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TOWARD A DIALECTICAL, SOCIOMATERIAL READING OF IDENTITIES, OCCUPATIONS AND TECHNOLOGY

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Abstract
Scholarly inquiry within the organizational and management disciplines advances a fundamentally dualistic approach to how technological change shapes occupational identity in contemporary work settings. If technology undermines established skills and meaningful engagement on the one hand, it enables new forms of professional agency and collective empowerment on the other. Whereas each perspective illuminates salient dynamics, both tend to analytically divide such identity-related outcomes, offering limited insight into how they coexist within socio-technical arrangements. This article thus seeks to redress this limitation by proposing a dialectical reading that conceptualizes occupational identity as emerging through socio-technical co-constitution, rather than as an outcome of technology. From this perspective, technology participates in the ongoing formation of occupational identity as part of relational configurations in which enabling and constraining dynamics are co-produced. Building on this viewpoint, we theorize occupational identity as constituted through the interaction of epistemic, affective, and agentic human–technological arrangements simultaneously shaped by knowledge practices, engagement, the coordination of institutionalized forms of work.

Keywords: technological change; work identity; occupations; future of work

Introduction

Technological change has become a defining feature of contemporary work, reshaping how occupations are organized (Baptista et al., 2020; Kivimaa et al., 2021; Liu et al., 2020), enacted (Pemer, 2021; Pareliussen et al., 2021), and understood (Gomber et al., 2018; Sakellariou Vecchiato, 2022). Within management and organization studies, a substantial body of research has examined the implications of digitalization (Klein Watson-Manheim, 2021; Pareliussen et al., 2021; Wallin et al., 2022; Pemer, 2021), automation (Lammi, 2021; Parker Grote, 2022), and artificial intelligence (Jarrahi et al., 2023; Raisch Krakowski, 2021) for work and professional life. Yet, despite this growing attention, explanations of how technology relates to occupational identity remain fragmented across divergent theoretical perspectives (Baptista et al., 2020; Barros et al., 2022; Raisch; Krakowski, 2021; Stein et al., 2013; van Doorn et al., 2023).

Broadly defined as the overlap between the collective self-concept ("who we are") and the functional roles ("what we do") that characterize members of a profession (Ashcraft, 2013; Pratt, Rockmann, Kaufmann, 2006), occupational identity may be negatively shaped by technology when the latter functions as a disruptive force that destabilizes ascribed professional skills, routines, and meanings (see e.g. Knop et al., 2024), thereby challenging

traditional forms of authority, and creating a subjective sense of harm to an individual's professional self-beliefs (Bechky, 2020; Craig, Thatcher; Grover, 2019; Gilani et al., 2019; Kashive et al., 2023).

For instance, early studies demonstrate that technologies like CT scanners disrupted traditional role relations by introducing uncertainty that threatened the authority of inexperienced radiologists, forcing them to rely on technologists and loosening established role structures (Barley, 1986). Similarly, in forensic science, the rise of DNA profiling created "evaluative spillovers" that challenged the working techniques and values of other occupational groups, such as firearms examiners, who viewed the push for objective standards as an affront to their values of holistic judgment (Bechky, 2020, p. 15). DiBenigno (2020), in turn, illustrates how professionals operating in complex organizational settings actively strive to maintain the influence of their occupational identities as technologies reshape coordination and task boundaries.

All in all, these studies suggest that technological change is closely intertwined with ongoing processes of identity negotiation, in which occupational identity stability is continually disrupted by evolving technological environments. However, “occupational identity disruption” may be equally triggered by positive advancements in technology use when the latter functions as an enabling resource that supports new forms of learning, collaboration, and professional emancipation, facilitating identity expansion and transformation (Hedman, 2017; Faulconbridge, Sarwar, Spring, 2023; Hein-Pensel, 2026; Lam, 2019; Nelson, Anthony, Tripsas, 2023).

Research evidence indicates that one of those positive advancements occurs when technological systems are integrated into professional practice, prompting workers to resignify their roles and expertise (Baptista et al., 2020; Raisch; Krakowski, 2021; Kronblad Jensen, 2023; Beane; Anthony, 2023). A classic case of identity reconfiguration was observed among librarians, who initially dismissed internet search as a "problematic niche" but later redefined their occupational identity from "masters of search" to "connectors of people and information" (Nelson and Irwin, 2014, p. 916). This shift enabled them to cede searching tasks to technology while focusing on new activities that reinforced a redefined identity.

Hence, although these contrasting accounts capture important aspects of occupational identity amidst scenarios of technological change, they implicitly rely on a dichotomous view of its enabling and constraining effects, treating them as alternative outcomes rather than co-occurring dynamics (Dafoe, 2015; MacKenzie, Marks, Morgan 2015; Wallin, Nokelainen, Kira, 2022; Burghardt Moeller, 2024). This paper then argues that such a dualistic framing obscures a more fundamental process: enabling and constraining effects may be co-emergent properties of the same relational processes through which work is organized and identity is enacted.

Reconceptualizing the relationship between technological change and occupational identity in this way involves moving beyond oppositional models that yet reproduce a "technological determinism" paradigm in which a specific technology will inevitably produce a specific organizational or identity outcome (Dafoe, 2015; Leonardi Jackson, 2004; Grant et al., 2006; Leonardi, 2009; Tripsas, 2009; Utesheva et al., 2016). While the current scholarship has made some progress in transcending an earlier prevalent "technological imperative" that ignored the social context where occupations and technology interact (Barley, 1986; Leonardi, 2007; Bechky, 2020; Pakarinen Huising, 2023; Zhang and Su, 2025), a broader socio-technical configuration encompassing multiple and simultaneous recursive interactions between individuals, collective occupational structures, and institutionalized technological systems is

still missing (Bailey Barley, 2020; Wallin, Nokelainen, Kira, 2022; Reissner Armitage-Chan, 2024; Hein-Pensel, 2026).

As such, this paper makes a threefold contribution. First, it advances occupational identity theory by developing a dialectical reading of socio-technical co-constitution that reconceptualizes identity formation not as an individual or socially constructed outcome, but as an emergent process generated through recursive relations between occupational practices and technological arrangements. Second, it theorizes the dialectical nature of technological change through the "three-pendulum metaphor", demonstrating how enabling and constraining dynamics are not opposing effects, but co-produced properties of the same socio-technical processes through which occupational identities are continuously formed and reconfigured. Third, it contributes to socio-technical systems theory and sociomaterial perspectives by extending these traditions to the domain of occupational identity, specifying how their core assumptions of relationality and entanglement operate through a multilevel mechanism spanning epistemic, affective, and agentic dimensions of work.

The remainder of the paper is organized as follows. The next section revisits the dominant perspectives on technology and occupational identity, highlighting their shared reliance on fragmented and dualistic assumptions. We then develop the "three pendulum metaphors" as a critique of the prevailing dualism in the extant literature occupational identity literature. Building on this synthesis, we propose a dialectical re-reading of this literature organized around socio-technical dimensions of identity co-constitution.

The positive-negative divide between occupational identity and technological change

Technology as an occupational "identity boost"

A consistent body of literature has shown that integrating technology in the workplace can be heralded as a transformative force that emancipates professionals by reshaping their identities in virtual environments, enhancing their skills, and fostering new forms of collaboration through hybridization (Anteby, Chan, DiBenigno, 2016; Boudreau et al., 2014; Bharatan et al., 2021; Kronblad Jensen, 2023; Susskind Susskind, 2015; Bévort Suddaby, 2016; Noordegraaf, 2020; Cornelissen et al., 2021). As such, this section explores the underlying mechanisms by which technologies help professionals transition between the real and the virtual worlds as if they had developed an "identity boost," and how in this case, technology is often framed as a tool, a medium, or an artifact of which humankind can take advantage and/or control to exploit and enact different discourses of professionalism (Kuhn, 2006; Nelson, Anthony, Tripsas, 2023).

One primary way technology facilitates the emancipation of occupational identity is by fostering the development of a hybrid professional identity. Hybrid identity refers to the merging of traditional and digital aspects of professional roles, creating a sense of being more adept in the real world because of an improved self-construal in the virtual environment (Turkle, 1995; Lam, 2019; Craig, Thatcher, Grover, 2019; Pakarinen Huising, 2023). In line with this, Carter and Grover (2015) introduce the concept of IT identity, arguing that the extent to which individuals view the use of IT as integral to their sense of self lies in how professionals learn to see themselves as part of a technologically adept workforce based on others' professional behaviors and interactions online. Riemenschneider and Armstrong (2021, p. 1149) further emphasize this by identifying the key components of an "information systems professional identity", which is grounded in the integration of tech-related business skills and

behaviors valued by IT professional teams in their online interactions, such as continuous learning and a problem-solving profile.

Alternatively, hybrid identities can occur due to the disruption of knowledge boundaries across different occupations, when the mutually constitutive nature of one's internal and external identity work in virtual environments calls upon an agentic activity to bring about inclusivity and innovation across fields (Beane Anthony, 2023; Lam, 2019; Kronblad Jensen, 2023). Such an agentic activity is vital to contradict the idea that technology is spelling the 'end of the professions', as professionals often make use of intertwined boundary work to respond to disruptions and protect interests and resources by engaging in multiple interdependent occupational identities (Faulconbridge, Sarwar, Spring, 2023). When knowledge boundaries are not clearly defined across professions, individuals are invoked to catalyze adaptation and resilience through the hybrid identities they perform, meaning they will be the ones to differentiate between core competencies and thus maintain their identities' distinctiveness in the workplace (Lam, 2019).

As an example of the development of hybrid professional identities in the face of knowledge boundaries, Faulconbridge, Sarwar, and Spring (2023) found that tech professionals in professional service firms (PSFs) maintained a work identity centered on the advanced skills and creativity in using AI applications, positioning themselves as collaborators in cross-functional projects. In contrast, lawyers stuck with their traditional roles centered on advanced legal skills, judgment, context sensitivity, and bespoke decision-making. Meanwhile, accountants, from whom were expected a tech-savvy profile to adapt to the changing working landscape, embraced AI for routine tasks while focusing on higher-value tasks that required professional judgment based on their professional experience and training. This inter-group dynamic illustrates the creation of a protective boundary around which professionals can redefine or reassert their roles and identities to showcase their unique capabilities in light of technological disruption.

Additionally, technology is framed as an "identity boost" regarding its pivotal role in fostering social media-enabled connections and the sharing of online collective identities, which can lead to one's occupational identity emancipation through identification with joint social identities (Vaast, 2019; Louis Mielly, 2022). This happens because technology allows for a synchronic collective behavior in the exchange of practical and symbolic resources shared within a given professional community (Ackland O'Neil, 2011). Specifically, multiple social identities (e.g., ethnic, national, or gender identities) are discursively resignified through affective interactions with social actors within the online groups to which one feels attached or belongs, which then becomes another source for occupational identification (Eddington, Jarvis, Buzzanell, 2022; Ren et al., 2012; Chávez, 2020). One example of this process is when some users curate online personas that showcase their expertise while networking with others in their field (Vaast, 2019) and establish themselves as thought leaders through content sharing and engagement in online communities and social media platforms (Gilani et al., 2019; Hedman, 2017; Zheng et al., 2021; Mellado Alfaro, 2020).

Just as technology can be an emancipatory tool, it can also be a medium for new forms of collaboration and work structures through which personal identity traits integrate with occupational identities. Since technology allows for different types of virtual work—virtual teams, remote control, and simulations—digital simulation technologies can decouple work from physical objects, leading to new organizational structures and dependencies (Bailey, Leonardi, Barley, 2012; Boudreau et al., 2014). New organizational structures are found in how technology enables remote work in digital nomadism through the performance of professional identities centered around work-life integrations toward physical mobility

(Kronblad Jensen, 2023; Aroles et al., 2023; Aroles et al., 2020; Bonneau et al., 2023; Cook, 2023; Toivanen, 2026). These are possible because technology, in this case, acts as a medium for the symbolic construction of glamorized internet-driven lifestyle occupations reliant on a patterned set of mythologies invoking the ideals of fun, authenticity, and creative freedom (Duffy Wissinger, 2017; Bonneau, Aroles, Estagnasié, 2023).

Another example stems from the gig economy, often framed as a way to cope with the erosion of organizational structures that fail to provide stable sources of occupational identification, fostering feelings of isolation and uncertainty (Hondros, Schiemer, Vogelgsang, 2023). Although the authors do not disregard the emotional anxiety and instability emerging from digital work, they suggest technology can become a medium through which workers facilitate identity formation and meaning-making towards their occupations. Precisely, technology would be a medium to develop personalized environments of belonging and community in digital spaces where workers would perform three integrated activities: labor (which serves necessities), work (which creates lasting products), and action (which serves to disclose the self in "spaces of appearance", i.e., virtual collective environments where workers can be seen and recognized by others). Ultimately, such a distinction would be essential to deal with the transiency of the labor market, both in the physical and digital future of work.

Anthony and Crosina (2018) also discuss technology as a positive medium when they contend it can help create collective meaning systems not only through how organizations interpret occupations, but also through how individuals form various bonds to technologies central to the execution of their work. Such bonds would be based on individual assessments of differences in the sources and consequences of technological change, implying that technology would be a medium to transform ongoing negative views of traditional labor routines and processes.

Bailey and Barley (2020) complement this viewpoint, arguing that scholarship on the role of artificial intelligence should go beyond design and use to incorporate variation in work practices, as these variations affect how individuals perceive their roles and identities within the workplace. The authors acknowledge that the use of intelligent technologies extends beyond individual work identities to promote institutional changes in the way organizations structure roles and responsibilities in response to technological advancements. Therefore, considering technology as a medium for different work-related bonds and meanings may be a possible venue for shifting from the traditionally “negative paradigm” where intelligent technologies replace labor to an “augmented intelligence” paradigm where occupational identities cannot be reflected upon without specific technological uses (Shestakofsky, 2017; Bailey Barley, 2020; Raisch Krakowski, 2021).

Finally, technology as an artifact enables workers to contemplate the role of workplace objects in shaping their occupational identities through the realization of their organizational utility. Robinson and Baum's (2020) study of retired chefs revealed objects can serve as totems and trophies for nostalgia, reminding workers of their skills and achievements and allowing self-construals on how work was or ought to be in light of who or what they are and were. This finding is important because it indicates the materiality of technology holds symbolic powers deeply revelatory of the occupational identities one has been willing to perform and, especially, those one has been unwilling to give up upon retirement. As such, it suggests access to certain types of technologies as occupational artifacts may be linked with the idea of successfully performed identities transcending space and time (Robinson Baum, 2020) to help individuals cope with identity conflicts even outside the professional sphere (e.g., whenever divorce, aging, mourning), meaning technology as an occupational artifact

may be a platform to investigate work identities' relationships with other social and personal identity categories.

Technology as an occupational "identity threat"

Most studies in occupational identity scholarship render technology as a threat to the future of work and occupations. In a slight resemblance to Postman's (1992) Technopoly, technology would negatively shape occupations and work identities by systematically dictating the terms and conditions of work in relation to one's technological capabilities rather than to essential human skills or needs. This shift would ultimately lead to the depersonalization of work and the prioritization of efficiency and productivity mindsets over social considerations (Raisch Krakowski, 2021; Vaast Pinsonneault, 2021).

In this vein, it can be argued that technology as an occupational "identity threat" is not merely a tool or a neutral instrument (Winner, 1977; Trist, 1981; Ropohl, 1999; Pickering Cetina, 2001; Barad, 2003; Orlikowski, 2008; Leonardi, 2011). Rather, it carries implicit values and ideologies that overshadow important aspects of occupational identity construction, such as creativity, craftsmanship, interpersonal relationships, and organizational identifications (Barley, 1986; Bechky, 2006; Craig, Thatcher, Grover, 2019; Petriglieri et al., 2019; Nelson, Anthony, Tripsas, 2023). This section then explores the underlying mechanisms by which technologies are held as autonomous entities humankind cannot control, evolving as an inevitable aggregate into one's occupational identity constitution.

When new technologies are unconsciously incorporated into the evolving scope of modern professions, they prevent workers from developing the key judgment and analytical reasoning that defines their occupation, resulting in an incomplete professional identity. Anthony (2021) found that knowledge workers in investment banking often black-box their analytical technologies, treating them as given without understanding them. This black-boxing not only influences the knowledge outputs of these workers but also constrains the development of junior members' expertise, impacting their career trajectories and the further development of their occupational identity. Therefore, the dependence on technology and the lack of understanding it engenders can lead to a diminished sense of agency among workers, who may feel alienated or reduced to mere operators of complex systems (Anthony, 2021; Petriglieri et al., 2019).

Moreover, compulsory automated technology adoption entails there is a relational aspect that may be lost (or at least compromised) to the identity construction of both senior professionals and occupational apprentices (Ashforth, Harrison, Corley, 2008; Anteby, Chan, DiBenigno, 2016; DiBenigno, 2020; Beech, Brown, Coupland, Cutcher, 2021). In conceptualizing "inverted apprenticeships," Beane and Anthony (2023, p. 21) showed how senior-junior interactions allow seniors to mount informed critiques of technologized methods, reassuring their professional identity as an expert through their mastery of older, "superior" techniques. Seniors' relations with junior members are therefore the "critical channel" through which senior professionals maintain their mandate to lead and advance their positions in the face of technological disruption.

At the same time, Beane's (2019) earlier study demonstrated that the introduction of robotic surgery has led to the emergence of opportunistic and isolated "shadow learning" practices among surgeon residents. Technology represented, in this context, a shift away from traditional "legitimate peripheral participation" (p. 90), where learning from senior members

was a collective, collocated process, moving toward a “helicopter teaching” (p. 99) style in robotic surgery. Such a shift meant local relationships with cohorts and mentors faded while trainees directed their relational focus toward a broader online community of anonymous expert surgeons to build a sense of their future professional selves, at the expense of an ensuing premature specialization and greater struggle to learn under no supervision.

On the whole, these findings suggest that technology has the power to trigger enacted daily relational practices toward occupational identity construction across multiple levels of professional experience. Technology may interfere with where both junior and senior professionals seek out specific types of relational environments, whom they decide to learn their craft from, how professional training must be conducted, and even dictate a sort of “relational stratifications” where professionals exhibiting high performance in technical knowledge gain exclusive and disproportionate access to practice alongside other experts (Beane, 2019; Anthony, 2021; Beane Anthony, 2023). Ultimately, technology conditions asymmetrical inter-personal relationships into how occupational identities are forged amidst the turmoil of technological change.

An analogous symptomatic feature is that workers are to sustain a self-image and discourse aligned with tech-fetishized organizational identities, e.g., by internalizing the burden of constant upskilling, adhering to algorithmic control regimes, or manipulating their professional identity through “mandatory fun” and “greenwashing” (Behrend et al., 2024; Selenko et al., 2022; Vaast Pinsonneault, 2021). Fears of obsolescence drive self-initiated learning as a stressful obligation rather than an opportunity, forcing workers to prioritize technical skills over the core tasks that define their professional identity (Wallin et al., 2022). Those who do not comply with such digital demands often become riddled with insecurity and anxiety as they watch their traditional expertise be devalued by automation, thereby losing the possibility of building a cohesive, long-term professional identity (Wallin et al., 2022; Brünker et al., 2023).

In the same way, algorithmic management may conflate with one's assessment of professional worth in the platform economy insofar as algorithmic metrics function as a form of affective and ideological control (Barros et al., 2022; Kellogg et al., 2020). While algorithmic management inflates a “fantasy of control” in which workers believe they can subvert traditional organizational systems (Brünker et al., 2023; Vaast Pinsonneault, 2021), digital workers must constantly comply with a self-image of an agentic, independent worker that silently lives side by side with mentally taxing, repetitive labor to prevent their digital identities and presence from faltering (Wallin et al., 2022; Aroles et al., 2020; Bonneau et al., 2023; Toivanen, 2026).

In organizations with intensified remote work, where an image of an “open culture” or “new work” is often promoted, workers are also driven to build an affective experience of “fun” around the tasks they perform through high-intensity rewards (Kellogg et al., 2020). Gamified technologies like scoreboards, digital points, and badges can be used to reward the collective manipulation of a “tech-forward identity,” characterized by workers’ compromise of their capacity to set moral or practical limits on their labor and merrily accepting work overload (Brünker et al., 2023; Kellogg et al., 2020). Other contours of such a “tech-forward identity” include workers impersonating an “empowerment archetype” of a self-directed, proactive intraentrepreneurial behavior who takes total responsibility for their own development (Brünker et al., 2023; Vaast Pinsonneault, 2021). Even the ease of modern communication technologies have changed the way professional identities are forged around time control when they prompt workers to comply with an organizational discourse of being

"always available," as if being "professional" implied one's restricting their own needs to align with organizational demands (Behrend et al., 2024; Wallin et al., 2022).

Beyond developing a tech-fetishized occupational identity to respond to institutional pressures, technology may also threaten occupational identities by transforming individual and collective patterns of action. Because occupational identity is rooted in the overlap between "who we are" and "what we do" (Ashcraft, 2013; Pratt, Rockmann, Kaufmann, 2006), any technology that alters the "doing"—the specific, habitual patterns of work—directly jeopardizes the "being" (Nelson Irwin, 2014; Anteby, Chan, DiBenigno, 2016; Craig, Thatcher, Grover, 2019).

Barley's (1986, 1990) foundational research of medical imaging devices is allusive of such a dynamics. He found that the introduction of such technologies disturbed ingrained work scripts because the "nonrelational elements" of a role (i.e. the solitary tasks and skills an individual performs) were the first to be impacted. Therefore, Barley (1986, 1990) showed that the physical attributes of technologies have the potential to socially alter the structure of professional functions and identifications, as they result in a cascade of erosion of traditional professional identities starting from how each worker must adapt "behavioral grammars" (p. 83) that inform everyday tasks to how such an adaptation spills over into role relations across various organizational departments.

Furthermore, when technology changes how a task is performed, it can prevent workers from "enacting" the very behaviors that define their professional selves (Pemer, 2021; Dierdorff et al., 2021). The execution of role-based tasks provides the evidence that an individual embodies their professional identity, especially because it allows professionals to receive competency-based validation from their peers (Bloom et al., 2021; Brown, 2022; Iatridis et al., 2022). Thus, whenever established work routines are interrupted due to technological change, they also prevent identity verification, resulting in a loss of competence-based self-esteem within a professional group (Craig, Thatcher, Grover, 2019; Bloom et al., 2021; Ma Agarwal, 2007). Similarly, continuing to carry out some tasks even if AI is able to do them indicates task execution serves vital identity functions to one's professional membership insofar as workers enact a series of "professional self-understandings," or even experience a "disruption of self-continuity" in the absence of certain work-related tasks (Goto, 2021; Selenko et al., 2022).

In a nutshell, as technologies become conditioning agents of occupations under ongoing (re)construction in postmodernity, they negatively shape occupational identity construction, causing workers to resist or react upon the introduction of new technologies into their occupational practices (Bailey Barley, 2020; Huising, 2014, 2015; Nelson, Anthony, Tripsas, 2023; Kellogg et al., 2020; Wallin et al., 2022). In addition, because scholars acknowledge technology has the potential to enhance efficiency and productivity, it also carries risks of depersonalization (Barley, 1986; Selenko et al., 2022; Hondros, Schiemer, Vogelgsang, 2023), loss of traditional skills and values (Beane, 2019; Beane Anthony, 2023; Bechky, 2020), and the redefinition of professional identity on the basis of workers needing to maintain (or develop) a critical and reflective approach to technology's integration into work so they can have human-centered values and practices protected (Nelson, Anthony, Tripsas, 2023; Craig, Thatcher, Grover, 2019; Bailey Barley, 2020).

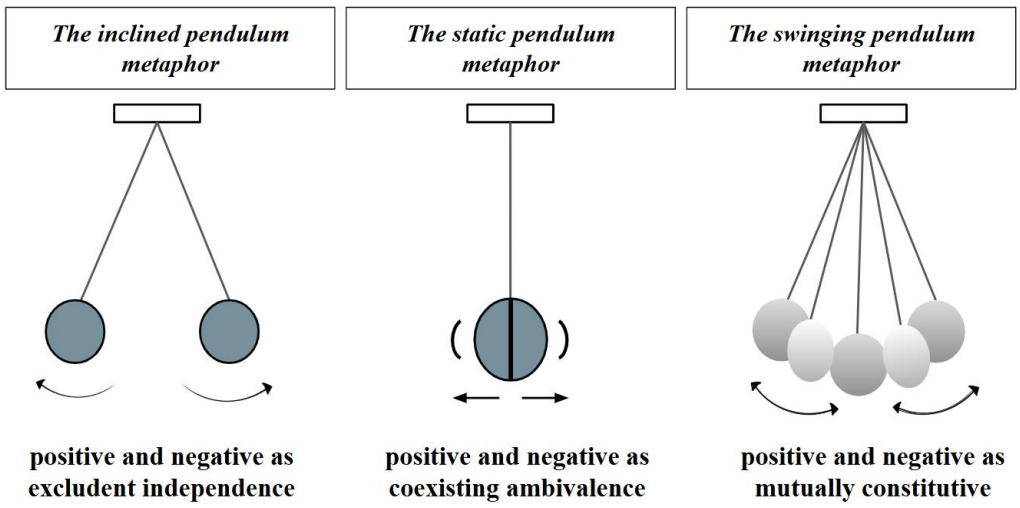
Limitations of the positive-negative dualism: The "three pendulum metaphors"

Considering what we have covered in the previous subsections, it is fair to state there is an extensive body of evidence sustaining technology use produces disparate occupational

identity outcomes, giving rise to what Raisch and Krakowski (2021) have labelled the "automation-augmentation paradox" in AI management scholarship. Research on human–machine collaboration, for instance, tends to frame AI and related technologies as either augmenting human capabilities or threatening dehumanization and job displacement (Shestakofsky, 2017; Reissner Armitage-Chan, 2024), particularly because they reckon collaboration with intelligent systems reorganizes autonomy, efficiency, and control within divergent relational contexts (Barley, 1986; Kellogg et al., 2020; Anteby Molnar, 2012; Anteby, Chan, DiBenigno, 2016).

However, treating identity outcomes as essentially contradictory effects of technology may point to a more fundamental limitation in how the relationship between technology and occupational identity is conceptualized in existing research. When findings are portrayed as having separate, opposing natures or effects, they tend to be disregarded as disciplinary bias and labor market polarization (Raisch; Krakowski, 2021), resulting in what we call "the inclined pendulum metaphor" (see Figure 1 for a comparison with other metaphors). Through such a metaphor, we group research evidence that still needs to transition to a relational ontology (Floridi; Sanders, 2004; Rai, Constantinides, Sarker, 2019), acknowledging human and technology as agents so closely intertwined in hybrid organizational systems that their relations, rather than individual actions or effects, determine identity outcomes across time and space.

Figure 1 – Three metaphors for interpreting the relationship between technology and occupational identity



Source: The authors.

Even when scholars acknowledge that technological change has both negative and positive effects on workers' occupational identity, these effects are treated as independent phenomena that coexist, originating what we named "the static pendulum metaphor." In this case, although both effects are found together, adding greater nuance to the empirical evidence on the phenomenon, they remain polarized in an immanent and simultaneous ambivalence, without advancing the mechanisms by which these effects can occur simultaneously.

Literature findings exemplifying such an ambivalent relationship can be found, e.g., in how practitioners who become academics experience an "amorphous" simultaneous identification and dis-identification" frequently oscillating between their past practitioner

selves and present academic identities, without ever achieving a singular, integrated self (Lam, 2019). Likewise, workers may form "ambivalent identities" whenever they feel they have some control over technology and can use it to attempt to learn new skills, yet remain with "conflicting thoughts, feelings, and actions" whenever their previous identity doesn't match new technological requirements (Wallin et al., 2022).

Even in research involving social media technology and its influence on identity construction, ambivalent findings indicate social media may simultaneously help engendered groups reshape gender dynamics through online political empowerment but, at the same time, make these subjects' fear their overtly politicization be judged against their public reputation for professional competence (Vaast, 2019). Social media can also represent a space where resistant professional identities are crafted and enacted against the regulation of traditional industries like print journalism (Barros, 2018), though it creates "invisible identity cages," where the monetization of romanticized lifestyles demands professionals incorporate their personal passions and interests into "desired selves" followers feel compelled to embody and perform (Bonneau, Aroles, Estagnasié, 2022). And, finally, whereas social media can help members of biosocial communities' forums navigate "high-stakes precarious categories", it may equally cause them to face a constant need to monitor their compliance with moral expectations that sustain a cohesive professional identity (Cheded et al., 2022).

In order to explain this co-occurrence of opposing findings, we contend, based on socio-technical theory, that both the negative and positive effects of technological change on occupational identity mutually constitute one another, introducing the "the swinging pendulum metaphor." When we state that both present a dialectical relationship, we refer to the fact that, at various moments, the often positive/negative influence of technology on occupational identity co-creates its opposite extreme, to the extent that these effects (whether positive or negative) represent merely externalities of recursive socio-technical relationships across multiple levels of organizational life.

Aligned with our argument, Pratt et al. (2006) maintain that professional identity construction is actually triggered by "work-identity integrity violations", i.e., negative experiences of mismatch between "who I am" and "what I do" and the ensuing stress they provoke may be necessary to spark the learning cycles that lead to a cohesive, customized professional identity. Some evidence allusive of our argument is present in how professionals must often "take hits to their image" by performing menial "scut work" so this work can become a net gain for them to build the relational resources and "relational authority" required to eventually demonstrate their professional expertise effectively (Huising, 2015). In a similar vein, on distinguishing between labor and action digital platform work, strenuous labor is often an "effortful accomplishment" required to prevent identity decay and to establish the "space of appearance" where a meaningful social identity can finally emerge (Hondros et al., 2023).

Moreover, within intergroup relationships, senior professionals may use their authority to scrutinize juniors' use of technology, creating a negative affective pressure in the form of a "productive fear of embarrassment" that forces juniors to "peel back the black box" of technology and lead to the reproduction of expertise and a master-level professional identity (Anthony, 2021). At the same time, in "inverted apprenticeship" configurations, it is seniors' lack of technical skills that creates a negative tension in the form of a "positional threat" driving seniors to restructure their interactions with juniors and allowing them to acquire new skills while preserving their high seniority status (Beane Anthony, 2023).

Hence, for technology to exert a negative influence on occupational identity construction, it must necessarily exert a positive one as well, so that both the negative and positive aspects

can then be recognized as such in their codependent individuality. This dialectical relationship is captured by the "swinging pendulum metaphor," as it is only through an analysis of the tension between these two currently polarized effects of technology on occupational identity that we can grasp the mechanisms by which these two phenomena co-occur and constitute one another. Paraphrasing the words of Poole and van de Ven (1989) on the nature of paradoxical relationships in the management and organization studies (MOS) field, engagement with one side of the tension may set the stage, or even create the conditions necessary, for the other's existence; in addition, over time there is often a mutual influence between the opposing forces, with swings from one side to the other.

Under such a dialectical lens, it is thus possible to conceive the positive and negative identity emerging of technology adoption as co-emergent effects of the specific relational configurations through which identity is continuously formed and reconfigured. Also, it is possible to understand that strands of research leaning toward a persistent conceptual separation between the opposing effects of technology ultimately obscure the co-constitutive processes through which occupational identity is simultaneously enabled and constrained across organizational and material contexts. As such, we draw on socio-technical systems theory and extend insights from sociomateriality to develop our first proposition:

P1.: Occupational identities are co-constituted through socio-technical processes in which technology use simultaneously produces enabling and constraining dynamics.

Toward a dialectical reading of occupational identity and technological change

Epistemic co-constitution: The enactment of knowledge-based reconfigurations of technical work

In the context of technological change, disparate relational dynamics have been examined across a range of interrelated domains. To begin with, research on occupational knowledge highlights how technological systems reshape what counts as legitimate expertise and how it is shared and validated in practice (Bechky, 2006; Anthony, 2018; Nelson Irwin, 2014; Østerlund Carlile, 2005). However, from socio-technical systems theory we learn that, when professionals interact with a technological artifact, they enact a "technology-in-practice", i.e., a specific set of rules and resources that structures their use and allow professionals to enact existing occupational norms (Orlikowski, 2008; Barad, 2003). So, after all, how do we escape this "occupational knowledge paradox"?

Modern scholarship emphasizes that expertise is not an "intellectual possession" but is relationally constituted, i.e., generated, applied, and recognized through interactions . Knowledge work is stabilized when members of a profession "domesticate" or "caretake" AI and other technologies, embedding them into a network of interactions that machines alone cannot replicate, neither can humans without them (Pakarinen Huising, 2023). Yet, technology destabilizes knowledge work by uncoupling the traditional relationship between hierarchical position and practical skill, while also forcing occupations to defend their legitimacy against technological standards established by related professions (Leonardi, 2009, 2011; Beane Anthony, 2023; Bechky, 2020).

Through a dialectical and sociomaterial lens, however, occupational routines and technologies are produced through the imbrication of human agency (what humans can do to achieve the "doing" of their professions) and material agency ("what the technology can do"). Professionals navigate the "kick back" of a technology's material properties, constructing

perceptions of affordance (i.e., “possibilities of use”) or constraint, which then lead them to change either their routines or the technology itself (Leonardi, 2007, 2009, 2011).

As workers engage in occupational practices that are essentially technological, they develop practical intelligibility, which translates as a sense of what is appropriate or expected to perform one’s occupational-related tasks and achieve specific ends (Loscher et al., 2019). This shared "knowing-in-practice" is what allows a community of practitioners to coordinate their actions towards technology (Brown Duguid, 1991; Lave Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Professional boundaries are thus maintained through "category-bound" technical practices, in which certain activities become so conventionally tied to a specific identity that the identity can be inferred from a technological act. For example, the act of "diagnosing lymphoma" is enacted by a professional performing a series of technology-mediated tasks like surgical biopsies, bone marrow aspirations, and analyzing imaging scans, and it is the very technological operationalization of such expert knowledge that allows one to identify the actor as a "physician" (Suchman, 2007).

That said, technological enactment helps negotiate professional boundaries based on occupational expertise, delineating who is inside or outside a professional group (Skovgaard-Smith, Soekijad, Down, 2019; Caza, Moss, Vough, 2017; DiBenigno Kellogg, 2014). Yet, the occupational identifications may not be defined only in interaction with other professional groups, but through relational processes of self-differentiation between the individual and the technology itself. This is because sociomaterial theory contends that technology is an active participant in the enactment of professional identities and boundaries (Orlikowski, 2008; Barad, 2003; Leonardi Barley, 2010). In medical settings, for example, the use of monitors and sensors can reconfigure the surgeon’s body and gaze, shifting their proprioceptive sense of where they are acting—either alienated from or more proximally joined to the patient's body (Suchman, 2007). In the same way, a police officer’s ability to carry gear and know how to use it becomes an embodied part of their professional "knowing how to act appropriately" (Loscher et al., 2019).

Consequently, because knowledge boundaries are not fixed—they are enacted through the practical work of aligning different "ordering devices" like protocols or schedules with the contingencies of the moment (Suchman, 2007)—professional boundaries do not occur solely where work activities pass from one group to another and a new set of skills or meanings is required (Mumford, 2006). The relational nature of occupational knowledge transforms the technology into a "glass box" (Lave Wenger, 1991, p. 102), facilitating and constraining the reproduction of expertise and the construction of a “strong, master-level” professional identity for the junior members (Anthony, 2021). Such divergent outcomes of occupational identity are thus understood by how humans relate to occupational norms emerging from technology use, which often erases labor involved in its operation (and, e.g., makes the work of technicians and support staff invisible), whilst naturalizes occupational expertise as a constituent of certain professions (Gong et al., 2020).

As such, we develop our second proposition concerning occupational identity’s epistemic technological co-constitution:

P2 (Epistemic co-constitution): Occupational identities are co-constituted through technological enactment of knowledge practices in which the definition, validation, and circulation of expertise emerge from socio-technical arrangements rather than pre-existing occupational boundaries.

Affective co-constitution: The entanglement of emotions, skills, and engagement with technical work

A second interrelated domain in which technological change has been found to paradoxically reshape occupational identity was through its affective implications, positioning emotions as central sites of socio-technical constitution (Rousi Renko, 2020). Studies show how emotional engagement with technological tools and systems influences not only what workers do, but also how they experience and make sense of their professional identities (Anthony Crosina, 2018; Lam, 2019; Pakarinen Huising, 2023; Hondros, Schiemer, Vogelgsang, 2023).

At first, research evidence explains the affective implications of one's occupational identity's contact with technology in terms of skill erosion. When traditionally ascribed emotional sources of occupational identity (like work pride, autonomy, and economic freedom) are threatened by technological change, these initially positive emotions tend to be replaced with a sense of alienation or loss of meaning for workers who see their roles reduced to mere operators of technology rather than skilled professionals (Gong et al., 2020; Alvesson, Lee Ashcraft, Thomas, 2008).

This emotional instability in the face of technological change is particularly salient in occupations that rely heavily on specialized knowledge, experience, and human judgment, which may find these attributes devalued in favor of technological proficiency and the ability to interface with machines. Wallin's et al. (2022) findings with IT professionals are quite representative of this relationship because, while "thriving developers" experience positive identity alignment through new digital opportunities, "stagnant self-doubters" find digitalization burdensome and repulsive, feeling that malfunctioning systems hinder their mastery of core work.

Under this monistic view, mastery and understanding of work practice lead to positive emotions such as pride, satisfaction, and a sense of control; conversely, when technology behaves in uninterpretable ways, it triggers confusion, frustration, and anger (Norman, 1988). Workers would thus need to actively search for new sources of positive identifications by cognitively restructuring their "technology-in-practice" based on their own identifications with collective occupational and organizational identities (Ashforth et al., 2013; Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999; Vough, 2012).

However, criticizing this prevailing perspective for its epistemic "opacity and accountability challenges," Pakarinen and Huising (2023, p. 8) demonstrate that integrating technical systems elicits dual affective responses (e.g., anxiety and empowerment). In fact, sociomaterial theory enlightens this new paradox by acknowledging that technology use and occupational identity are entangled in a cognitive-affective tandem: while cognition provides understanding, the emotional system assigns value (Norman, 1988). As such, whilst positive emotional states towards technology use at work might provide individuals with a broader focus and creativity to glimpse new affordances for previously performed occupational tasks, negative states might be equally important in providing the narrow focus needed to finish those specific tasks.

Emotional experience and skill adaptation are therefore understood as co-produced in technologically mediated work environments, as they help explain why negative emotions like "fear" of embarrassment under senior scrutiny might also lead to positive affective responses like motivation to "peel back the black box" not just out of efficiency goals, but due to a cognitive realization that engaging in a productive development of deep reasoning skills leads to a more proper enactment of a professional identity (Anthony, 2021).

Yet, as in artistic- and knowledge-centered work engagement is particularly driven by an interlocking structure of "wantings" and emotional investment in the objects of knowledge

pursuit—like a scientist studying a protein to develop the treatment for a disease, or an IT professional trying to develop a software module—such a monistic view is often used to explain why some professionals (e.g., musicians) reject new technologies (e.g., digital synthesizers) to protect the core of their occupational identity (Nelson, Anthony, Tripsas, 2023). In this specific case, positive emotions are associated with cognitive responses of continuity and excitement, which are needed for creative practice and distinctive expression (Shatzki, 2001). This is why returning to analog technology affords a tactile and emotional bond (i.e., an "embodied connection") that allows them to use their bodies to control and shape their professional output (Shatzki, 2001; Nelson, Anthony, Tripsas, 2023).

Hence, the concept of entanglement (i.e., affective-material relations) becomes central to escape the pervasive dualistic view between affect and technology use in occupations. Since entanglement refers to an ontological fusion where the social and the material are inherently inseparable, technologies do not have inherent properties but acquire their form, attributes, and capabilities through their ongoing "intra-action" within sociomaterial practices (Orlikowski, 2008; Barad, 2003; Suchman, 2007). Affective-material relations highlight that these entanglements are not just functional or mechanical; rather, they are organized by a teleoaffective structure, which includes both the goals (telos) an actor pursues and the appropriate emotions (affective component) associated with those actions (Loscher et al., 2019).

The entanglement concept helps explain that, just as one's occupational identity may be co-constructed through the specific handling of professional tools and their embodied work of making those tools visible (Suchman, 2007), appropriate emotional states are often assigned to essential "capabilities" for a role. For instance, a physician's ability to remain calm and exhibit positive emotions is as much a part of their professional "knowing how to act appropriately" as their clinical skills to handle a stethoscope (Loscher et al., 2019). In fact, entanglement reveals how many of the emotional states one associates with their professional identity are formed in relation to specific objects, such as a chef's "German blades" (Bechky, 2006).

Organizational objects serve as ever-present reminders of "who we are" and facilitate a sense of solidarity and bondedness (Bechky, 2020; Koppman et al., 2016). Since material markers symbolize and legitimize identity, the loss of these artifacts—such as moving to a "hoteling" office or losing physical books to digital databases—is experienced as a threat to the self (Bechky, 2006; Craig, Thatcher, Grover, 2019; Nelson Irwin, 2014). As such, Craig, Thatcher, and Grover's (2019) "IT Identity Threat" is defined specifically as the anticipation of harm to values, meanings, or the enactment of identity caused by technology use.

For some professions, such as professional athletics, artifacts like signed jackets become "totems and trophies" that sustain identity across time and space, even into retirement (Robinson Baum, 2020). These objects represent a duality: they are both technological (what I do) and symbolic (who I am) (Robinson; Baum, 2020; Bechky, 2006, 2020), demonstrating that affective attachments to core technologies evolve as emotional bonds to one's transient identity formation (Anthony; Crosina, 2018).

Still, for sociomateriality, technology does not merely "mediate" work; it performs organizational realities through affective organizing (Orlikowski, 2007). For example, "push email" on devices like smartphones can become so entangled with professional norms of responsiveness that it extends the workday until the professional goes to sleep and creates a "sick" compulsion to check the device constantly (Orlikowski, 2007). In the same way, platform workers' mentally taxing labor creates a space of online appearance that eventually provides the meaning and reality of their professional existence (Hondros, Schiemer,

Vogelgsang, 2023). Or else, online communities use sociotechnical assemblages (i.e., individuals using affect like anger or shared ire to author collective identities that navigate real-life contradictions) to amplify the very affects that originate them, turning affect central to the constitution of identities in the making (Eddington, Jarvis, Buzzanell, 2022).

That said, we develop our third proposition concerning occupational identity's affective technological co-constitution:

P3 (Affective co-constitution): Occupational identity is co-constituted through the entanglement of affective-material relations with technologically performed work, insofar as emotions and capabilities are mutually reinforcing dimensions of socio-technical engagement.

Agentic co-constitution: The relational dimension of human–technology interaction

A third interrelated domain in which technology use paradoxically shapes occupational identity revolves around the dichotomy between human and technological agency. Since technical systems increasingly participate in work processes in ways that blur traditional distinctions between human action and technological perfomativity, they eventually become relational actors that actively participate in the formation of occupational identity (Anteby, Chan, DiBenigno, 2016; Pakarinen Huising, 2023; Bailey, Leonardi, Barley, 2012; Bailey Barley, 2020).

In fact, central to the relationship between technical systems and occupational identity is the concept of technological performativity (Leonardi, 2011). From a sociomaterial perspective, both technologies and humans possess the capacity to act on their own, though what distinguishes them is that human agency involves intentionality, i.e., motivation, rationalization, and reflexive monitoring toward a specific goal (Leonardi, 2007, 2009, 2011). Humans would possess the discretion to "choose to do otherwise" with a technology, whereas a machine follows rigid rules regardless of whether the outcome is sensible or logical (Norman, 1988; Orlikowski, 2008; Leonardi, 2007, 2009).

Needless to say, such a distinction has become blurred with the emergence of AI systems, leading the MOS field into another paradox regarding human and technological agency (Raisch Krakowski, 2021). Luckily enough, sociomateriality has long reconciled this paradox by proposing that human and non-human agencies conflate into sociomaterial assemblages (Orlikowski, 2008; Barad, 2003). Through this concept, we learn that human and technological agencies constitute a composite, shifting grouping that has so thoroughly saturated one another that previously taken-for-granted boundaries between them have dissolved (Orlikowski, 2007, 2008).

In this relational ontology, neither form of agency is ontologically prior; they are constitutively entangled, meaning people and things construct their specific capabilities only through their relationships with one another (Orlikowski, 2007, 2008; Barad, 2003). Hence, sociomaterial assemblages help explain why core elements of occupational identities (such as humans' so-called "reasoning superiority" over technology) begin to be put under tension as professionals engage with material setups. As technical systems are rapidly evolving into AI interdependent systems, rather than fixed positions between humans who configure material agency and technologies that will be interwoven with their goals (Shatzki, 2001, 2005; Leonardi, 2011), technological agency questions professional authority and transforms it into a "probabilistic achievement" enacted through daily practice within a network of human and non-human actors (Pakarinen Huising, 2023).

Considered equivalent participants in a network of human and non-human agencies (Orlikowski, 2008), technologies therefore urge the construction of occupational identities

that increasingly navigate distributed agency through recursive activities and discourse within sociomaterial assemblages (Orlikowski, 2008), implicating a reconfiguration of human agency per se, from one that uses intentional decision-making to one that resembles calculative work coordination and reordering. This conceptualization is important for the MOS field in particular, as sociomaterial assemblages entail hybrid organizational systems in which the actions of machines and humans collectively produce emergent behaviors that redefine the very nature of management (Raisch Krakowski, 2021; Anthony, Bechky, Fayard, 2023).

By serving as "occasions for structuring," these systems can interfere with manifestations of occupational identity and, hence, shift a workplace's social structure (Barley, 1986; Bailey Barley, 2020). When technicians began documenting their self-ascribed unique expertise in a shared system, the advice-seeking structure of an IT company was inverted from a hierarchically rigid to a meritocratic one, with senior members renegotiating their occupational knowledge status to seek help from junior members who had proven their technical competence (Leonardi, 2007).

In the same way, large-scale digital infrastructures, such as ERP systems, often impose rigid materiality that conflicts with local practices of equalizing occupational status. In these contexts, organizational routines function as relational shock absorbers, balancing the technological agency's demands for centralized control with humans' need for local discretion and adaptation (Berente, Lyytinen, Yoo, King, 2016).

Moreover, non-human entities' capacity to act on their own, apart from human intervention, represents a shift in the boundaries of professional tasks and fundamentally redefines workers' self-conceptions (Barley, 1986; Raisch Krakowski, 2021; Carter Grover, 2015). Automation in a task non-central to one's occupational self-categorization often "spills over" into adjacent, maybe core-identity tasks, making human-machine interaction (augmentation) mandatory in ways human professionals might not have anticipated, nor wished for (Raisch Krakowski, 2021; Bechky, 2020). The use of simulation technologies in automobile engineering, for instance, has split the simulation engineer's role into two new, almost distinct occupations: simulation modelers (performing routine tasks) and simulation analysts (performing high-level analytic work) (Bailey, Leonardi, Barley, 2012).

The previous example demonstrates how technology can dissolve a single role into a new division of labor based on a worker's relationship with digital representations. In this regard, technology structures might interfere with how occupational roles are interpreted by determining what is considered "professional" work and what can be hived off to machines or other groups (Beane, 2019; Anteby, Chan, DiBenigno, 2016).

Furthermore, technology-induced changes in one area can spill over into neighboring occupations, renegotiating previously defined professional boundaries regarding technology use (Bechky, 2020). In professional service firms, the introduction of AI has triggered "intertwined boundary work," where professionals respond to disruption by both defending their core privileges and creating new domains of expertise. This process establishes technologists (data scientists and AI specialists) as legitimate actors within professional boundaries, leading to new forms of inter-professional collaboration that unsettle traditional governance structures (Faulconbridge, Sarwar, Spring 2023; Murphy Kreiner, 2020).

When analyzing non-human agency's influence on task boundaries, however, one must be cautious not to fall into the same paradox of assuming human agency is reduced to either resist the constraints or exploit the affordances of a technology's material agency in sociomaterial assemblages (Leonardi, 2007, 2009). Under such assumption, human agency is relegated to the creation of new routines or the physical modification of the technology itself,

and thus the ensuing negotiated work identities are resultant from the formation of occupational systems materialized in accepted techniques, values, and institutional pathways (Leonardi, 2011).

Cheded et al. (2022) try to escape this agency-identity paradox when they frame occupational identities as “temporary fixes” instigated to provide some form of consistency not in relation to material agency, but in relation to humans’ intra-action within sociomaterial assemblages. Since some occupational identities are often associated with vulnerable identities outside the workplace (e.g., being disabled, black, non-binary, etc.) (Brown, 2019; Reyes-Menendez et al., 2020), workers form occupational systems in line with their workplace material setup, in order to navigate the tensions and conflicts in their sensemaking and belonging to social categories of vulnerability attached to their occupational identities (Cheded et al., 2022).

Bechky (2020), in turn, contradicts this dualistic assumption, maintaining that there is more to humans’ agency in sociomaterial assemblages than performing authentic ways of organizing occupations and identities. To the author, human agency represents the exercise of a collective reflexive attitude in which individuals realize their occupational identities often comply with the very occupational systems they help create. Therefore, Bechky (2020) argues human agency is key to enable humans to respond to technological change without assuming it is a “natural social construction.”

Through this lens, technological change can revitalize an occupation by providing a new foil against which identity is defined. Technical systems participate in identity formation by offering new symbolic resources for workers to define "who they are" in relation to the tools they use (Kronblad Jensen, 2023; Craig, Thatcher, Grover, 2019), giving rise to what modern scholarship conceives as a genuine "IT Identity", i.e., the extent to which a person views their use of technology as integral to their sense of self (Riemenschneider Armstrong, 2021). In this case, different alignments between human and technological agency implicate the creation of specific identity work archetypes (Wallin et al., 2022), such as librarians who resignify their task jurisdiction as "masters of search" to become "connectors of people and information" only after the Internet supplanted their traditional role in search (Nelson Irwin, 2014).

In light of what has been discussed in this subsection, we contend technical systems and advanced digital technologies function as relational actors within sociomaterial assemblages marked by the reorganization of work systems coordination, task boundaries, and agency distributions. These systems do not merely augment or replace human work but participate in structuring how occupational roles are enacted and interpreted, which culminates with our fourth proposition concerning occupational identity’s agentic technological co-constitution:

P4 (Agentic co-constitution): Occupational identities are co-constituted through relational configurations in which human and technological agency are mutually implicated, such that technical systems participate in the ongoing redefinition of professional roles, task boundaries, and self-conceptions.

Concluding remarks

Building on a relational ontontology of technology and occupations, this paper develops a dialectical, sociomaterial reading that explains how occupational identity is constituted through the simultaneous generation of enabling and constraining dynamics across epistemic, affective, and agentic dimensions of work. In so doing, it provides an integrated lens through

which technology is understood primarily as a substantive component of the continuous formation and reconfiguration of occupational identities.

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