Studying Organization Identity Empirically: A Review

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Abstract
The growing conceptual interest in organizational identity has only slowly translated into scholarly empirical work on the subject in the management literature. This paper reviews and identifies patterns in the empirical work that has been completed, focusing particularly on the methodological approaches that have been adopted. It finds that relatively little empirical work to date has focused on company examples, it largely relies on individual informants, textual descriptions, and simplistic attribute lists to describe organization identity, and tends to assume organization identity as static and unified. Based on our understanding of the existing literature, we propose that future empirical work on organizational identity should draw on principles of careful mesotheorizing, multiple intelligences, narrative forms of understanding, account for multiple identities, and draw on emotional as well as cognitive considerations.

Introduction

Since Albert and Whetten's (1985) landmark article, the field of organizational identity has grown to become a prominent domain of inquiry in the management literature. The topic has inspired a growing number of scholarly articles, edited books (e.g. Whetten and Godfrey, 1998) and even a recent special topic forum of Academy of Management Review (January 2000). A variety of explanations have been proposed for this intense interest. Organization identity offers a conceptual bridge across traditional analytical divides such as micro and macro, agency and structure, and individual-, group-, and organizational levels of research (Porter, 2001). The phrase "organization identity" also has the advantage of being understandable and salient to both academic and practitioner audiences, providing scholars with the tantalizing possibility of a concept that can cross the theory-practice divide (Gioia, Schultz, and Corley, 2002). And increasingly heterogeneous workforces, in which externalised bureaucratic structures are dismantled, mean the notion of an internalised cognitive structure or "rudder" of what the organization stands for--residing in the heads and hearts of its members—has become highly attractive (Albert, Ashforth and Dutton, 2000: 13).

Upon closer examination, however, the concept of organizational identity is problematic for a number of reasons. A variety of definitions of "identity" exist, each grounded in particular ontological and epistemological assumptions. Extending any construct from individual to group levels carries with it a variety of challenges from the standpoints of both conceptual development and empirical study. Not least importantly, while a great deal of conceptual work has been completed on organizational identity, the construct has proven relatively difficult to examine empirically and relatively few scholars have tried (Foreman and Whetten, 2002). It is the purpose of this paper to address this last issue in particular, by reviewing and identifying patterns in the existing empirical work on organizational identity, focusing mainly on the methodological approaches that have been taken. We then make five suggestions concerning fruitful directions empirical work on organizational might in future.

What is "Organization Identity"?

Organizational identity was originally defined as "that which members believe to be central, enduring, and distinctive about their organization" (Albert and Whetten, 1985), although more recently the extent to which an identity must be enduring has been called into question (Gioia, Shultz & Corley, 2000). Other definitions of organization identity state that it reflects an organization's central and distinguishing attributes—including its core values, organizational culture, modes of performance, and products (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996), or that it refers to a collective, commonly shared understanding of the organization's distinctive values and characteristics (Hatch and Schultz, 1997: 357). Organization identity is frequently confused with the similar but separate notion of "image", which is the "set of views on the organization held by those who act as the organization's 'others'." (Hatch & Schultz, 2002: 995). While organizational identity refers to what people see as their organization's distinctive attributes, image refers to that which people believe *others* see as distinctive about their organization (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991: 550), or its "construed external image" (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail,1994). Other scholarship has focused on the close and reciprocal relationship between organizational identity and image (e.g. Gioia and Thomas, 1996: 394).

Broadly speaking, the literature on organizational identity can be classified into at least three different perspectives (Gioia, 1998: 25). *Functionalist* or *social realist* studies (e.g. (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996), are grounded in realist ontological assumptions that take "identity" as an essential object or asset, with scholarship proceeding deductively through hypothesis testing by objective observers. *Interpretative* or *constructionist* studies (e.g. Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997) are grounded in subjectivist, hermeneutic assumptions that consider identity akin to improvisational theatre, for which studies are inductive and grounded in participant observation, often presenting informant accounts in narrative form. *Post-modern* or *semiotic* studies (e.g. Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003) are grounded in poststructuralist assumptions, considering identity to be an ever-changing collage or illusion created by the party in power, with scholarship typically proceeding through critical deconstruction or discourse analysis.

Why Study Organizational Identity?

Regardless of one’s paradigm, the ability to develop a shared understanding of organizational identity is generally seen as potentially valuable for the enterprise for several reasons. A shared sense of image and identity can provide institutional legitimacy necessary to attract resources (Brown, 2001), and has been proposed as essential to long-term organizational success (Collins and Porras, 1996). It has been claimed that a strong sense of identity might provide organizations with the confidence to be proactive (Gioia and Thomas, 1996: 396), and to better able to avoid, weather and rebound from crises (Whetten and Godfrey, 1998:167; Gioia, Schultz and Corley, 2000:75), and deal with the challenge of the “collapse” of internal-external organizational boundaries (Hatch and Schultz, 1997). Revisiting identity has also been cited as an important way for self-managed teams to handle critical incidents (Oliver and Roos, 2003).

Identity is a cognitive image held by organizational members (Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, 1994) that is actively used to screen and interpret issues, emotions and actions (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991: 542). Organizational identity has been found to have a powerful impact on interpretation processes within organizations (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991: 550), constraining organizational actions and decision-making processes (Fombrun, 1996: 111), depoliticize organizational issues (Gioia and Thomas, 1996: 397) and help define issues as threats or potential opportunities (Dutton and Dukerich, 1994: 543). It may also provide a frame within which resources become emphasized, prioritised and deployed, and how perceptions of core capabilities can become constructed (Glynn, 2000:295). The closer an organization's unique source of competitive advantage is to its core identity claims, the more likely the resource or capability can be legitimately characterized as an organization-specific asset (Whetten and Mackey, 2002: 404).

Further, social identity theory implies that individuals *identify* with organizations in cognitive, affective and evaluative ways (Tajfel and Turner, 1985). To the extent individuals identify with their organization, their commitment and attachment to the collective—their in-group cooperation—may increase. Social identity may also contribute to the internalization of organizational learning (Child and Rodrigues, 2003). The concepts of organizational identity and identification provide a way of accounting for the agency of human action within an organizational framework, are infused with motivation and feeling, and help bring questions of meaning back into organization life (Albert, Ashforth and Dutton, 2000:14).

Reviewing the Field: Limited Empirical Work

Although the concepts of identity, image, and identification have generated a great deal of theoretical attention, relatively few empirical studies have been published that examine their effects (Dukerich et al., 2002), and the understanding of specific processes and situations of identity construction in and around work and organizations remains somewhat poor (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003:1). Most of the studies that have been conducted to date are built upon methodological foundations that may have constrained their usefulness for scholars and practitioners alike.

It is the purpose of this paper to review existing empirical studies of organizational identity and identify categories as well as gaps in current empirical research. In choosing articles for analysis, we selected articles from scholarly journals in which the authors made an explicit attempt to study organizational identity directly, in real organizations. In many of the articles, a variety of methodological approaches were adopted to examine the identity of one or several organizations. In some cases, the description of organizational identity formed the basis of the study, while in others it constituted only a part of the overall analysis. For each study we have focused on the methodological approach adopted to address the description of the organization's identity.

In selecting articles for examination, we eliminated those that contained highly perfunctory descriptions of organizational identity such as "illustrative case studies" (e.g. Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) or general references to well-known cases such as the Body Shop or Royal Dutch Shell (Hatch and Schultz, 1997). Nor did we focus on the numerous studies of organizational *identification,* most of which typically focus on designing or using existing measures of elements of identification, including different forms of commitment, self-esteem, value congruence, citizenship behaviours, or other related variables. While some of the articles in our review make claims concerning organizational identification, our survey focuses exclusively on those scholars who have attempted to conduct empirical studies of organizational *identity*.

The 11 articles we examined included a range of different empirical methods, including large-scale quantitative surveys, longitudinal case studies, action research, content analysis, studies of archival data, and a variety of multimethod approaches. Each article brings a unique combination of methodological approach, method of data collection and analysis together, leading to a variety of ways of describing organizational identity (the methodological elements of the articles we included in our study are summarized in Table 1.)

Table 1: Empirical Studies of Organizational Identity in Scholarly Journals

Author(s)	*Organization(s) Studied*	*Methodological Approach*	*Method of Data Collection*	*Method of Analysis*	*Identity Descriptions*
Dutton & Dukerich, 1991	Port Authority of New York and New Jersey	Longitudinal case study	Interviews, reports, memos, speeches, articles	Construction of issue history and theme analysis, development of "identity attributes"	Six "attributes, including: "professionalism", "ethical/scandal-free/altruistic", "committed to quality", "committed to region's welfare", "employees as family", "can-do mentality"
Elsbach & Kramer, 1996	Eight, "top-20" US business schools	"Iterative" qualitative data analysis	Interviews, analysis of school catalogues and biographies	Collection of 844 "identity statements", developed "identity dimensions"	"participatory culture", "diverse students", "small/friendly culture, "rigorous/technical", "quantitative program", "academy values", "teaching values", "friendly culture", etc.
Gioia & Thomas, 1996	372 colleges and universities in the United States	Quantitative study of issues interpretation processes	Large-scale survey	Measurement of identity along two dimensions (utilitarian or normative), then measure of identity strength	Two "identities"--"utilitarian" and "normative"--measured through nine questions e.g.: "are symbols and ceremonies important to the functioning of your institution" (normative).
Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997	A large hospital rehabilitation unit	Action research	Participation, observation, interviews, free associations and formal documents	Search for dominant themes, coding and clustering	Two "identities" described: "rehabilitation identity" and "acute care identity", distinguished partly by dress codes
Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997	A mutual, non-profit organization	Qualitative, field-based study	Executive development sessions and fieldwork: participant observation, interviews, archival sources	Generation of themes, comparison of data, generation of two identity "dimensions"	Two identity dimensions described: "volunteer-driven" and "family of friends"
Eneroth & Malm, 2000	Axis Communications, a multinational, high-tech company	In–depth case study	Interviews, study of archival data	Interpretation by researchers into four organizational	Four identities: "experts on intercompatibility", "printer technology company", "net

				"identities" that evolved over time	printing company" or "net working company"
Glynn, 2000	Atlanta Symphony Orchestra	Qualitative field study	Semi-structured interviews, archival sources	"Identity claims" by organization members categorized by researcher into two identity "dimensions"	Two identities: normative: "artistic excellence", and utilitarian: "fiscal solvency"
Bartel, 2001	Pillsbury community outreach	Multimethod panel design	Interviews of convenience sample	Collection of 23 "identity attributes", adjectives, values, other indicators, reduced to six through factor analysis	Six identity "factors": "cooperative", "competitive", "results-oriented", "innovative", "socially responsible", and "predictable"
Dukerich, Golden & Shortell, 2002	Physicians associated with three health care systems	Quantitative study	Focus groups, survey of 1504 physicians	Factor analysis of 37 "identity attributes"	37 identity attributes including: "cooperative with physicians", "concern for the bottom line/profit", "impersonal", "integrated system", conservative, "empowers physicians", etc.
Foreman& Whetten, 2002	Rural cooperatives in a midwestern US state	Quantitative study	Focus groups, survey of 670 rural co-op members	10 items selected from focus groups to include on survey	10 identity elements including: price of products or services, customer service, professionalism, member ownership and control, social relationships, community involvement, etc.
Monin & Durand, 2003	French elite restaurants	Archival data	"Three signature dishes" listed in Guide Michelin for some 600 French chefs	Times series analysis, Cox regression	Two identity categories: "classical cuisine", and "nouvelle cuisine"

Findings

Our review of the empirical studies of organizational identity has led us to make a number of observations about the field in general:

Relative Absence of Company Examples

With the exception of Bartel's (2001) study of the community outreach group within Pillsbury, the vast majority of scholarly empirical work on identity has been conducted in non-business organizations. While this is perhaps understandable due to the relative youth of the field and greater ease of access for scholars into institutions such as universities, legitimate questions may arise concerning the generalizability of such studies to the company realm.

Individuals as Informants for Collective Phenomena

With a few notable exceptions (e.g. Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997), the existing empirical work on organizational identity has been based entirely on data provided by individual informants. The notion of using data collected at an individual level to study a collective construct such as organizational identity is a concern in organizational research, and often ignore the interactions between individual and collective or "double interacts" (Weick, 1979), in which the individual influences the collective and vice versa.

Emphasis on Textual Data

Most existing studies of organizational identity have been based on text, verbal descriptions, logical accounts and/or quantitative measures. It has already been pointed out that such techniques may not incorporate the ineffable or unobvious realms of individual's' experiences within organizations, and that the organizational identities assessed in current research may be incomplete (Harquail and King, 2002). Asking informants to convey information about highly abstract constructs—such as organizational identity—in exclusively verbal and/or textual form ignores a rich variety of possibilities that may result from other modes of expression.

Emphasis on Simplistic "Attributes"

Much of the preliminary research on organizational identity has resulted in identity descriptions that are grounded in relatively simplistic lists of "indicators" or "categories" that are inferred by the external researcher rather than by the informants themselves. While such lists of terms lend themselves to quantitative content analysis, the act of stripping these phrases out of context renders it extremely problematic to assign them meanings.

Identity Presumed to be Static and Unified

Much of the existing empirical research on organizational identity treats it as if it were a "unified phenomenon" (Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997:868), or an enduring, reified concept (Gioia, Schultz and Corley, 2000: 76). Such approaches, which implicitly seek essentialist definitions of organizational identity, tend to discount the inherent complexity of many of today's business organizations.

Looking Ahead: New Empirical Approaches for Organizational Identity

It is our opinion that the field has reached the point now where the study of organizational identity *in real companies* can and should be encouraged. Beyond choice of location for fieldwork, our study has led us to develop a number of guidelines and research directions that might be considered in future empirical studies into organizational identity.

Careful Mesotheorizing

Although it has been claimed that identity and identification are terms that travel easily across levels of analysis (Albert, Ashforth and Dutton, 2000: 13), the extent to which collectives can be referred to as if they had human characteristics is limited (Morgeson and Hofmann, 1999). As with other collective phenomena such as “organizational memory” or “organizational learning”, care should be taken when transferring individual level constructs to groups. Studies of organizational identity would thus benefit from more rigorous treatment of the methodological challenges associated with “mesotheorizing” (House et al., 1995).

Multiple Intelligences

All individuals have broad sets of capabilities or “multiple intelligences” including logical-mathematical, linguistic, spatial, musical, bodily-kinesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal capacities (Gardner, 1993), which they use to understand the world. However, their dependence on textual descriptions and logical inferences means that the vast majority of empirical studies of organization identity exclusively draw on linguistic and logical-mathematical intelligences. Future studies might usefully shed light on additional aspects of organizational identity by focusing on other “intelligences”.

Narrative Approach

The generation of list of identity “attributes” ignores the importance of organizational stories as mechanisms for conveying shared beliefs. In more conceptual work, it has been pointed out by some scholars that organizational identity may lack sufficient substance and discreteness to be captured in questionnaires or single interviews and to be measured and counted (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003:1). The use of narrative—rather than paradigmatic—modes of logic privileges an understanding of actors’ motivations and intentions, rather than favouring rigorous classification and explanation (Fiske and Taylor 1991). Organizational stories convey shared beliefs among organizational members concerning the alleged uniqueness of certain organizational features, and can be considered highly functional myths (Martin, Feldman, Hatch and Sitkin, 1983). Future research into organizational identity might usefully draw on the advantages of a narrative approach to organizations, rather than focusing on single indicators.

Multiple Identities

Although an abundance of literature that presupposes singularised identities exists, others have proposed that organizational identities are multi-layered (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Albert, Ashforth & Dutton, 2000; Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997), or attached to formal or informal social and demographic categories, i.e. “nested” or “crosscut”. Such evidence has led to calls for the study of identity as something other than an enduring, reified concept (Gioia, Schultz and Corley, 2000: 76). We join this call for research that explores questions of organizational identity that explicitly address questions concerning multiple identities.

Cognitive and Emotional

The existing empirical literature on organizational identity is dominated by a cognitive bias that presumes organizational identity is a subject that can be reflected upon cognitively. Organizational identity has been compared with a mental model, a cognitive representation that distils the profoundly rich information in an environment into frames for understanding and action. (Harquail and King, 2002). Yet, emotions have also been reported to be useful in alerting and focusing individuals to important changes in the environment, preparing appropriate response strategies and anchoring events of great importance in the individual’s long-term memory (Scherer and Tran, 2001). We suggest that organizational identity is a construct which can be felt as well as mentally contemplated, and thus may benefit from empirical work that taps into affective, as well as cognitive, considerations.

Conclusion

The young field of organizational identity has great promise for crossing many boundaries that exist in the management literature. After many years of conceptual theory building, a number of scholars have begun embarking on field studies of organizational identity, and yet it is our belief that more innovative methodological approaches have the potential to take this literature forward much faster. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to propose specific methodological techniques for better understanding the somewhat nebulous construct of organizational identity, we have identified some preliminary directions that may guide future research on this promising topic.

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