of social phenomena, 'as they become evident in the here-and-now' (Miettinen et al., 2009: 1309). In general, practices are defined here as 'what people do' (e.g. Jarzabkowski, 2008) and thus may refer to all sorts of activities in the social realm, such as political, cooking, recreational, or religious practices (Schatzki, 2006: 1863–1864). For our analysis, we will retain Schatzki et al.'s (2001: 11) more specific definition of practices as 'embodied, materially mediated arrays of human activity centrally organized around shared practical understanding'.

This focus on practice has developed across a number of topic areas within organization studies, such as strategizing (Vaara and Whittington, 2012), project management (Blomquist et al., 2010), or technology use (Orlikowski, 2007). Feldman and Orlikowski (2011: 1240) identified three approaches to the study of practice in organization studies: (1) the *empirical* approach, which focuses on 'how people act in organizational contexts'.

(2) the *theoretical* approach, which focuses on ‘the relations between the actions people take and the structures of organizational life’, and (3) the *philosophical* approach, which focuses on ‘the constitutive role of practices in producing organizational reality’. We will retain the latter to analyze the OaP image, as it explicitly engages in an ontological reflection about the primacy of social practices in constituting organization, and thus addresses the entity-process paradox.<sup>1</sup> More specifically, we will focus on the work of Schatzki (2005, 2006), for whom the practice perspective represents a distinct social ontology – a ‘site ontology’ – that holds crucial implications for organizations.

Schatzki’s practice ontology (Schatzki et al., 2001) is based on the belief that social phenomena occur in ‘sites’, which are particular types of contexts composed of a ‘nexus of practices’ and ‘material arrangements’, what he called a ‘field of practices’. Moreover, in this view, all social phenomena occur *within* and *compose* the field of practices that characterize them. This recursive relation between the field of practices and the social phenomena is a key principle of the practice lens. It implies that ‘phenomena always exist in relation to each other, produced through a process of mutual constitution’ (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011: 1242). The ongoing and processual nature of this relationship suggests that social phenomena are accomplishments produced, maintained, and transformed in every instance of action. Schatzki has explicitly applied this practice ontology to the study of organization, which he defined as ‘a bundle of practices and arrangements’ that includes, for example, ‘executive board practices, managerial decision-making practices, communication practices between managers and employees, practices of design, construction, supervision, shop-floor activity, advertising, and upkeep, as well as dispersed practices of giving orders, asking questions, and reporting problems’ (Schatzki, 2005: 477).

Regarding the *metaphor–metonymy dynamic*, Schatzki’s ontology of organization gives us an interesting view of the OaP image as grounded in a ‘metaphor from metonymy’ relation. The notion of ‘site’ is particularly relevant here: an organization is said to be situated *within* practices. This metonymic reasoning operates as a compression (on the vertical level) wherein the distinct elements that compose practices – human activities, bodies, materiality, rules, emotions, shared understanding – are compressed into an entity (the organization). This compression takes the image of a ‘bundle’ of practices, or of a loosely coupled arrangement of social and material elements, which *together* constitute the organization. This image of the ‘bundle’ of practices has been applied, for instance, in the project management literature to highlight the need for contextualizing projects (Winter et al., 2006) and for broadening their scope to include other organizational practices (Atkinson et al., 2006).

The ‘bundle’ metaphor is quite different than others (e.g. the organizational actor metaphor that we discussed previously; King et al., 2010), in that the specific components or parts need to be held together to act as ‘identity referents’ (Whetten, 2006) of the whole. In other words, the metonymic reasoning underlying Schatzki’s (2005, 2006) version of the OaP image leads us to see the organization as implied in the relation (or mesh) of the specific elements that compose the practice, and not in each one independently. Moreover, following what can be called a matryoshka logic (i.e. an ‘object within similar object’), this metonymic reasoning allows us to understand the coupling of the ‘bundle’ as a continuous unfolding of the organization into practices, which are then

unfolded into actions, which can also be unfolded into understandings, rules, emotions, and so forth. Bechky (2006) provides an interesting illustration of the metonymic reasoning underlying the OaP image. In her study of film projects, she showed how film work is collectively accomplished and coordinated through an array of interconnected practices. More specifically, her study established three key practices (enthusiastic thanking, polite admonishing, and role-oriented joking) through which film crew members learn and negotiate their roles. In other words, the system of roles in the film business is enacted and negotiated *in situ* through these practices.

Next, let us consider the *directionality of the process of imagination*. In the vertical (metonymic) dimension, following the principle of recursivity that characterizes the practice perspective (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011), the OaP image presents a bidirectional relation between the parts and the whole. In this context, what Schatzki (2005) called the structure or organization of practices is particularly relevant to our inquiry. In his view, practices ‘organize’ organization, but are also ‘organized’ by it. Let us return to Bechky’s (2006) study on film projects to illustrate this idea. As mentioned previously, her study illuminates the very practices that constitute the system of roles in filmmaking (in a metonymic–vertical logic, from the parts to the whole). At the same time, Bechky also demonstrated how, conversely, the system of roles organizes these practices (from the whole to the parts). For example, she showed how international career paths influence role-oriented joking. She concluded that film projects are organized around structured role systems whose nuances are negotiated in practices. As this example demonstrates, the bidirectionality of the OaP image allows for a processual understanding of organization through the recursive dynamic between practices and the structure of practice.

Regarding the degree of *concreteness* of the OaP image, we must note the emphasis on embodiment and materiality, which is one of the distinctive characteristics of OaP approaches. In this sense, we argue that the materiality of practices is what makes the OaP image more concrete and tangible, especially when considered in its empirical variant (cooking practices, teaching practices, ordering practices, etc.). Moreover, this concreteness can also be related to the embeddedness of organization in particular sites or contexts and material events. As Schatzki (2006) noted, the happening of an organization consists of the unfolding of performances in particular sites supported by the material world. The emphasis given to the *embodiment* of practices results in a metaphor that appeals to the direct and experiential basis (Gibbs, 2006) of human activities, and thus to a concrete understanding of organization as experienced phenomenon. As an example, let us consider Nicolini’s (2009) study on telemedicine, in which he proposed to *zoom into* the material and situated local production of organized activity. ‘Zooming in’ implies describing an array of embodied practices and artifacts such as official documents, practitioners’ narratives and conversations, and bodily actions. This movement is crucial for representing and understanding practices by taking the experiences of practitioners (e.g. nurses, physicians, patients) as starting point of the inquiry. Yet, as Nicolini argued, a second step is also needed: *zooming out* of practices in order to follow the connections between these practices in a historical account of organized activities. The need for this second step reveals, as we argue next, one of the main challenges of the OaP image: how to scale up while staying in the realm of practices.

To conclude, let us consider how the OaP image deals with the process–entity paradox. We argue that the strong focus on practices as the starting point of the analogical reasoning presented in this image and the metonymic compression at work diminish the entity-like dimension of organization. The metaphors implied in the ideas of organization as ‘site’, ‘field’, or ‘bundle’ of practices result in a loosely coupled, yet grounded, entity expressed in an array of human activities. Scaling up from the parts to the whole is rather difficult (see also, Nicolini, 2009): the organization stays at the level of human action or enacted structures (e.g. a system of roles). However, this does not imply a static definition of organization. To the contrary, the continuous unfolding of organization into actions, and then into practices, rules, emotions, matters, and so forth, offers yet another strong processual image.

### *Organization as Communication*

The third image we analyze, the Organization as Communication (OaC) image, has in the last decade gained considerable traction in organization studies, and particularly in organizational communication studies. Anchored in a ‘communicative constitution of organization’ or ‘CCO’ perspective (for a recent overview, see Brummans et al., 2014), this stream of theorizing is held together by the core idea that organizations essentially ‘consist of’, ‘emerge in’, or ‘are constituted by’ communication (Kuhn, 2012; Putnam and Nicotera, 2009; Taylor and Van Every, 2000). The OaC image is based on the assumption that language does not merely serve representational purposes but creates, constitutes, and shapes instances of social reality (Cooren, 2012; Craig, 1999). Accordingly, organizations are imagined here as *communication-based entities* (Taylor and Cooren, 1997); that is, as collective phenomena consisting primarily of communicational events or processes. It follows that individual organizational membership, hierarchies, job roles, etc., are seen as secondary means to make these occurrences of communication more likely (Blaschke et al., 2012).

Generally speaking, main proponents of the OaC perspective (e.g., Bencherki and Cooren, 2011) tend to be in close alignment with endogenous process thinking (e.g. Hernes and Weik, 2007a), as they share the assumption that organizations do not predate the very processes (of communication) that give rise to their existence in the first place. However, the OaC image gains specificity by focusing on one type of process in particular; that is, communication (i.e. a process of meaning negotiation through symbolic and material use; Ashcraft et al., 2009) as *the* fundamental constitutive process able to incarnate organizations. In other words, communication (the part) is grasped as the site and surface where the organization (the whole) gets instantiated and thus can sustain its existence (Taylor and Van Every, 2000). Moreover, a distinctive feature of the OaC image is that it presents a symmetrical or equivalent (e.g. Fairhurst and Putnam, 1999) relation between communication and organization: both terms are considered as ‘variant expressions for the same reality’ (Taylor et al., 1996: 28). We argue that this equivalent relation avoids the trap of considering organization (the whole) as a primary and separate phenomenon from its (constitutive) parts. Consequently, this process of imagination opens up paradoxical and recursive paths of thinking about organizations.

To further understand how the OaC image unfolds this constitutive logic, we will apply our analytical grid especially to the works of one of the core schools of CCO thinking, the Montreal School (see Brummans et al., 2014), which has developed a rich communicational ontology of organization and organizing over the past 20 years.

Concerning the type of the *metonymy–metaphor dynamic*, we can classify the OaC image as a ‘metaphor from metonymy’ relation. In the Montreal School’s conceptualization of organization, the starting point is a form of metonymic reasoning: ‘When I imagine an organization I have in mind nothing more than an interlocking network of communication processes’ (Taylor, 2003: 12). In other words, Taylor and his followers follow the idea that organizations *consist of* events or processes of communication (conversations and texts) that are connected to each other. The underlying metonymic logic that characterizes this viewpoint is inspired by Tarde’s (1899) maxim: ‘explain the large [organization] by looking at the small [communication]’ (Bencherki and Cooren, 2011: 1585, see also Cooren and Fairhurst, 2009). However, while the metonymic logic of the OaC image serves as the baseline premise of the Montreal School’s work, its proponents have mobilized additional metaphors in order to illuminate *how* the organization as an entity is connected to its constitutive parts; that is, events or processes of communication.

For instance, Bencherki and Cooren (2011) explain the constitutive relation between organization and communication by drawing on the metaphorical domain of ownership or possession. In their view, the organization as entity comes into being through both *attributive* (i.e. acknowledging or ascribing ownership) and *possessive* (i.e. acquiring or claiming ownership) relations to the communicative processes that represent its constitutive parts. Accordingly, the constitution of organization requires (1) the continuous and interrelated occurrence of communicative processes or events that are attributed to the organization as a collective entity or actor (Taylor and Cooren, 1997) and (2) that the organization is constructed as an entity that starts ‘possessing’ the very communicative processes that have given rise to its existence in the first place (Bencherki and Cooren, 2011).

In terms of the *directionality of the process of imagination*, the metonymic compression of the OaC image results in a symmetry and bidirectionality between the whole–parts relationship in both the vertical and horizontal axes. In the vertical (metonymic) dimension, the organization is imagined as being constituted through the occurrence of communicational events, which can also be seen as being populated and constituted by various ‘figures’, one of which is the organization (Cooren, 2010). Interestingly, this bidirectionality also applies to the horizontal (metaphorical) dimension of the OaC image: one can either perceive the organization or organizing as being ‘like’ communication or, conversely, perceive that communication has organizing properties (Cooren, 2000). Robichaud and Cooren (referring to the work of James R Taylor) also point out this recursive relation by defining organization as ‘an ongoing flux of interaction from which stabilized patterns of relations and meanings emerge, which, in turn, feed back into the interactions and joint activities of organizational members’ (2013: xvi).

Concerning the *degree of concreteness* of the OaC image, we must note two ideas related to the OaC lens. The first one relates to the empirical approach that characterizes CCO scholarship, which is summarized in the following motto: ‘never leav[e] the realm of communicational events’ (Cooren et al., 2011: 1153). A communicational event in this view is not limited to humans interacting with each other but also includes talk,

discourse, artifacts, metaphors, architectural elements, bodies, texts, or narratives in their performative character. Moreover, an event is not a single episode of action: it is an ongoing chain of interactions. This focus on communicational events results in what Fairhurst and Putnam (2004: 6) call a ‘grounded in action’ approach, which puts forward the contingent and situated dimensions of meaning negotiation that constitute organizational realities. A recent example is Vásquez et al.’s (2015) article on the (dis)ordering properties of organizational text in the context of project organizing. This empirical study focuses on three communicational events taken from three distinct project organizing contexts to examine the dynamics of delineating meaning (ordering) and opening meaning (disordering) that are at play in what is called in the article texts-in-use (e.g. a proposal form, a working document, and a post-project report in PowerPoint). The focus on communicational events allows the analysis to be grounded in situated local practices. However, the argumentation is also linked to a processual understanding of organization by viewing project organizations as being ‘moved by’ and ‘consisting of’ communicative practices of ordering and disordering.

The second idea concerns the material dimension of organization. Through the OaC lens, and according to the Montreal School, for the organization to exist it must be materialized in talk, bodies, objects, sites, texts, and so forth. Hence, these materializations are seen as acting for, or speaking on behalf of, the organization. They are considered to be actors that take part in constituting the organizational reality. Cooren et al. (2011: 1153) give the following example: ‘Something as material and (apparently) inert as a building, for instance, participates in the constitution of an organization through what it does: sheltering operations, channeling activities, impressing visitors, communicating some specific values, norms, and ideologies.’

Finally, let us consider how the OaC image enables scholars to tackle the process-entity paradox. The OaC image not only invites us to perceive the organization–communication relation in the form of a metonymic compression linking the whole to its parts but, importantly, the image also provides us with specific answers to the question of *how* the parts (communication) constitute the whole (organization). In other words, how is the organization as a somewhat stable entity constituted by something as fluid and dynamic as communication processes? The answer to this question lies in the double role of communication. First, it is *in* and *through* communication that meaning is constructed and that an interpretive framework is created to make sense of organizational situations (process). Second, communication transforms these scattered situations and local initiatives into a collective actor (entity). Thus, the paradoxical relation between entity and process that characterizes process thinking (Hernes and Weik, 2007a; Weik, 2011) is addressed by suggesting that organizations, as whole entities, are constantly reproduced in ongoing processes of communication. OaC scholars thus attend to both process and entity, as well as organization and organizing (Cooren et al., 2011).

## Discussion

We are finally ready to compare the three offsprings of the flux image – Organization as Becoming (OaB), Organization as Practice (OaP), and Organization as Communication (OaC) – by drawing on the three dimensions of our analytical framework: (1) the nature

**Table 2.** Metaphor-metonymy analysis of the three offsprings of the flux image.

|   | Organization as Becoming (OaB)   | Organization as Practice (OaP)  | Organization as Communication (OaC)  |
|---|--|---|--|
| Source concept of the image   | Becoming = perpetual process of change (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002: 576)   | Practice = embodied and materially mediated arrays of human activity (Schatzki et al., 2001: 11)  | Communication = complex and dynamic process of meaning negotiation (Ashcraft et al., 2009: 22)                 |
| Examples of empirical studies following the image                         | Bjerrregaard and Jonasson (2014); Packendorff et al. (2014)  | Bechky (2006); Nicolini (2009)  | Bencherki and Cooren (2011); Vásquez et al. (2015)   |
| <b>Analytical grid for studying metaphor-metonymy relations</b>           |  |   |  |
| (1) Metaphor-metonymy dynamics  | Metonymy within metaphor (metaphor as the main driver)   | Metaphor from metonymy (metonymy as the main driver)  | Metaphor from metonymy (metonymy as the main driver)   |
| (2a) Metaphorical (horizontal) directionality                             | Primarily unidirectional (understanding organization through a becoming lens)  | Primarily unidirectional (understanding organization through a practice lens)   | Bidirectional (understanding organization through a communication lens, and vice versa)                        |
| (2b) Metonymic (vertical) directionality                                  | Partly bidirectional (coproduction)  | Strongly bidirectional (equivalence)  | Strongly bidirectional (equivalence)   |
| (3a) Degree of concreteness of the source domain                          | Becoming as an abstract process  | Practice as both abstract and concrete process (material, embodied, and observable)   | Communication as both abstract and concrete process and practice (material, embodied, and observable)          |
| (3b) Degree of concreteness of the target domain                          | Rather abstract imagination of organization as emergent order (e.g. Tsoukas and Chia, 2002)                            | Rather abstract imagination of organization as bundle or mesh of practices (e.g. Schatzki, 2006)  | Rather concrete, anthropomorphized imagination of organization as (macro-) actor (e.g. Robichaud et al., 2004) |
| <b>Forms of dealing with the process-entity paradox</b>                   |  |   |  |
| Type of dialectical thinking (drawing on the terminology by Putnam, 2013) | Selection: tendency of denying the paradox by choosing one pole (process) as the primary (e.g. Tsoukas and Chia, 2002) | Separation: recognizing both poles, but tendency of collapsing the macro (entity) into the micro (practice) (e.g. Schatzki, 2005, 2006) | Connection: embracing the paradox (e.g. Bencherki and Cooren, 2011; Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015)             |

of the metaphor–metonymy dynamics, (2) the directionality of the process of imagination, and (3) the degree of concreteness of the image. Ultimately, these three dimensions can also serve as a means to explain the varying degrees to which these images allow for tackling the process–entity paradox. Table 2 summarizes the key elements of comparison between the three images that we have identified, based on our analytical framework. In the following, we will further illuminate these elements by discussing them point by point.

### *Metaphor–metonymy dynamics*

The metaphor–metonymy dynamics play out differently for each of the three images. As discussed above, the OaB image seems to be primarily driven by a metaphorical impetus, effectively challenging conventional notions of organization by means of the ‘becoming’ analogy (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). Hence, we can argue that the OaB image represents a ‘metonymy within metaphor’ (Goossens, 1990), given that the metonymic idea that organizations *consist of* processes of becoming is less pronounced. For instance, even though Tsoukas and Chia (2002) conceptualize organization as being generated and constituted by perpetual change or ‘becoming’, they also describe organization as an emergent order that is distinct from the very processes that have produced it in the first place. Our assessment is that, in the case of the OaB image, the process of imagination is primarily driven by a metaphorical or horizontal logic. This is also confirmed by the observation that scholars centered around the OaB image (who would affiliate themselves with ‘process organization studies’ or ‘process philosophy’) tend to reproduce the same horizontal mode of reasoning by moving from one process analogy to the next in their theorizations of organization (e.g. in the various chapters of the process philosophy handbook by Helin et al., 2014). However, this mode of reasoning may prevent scholars from delving deeper into the metonymic dimension of the image, which would require specifying the parts or processes that constitute organization.

In contrast, the process of imagination is different in the case of the OaP and OaC images, which both tend to be more strongly driven by a metonymic logic. The focus here is to look, on the micro level, at practices as arrays of activities (Schatzki, 2005, 2006) and/or communicative interactions (Bencherki and Cooren, 2011; Cooren et al., 2011) that collectively constitute organization. Accordingly, we believe it is valid to classify these two images as ‘metaphors from metonymy’ (Goossens, 1990), given that the metonymic insight is primary, and the metaphorical insight, secondary.

### *Directionality of the imagination of process*

In this dimension, we are interested in the extent to which the images invite for bidirectional thinking. As specified in our analytical grid (see Table 1 and Figure 2), we distinguish between bidirectionality in the horizontal (metaphorical) and vertical (metonymic) dimension. In the *horizontal dimension*, both the OaB and OaP images establish an asymmetric relation between the source and target domains. In both cases, the process of imagination tends to follow a unidirectional logic from the source to the target in that the becoming (or the practice) lens sheds light on organizational phenomena. However, this logic does not

necessarily work the other way around. For instance, one can hardly find OaB scholars interested in how an organizational lens can advance our understanding of becoming, which is a rather vague domain to begin with. In contrast, the OaC image seems to apply more symmetry and bidirectionality. While a large body of OaC-inspired research is concerned with viewing organizations through a communication-centered lens (thus operating in a similar logic to the OaB and OaP images), we can also find works in the same perspective that examine, in the opposite direction, the organizing properties of communication (e.g. Cooren, 2000; Vásquez et al., 2015). Accordingly, we can conclude that the OaC image is different in that it sparks bidirectional thinking in the horizontal dimension more than the other offsprings of the flux image tend to do. The bidirectionality of the OaC image is also shown in its capacity to connect two distinct academic disciplines (i.e. organization studies and communication studies), based on the assumption of a symmetric and isomorphic relation between organization and communication: 'If, indeed, the two constructs [organization and communication] are isomorphic, then all organizational theories contain implicit notions about communication and all communication theories, in turn, provide important insights about organizing' (Putnam et al., 1996: 396).

In the *vertical dimension*, bidirectionality plays out in yet different ways. To describe these differences in more detail, we draw on the analytical terminology established by Smith (1993; see also Putnam et al., 1996). Smith argued that the organization-process relation<sup>2</sup> can be described in various terms that exhibit different degrees of bidirectionality and symmetry. For her, the two strongest forms of bidirectionality are (1) *coproduction* (i.e. organizations and their processes 'stand in a coproductive relation as producers/products of one another'; Smith, 1993: 11) and (2) *equivalence* (i.e. organizations and their processes become one and the same). By drawing on her terminology to describe the vertical directionality of the three images, we can characterize the OaB image (in the version of Tsoukas and Chia, 2002) as bidirectional in the sense of 'coproduction'. As emphasized above, the OaB image is distinguished by an underlying logic according to which processes (becoming) produce organization (order), which produces processes, which in turn coproduce organization, and so on. However, in this regard, the OaB image does not go as far as the OaP and OaC images, which extend vertical bidirectionality between an entity and its constitutive parts or processes toward 'equivalence'. In other words, the OaP and OaC images both imply that the organization becomes inseparable from its constitutive processes (i.e. practices or communication).

### *Degree of concreteness of the image*

The criterion of concreteness is based on the assumption that metaphors and metonymies tend to become powerful heuristic devices by illuminating a target domain in the light of a more concrete and comprehensible source domain (see Cornelissen, 2008; Tsoukas, 1991). As we can see in Table 2, the concreteness of the resulting figure again varies for the three images. The OaB image invites us to draw on a rather abstract source domain (becoming) so as to shed light on a similarly abstract target domain (organization). Consequently, the image results in a somewhat generic figure that is difficult to grasp empirically. In contrast, the OaP and OaC images, presumably due to their stronger emphasis on metonymic reasoning, offer more concrete and observable figures. More than the OaB image, the OaP and

OaC images invite scholars to ground their understanding of organizations in the study of empirically observable practices (as arrays of actual activities; Schatzki et al., 2001) or communication (as interplay of conversations and texts; Taylor and Van Every, 2000). Both images are grounded in embodied (and very material) source domains, thus facilitating the heuristic value of the process of imagination.

Furthermore, the OaP and OaC images differ in the degree of concreteness of the target domain. The resulting figure of the OaC image tends to be more concrete than that of the OaP image. As previously argued, the OaP image invites us to perceive organizations as ‘bundles’, ‘sites’, or ‘fields’ of practices. The resulting figure invokes a somewhat abstract process of imagination that is limited in fostering our understanding of organizations as (processual) entities (see King et al., 2010). In contrast, the degree of concreteness of the resulting figure tends to be higher in the OaC image. This is primarily because of the actorhood metaphor that this image entails. Personifying the organization as a ‘macro-actor’ (Robichaud et al., 2004) grounds the target domain in an experiential basis. However, one can argue that the anthropomorphization of organizations as actors (see Shepherd and Sutcliffe, 2015) may result in a too reified and entitative conceptualization of organizations, while neglecting the processual side, at the same time (that is more pronounced in the OaB image, for example).

In sum, we can classify the three images in a continuum that ranges from the more abstract (OaB) to the more concrete (OaC) imagination of organizations as processual entities. We believe that the greater degree of concreteness of the OaC image is due to the strength of the metonymic compression that is characteristic of this image, which helps ground the target domain of organizations in a more concrete source of domain of (empirically observable) events of communication. Interestingly, the OaC image can help overcome some of the heuristic problems in the process of imagining organization as flux, such as the difficulty to scale down from the whole to the parts (OaB image), and inversely, to scale up from the parts to the whole (OaP image).

### *Type of dialectical thinking*

The three dimensions of our analytical framework explored the differences in the interplay of metaphorical and metonymic reasoning in the three offsprings of Morgan’s flux image (OaB, OaP, and OaC). In a next step, we will share our thoughts on the metaphor–metonymy relations found in these offsprings to explain how they differ in tackling the process–entity paradox. In order to do so, we follow Putnam’s (2013) classification of dialectical approaches, which allows us to describe how each of these offspring images deals with oppositional tensions (in this case, between process and entity) in imagining organization. As we see in Table 2, the type of dialectical thinking differs for each image.

We argue that works following the OaB image tend to adopt a *selection* approach (Putnam, 2013), which entails favoring one pole of the dichotomy (in this case, process) while ignoring the opposite (here, entity). This approach is one of the most typical ways of addressing oppositions and contradictions. However, as mentioned by Putnam (2013), it tends to overspecialize theory building by disregarding key elements and the relationships between the two poles of a dichotomy. The denial of the opposite pole makes it difficult to unpack the paradox. As mentioned previously, by selecting process over

entity, the OaB image is rather limited in providing answers to the question of *how* organizations are constituted by processes.

Next, let us consider the OaP image<sup>3</sup> that we classify as operating in a *separation* approach (Putnam, 2013), which is characterized by recognizing both poles of an opposition, but on different levels, at different times, or as different topics. A classic example in organization studies is the separation of micro and macro levels of analysis (see Burrell and Morgan, 1979). Usually, the macro orientations to organization engage in separation by treating the organization as a large and distinct body, dominating local interactions. In contrast, those who favor the local and adopt micro approaches (such as the OaP image) tend to engage in separation by collapsing the macro into the micro (e.g. the matryoshka logic of Schatzki's article, 2005), or by moving from one pole to the other (e.g. the focus on practices through entitative analytical constructs in the theoretical variant of the OaP image; e.g. Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011).

In turn, we argue that works following the OaC image tend to adopt what Putnam (2013: 27) calls a *connection* approach, which 'embraces the oppositions, respects and privileges both of them, preserves and celebrates their tensions to generate new constructs.' The OaC image presents a dialectical logic in which the opposite poles are connected. Concepts such as imbrication (Taylor, 2011), coorientation (Taylor and Van Every, 2000), metaconversation (Robichaud et al., 2004), or presentification (Cooren et al., 2008) embrace the process–entity tension and work from it – instead of collapsing one pole into another, or privileging one over the other. In this regard, the OaC image 'celebrates' this paradox and makes it the basis of theory building: to study both the entity and the process of organization (Cooren et al., 2011). This results in a way of imagining organization in which the process–entity paradox is unpacked by teasing out an array of other tensions such as presence–absence, integration–differentiation, stability–change, or fleeting–enduring (Putnam, 2013). Moreover, it allows for reconciling 'entitative' views of organization with processual views.

## Conclusion

### *Theoretical contributions*

Overall, our article offers two main theoretical contributions. First, we add to the body of work on images of organization initiated by Morgan (1980, 1983, 1986). In particular, our article extends Morgan's writings by specifying the *process of imagining organization* through the combination of metaphorical and metonymic analysis. In his later writings, Morgan (1996) hinted at the importance of including metonymy in the analysis of images of organization. With these reflections, he appeared to suggest that his metaphor analysis was incomplete. We took inspiration from this idea, as well as from work in linguistics and cognitive science suggesting that metonymy is a prime activity in thinking and imagining along with, or as part of, metaphors. In this article, we detail the different ways in which metaphor and metonymy may interact and form images of organization. We formalize these interrelations in an analytical grid (see Tables 1 and 2), which captures the basic operations of metaphorical–metonymic imagination. The value of the grid as a methodology is that it highlights different processes of imagination, as well as the images that they produce, depending on whether metonymy or metaphor

is the starting point or main emphasis and whether the process of imagination entails bidirectionality and concreteness.

In addition, the grid provides practical detail for the idea of ‘disciplined imagination’ (Cornelissen, 2006; Weick, 1989), which has not yet been specified in a direct operational manner. With our analytical grid, we hope to have provided a specific methodological ‘tool’ that researchers can use to guide their imagination, or to assess the basis of images with which they are confronted. Researchers can use the grid to discover alternative vocabularies and ways of thinking about organizations, or to evaluate and assess the heuristic value of particular images. Importantly, we have demonstrated the usability of this grid for comparing images of organization more generally and to explain why some images are better equipped than others to inspire imaginations of organizations in paradoxical or dialectical terms (see Putnam, 2013; Smith and Lewis, 2011).

In this regard, our framework complements Morgan’s work (1986, 1996) in that it allows researchers to study images of organizations in light of the dynamic interplay of these images’ metaphorical and metonymic dimensions. Rather than focusing on single images, as object-like representations, we believe there is value in thinking about metaphors as a continuous, dynamic, and paradoxical interplay of imagination, in which new (metaphorical) associations are made, new details are (metonymically) elaborated, and the link between them progressively shifts our understanding (see also Putnam and Boys, 2006). The framework also adds another dimension to Morgan’s canonical list of eight metaphorical images (1986), in that our grid helps researchers think about the nature and workings of each of his images, and deconstruct the image as a whole as well as its explanatory and interpretive details. In this context, our framework can be useful for a differentiated assessment on why certain images are more or less pronounced than others in imagining organizations in novel and paradoxical ways. For instance, the novelty of Morgan’s image of the ‘organization as psychic prison’ (1986) can be primarily linked back to its bidirectionality (i.e. by inviting us to rethink organization as prison and, vice versa, prison as organization) and the concreteness of the resulting figure. However, it is less pronounced in terms of metaphor-metonymy dynamics, as it seems to work first and foremost as a metaphorical analogy but less so as metonymic part–whole substitutions. At the same time, the heuristic value of this particular image is diminished by a rather close proximity of the source domain (prisons) and the target domain (organizations; see also Cornelissen, 2006). In sum, we hope that our framework can help further illuminate Morgan’s work (1986) by emphasizing that his eight images open up a wide spectrum and multifold configurations of imagining organization.

Second, by applying the grid, we contribute to unpacking the entity–process paradox in process organization research (see Bakken and Hernes, 2006; Hernes and Weick, 2007a; Weick, 2011). Imagining organizations as processual phenomena (see also Morgan’s notion, 1986, of the ‘organization as flux and transformation’) presumes a somewhat paradoxical relation between the organization as entity and as process: how can the fluid (process) constitute the comparably solid (entity), and how can something solid even be recognized in a fluid process? In this article, we directly address Hernes and Weick’s (2007a) call to further unpack the subtleties of this paradox. While we do not suggest that we have explained away the paradox, our study provides a more detailed understanding of the pathways of imagining how processes and organizations may coevolve and coconstitute each other. This detail, as we have demonstrated, comes from pushing our

understanding of process images beyond seeing them simply as metaphors. Instead, we highlight the value of analyzing process images regarding the interplay between metonymy and metaphor as a way of understanding the relations between specific details and the larger whole that are both 'at rest' and 'in flux'. As our study aims to have shown, the combination of metonymy and metaphor provides a useful explanatory framework for comparing different images regarding their ability to understand the paradoxical notion of organization as process.

By employing our analytical grid, we have added to the literature a novel and detailed metaphorical–metonymic analysis of flux-based images of organization. Since Morgan's work, flux-based images have become a mainstay of organizational scholarship (e.g. Hernes, 2014; Langley et al., 2013; Tsoukas and Chia, 2002), but have not, with the exception of Morgan's own writings, been analyzed in metaphorical and/or metonymic terms. This, we argue, has been a significant shortcoming, as the literature on process research is rife with metaphorical and figurative ways of thinking about organization and so would clearly benefit from such analysis. Our comparative analysis of three dominant offsprings of the flux image (Organization as Becoming, Practice, and Communication) suggests that the images scholars use are actually starkly different, even if they all are grounded in a processual understanding of organization. Such a difference implies that there is a need for organizational scholars to acknowledge the figurative roots of different process images and then assess, based on their constituent details, what insights and inferences such images afford. With our analysis, we show not only that different process images afford different forms of imagination, but also that they vary in their ability of capturing processes of organizing in dynamic, evolving, and concrete ways. For instance, we demonstrated that those images in which the metaphorical and metonymic dimensions were most closely interconnected (e.g. the OaC image) lend themselves particularly well to comprehend organizations as both processes and entities, because they tend to embrace the dialectical tension between the two poles (see Putnam, 2013).

### *Practical implications*

Based on these theoretical contributions, our article also offers a number of implications for organizational practitioners. In particular, we believe that our analytical grid, like Morgan's initial work (1980, 1986), can be insightful to practitioners as both a means of reflecting on their assumptions about organizations and of opening up new ways of thinking and imagining them. Our analytical grid, and more generally our considerations on the process of imagining organization, provide at least two insights for practitioners. First, our grid can be useful for reflecting about the images they draw on in their day-to-day activities, for instance, by sensitizing for the fact that imaginations tend to have not only a metaphorical but also a metonymic dimension (see also Morgan, 1996). For instance, we believe that our grid can be functional for managers as a means to illuminate the horizon of potential meanings of an image before actually mobilizing it in practice (see also Oswald and Schoeneborn, 2011). Such anticipatory ways of dealing with the process of imagining can be useful in practice, for example, in the context of change management (where metaphors tend to abound; see Dunford and Palmer, 1996; Marshak, 1993), especially in order to avoid that the use of images in organizational practices yields unintended and counterproductive effects (e.g. by neglecting the

bulimic connotations that a term like ‘lean organization’ may evoke in the context of organizational restructuring; see Dunford and Palmer, 1996; Oswald and Schoeneborn, 2011).

Second, our meta-theoretical reflection can also be seen as an invitation to imagine organization in paradoxical ways, and more particularly as both entity and process. The analysis of the three offsprings of the flux image reveals the advantages of embracing this paradox as it allows for a more dynamic understanding of the creation, transformation, and actual use of images in organization. For instance, the famous metaphor ‘Who says that elephant can’t dance?’ by the former chairman and CEO of IBM, Louis Gerstner Jr, is a good example of an image that keeps the notion of entity (the organization as elephant) in a fruitful tension with process (change as a form of dance; see also Oswald and Schoeneborn, 2011). In this respect, our analytical grid may help practitioners think about ways to redesign certain experiences for employees or strategically communicate ‘metaphors within metonymies’ (Goossens, 1995a) that embrace the paradoxical character of organization.

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### Notes

- 1 The empirical and theoretical approaches of Organization as Practice present a very distinct view of the process–entity relation. The empirical approach, the more prominent one in organization studies (in the literature known, for instance, under the label ‘strategy as practice’; Golsorkhi et al., 2010) tends to analytically separate the entity (organization) and processes (practices). In the theoretical approach, as Feldman and Orlikowski (2011) aptly observed, the focus on the relationships and performances (processes) that constitute the organizational world and the analytical use of entities (genres, artifacts, routines) tend to blur the distinction between entity and process.
- 2 Note that Smith’s work (1993) relates to root metaphors used to describe the organization–communication relation. However, we believe that her generic terminology can also be usefully applied to describe other organization–process relations and their directionality.
- 3 We will only consider the ontological (Schatzki, 2005, 2006) and theoretical (Feldman and Orlikowski, 2011) variants of the OaP image, because works following the empirical variant do not tend to adopt a dialectical lens.

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