

INTRODUCTION TO SPECIAL TOPIC FORUM

ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY AND IDENTIFICATION: CHARTING NEW WATERS AND BUILDING NEW BRIDGES

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Identity and identification are powerful terms. Because they speak to the very definition of an entity—an organization, a group, a person—they have been a subtext of many strategy sessions, organization development initiatives, team-building exercises, and socialization efforts. Identity and identification, in short, are root constructs in organizational phenomena and have been a subtext of many organizational behaviors.

Part of the power of the constructs comes from the need for a situated sense of an entity. Whether an organization, group, or person, each entity needs at least a preliminary answer to the question "Who are we?" or "Who am I?" in order to interact effectively with other entities over the long run. Similarly, other entities need at least a preliminary answer to the question "Who are they?" for effective interaction. Identities situate the organization, group, and person.

Another part of the power of identity and identification derives from the integrative and generative capacity of these constructs. Identity and identification are terms that travel easily across levels of analysis. They simultaneously convey distinctiveness and oneness (e.g., of an organization, group, or individual), while allowing for blurring, multiplicity, and dynamism in identity content and process. As noun (identity) and verb (identify), they can be used as versatile concepts, frames, or tools that open up possibilities for theoretical development and revelation. We hope you will see the generous yield from this

invitation in both the articles and concluding dialogues contained in this forum.

WHY NOW?

Neither identity nor identification is a new construct in the organizational literature. However, there are several reasons why both are particularly important in contemporary organizational life. On the macro side, as the environment becomes ever more dynamic and complex, organizations become ever more organic. The flattening of hierarchies, the growth in teamwork and empowerment, the outsourcing of secondary competencies, and so on are means of creating flexible pools of sophisticated capacities. However, as conventional organizational forms are dismantled, so too are many of the institutionalized repositories of organizational history and method, and the institutionalized means by which organizations perpetuate themselves. Increasingly, an organization must reside in the heads and hearts of its members. Thus, in the absence of an externalized bureaucratic structure, it becomes more important to have an internalized cognitive structure of what the organization stands for and where it intends to go—in short, a clear sense of the organization's identity. A sense of identity serves as a rudder for navigating difficult waters.

On the micro side, it may seem odd to argue that identity and identification are important in contemporary organizations. Given the massive corporate downsizings of recent years, the de-

crease in long-term relational contracts in favor of shorter-term transactional ones, and the growth in boundaryless careers (Arthur & Rousseau, 1996), the notion of identification with and loyalty to one's employer, workgroup, or occupation may seem quaint, even naive. However, it is partly because of this loss of organizational moorings that individual identity and identification are critical issues.

These are turbulent times. In preindustrial society one could see much of one's future self in one's parents and grandparents. The industrial age uprooted numerous traditions, but identity choices (whether made by design or default) regarding one's occupation, employer, neighborhood, and friends often assumed an air of permanence. In postindustrial times, however, there are far fewer identity givens, more identity options, more tolerance of identity diversity, and more frequent identity changes over the life course (Gergen, 1991). In such a world there is a need not just for self-discovery but self-invention, and possibly reinvention. In such a world one's identity moorings are planted in shifting sand. Thus, it is because identity is problematic—and yet so critical to how and what one values, thinks, feels, and does in all social domains, including organizations—that the dynamics of identity need to be better understood.

Diversity also motivates a concern with identities and processes of identification for individuals, groups, organizations, and populations. Evidence abounds that social distances between social entities are declining. Political boundaries between many nation states have shattered. Organizational forms are mutating. People with more diverse backgrounds, expectations, and values increasingly populate all levels of work organizations. The result is that an identity formed through interaction with a similar other is necessarily altered when the other is replaced by a stranger.

The same is also true at the macro level. Organizations that come into contact with new entities, such as Web-based competitors, are likely to have to rethink their identity and decide whether they wish to add a ".com" to their name. All of these changes add to the range of identities and self-definitions available to social entities. The sheer scale and range of heterogeneity of people, of groups, and of social forms more generally, fuel greater interest in identity pro-

cesses and their role in organizational theory and practice.

The momentum to study identity and identification also comes from a rediscovery of the importance of meaning and emotion in organizational life. The beauty of the identity and identification concepts is that they provide a way of accounting for the agency of human action within an organizational framework. By internalizing the group or organizational identity as a (partial) definition of self, the individual gains a sense of meaningfulness and connection. Identity and identification explain one means by which individuals act on behalf of the group or the organization. Thus, theories of identity and identification are infused with motivation and feeling. They help to explain the direction and persistence of individual and more collective behaviors. They are ideas that fit the times' concern with how people acquire and make meaning in social life. As the articles in this special issue reveal, these theories are powerful lenses for explaining change, action, and inaction by individuals and collectivities.

DESIGN OF THE THEORY FORUM

The current state of identity scholarship left us in a quandary. On the one hand, we believe that more integration is needed to encourage cross-fertilization and opportunities for theoretical ideas to build on one another. On the other, the state of current theory called for an opening up, rather than a closing down, of theoretical possibilities. The two competing conditions inspired a broad invitation to the field for theoretical papers addressing issues of identity and identification in organizations, as well as the introduction of a design innovation in how this forum is organized. The design innovation is the "Identity Dialogues" conclusion to the special issue. We asked the authors of each article to read the other articles to appear, and then build bridges across articles from their particular point of view. Thus, the six integrative statements provide multiple vantage points on how each of the forum articles is linked to the others.

The diversity of the six articles in this special topic forum suggests the continuing generative richness of the concepts of organizational identity and identification. Together, the articles and dialogues provide a richly textured account of how and why identity and identification pro-

cesses matter in organizations. Whereas some articles set the discussion in a larger framework (e.g., Gioia, Schultz, & Corley), others begin to explore largely uncharted waters (e.g., Pratt & Foreman). The articles range from micro (Brickson and Hogg & Terry) to more macro concerns (Scott & Lane), and reflect a theoretical eclecticism—from individual cognitive processes (Hogg & Terry) to psychodynamic theory (Brown & Starkey).

Although some may be dismayed at the lack of consensus regarding the meaning and definition of the terms *organization identity* and *identification*, we prefer to see this diversity as reflecting a creative process that will evolve through cycles of divergence and convergence. Different views at different points in history may simply serve different purposes, without the lack of universal agreement being in any way an impediment to progress. In fact, it may turn out that some of the most profound issues raised by questions of identity are not resolvable; that identity—because of its depth and profundity—will always be, in part, an enigma.

THE IDENTITY ARTICLES

Michael Pratt and Peter Foreman ("Classifying Managerial Responses to Multiple Organizational Identities") analyze how managers handle multiple organizational identities. They argue that managers tend to favor a plurality of identities when the identities are thought to hold future value, are supported by powerful stakeholders, are intensely held and considered legitimate by stakeholders, and when the organization is not facing strict resource constraints. Managers also tend to favor linking these identities when the identities are compatible and diffused across the entire organization, and when the interdependence among the relevant stakeholders is high. Crossing high and low levels of "identity plurality" with high and low "identity synergy" leads to an elegant 2×2 table of potential managerial responses.

Drawing insightful parallels between the literature on individual identity and organizational identity, Pratt and Foreman discuss the pros and cons of each response. A particular strength of their analysis is the discussion of not only the modal response within each of the four cells but of potential responses at the *margins* dividing the cells. It is often in these kinds of gray areas

that organizational complexity and dynamism lie—and, thus, the real challenges for practitioners and scholars alike.

Susanne Scott and Vicki Lane ("A Stakeholder Approach to Organizational Identity") set the problem of identity within the broader context of manager-stakeholder relationships. They argue that "organizational identity is best understood as contested and negotiated through iterative interactions between managers and stakeholders" (p. 44), focusing on what they call *organizational identity construction*. They advance a number of propositions concerned with the factors that shape the desired organizational images that managers form—for example, that managers will be more concerned with the accuracy of desired organizational images when they believe that the intended stakeholder audience has access to alternative information sources regarding the organization, or when the images consist of claims that are quantifiable and measurable.

Developing the stakeholder approach, Scott and Lane suggest a number of propositions relating properties of stakeholders to the construction of identity—for example, the denser the stakeholder network (the number of relationships in a network linking members together, relative to the total number possible), the greater the influence of stakeholder needs, values, and beliefs on managers' reconstruction of organizational identity. Scott and Lane also discuss a number of tactics that organizations use to cue stakeholder identification and influence stakeholders to view themselves as members of an organization.

Dennis Gioia, Majken Schultz, and Kevin Corley ("Organizational Identity, Image, and Adaptive Instability") take to task the idea that organizational identity is core, distinctive, and enduring (Albert & Whetten, 1985). They build an elegant account of how organizational identity and image interrelate in a process over time to make organizational identities adaptively unstable. They ask the important question of where the apparent stability of identity is to be found and argue that "the seeming durability of identity is actually contained in the stability of the *labels* used by organizational members to express who or what they believe the organization to be" (p. 64). Their article maps the various ways that organizational scholars have applied the construct of image to theories of identity and identity change.

These authors distinguish between an identity that endures (remains the same over time) and—in their view, what is more prevalent—an identity that exhibits continuity over time (the latter admits shifts in meaning and interpretation). Drawing on these distinctions (as well as on others), the authors build a theory about how different forms of organizational images destabilize a sense of organizational identity and engage an adaptive process of identity change. They buttress their arguments with a particularly lucid account of revisionist history and postmodernism. Their depiction of the recursive process of mutual influence between an organization's sense of self-definition (identity) with changing organizational images creates a framework for understanding incremental adjustments of organizational identities over time.

Shelley Brickson ("The Impact of Identity Orientation on Individual and Organizational Outcomes in Demographically Diverse Settings") addresses the question of how identity processes affect majority and minority responses to diversity in organizations. Her framework uses Brewer and Gardner's (1996) idea that contexts can activate three different types of identity orientations for individuals—personal, relational, and collective—each of which has different social motivations. She uses these distinctions to build two important sets of arguments.

First, she argues that different features of organizational contexts (organizational, task, and reward structures) engage different identity orientations. The engagement of different orientations, in turn, is related to different cognitive, affective, and behavioral responses of individuals in groups. Second, she maps the engagement of different identity orientations to individual and organizational outcomes that relate to the way that diversity is experienced in organizations and the kinds of organizational-level, diversity-related patterns that unfold. Her core claim is that activation of a relational identity orientation in organizations offers the most promise for progress in diversity management practices.

Andrew Brown and Ken Starkey ("Organizational Identity and Learning: A Psychodynamic Perspective") argue that organizational learning is often retarded by the organization's efforts to preserve its current identity. Drawing on the psychodynamic literature, Brown and Starkey consider five defenses individuals and organizations use that may prove dysfunctional for

organizational learning: denial (individuals and organizations disclaim knowledge and responsibility, reject claims on them, and disavow acts and their consequences), rationalization (an attempt to justify impulses, needs, and so on that one finds unacceptable so that they become both plausible and consciously tolerable), idealization (the process by which an object becomes emotionally overvalued and stripped of its negative features), fantasy (a kind of vivid daydream that affords unreal, substantive satisfactions), and symbolization (the process through which an external object becomes the disguised outward representation for another internal and hidden object, idea, person, or complex).

The existence of all of these defenses, Brown and Starkey argue, make change difficult. At the same time, they point to three factors that they believe can contribute to a change in organizational identity: critical self-reflexivity; the promotion of a dialogue about the future identity; and, perhaps most difficult, the attainment of an attitude of wisdom.

Michael Hogg and Deborah Terry ("Social Identity and Self-Categorization Processes in Organizational Contexts") focus on an important extension of social identity theory called *self-categorization theory*. According to this, categorizing oneself as a group member accentuates one's self-perceived similarity to the group prototype. In becoming a de facto prototypic member, one tends to enact the group identity—at least when the group is salient. Thus, Hogg and Terry argue that this depersonalization of the self "is the process underlying group phenomena" (p. 123). This is an immensely important claim, for it suggests that group dynamics cannot be understood apart from the categorization and identity processes of group members.

Hogg and Terry illustrate the power of their argument with applications to cohesion and deviance, leadership, and group structure. The discussion suggests a number of provocative propositions, such as "social attraction may foster organizational cohesion, and thereby identification and adherence to organizational norms; conversely, interpersonal attraction may fragment the organization and disrupt identification and adherence to norms" (p. 126); "organizational identification may hinder endorsement of effective leaders" (p. 130); and "harmonious relations among subgroups... are often best achieved by simulta-

neous recognition of subgroup and organizational identity" (p. 132). In short, the depersonalization of the self has intriguing implications for a variety of organizational phenomena.

THE IDENTITY DIALOGUES

The authors have approached the extension task in the dialogues in distinctly different ways. Some look across the articles and find commonalities, as do Pratt and Foreman, in their account of the "beauty" and "barriers" to organizational identity theories. Others take a stand about the most pressing need for theoretical development. Gioia, Schultz, and Corley assert that it is the concept of organizational identity that requires deeper consideration, whereas Scott and Lane focus on the "stickiness" of organizational identity.

Some authors use the dialogue format to categorize the six-article set. Brickson does this by classifying the articles by their prescriptive versus descriptive tones and by their level of analysis (e.g., more micro or macro in orientation).

Finally, some authors use the dialogues to reinterpret others' articles through an extension of the authors' core premise. Hogg and Terry do this, as they reinterpret how the other authors' ideas could be elaborated through a social identity lens. Brown and Starkey also take this stance in surfacing the psychodynamic processes underlying core ideas in the other articles.

CONCLUSION

The identity articles and dialogues touch on a wealth of provocative issues: multilevel

identities (personal, interpersonal, and collective) and the parallels in identity dynamics among levels; identities as negotiated or socially constructed phenomena; multiple identities and the dynamics among identities; identities as political arenas; identities as enduring versus changeable qualities; identities as spontaneous and emergent versus planned and managed phenomena; identity and demographic diversity; identities as flashpoints for psychodynamic processes; identification as a basis for group phenomena; and so on. As the variety of topics indicates, identity and identification are, indeed, generative constructs. It is our hope that the articles and dialogues in the special topic forum will inspire organizational scholars to continue to explore the rich and challenging nuances of identity and identification in organizational life.

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