



Constructing Organizational Identity

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Abstract

Although the field of organizational identity has generated a great deal of interest among organizational theorists in recent years, many of the empirical studies conducted to date share some important methodological limitations. Specifically, many such studies use textual descriptions from single informants to derive simplistic lists of identity "attributes", which can inevitably provide only a limited understanding of what has been claimed to be a manifold and fluid concept residing in the heads *and* hearts of organizational members. In this paper, we moved beyond verbal and textual data to consider how senior managers in three separate organizations expressed the identities of their organizations, when invited to do so using a 3D building technique. Our study of these three interventions led us to make three key findings related to this alternative process of identity expression. First, we found that participants generated organizational identity descriptions that were grounded in rich, narrative-based, metaphoric imagery. Second, hidden thoughts about organizational identity that had not previously been discussed became part of the discussion. And finally, the object-mediated inquiry mode of discussion enabled emotions to be surfaced in a safe manner.

Keywords: organizational identity, metaphor, object-mediated inquiry.

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 recent debate in the field has focused on the relative merits of organization identity as a useful metaphor in the generation of knowledge in organization studies (Cornelissen, 2002a, 2002b; Gioia et al., 2002a, 2002b). The merits of this discussion have been questioned by social psychologists, who argue that organizational identity is an example of social rather than personal identity and thus is a fact of organizational life (Haslam et al., 2003). This view would appear to be supported by Luhmann's theory of social systems, which claims that features of the organization do not have to be traced back to features of individuals, but can be considered real *sui generis* (Seidl, 2003). We believe that although these debates usefully revisit some of the concept's core assumptions, they are unfortunately occurring against a background of surprisingly little serious empirical work. We believe that in order to determine whether or not the concept of organizational identity has heuristic value for theorizing, such theoretical debates should be complemented by a fuller understanding of how well the concept meets the empirical world of practicing managers.

The purpose of this paper is twofold. First, we review the existing peer-reviewed empirical studies on organizational identity. Second, we complement this existing work by exploring a novel method for generating identity descriptions within organizations. Using a standardized technique that involves constructing organization identity using colourful 3D building materials, we intervened in three organizations to generate identity descriptions quite different from those possible through use of traditional text-based techniques alone. We report our findings in this paper and propose implications with the potential to shed light on the merits of studying organizational identity.

Why Study Organizational Identity?

A variety of explanations have been proposed for the keen interest in organizational identity. The notion 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” is 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 et al., 2002a). As workforces become increasingly heterogeneous and externalised bureaucratic structures are dismantled, 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 attractive (Albert et al. 2000).

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 may indeed be 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), to be better able to avoid, weather and rebound from crises (Whetten and Godfrey, 1998; Gioia et al., 2000), and to 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).

As a cognitive image held by organizational members (Dutton et al., 1994), organizational identity is actively used to screen and interpret issues, emotions and actions (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991). Organizational identity has been found to have a powerful impact on interpretation processes within organizations (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991), constrain organizational actions and decision-making processes (Fombrun, 1996), depoliticize organizational issues (Gioia and Thomas, 1996) and help define issues as threats or potential opportunities (Dutton et al., 1994). 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). 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).

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 et al., 2000).

Concerns about “Organizational Identity”

This lengthy list of potential organization identity benefits needs to be weighed against some significant concerns about the concept, beyond its robustness as a metaphor. To begin with, a number of different definitions of “identity” exist; each grounded in particular ontological and epistemological assumptions. 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 et al., 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 and Kramer, 1996), or that it refers to a collective, commonly shared understanding of the organization's distinctive values and characteristics (Hatch and Schultz, 1997). Organization identity is sometimes 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 and Schultz,

2002, p.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, p.550), or its "construed external image" (Dutton et al., 1994). Other scholarship has focused on the close and reciprocal relationship between organizational identity and image (e.g. Gioia and Thomas, 1996).

Broadly speaking, the literature on organizational identity can be classified into at least three different perspectives (Gioia, 1998, p.25). *Functionalist* or *social realist* studies (e.g. Elsbach and 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.

In addition, extending any construct from individual to group levels is challenging from the standpoints of both conceptual development and empirical study. Although a great deal of conceptual work has been completed on organizational identity to date, the construct has proven relatively difficult to examine empirically and relatively few scholars have tried (Foreman and Whetten, 2002).

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). 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. We conducted a search using EPSCO Business Source of all peer-reviewed articles that included the phrase “organizational identity”, and then narrowed these down to include those in which the author(s) made an explicit attempt to empirically study organizational identity in real organizations. This meant eliminating from our review those articles containing 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 focus on designing or using existing measures of elements 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, this survey focuses exclusively on those scholars who have attempted to conduct empirical studies of organizational *identity*.

We found a total of 11 empirical articles incorporating a range of different methods, including large-scale quantitative surveys, longitudinal case studies, action research, content analysis, studies of archival data, and a variety of multi-method approaches. In some cases, the description of organizational identity formed the basis of the study, while in other instances it constituted only a part of the overall analysis. Each article brought together a unique combination of methodological approach, method of data collection and analysis, resulting in a variety of ways of describing organizational identity (these are summarized in Table 1.)

---insert Table 1 about here---

Summary of Empirical Organizational Identity Literature

Our review of the empirical studies of organizational identity led us to make a number of observations about the field in general. 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 ignores the interactions between individual and collective or “double interacts” (Weick, 1979), in which the individual influences the collective and vice versa.

In addition, most existing studies of organizational identity have been based on textual data, 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. Furthermore, much of the existing empirical research on organizational identity treats it as if it were a “unified phenomenon” (Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997), or an enduring, reified concept (Gioia et al., 2000). Such approaches, which implicitly seek essentialist definitions of organizational identity, tend to discount the inherent complexity of many of today’s business organizations.

Finally, 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.

Overall Finding: 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” (see column 6 of Table 1). 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 meanings to them. Attribute lists provide a highly limited understanding of what has been referred to in the literature as a manifold (Harquail and King, 2002), fluid and unstable concept (Gioia et al., 2000), which resides in the heads *and* hearts of organizational members (Albert et al., 2000). Why have so few scholars taken up what Harquail and King (2002, p.A6) referred to as the need to extend our categorizations of organizational experience, incorporate types of individual experience that are often latent and thus overlooked, and recognize “the whole person as a contributor to and definer of what is unique about an organization”? What other ways might groups of managers express the identity of their organization?

Toward New Empirical Approaches for Studying Organizational Identity

We respond to the call for more multidimensionality in studying organizational identity in order to develop richer descriptions of the construct beyond verbal “identity statements” (Elsbach and Kramer, 1996). It is also our opinion that the field has now reached the point where the study of organizational identity *in real companies* can and should be conducted. With these factors in mind, we propose a number of additional considerations that may be used to develop a richer methodological approach to studying organizational identity.

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). 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 et al., 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 presupposes singularised identities, other scholars have proposed that organizational identities are multi-layered (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Albert et al., 2000; Pratt and 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 et al., 2000). 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 distills 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.

Method

Data Collection

Our study can be characterized as an exploratory, multiple case study using participant observation and interview data. We collected participant-observer data from divisional management teams of three multinational companies from different industries (packaging, chemicals, and software). Each team consisted of between six and ten participants and was responsible for the management of a company division—thus similar in terms of organizational hierarchical level—and included representatives from a variety of divisional functions. In all three firms, we provided a novel context for discussions of organizational identity through use of a standardized technique and facilitation process involving 3D construction materials, to explore the identities of their organizations¹. The technique draws on the concept of “serious play” (see Roos et al., 2004), which refers to the integration of cognitive, social and emotional dimensions in a playful mode of experience. We selected this approach because it acknowledges the four dimensions suggested above for the study of organizational identity, namely:

¹ The technique is named: “LEGO Serious Play”.

- It embraces multiple intelligences by drawing on visual-spatial intelligence through the active creation of new images and constructions, linguistic intelligences through the explanations individuals provide for their constructions, and bodily-kinesthetic intelligence to some extent due to the use of the hands in the construction activity.
- It embraces narratives by requiring participants to create new stories to explain both parts of and the overall construction.
- It embraces multiple identities by asking participants to build individual identities *before* participating in the co-creation of a shared group identity representation. Thus, everybody could voice his or her own view of the firm, which allowed for a diversity of different identity standpoints to be expressed.
- It embraces emotional considerations by occurring within a “playful” framework, which has been claimed to facilitate emotional expression on a number of levels (Winnicott, 1971).

We facilitated three structured exercises using 3,000 individual LEGO pieces of a variety of colors, shapes and sizes, following a series of guidelines that were consistent across each session. In each case three “warm-up” exercises were delivered, including: 1) an opening exercise designed to improve participants’ skills in using LEGO materials, 2) an exercise that developed participants’ abilities to describe their constructions using metaphors, and 3) an exercise designed to improve their ability to create a story describing their constructions. Following these warm-ups, participants were asked to use a wide assortment of LEGO materials to individually construct a representation of their organization’s “identity”—not the physical facilities of the enterprise, but its essential characteristics, key functions, internal relationships, structures, most prominent features, and central attributes. Their constructions identified how they as individuals understood their organization, and answered the question: “who is your organization, at its core?” After each participant constructed an individual identity representation and discussed it with the other members of the group, participants were asked to work together and collectively build a single, joint version of their organization’s identity. In practice, all three groups did this by pushing their individual constructions to the center of the table, and taking key elements of the individual representations to be used in the

overall group construction. Once completed, a volunteer from each group explained the collective model overall, a process which was recorded and fed back to the participants following the workshop, together with images of the identity construction.

In two of the cases, both co-authors conducted the interventions; in the third case, one of the co-authors conducted the intervention together with a third researcher, who agreed to participate in this study. The interventions were videotaped and researchers took notes during the interventions themselves. Additional data was collected through pre-intervention interviews with participants and post-intervention evaluation surveys, which included both standardized questions and a space for “additional comments”.

Data Analysis

Notes taken during the three interventions themselves and while re-examining the videotapes, the pre-intervention interviews, and the post-intervention surveys were independently classified into a mid-range accounting scheme based on Bogdan and Biklen (1992). The data was organized around context, situation definition, perspectives, ways of thinking about people and objects, process, activities, events, strategies, relationships and social structures, and methods. This process facilitated the organization of the considerable volume of data collected in order to allow for the development of categories. To improve the data's reliability, each of the two co-authors completed separate accounting schemes. Once we had completed schemes for each intervention, each of the co-authors began independently generating preliminary categories (Dey, 1993), and assigning textual data to each of the emergent categories. Once completed, these categories were compared and discussed by the co-authors to generate this paper's findings, which were subsequently compared to existing literature, with the aim of raising the work's theoretical level (Eisenhardt, 1989).

In presenting our data, we begin by outlining three summary case studies that describe elements of when the intervention took place, who participated, background information on

the firm, and key issues faced. The case studies outline important elements of both the content and process of the identity construction exercises in each company. Following the case studies, we present our three main research findings.

Three Intervention Case Studies

Case 1: PackCo²

The first intervention was conducted in April 2001, for the senior management team of the French country operation of a multinational packaging company. Eight individuals participated, including the directors of marketing, sales, finance, human resources, manufacturing, and technical services, as well as the managing director. PackCo was organized as a series of autonomous country operations, with each country management team almost entirely responsible for decisions occurring within its country. More recently, however, several efforts to implement “global processes” had been attempted, and a tension existed between what were perceived as competing pressures for centralization and entrepreneurship. In addition, the company was facing new competition from a variety of alternative packaging materials, and had announced its intention to diversify away from its core product.

Constructing PackCo’s Identity

Seven out of the eight individual representations of PackCo’s identity consisted of fortress-like constructions, including solid walls protecting the company from the outside world and organizational members defending the fortress from “enemies”. More specifically, the company was described as a pyramid (hard to climb, narrow rooms, protected by lions), a castle (protected by walls, under siege), Fort Knox (full of gold, military organization), and a temple (hierarchical, protected, few links with outside world). One metaphor distinct from these was that of an old tree, emphasizing the fact that the organization was solid and stable.

² The names of “PackCo”, “ChemCo”, and “SoftCo” have been disguised per agreement with the informants.

A great deal of commonality among individual identity constructions was evident in the first stages, however, a number of debates arose during the ensuing discussion. For example, some individuals wanted the country operation to be represented as a “cash cow” to the overall company, whereas others thought they were more like a “tiger”. In the group’s shared identity representation, senior management was built as being in a centralized “control tower”, where people had “broad views” and could see the world outside the fortress walls. The fortress images implied that the organization was built on solid foundations. However, during the conversation of a shared organizational identity, the managing director expressed the different view that the organization was in fact vulnerable to new threats, stating: “the foundations are not as solid as we thought.” The company was thought to be moving to shakier ground, and so the group decided to put its entire structure up on pillars as a result, to convey the idea of an organization on rough seas, or at least being in transition to this quite different state.

Head office came in for a fairly significant amount of blame for many of the organization’s challenges. For example, the company was expected to strike out and explore new possibilities (diversification), yet was receiving little assistance in doing this from headquarters. This conversation raised several questions about the company’s espoused diversification strategy. One participant commented: “We have had many discussions about how many scouts we need. Should they be internal or should be bring them in from the outside?” Another one commented: “People are doing this alone, without much support from the parent company”.

Case 2: ChemCo

This intervention was conducted in February 2002, at the offices of a mid-sized specialty chemical company based in Switzerland. Six participants from one of the company’s three divisions participated in the exercise, including five middle managers from functions including: marketing, sales, logistics, and production, and the Vice President of divisional strategy, who reported directly to the Divisional President. Although it was profitable, it did not generate the same high level of return as the company’s other divisions. The division had developed into

It had recently completed a multi-year strategic plan, a process in which all participants in the intervention had participated.

Constructing ChemCo's Identity

The individual identity constructions were quite diverse, including a magician operating behind a barrier, a highly mobile vehicle, a surveillance tower surrounded by threatening “polar bears”, and a factory controlling scattered sales people through use of an antenna. When the group was asked to build a shared representation of its identity, it represented the division using three large bases to represent the three main business units of the division, each of which was focused on a different market segment. Each unit included a variety of figures representing various components, personnel, strengths, weaknesses, and management techniques, as viewed by clients on the outside. It was interesting to note that despite encouragement from the facilitators, the group was initially unable to come up with an overall metaphor to describe its identity. Those present saw their division very much as three autonomous operations linked by many tangled processes, and several different attempts to create a simplified version of the key characteristics of the organization as a workflow process of delivery to clients were rejected as “too simplistic”. This difficulty was resolved when the group agreed to build in some of the internal structural complexity participants saw in their organization.

Behind this three-part external face of the organization, participants built a narrow set of communication channels to the pair of support departments, which were clogged with a stream of information requests far in excess of the “bandwidth” available for them to be dealt with. This operational complexity appeared common to all three of the division’s business units, and it would go on to become a guiding image for the subsequent discussion. Overall, the division’s identity consisted of three broad, flat, diversified surfaces that were loosely coupled, but all dependent on a labyrinth on support structures that were difficult to comprehend. In the ensuing discussions, the representative from the sales department took the opportunity to comment on the imperfect delivery of the logistics department, while the

logistics manager replied that the sales department had little appreciation of the complexity involved in liaising with manufacturing and putting together specialized orders at short notice. Towards the end of the session, a few individuals added new structures to the construction, to emphasize a few parts of the company where managers were able to overcome the organization's complexity through clear communication channels or "tubes".

Case 3: SoftCo

The third intervention was conducted in June 2002, for ten members of the senior management group of software company SoftCo's regional Northern European division. Participating in the session were six country managers, three functional managers, and the managing director of the division. The group of managers had yet to "gel" as a team, especially since each one held bottom-line responsibility for his (no women participated) operation alone. Prior to the session, participants described the company as an "American style" matrix organization with country managers on the one hand and international product managers on the other, each having separate profit and loss responsibility. The division functioned as a virtual team that was very diverse, with many different languages, cultures and currencies. Its leader wanted to try to move beyond a "hub-and-spoke" management system with him at the center, to explore whether or not these country and functional managers could create a peer-to-peer support network and even evolve into a real "team".

Constructing SoftCo's Identity

The individual identity constructions reflected highly subjective views of the organization. For example, the human resources manager viewed SoftCo Northern Europe as "all about people", with road construction work needing to be done to link them up. One participant used a different animal figure to represent each of the country operations, and the animals were placed in a circle around a "farmer", representing the managing director, who was collecting money. He explained, "We all have similar needs, we all want to be patted on the head". Another country manager put Sweden in the middle, and pointed out that the managing director was himself Swedish. Each of the country managers built constructions that included current issues faced by his own operation.

The shared identity representation for SoftCo's Northern Europe division represented six independent country operations, loosely connected in a network. Each member of the group built his own operation, and pushed this into the middle of the table to be connected with the others. The main link between the operations was the managing director, who connected everyone else through "radio control". One participant pointed out the "gaping hole in the air over the construction"-- referring to the absence of "the corporate image shining down" on the different people. The resulting group construction was highly complex, but everyone eventually agreed to the overall identity image of individuals linked through "antenna relationships", implying that they could call each other up but remained relatively distant from each other.

The process of collectively constructing the identity for SoftCo Northern Europe was very difficult. Construction of a shared identity started only when the general manager started to divide the work, and it advanced when he told a very personal story concerning his position and link with his boss. The discussion really took off when the team focused on questions of organizational *image*, or how the organization was perceived from outsiders such as customers. The country managers from the less developed market operations expressed the most interest in forming a team, while those from larger, more established markets showed less interest. Some of the advantages of creating a more formal network were discussed, such as the possibility of creating a forum for organizational learning or at the very least removing some of the "loneliness" of the country managers. However, the managers frequently appeared to view each other as potential competitors for resources, rather than as potential collaborators. The relationship with head office was raised at various points in time, with one manager commenting: "The development of a team mentality is held back by the centralized control from HQ".

Findings

After analyzing our observations, interview notes, and the survey results from each of these three firms, we generated three major findings. First, participants appeared to enhance

sensemaking around their organizational identity through the use of rich metaphors. Second, identity descriptions appeared to encompass hidden thoughts *in addition* to the otherwise overt content of conversations about their firms. Third, the development process of these new identity descriptions revealed a number of previously hidden emotions to the participants.

1st Finding: Rich Organizational Imagery

In all three cases, we found that the collective identity descriptions generated were very detailed and inclusive. Each included meanings and often even physical elements of participants' individual models of the firm, as well as new and different views that emerged during the discussions surrounding the collective construction processes. Each team generated rich, multidimensional metaphoric images to which were attached narratives. Metaphors are figures of speech that—like other tropes—allow us to explain one phenomenon in terms of another. In this study, the metaphors developed helped managers make sense of and express their abstract or intuitive experience of “organizational identity”. Each of the management teams collectively constructed an overall representation of its organization's identity that centered on a unifying metaphor. In PackCo this became “the fortress”, in ChemCo it was “tubes through messy interconnections”, and in SoftCo, “antenna relationships” were used to represent the identity of their organizations. The images were quite powerful for the managers involved. One manager from PackCo commented: “The image summarizes 40 overhead slides in one single playground”.

The variety of meaning and the significance placed on the overall image that emerged illustrate well the importance of imagery for human sense making, as discussed at length in the literature (e.g. Lakoff and Johnson, 1980; Ortony 1993; Grant and Oswick 1996, Sackmann 1989, Tsoukas, 1991 & 1993). These forms of imagery, generically called tropes (Gibbs, 1993), are devices of comparison, whereby something is understood in terms of some other, seemingly unrelated thing. As illustrated by our three cases, tropes like “antenna relationships” and “the fortress” helped the managers in this study make sense of and express the abstract or intuitive experience of “organizational identity.”

In addition to improving basic sensemaking (e.g. Oswick et al., 2002), metaphors can contribute to transform existing thinking or even generate new insights (Sackmann 1989; Grant and Oswick, 1996). They do not simply describe an external reality; they also help constitute that reality and prescribe how it ought to be viewed (Tsoukas, 1991). The thick and deep identity descriptions provided in each of the three cases suggest that imagery constructed multi-modally, i.e., involving pictorial-visual, verbal-narrative, spatial-kinesthetic and haptic sensory inputs, may have an important positive impact on how managers construct and share meaning about organizational identity. Bürgi and Roos (2003) have outlined how externalizing individual viewpoints by means of three-dimensional metaphors allows for a physical experience of the relatedness of concepts. As one manager from SoftCo commented: "I think there was great value in seeing our company in a 3D perspective...better than just having the stuff on a whiteboard". The impact of such an extension of the use of metaphor in processes of enactment lies with its potential "to make the issue at hand more transitory and plastic" (Huff and Jenkins, 2002, p.8). By extending our expressive repertoire, it might thereby facilitate processes of enactment in instances where language might impede understanding. This is even more relevant as managers might be able to enlarge their capacities for novel interpretations by systematically varying metaphors (Smircich and Stubbart, 1985).

The metaphoric identity descriptions included embedded *stories* about the firms as they were seen by each team on the day of the intervention, but often also included many historical elements as well as future outlooks. For instance, the PackCo team created a story of how the fortress had gradually been built to protect the gold they had made, that competitors now wanted to "steal" that gold, and that new competitors arriving on the scene had the potential to "break down the fortress walls". The ChemCo team's identity story showed how the division had expanded from one business to three, how the complexity of its logistics and manufacturing function impacted it in the present, and how the team needed to develop more "tubelike" structures which would cut through the mess to improve things in the future. The SoftCo group developed a shared story that explained how their regional structure had been

imposed “from above,” and how this impacted interactions among members of the team both at that time and in the future. Each of these overall identity “stories” contained a variety of “sub-stories”, often centered on a particular LEGO piece in the model. For example, a woman-shaped figure was designated as “the accounting lady on the third floor”, and symbolized to the PackCo team a story of how they had to deal with financial constraints to “get things done” in this organization.

Our first finding suggests that people’s organizational identity is profoundly shaped by rich guiding metaphorical images and the narratives that can accompany them. The *process* of developing these images brings us to our second finding.

2nd Finding: Integrating Hidden Thoughts

In each of the three cases, participants reported that they had either said or heard things that surprised them, i.e. that they had never said or heard previously, about their organization. In building their constructions, the managers from PackCo all seem to be informed by the same deep world-view, namely that their organization was somewhat sealed off, threatened from outside forces, and in need of defending, which was captured in the fortress trope. This “defensive” image contrasted sharply with the authors’ understanding of this organization from media reports and from data gathered from these same managers in pre-interviews, who gave no indication that the foundations of the firm really were not as solid as they appeared. More emphasis was generally placed on the firm’s impressive record of success.

In ChemCo, the identity construction seemed to reveal the underlying, unspoken perception that the organization was highly confusing and chaotic, and that this confusion was leading the company to lose customers. At the same time, the image of “tube relationships”—clear communication channels—emerged during the process, and this appeared to provide some unexpected guidance for how the organization could improve its situation. The head of logistics, who felt much of the burden of this simplification task, commented in the follow-up survey on how the rich organizational identity image led him to take new specific actions: “the

amplitude of the problem was made so strongly by our being able to look at the big picture of the whole division... there is now a process of analyzing how to change the details of what we do, and things will slowly be put into place to improve the clarity and transparency about what we actually do.”

In SoftCo, the representation of how the regional leader and his direct reports interacted--via “antennas”-- strongly revealed the desire of country managers to be left alone while they recognized that the regional leader was striving to form a real team. When one participant made a point of trying to adhere to the team idea, stating: “We have a number of issues country by country across this region that we should use our combined skills to solve” (while pointing at a particular phenomenon they had built into the model), nobody picked up on this idea. Another participant openly questioned the very idea of working together at all, commenting: “Although we share some problems it might be difficult to work together on solving them since our roles are very different.” By agreeing on the “antenna” metaphor, the SoftCo managers (with the exception of the leader) seemed to reveal a deeply held belief that they were not a real team, and shouldn’t become one either.

In each case it was the constructions *per se* that embodied these underlying and seemingly hidden thoughts. Although challenging in nature, in each case these revelations became defining moments of “truth,” when participants spoke up and said things about their organization that they otherwise may not have said, at least not so direct and frankly. In this regard, Morgan emphasizes the relevance of metaphors for processes of enactment, commenting that “each metaphor opens a horizon of understanding and enacts a particular view of organizational reality” (Morgan, 1997, p.427). It has been argued that the transformative power of metaphors stems from their potential to uncover perceptions, attitudes and feelings which until released by metaphor were previously subconscious or unarticulated (Barry, 1994; Marshak, 1993; Sarbin, 1986). For processes of enactment, metaphors serve as important components of the knowledge that organizations have of themselves, and therefore as tools with which managers can better understand their - enacted - organization and environment. Tsoukas (1991) argues that metaphors “do not

simply describe an external reality; they also help constitute that reality and prescribe how it ought to be viewed” (1991, p.570).

3rd Finding: Surfacing Emotions Safely

The images, metaphors and stories expressed during the identity building exercises extended deeper than purely cognitive conversations, since much of the group interaction was highly emotional in nature. The expression of emotions appeared to be facilitated by the use of building materials and a built model, a form of “object-mediated inquiry” (e.g., Edwards, 1986; Barry, 1994), which enabled participants to communicate about difficult issues through use of the LEGO materials rather than through face-to-face confrontation. Although managers were observed pointing at, and even talking to the LEGO model in question rather than to other participants when sensitivities surfaced, their discussions seemed significantly more open and frank than previous attempts had been. For example, when citing examples of problems in delivery of products, the participant from the sales department of ChemCo pointed to the logistics part of the model in identifying and describing the problem, rather than to the logistics manager present in the room.

The power of object-mediated inquiry is that it can make hidden thoughts more discussable, which enriches any discussion of “organizational identity.” This phenomenon was evident when the managing director of SoftCo built an elaborate model describing his relationship with his boss. The group was silent as he outlined several of the higher and lower points of this relationship. The managing director of PackCo commented after a few weeks that he was surprised at the level of openness and frankness during the discussions about even very sensitive issues. A ChemCo manager reflected after the session: “I found it also to be a very interesting way of expressing subjective views, and I was amazed at how emotional it could be. There were hundreds of ways of representing this person or role, or this department, and the way that was chosen was always very communicative, and very funny.” The head of logistics from ChemCo reflected: “(logistics) was very strongly challenged in the building session, and since I am part of it, I felt it strongly.”

The LEGO models constructed by participants seem to have allowed articulation and manipulation of otherwise elusive and at times highly emotional images of their organizational identities. Moreover, participants were able to experiment with alternative views in a seemingly safe way without fear of being reprimanded or held back by seniors or peers, consistent with Johnson-Laird and Steedman (1978). We conclude that the organizational identity representations probably included both conscious and unconscious thoughts *and feelings* about the identity of the organization as authentically perceived by participating managers at that moment in time. By providing an object-mediated method for these hidden feelings to be expressed, the process provided a safer means of adjudicating these differences.

Conclusion

As a psychological and social reality, organizational identity is an empirical, theoretical and practical construct that can be used to enhance understanding of organizational processes (Haslam et al., 2003), and appears to hold 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, although to date much of this work has been limited in a number of respects. Our review of empirical studies of organizational identity revealed that many of these studies use individual informants to generate textual descriptions in a non-company context, where identities are presumed to be static, and lead to identity descriptions based on lists of simple attributes.

In this paper we explored the use of standardized technique involving 3D construction materials as a means by which management teams could describe the identities of their organizations. Organizational identity is not a purely cognitive, verbal construct; it is also emotional and capable of being expressed in a variety of ways. By embracing the calls for understanding the multi-dimensionality of the phenomenon of organizational identity, we found that imagery and objects can foster the development of richly metaphoric, often

surprising, and emotional-laden descriptions of organizational identity that are salient to the context in which the organization is situated at a given time. Beyond this exploratory study, it is our hope that further empirical work will extend the study of organizational identity beyond the realm of the verbal and to its rightful place as a multifaceted source of meaning in organizational life.

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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"

Table 1 (continued)

Czarniawska & Wolff, 1998	Two European universities	Case studies	Interviews and secondary documents	Narrative accounts developed by co-authors.	Two story titles "one of us" and "the stranger", and narratives.
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"
Welleford & Dudley, 2000	Total Action Against Poverty (community action agency)	Single case study	Interviews, secondary publications	List of 35 terms distilled from a promotional letter written by Executive Director; confirmed in interviews	Two 10-word lists describing identity, e.g.: "education oriented", "efficient", "open to public", "a working family", "team focused".
Bartel, 2001	Pillsbury community outreach	Multi-method 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"
Kärreman & Alvesson, 2001	Swedish newspaper	Ethnographic	Participant observation, interviews	Interpretation of edited meeting transcription	Descriptions of construction of customer, product, organizational relations, cognitive style, particular rhythm, view of outside world, and mentality
Labianca et al., 2001	U.S. higher-education institutions	Quantitative study	Large scale survey	Measurement of identity along two dimensions (utilitarian or normative), then measure of identity strength	Two "identities"-- "utilitarian" and "normative"-- measured through seven questions e.g.: "do top administrators feel that your institution should be "competing" for students as if they were clients or customers?"
Brown & Humphreys, 2002	"Hero University", Ankara, Turkey	Ethnographic	Interviews, immersion in stream of organizational events	Coding transcription from 42 interviews, generation of thick description	Organization of "narrative" of nostalgia and hegemonic resistance.
Dukerich, Golden & Shortell, 2002	Physicians associated with three health care	Quantitative study	Focus groups, survey of 1504	Factor analysis of 37 "identity attributes"	37 identity attributes including: "cooperative with physicians", "concern

	systems		physicians		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.