

Organizational identity: A survey

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Abstract

In this paper, we present an overview of the literatures on organizational identity and organizational identification. We present overviews of four major approaches to organizational identity: functionalist, social constructionist, psychodynamic, and postmodern. The literature on organizational identification, by contrast, exhibits greater consensus due to the hegemonic power of social identity theory, and is predominantly functionalist. We review recent research on organizational identification regarding performance outcomes and antecedents (mainly focusing on leadership and the social exchange perspective), and in relation to change and virtual contexts. Following an overview of the papers in this special issue, some suggestions for further research are then offered.

Keywords: Organizational identity, organizational identification, review, organizational behavior

1. Introduction

Over more than two decades organizational identity (OI), along with its associated construct organizational identification (OID), have become two of the most significant concepts (some would argue ‘constructs’ or ‘theoretical lenses’) informing organization and management research. OI and OID have come to occupy central positions in efforts to understand organizations and their interactions with the environment. Recently, investigations of global issues including climate change, economic crisis and public spending cuts, have often implicated OI and OID rendering them still more salient issues for theorists. While tremendous theoretical and empirical developments have been made regarding OI and OID, there is still considerable scope for further advances.

Although OI and OID have been widely researched, extant literatures have not yet paid sufficient attention to a number of major issues, and these offer tremendous opportunities for developing identity and identification studies. For example, although OI has been approached from multiple theoretical angles, there is still little work on mapping these divergent approaches. How can OI, and OID mainly conceptualized from a social identity perspective, be integrated with other major theoretical perspectives, such as social exchange theory in order to explain the behavior of individuals, groups and organizations? What is the role of OI and OID in motivating employees to engage in both in-role and extra-role behaviors and performance? How does leadership influence OID and hence employee performance? What is the relationship between employee OID and organizational change?

How is OID developed within an organization?

The purpose of this special issue is two-fold. First, it aims to stock-take the achievements of OI and OID research. Second, and more importantly, it aims to stimulate cutting-edge research contributions (including commentaries on new challenges and new opportunities) on OI and OID. We approach the first aim by reviewing the recent literatures on OI and OID in this paper, and the second aim by incorporating a number of articles drawing on the latest research into this special issue. This paper is structured as follows. First, we present an overview of OI research, identifying dominant perspectives (i.e., functionalist, social constructionist, psychodynamic, and postmodern) and discuss potential future research. Second, we review the recent literatures on OID, with particular focus on (a) OID’s relationships with leadership, social exchange, and employee performance and (b) OID in non-traditional organizational contexts. We also present a number of important future research avenues regarding OID. Finally, we introduce the papers that are included in this special issue.

2. Organizational Identity

‘Organizational identity’ (OI) has become an increasingly important domain of inquiry for scholars (Brown, 2006; Corley, et. al. 2006) and also a key issue for managers (Cheney, 1991, p. 201). Interest in identities at the level of the organization has, since the publication of Albert and Whetten’s (1985) seminal work, been accompanied by a vigorous focus on collective and in particular organizational ‘selves’ and their implications for theory and practice. OI is now recognized as key in efforts to understand strategic change (Ravasi & Phillips, 2011), decision-making (Riantoputra, 2010), internal conflicts (Humphreys & Brown 2002), communication (Fombrun, 1996), issue interpretation and response (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Gioia & Thomas, 1996), and pivotal to the theorization of issues centred on legitimacy (He & Baruch, 2010; Sillince & Brown, 2009). Seeking to account for this trend, sociologists have suggested that in an increasingly fragmented, discontinuous and crisis-ridden world identity issues at all levels are both highlighted and problematized (Giddens, 1991). Others have pointed to the utility of the concept of identity to bridge levels of analysis, link micro- and macro-level structures and processes, and thus to cohere otherwise disparate strands of organization-based research (Ashforth & Mael, 1996, p. 4; Polzer, 2000, p. 628).

Ultimately, there is an emergent consensus that it is ‘because identity is problematic - and yet so critical... that the dynamics of identity need to be better understood’ (Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000, p. 14).

In their original formulation of the concept Albert and Whetten (1985) argued that an organization’s identity was constituted by a set of claims regarding what was central, distinctive and enduring about it. However, they did not indicate the criteria for specifying these claims (what constitutes ‘centrality’, for example?), but did recognize explicitly a number of complicating factors which mean that organizations may be characterized by multiple identities and that identities claims are often political acts, and can be ambiguous, complementary, unrelated and contradictory. Unsurprisingly, perhaps, use of the concept over subsequent decades has not been consistent, leading Whetten (2006, p. 220) to complain that ‘the concept of organizational identity is suffering an identity crisis’ and Pratt (2003, p. 162) to assert that as an explanatory concept identity ‘is often overused and under specified’.

Recognition of these issues has led to multiple attempts to re-define the concept, for example, as ‘*the theory that members of an organization have about who they are*’ (Stimpert, Gustafson, & Sarason, 1998, p. 87) and more recently as ‘the combinative construal of firm culture, history, structure, characteristics, status and reputation’ (Martin, Johnson, & French, 2011, p. 576). What is clear, is that organizational identity is about ‘self-referential meaning’, that is, ‘an entity’s attempts to define itself’ (Corley, et. al. 2006, p. 87), and implicates questions such as ‘who are we?’ and ‘who do we want to become?’

An embarrassment of definitional riches, though, cannot gloss over the fact that the OI field is riven with uncertainties and often fractious disagreements. While most studies have concentrated on internal processes of OI formation, it is increasingly evident that identities are formed in part through dialogue with external stakeholders and are best construed as relational and comparative (Corley, et. al. 2006; Martin, Johnson, & French, 2011). There is agreement that OI is a collective-level concept, but dissensus whether this refers to a 'social actor' (Whetten & Mackey, 2002) or to collections of individual-level understandings (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail 1994; Harquail & King 2003), and if the latter, whether these are an 'aggregate' or some form of 'gestalt' property of organizations. A minority view holds that OI is merely a metaphorical device that suggests resemblances between individual and collective identities (Cornelissen 2002a,b), with most scholars preferring to regard it as a phenomenon referring to psychological and social realities with antecedents and consequences for other social processes and outcomes (Haslam, Postmes, & Ellemers, 2003, p. 359). Considerable debate centers on how to differentiate OI from cognate terms such as corporate image and reputation (images projected to external audiences), construed external image (how insiders believe outsiders view the organization), and particularly organizational culture (Fombrun, 1996; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Hatch & Schultz, 1997). Attempts to address these and other related issues have resulted in a multiplicity of perspectives, with varying ontological and epistemological assumptions and methodological preferences, which we here consider under four (admittedly somewhat arbitrarily imposed) labels: 'functionalist', 'social constructionist', 'psychodynamic' and 'postmodern'.

3. Functionalist perspectives

Functionalist perspectives which hold that identities are composed of essential, objective and often tangible features, dominate OI research not just in organization studies but in allied areas such as marketing and strategy (e.g. Balmer & Greyser, 2006; Brown, Dacin, Pratt, & Whetten, 2006; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Cornelissen, Haslam, & Blamer, 2007; Fombrun & Shanley, 1990; He, 2012; He & Balmer, 2007; He & Murkherjee, 2009; Martin, Johnson & French, 2011). In the fields of marketing and brand management OI is often associated with corporate logos, physical attributes of corporations, official histories, documentation, and senior managers' speeches (Olins, 1989; van Riel & Balmer, 1997).

Brun's (2002) analysis of identity change, which focuses on a new logo and visual identity programme at France Telecom is in many ways typical of this stream of research. Within organization and management studies functionalist approaches lead often to attempts to categorize organizations' identities and identity responses to environmental cues, and to concerns with the definition of formal identity constructs with putative explanatory and even predictive powers. Scholars working from a new institutionalist perspective, for example, analyze the isomorphic pressures on organizations to articulate clear and 'acceptable' identities and the potential advantages and drawbacks of nonconformity for performance (Rao, Monim & Durand, 2003; Smith, 2011).

Rarely, though, in these studies, is OI tightly elaborated. One exception is Whetten and Mackey's (2002) attempt to outline a view of organizations as social actors with legal status whose identities can be discerned through their collective entity-level commitments, obligations, and actions. Whetten's (2006, p. 2009) view is that such a conception of OI has 'construct validity' which 'lends itself to model building, hypothesis testing, and empirical measurement'. In effect, though, this conception reifies organizations, attributing to them objectively extant status, while privileging the hegemonic efforts of a few, generally the most senior, executives. Such is the allure of functionalist-essentialist thinking that these tendencies are evident even in sophisticated efforts to unpack the OI concept: Corley et al. (2006), for example, recognize the limitations of 'exercise[s] in positivist epistemology' (p.91), but devote much attention to specifying notional identity criteria, dimensions, operationalization and means of assessment. While evidently 'the main stream' approach to the study of OI, functionalist research often relies on over-socialized views of organizational members, marginalizes the processes whereby sense is made by participants of complicated actions, events and histories, is insensitive to discourse and the embodied nature of cognition, and ignores the relations of power in which identity statements are made, championed, forgotten and contested.

4.Social constructionist perspectives

Social constructionist perspectives, sometimes also referred to as interpretive or social cognition approaches, regard OI as the socially constructed product of relationships between collectively held, and socially structured individual cognitions regarding 'who the organization is' (Corley, et al. 2006; Dutton et al., 1994; Harquail & King, 2003). In most formulations, OI refers to relatively shared understandings concerning what is central, distinctive and enduring about an organization, that give meaning to members' experience of work, and which derive from a complex of interactions by multiple actors from across professional groups and hierarchical levels (Glynn, 2000; Harrison, 2000; Kjaergaard & Ravasi, 2011). Two distinctive variants have been outlined by Pratt (2003), who differentiates between an 'aggregate' perspective, where collective identities reside in the minds of individual members and is therefore a summation of individual views; and a 'gestalt' version, which suggests that collective identities are located in the relationships and relational ties that bind cognitively people together. A wealth of research has resulted in a tremendous stockpile of cases which analyse how OI is bound-up and (at least partially) constituted from discourses centred on everything from dress codes (Humphreys & Brown, 2002; Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997) to processes of remembering/forgetting (Anteby & Molnar, 2012), nostalgia (Brown & Humphreys, 2002), and media attention (Kjaergaard & Ravasi, 2011).

This approach to the conception and study of OI tends generally to depict it as less stable and more malleable, less the product of senior executives' decisions and more open to political influence at different levels, and less clearly defined and more ambiguous than functionalist perspectives maintain. In seeking to elaborate organizations' identities scholars have most usually focused on notional psychological phenomena such as beliefs, values and assumptions or on stakeholders' use of language.

For example, Ran and Duimering (2007) argue that identity claims establish value-laden categories, position the organization either positively or negatively within these categories, and construct movement and transformation within them to generate past, present and future identities. Recently, however, Harquail and King (2010) have contended that social cognitions and language use are ‘embodied’ and, drawing on a substantial literature that emphasizes the biological basis of social and cognitive capacities (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999), have suggested that this embodiment needs to be appreciated to unpack how people construct organizations’ identities. This means focusing on people’s ‘bodily-kinesthetic, visual-spatial, temporal-aural, and emotional experiences of their organizations’ in order to figure out ‘what is central, distinctive, and enduring about an organization’, resulting in putatively richer analyses involving more different types of information such as temporality, spatiality, rhythms, audio cues, odours, visual and emotional displays (Harquail & King, 2010, p. 1620).

5. Psychodynamic perspectives

Psychodynamic and psychoanalytic perspectives on OI complement realist and rationalist approaches by drawing attention to otherwise unacknowledged unconscious processes in organizations which shape collective identities (Bion, 1968; Jacques, 1955). Diamond (1993), for example, has analysed OI as a ‘defensive solution’ to the psychological threats to participants which emanate from their often contradictory and conflicting individual aims; threats which are lessened and rendered tractable by the imposition of supposedly ‘rational’ administrative processes which characterize organizational life. Adopting a Lacanian point of view, Driver (2009) has articulated a rather different understanding of OI which emphasizes its ‘imaginary’ character. In this version of the concept actual identities are unknowable, and attempts to define organizations’ identities are illusions or fantasies. This is because answers to questions of identity (individual or collective) are merely conscious efforts ‘to cover up an unconscious lack in the subject that cannot be overcome’ (Driver, 2009, p. 56). This does not mean that the study of OI is for Driver pointless; rather, such research constitutes opportunities to experience *jouissance* (enjoyment) that is potentially empowering and liberating as we struggle with our failure to realize desire for self-knowledge.

Drawing on the work of Freud, Brown (1997) and Brown and Starkey (2000) have provided an analysis of the psychodynamics of organizations which depicts organizations as means for regulating collective self-esteem. Their argument is that ego-defense mechanisms such as denial and rationalization function at the organizational level to ameliorate anxieties and that these regressive tendencies may be mitigated through management practices such as critical self-reflexivity, dialogue regarding future possible identities, and the (‘wise’) cultivation of the desire to explore ego-threatening issues. Drawing on this theorization of OI, researchers have shown how these dynamics are manifested in practice. Duchon and Burns (2008) have illustrated cases of extremely high (Enron), unduly low (Salomon Brothers) and healthy (Liz Claiborne) narcissism and commented on their performance implications. Ketola (2006) has investigated a range of defenses employed by an oil refinery and its parent company during an oil spill to argue that ego-defenses serve a useful function, defending self-esteem while ‘responsible’ organizational change takes place. Other authors have used psychodynamic approaches to OI to analyze ganging behavior at Enron (Stein & Pinto, 2011), the Space Shuttle Challenger disaster (Schwartz, 1987, and emotions in institutional work (Voronov & Vince, 2012).

6. Postmodern and non-standard perspectives

While in management and organization studies, postmodernism is often associated with questioning, challenge, indeterminacy, fragmentation and difference (Rosenau, 1992), as a concept it has its origins in ‘a growing sense of the problematization of identity’ (Dunn, 1998, p. 2). Although for some, ‘identity’ at any level is best regarded as a myth or illusion (Baudrillard, 1998), and an invention of power, in the main, ‘postmodern’ perspectives on OI have come to be associated with discursive (linguistic) and imagistic theorizations and analyses of identity phenomena.

For example, Gioia, Schultz and Corley (2000, p. 72) have noted how postmodern assumptions result in a fracturing of organizations’ identities such that ‘Identity no longer holds a distinct and persistent core of its own but becomes a reflection of the images of the present moment’. Based on a case study of Royal Dutch Shell, Coupland and Brown (2004) have analyzed how the identities of organizations are, in part, co-authored in dialogues between supposed ‘insiders’ and notional ‘outsiders’, and suggested that identity construction processes are on-going arguments. A distinctive theorization is that offered by Seidl (2005) who considers OI using the work of Luhmann to suggest that organizations are constituted by their autopoiesis, and that autopoietic processes define clearly the boundaries of organizations, and differentiate them from each other in ways which render them unique.

The largest body of non-mainstream research has theorized organizational identities as texts constituted through discourse, most usually narratives (Brown & Humphreys, 2006; Chreim, 2005; Czarniawska-Joerges, 1994; Humphreys & Brown, 2002). For Czarniawska-Joerges (1994, p. 198), organizations’ identities are constructed in continuing processes of narration ‘...where both the narrator and the audience formulate, edit, applaud, and refuse various elements of the ever-produced narrative’.

Complementary to this, Brown (2006) has defined OI as the totality of identity-relevant narratives that participants author about them in their conversations, written histories, documents such as reports and web presences, and sought to refocus attention on issues of power, reflexivity, voice, plurivocity, temporality and fictionality (Brown, Humphreys, & Gurney, 2005).

While there has been, in general, in management and organization studies, a distaste for, distrust of, and disinclination to engage with what are routinely pigeonholed and marginalized as ‘postmodern’ conceptions of OI, it has proved impossible to ignore them altogether. So challenging are radical postmodern approaches to OI that Gioia (1998, p. 29) has proposed that we acknowledge their critique of mainstream perspectives and then for pragmatic reasons actively ignore them, ‘...while trying to accommodate the contributions of the affirmative postmodernists’.

7. Into the future

What, then, of the future for OI? While there are as yet no signs that interest in OI is declining, neither are there overwhelming grounds for optimism that definitional, ontological, epistemological or methodological disputes between scholars are likely to be resolved any time soon. Rather, what seems most likely is a continuation of parallel streams of research that implicate the concept of OI but which only sporadically make reference to each other.

Debates regarding the status of the OI concept as construct (Haslam, Postmes & Ellmers, 2003; Whetten, 2006), the answer to self-referential questions (Brown & Humphreys, 2006), or metaphor (Cornelissen, 2002a,b) will continue to influence the theory and practice of OI research. The future, much like the recent past, is likely to be characterized by a plurivocal, ad hoc and at times somewhat idiosyncratic exploration of collective identities issues.

Should organizations' identities be conceived broadly and investigated using a range of methods to collect multiple forms of data to piece together a rich picture which, although replete with nuance, is also inevitably complex? Or is the field best served by precise, pared down versions of the concept which eschew concern with layers of meaning to yield testable hypotheses? In analyzing an organization's identity how much detail is worthwhile? Pratt and Foreman's (2000, p. 20) suggestion that '*Organizations have multiple organizational identities when different conceptualizations exist regarding what is central, distinctive, and enduring about the organization*' looks on the face of it very reasonable; but what if it leads to a realization that organizations have as many identities as they have members (e.g. Harrison, 2000)? Most analyses of OI fixate on one or perhaps two notionally rigorously defined identities in an effort to demonstrate antecedents, moderating relationships, and outcomes associated with them; but what do these disengaged, often simplistic studies really tell us about the political dynamics and experiential nature of lived identities?

Moreover, in a world characterized by increasing numbers of virtual organizations, co-operative trading blocks, partnership sourcing and a growing awareness that the boundaries of even conventional organizations are not just permeable but symbolically enacted what does it mean to focus specifically on OI? Of course, identity studies can be undertaken at different levels of analysis and on different forms of organizing, but only if they can be made, as Whetten (2002) challenges us, 'identity enough' and 'organizational enough' to promote meaningful scholarship.

To what extent should these and a host of other thorny, perhaps intractable, questions uncertainties, and conflicts concern us? Although Whetten (2006, p. 220) writes that the field is 'suffering an identity crisis', and many others have called for focus and clarity, it is not clear that a univocal, homogenized discourse on OI is one sensibly to be valorized.

For those who see utility in the promotion of dialogues between scholars with different research assumptions, or who harbor concerns that 'knowledge' gained in one tradition may not effectively be shared across paradigmatic boundaries, heterogeneity will be a cause for concern or even regret (cf. Corley, et. al. 2006).

Those who favor pluralism and difference, who regard multiple competing scholarly conversations as inevitable, productive, or perhaps Indicative of the robust health of a field of inquiry, may be more sanguine.

8. Concluding remarks

OI and OID have attracted considerable academic attention over the last few decades.

In this paper, we presented an overview of the fields of OI, reviewed some of the most recent work, and introduced the papers that appear in this special issue.

The OI literature is particularly rich, with multiple perspectives which we labeled functionalist, social constructionist, psychodynamic, and postmodern. Development process) in the field. Yet, a wide range of important issues await further examination. These include, for example, the relevance of emotions for OI and OID, personal factors on OI perception and OID, social capital and OI/OID, corporate social responsibility and OI/OID.

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