Guest Editorial

Extending and Advancing Theories of Organizational Identity

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ABSTRACT
Changes to the study of organizational identity over the past three decades show a clear pattern of maturation. The papers in this special issue reflect this maturation and help illustrate how the field has moved from discussing traditional issues such as 'what is identity?' to more contemporary issues such as how identity, through its paradoxical character, is a useful concept for addressing managerial choices and dilemmas. Taken together, these papers demonstrate how further integration of existing theories can help develop the field and give scholars and practitioners food for thought about where we are and where we are going in advancing knowledge and insight on the identity of organizations.
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INTRODUCTION

Just over 20 years ago, Albert and Whetten (1985) provided the first theoretical framework supporting the idea that organizations – and not just individuals – can have an 'identity'. In the following years, researchers interested in topics as varied as issue management (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991), the implementation of Total Quality Management (Reger *et al.*, 1994), individual roles within an organization (Ashforth and Mael, 1996) and strategic change (Gioia and Thomas, 1996) found in this concept a powerful explanation for the phenomena they were observing. As research on organizational identities intensified, however, the fundamental richness, as well as the relative ambiguity, of Albert and Whetten's early treatment of the concept opened the way for the development of new interpretations, rooted in different disciplinary and epistemological traditions.

In 1998, Whetten and Godfrey edited a book of conversations about identity emerging from three conferences attended by some of the best researchers looking into organizational identity. Building on these conversations, a special issue of the *Academy of Management Review* in 2000 provided another

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basis for a comprehensive treatment of fundamental issues, with conceptual considerations of topics such as multiple identities (Pratt and Foreman, 2000), self-categorization (Hogg and Terry, 2000) and the dynamics possible in the interrelations between organizational identity and image (Gioia *et al.*, 2000). These contributions not only built on empirical work carried out in previous years (eg Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Gioia and Thomas, 1996), but also inspired and supported a renewed interest in empirical research (eg Foreman and Whetten, 2002; Dukerich *et al.*, 2002; Corley and Gioia, 2004; Corley, 2004; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006; Nag *et al.*, 2007), helping expand the boundaries of the field and providing new insights on the concept itself.

The multiplicity and diversity of scholars coming from fields such as organizational behavior, marketing, strategy, psychology, organization theory and corporate communication stimulated a fertile debate and a productive contamination across fields (cf. Brown *et al.*, 2006; Soenen and Moingeon, 2002; Schultz *et al.*, 2000). On the practical side, this resulted in the juxtaposition and integration of different perspectives – some more focused on internal interpretations, others on external projections; some focused on the individual, others on the organizational level – and helped contribute to an enriched pragmatic understanding of organizational identity-related issues, ultimately producing useful heuristic conceptual tools for analyzing and handling these issues (Hatch and Schultz, 2001; Balmer and Soenen, 1999; Van Riel, 1995).

Despite these pragmatic advancements, the integration of scholarly work rooted in different traditions has not always been as smooth. In spite of extensive cross-citation, different understandings of the concept seemed to co-exist, reflecting different philosophical, epistemological and methodological perspectives. Unfortunately, these differences were seldom fully acknowledged or effectively handled, leading to conceptual confusion and, worse, empirical uncertainty. Only in recent years have some collective efforts (Corley *et al.*, 2006; Brown *et al.*, 2006) openly addressed the issue, proposing re-conceptualizations of the field that help facilitate the convergence of scholars around common terminology and the bridging of different perspectives. Indeed, the long-term viability of organizational identity as a concept and its usefulness as a powerful explanatory framework now require scholars to recognize differences across perspectives and work to show how the different perspectives can be used together to provide a more complete picture of this complex phenomenon. This special issue has the ambition of catching the favorable wave of interest in further conceptual development on organizational identity as a way to re-energize theoretical and empirical research on the topic.

In reflecting on these changes to the study of organizational identity over the past three decades, we see a clear pattern of maturation in the field – from a beginning focused on definitional debates and exploration of the construct's boundaries (*What is organizational identity really?* (eg Albert and Whetten, 1985; Gioia and Thomas, 1996)) and pretty soon to the question: *Under what conditions do identities change?* (eg Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Fox-Wolfgramm *et al.*, 1998). In the aftermath of that issue, a more fundamental debate arose around the question: '*Is it more or less enduring?*' (eg Gioia *et al.*, 2000, Corley and Gioia, 2004). In the last years, we can observe a progression of those debates to a more refined level (eg '*Where do identities originate from?*' (eg Glynn, 2000; Whetten and MacKey, 2002)), and finally to the emergence of new ideas (eg *the practical underpinning of organizational identities* (eg Nag *et al.*, 2007) and *the nature and impact of identity threats* (eg Elsbach and Kramer, 1996; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006)), as well as to connections with other areas of organizational science (eg *identity and institutions*; Czarniawska, 1997; Hsu and Hannan, 2005; Whetten, 2006).[1]

In using this special issue as a spark for new theoretical and empirical efforts aimed at furthering conceptual refinement and integration, we decided to reflect that maturation of the field in the structure of the issue itself. First, we present four refereed papers that provide not only an intriguing set of new foci for the study of organizational identity, but also a reflection of the maturing field through a cross-section of authors at different points in their careers (including two researchers who originally helped define the field) and across different ontological and epistemological perspectives. We then conclude the special issue with two invited pieces, the first from Mary Ann Glynn and Ian Walsh, co-authors representing both the accomplished and the preliminary ends of the research spectrum, who examine identity for organizations that no longer exist except in the memories of long-remembering stakeholders, and the second from a newly minted PhD, Mirdita Elstak, who gives a refreshing and slightly provocative view of the field from the perspective of one who recently completed a dissertation on organizational identity.

THE SUBMITTED PAPERS

The first part contains four papers that draw on past literature as well as empirical inspiration to extend different aspects of a theory of organizational identity. In these papers, the authors cast new light on 'classic' issues in organizational identity research, such as balancing conflicting tensions for conformity and differentiation (King and Whetten), or continuity and adaptation (Foreman and Parent; Jacobs *et al.*), and monitoring and handling multiple interpretations of the organization (Price and Gioia). In addition, they contribute to the further clarification of the nomological net of the concept by delineating more clearly the relationships between organizational identity and related concepts such as image, legitimacy and reputation.

Collectively, these papers refine theoretical discussion on organizational identity by moving forward from fundamental questions about whether organizational identities 'change or not' (we know now that they can) or whether they are about 'being different or being the same' (we know now that they are about both) by tackling the more contemporary issue of how members manage to handle and reconcile conflicting internal and external demands in the face of shifting perceptual environments. Interestingly, discussions seem to no longer center on the paradoxical character of identity as such – due to the inherent tension between the pressure to conform to social categories and the need to be different from others – but on how identity, exactly through its paradoxical character, is a useful concept for addressing managerial choices and dilemmas that may otherwise paralyze the organization (cf. Fiol, 2002).

In the first paper, Brayden King and David Whetten trace the interrelations between identity and two critical constructs for the survival of the organization: legitimacy – defined as externally perceived conformity to taken-for-granted standards – and reputation – defined as externally perceived distinction within a reference group. The authors suggest how the relative compliance of an organization with the requirement of its social identity – that is, the categorical reference group the organization is perceived as belonging to – may explain its capacity to reconcile apparently contradictory demands for conformity and distinction. More specifically, King and Whetten argue that compliance with the minimum standards of a social category will be required for securing legitimacy; however, good reputations will be acquired only to the extent that the organization is evaluated positively according to some ideal standards. Reputation and legitimacy, then, are perceived as complementary, reciprocal concepts, related to the capacity of the organization – as a social actor – to strike a balance between the need to clarify who the organization is similar to and how it is different from all similar organizations.

In our second paper, Kristin Price and Denny Gioia address another central issue in research on organizational identity: the monitoring of potential discrepancies among internal and external perceptions of what the organization is and what it stands for, and how organizations can attempt to develop sufficient sensitivity to the timely discovery of such discrepancies. They argue that timely discovery will minimize the harmful effects of divergent interpretations and representations of the organization. The authors extend the concept of 'self-monitoring' – conceived as the relative ability of an individual to monitor and control the way in which they present and express themselves in a social setting (Snyder, 1979) – to the organizational level of analysis. They elaborate a multi-level theory that identifies a series of factors that – at the individual, unit and organizational level – are likely to improve the capacity of an organization to assess how its identity is perceived externally by multiple audiences, and how these multiple interpretations might be managed.

In the third paper, Peter Foreman and Milena Parent use the extreme case of what they call 'iterative organizations' – organizations whose operations appear periodically for only brief moments of focused attention, such as the biannual Olympic Games – to investigate the process of *organizational identity development*. While we know that all organizations have an identity, we know little about where these identities originate from and how they develop over time. Using several case examples of iterative organizations (athletic/cultural events in Canada) that must attend to the identity development process with each new iteration, Foreman and Parent provide valuable insights into the relationship between an organization's identity and its institutional environment, thus illuminating a set of factors that both contribute to and complicate the identity development process. Generalizing beyond the case of iterative organizations, the paper provides key insights into the identity development process of organizations in general and, in the process, provides new perspectives on the concept of organizational identity.

In the last of our peer-reviewed papers, Gabriele Jacobs, Jochen Christe-Zeyse, Anne Keegan and Laszlo Polos combine insights from micro- and macro-level approaches to organizational identity to reflect upon how organizational changes may result in identity threats to the organization itself. The authors build on the notion that organizational identity acts as a set of restrictions for acceptable features and properties of an organization and argue that threats arise whenever proposed changes violate these restrictions. Using the case of the German Police, the authors illustrate how substantial changes in structures and routines may lead to a misalignment between these features and the established culture of the organization. Under these circumstances, members may be brought to reflect whether these changes actually reflect and/or imply a higher-order alteration of the very identity of the organization – that is, seeing as threatened the organization 'as they used to know it' and reacting accordingly. They highlight how such reactions can lead to considerable unrest among organization members, which, in turn, can affect the credibility, and therefore the efficacy, of the managers who were involved in the change.

INVITED REFLECTIONS

As argued above, we may describe the evolution of the organizational identity field as progress toward maturity, very much akin to an individual's career or personal development. We reflect this evolution of the field in the invited papers in the second part of this special issue. We include reflections of identity scholars at different stages in their careers – one contribution from a pairing of an experienced identity researcher with a current doctoral student and the other from a newly minted PhD in the field – who provide different perspectives of the past and present and the expected trajectory of the field. First, Ian Walsh and Mary Ann Glynn provide thoughts and insights on the usefulness of organizational identity in examining currently underexplored organizational phenomena; specifically, they focus on the case of an organizational death and subsequent efforts by its members to keep its identity alive beyond the organization's existence as a way to examine the role played by organizational identity in areas such as leadership, organizational decline and organizational identification without membership.

The special issue closes with a contribution from Mirdita Elstak, who defended her identity-related dissertation while this special issue was being put together: an experience that provided fertile material for a new and generative perspective on the field. We will not expand here on her paper because her crisp and provocative statement is clear enough to make us all think about where we are and where we are going as a community interested in advancing knowledge and insight on organizational identity.

Note

1 As the dates of the references show, the development is not neatly linear, but the tendency toward maturation and the elaboration of our thinking about the subject is clearly visible.

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