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A New Paradigm of Organizational Identity and Organizational Identification

Sirkwoo Jin
(Merrimack College, 315 Turnpike Street, North Andover, MA 01845, USA)

Abstract: Research in organizational identity and identification has been heavily influenced by social identity theory. However, the current theory of social identity is limited to situations where organizations are perceived as distinct and salient. Drawing on ideas from "family resemblance" (Wittgenstein, 1953) and "relational structuralism" (Saussure, 1966), I propose an alternative perspective of how organizational members make sense of and internalize their organizational identities when organizational boundaries are blurry. This perspective extends the current scope of organizational identity and identification theory by considering the role of individual differences and industrial characteristics.

Key words: organizational identity; organizational identification; identity negotiation
JEL codes: M10, M12, M14

1. Introduction

Organizations must engender identification to facilitate their functioning. Organizational identification is defined as "the perception of oneness or belongingness to some human aggregate" (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, p. 21), and it occurs "*when an individual's beliefs about his or her organization become self-referential or self-defining*" (Pratt, 1998, p. 172). Specifically, Pratt (1998) suggested that organizational identification involves (a) evoking one's self-concept in the recognition that one shares similar values with an organization (affinity), and/or (b) changing one's self-concept so that one's values and beliefs become more similar to the organization's (emulation).Consistently with this, Ashforth and Mael (1989) theorized that social identification is dependent upon a social construction of organizational or collective identity (i.e., organizational identity) in the sense that identification processes at the individual level require a referent that takes the form of collective identity; Albert and Whetten (1985, p. 267) also wrote that "*identity is linked with the term identification. Identity serves the function of identification*."

Importantly, the extant literature on social cognition (e.g., Fiske & Taylor, 1991; Rosch, 1978) and social identity (e.g., Albert & Whetten, 1985; Tajifel & Turner, 1986) suggested that organizational identity is based on members' categorization of their organizations' attributes and features. In particular, by identifying their unique attributes and featuresthrough comparing them with others, organizational members can produce organization-distinctive stereotypical and normative perceptions and actions, which become foundations of their

Sirkwoo Jin, Assistant Professor of Management, Girard School of Business, Merrimack College; research areas/interests: creativity, emotions, leadership, teams. E- mail: jins@merrimack.edu.

organizational identities. Therefore, developing and maintaining unique and distinguishable attributes and features is crucial for any organizations to facilitate their members to cultivate salient, stable and strong organizational identities and to perceive the central, distinct, and stable features of belonging organizations — organizational identification (Albert & Whetten, 1985).

However, today's business environment and organizational practices make it very challenging, if not impossible, to do so. For example, today's organizations have more complexity in its policies and structure than before, which should make their members difficult to identify salient organizational attributes and features. The fast pace of organizational change also contributes to their difficulty because organizational members' categorization becomes easily outdated (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Furthermore, extremely uncertain, dynamic, and complex current organizational environment have led today's organizations to build a great number of interlocks with others (Boyd, 1990), which have made them use homogeneous rather than unique and distinguishable practices and policies with others for business success (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Finally, current emerging employment relationship from restructuring, downsizing, and outsourcing, as well as frequent alliances between competing organizations makes it further difficult for organizational members to develop their organizational identification perception. Therefore, the extant literature on organizational identity and identification seems to fail to provide applicable explanation and practical implications to today's organizations.

This paper seeks to address this issue by proposing an alternative perspective of organizational identity and organizational identification. Specifically, I will suggest that organizational members can make sense of their organizations' identity through family resemblance (Wittgenstein, 1953) and relational structuralism (Saussure, 1966). Then I consider the role of individual difference factors such as uncertainty orientation (Sorrentino & Roney, 1999) in this perspective so to extend it to an integrative model of organizational identity. By doing this, I will propose an integrative model of members' organizational identification, which provides a guidance for the future research on this topic as well as practical implications for managers who wish to build competitive organizations with royal and committed members.

2. Organizational Identity from Internal Comparisons

The concept of organizational identity was adapted from sociology and psychology, and delivered into the field of organization studies by Albert and Whetten (1985). According to them, the phenomenon of organizational identity appears whenever organizational members ask themselves about their own identities (e.g., "who are we?"), their tasks and roles (e.g., "what business are we in?"), and their preferences and goals (e.g., "what do we want to be?"). Such questions can be answered by members' comparing their organizations with others and identifying salient and distinctive attributes and features; when their organizations are separable and different from other organizations, members can find their organizational identity with ease.

Importantly, because organizational identification occurs when members perceive their organizational identity as their referent (Pratt, 1998), members' being able to understand their organizational identity is crucial for their developing organizational identification. Indeed, Ashforth and Mael (1989) argued that organizational identification is more likely to occur when the organization is more distinctive with others while its outgroups are more salient. However, as discussed earlier, the current organizational environment and organizational responses to it makes it difficult for members to understand organizational identity from inter-organizational comparisons, and thus make it further difficult for them to develop organizational identification. If so, how can today's organizational members understand their organizational identity and develop identification?

The answer can be found from conceptualizing organizational identity as a schema (Albert & Whetten, 1985, pp. 267-268): "*Organizations define who they are by creating or invoking classification schemes and locating themselves within them…The classification schemes implied by statements of identity are likely to be highly imperfect…Which classification schemeis invoked may well depend on the perceived purpose to which the resulting statement of identity will be put.*" A schema is defined as a cognitive structure that represents knowledge about a concept or type of stimulus, including its attributes and the relations among them (Brewer & Nakamura, 1984; Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Most schema exists in the abstract form, and thus do not have necessary and sufficient attributes. Instead, most of them fall within fuzzy categories, and natural categories do not have necessary and sufficient defining attributes. In this view, category members are related by the criterion of family resemblance (Wittgenstein, 1953); as the members of a family, members of a category share some features with each other, and other features with other category members. However, it is apparent that there are overlapping nets of similarity between category members that are inter-wound.

Then how can we classify both similar and dissimilar persons as a family? In other words, how can we construct categories from overlapping nets of similarity? Wittgenstein (1953) suggested that people can categorize and build schemas by exemplification and comparison; while it is impossible to define a category by its unique and distinct attribute, it is possible by looking into various members of the category so to find the similarity within it and so to achieve cogent knowledge about it. This idea implies that organizational members can make sense of their organization by focusing on *internal* events and finding similarity within them, instead of comparing them with *external* organization — which might be an alternative mechanism of developing an organizational identity and thus building organizational identification in today's organizations.

With regards to this, Hatch and Schultz's (2000) provide an relevant and meaningful argument about relational difference between organizational identity, culture, and image: borrowing Saussure's (1966) idea that words are defined in relation to how they affect each other in use (rather than what they are believed to represent in the world), they argued that organizational identity can be appreciated by relating it to organizational culture and organizational image, which are inter-connected and overlapped with organizational identity. More specifically, they argued that (p. 27): (1) identity is formed from both internal and external positions, (2) who we are cannot be completely separated from the perceptions other have of us and that we have of others, (3) multiple images of identity refer to the same organization, (4) identity is a text that is read in relation to cultural context, (5) tacit understandings sit alongside overt expression of identity, and (6) identity involves the instrumental use of emergent cultural symbols, all of which arguments imply that employees can find and understand their organizational identity by comparing and relating them to their organizational culture and image. Such process with include (1) comparing what employees experience in organizations to their organizational image (step 1) and (2) comparing what they find from the comparison (step 1) to their organizational culture (step 2), or vice versa (step 2 and step 1). Through this process, employees can make sense of their organizations, and achieve appropriate or *positive* (Pratt, 2000) organizational identification in ambiguous and vague environment. Therefore:

Proposition 1: Organizational members can find and internalize organizational identity by comparing what they experience in organization to organizational culture and image, if there are no distinct boundaries between their organizations and others.

This proposition suggests how organizations manage and develop their identities in the contemporary competitive and turbulent environment. First, if organizational culture or the system of shared values and norms that define appropriate attitudes and behaviors for organizational members (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986, p. 160) is widely shared among members and intensely melted in the organizational artifacts and behavioral pattern (Martin & Siehl, 1983; Schein, 1992), members can quickly find the relevant reference criterion for comparison. In addition, if organizations offer more opportunity for members to understand organizational mission, history, and values, it will lead members to have better knowledge on their organizational culture (Pascale, 1985; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979).

Proposition 2: Employees of organizations with stronger organizational culture can develop and maintain their positive organizational identity more successfully.

Additionally, organizations may facilitate their members find their organizational identities by managing construed image. To construct and reconstruct organizational identities as a good story (Weick, 1995), organizational members have to pay attention to how others see themselves (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Gioa, Schultz, & Corley, 2000). However, organizational images are often identity-threatening, and if audiences are diverse, they are multiple (Hatch & Schultz, 2000). Therefore organizational images are apt to be ambiguous, and difficult to construed, which may make their employees difficult to conduct a comparison between what they experience in an organization with them. However, if organizations give sense and help their member perceive and interpret them (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), members will reconstruct their reality and build relevant comparison criteria to what they experience and believe about the organization. Therefore:

Proposition 3: Employees of organizations with unifiedorganizational image can develop and maintain their positive organizational identity more successfully.

3. Organizational Identification from Identity Negotiation

Organizational members' identity is embedded in their social interactions (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934), and thus they possess as many selves as the number of their interaction with others (James, 1890). Given by this, scholars with symbolic interaction perspective provide theoretical underpinnings of multiple-selves, which are hierarchically structuredon the basis of their salience to the self and the degree to which they are committed to the identities (e.g., Burke, 1980; Stryker, 1980; Serpe, 1987). Therefore, identities are strategic and mindful social construction created through interaction (Burke, 2003; Stryker & Burke, 2000; Thoits, 2003). Furthermore, organizational identities and identification are outcomes of the negotiations between multiple-selves that members conduct with themselves; Pratt (2000), for example, identified their four types such as identification, disidentification, ambivalent identification, and deidentification.

One study on the identity negotiation process supports this idea (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). The authors proposed that multiple social identities are structured in four different ways, such that (1) intersection (Figure 1a), which is to define one's identity as the intersection of multiple group identities, (2) dominance (Figure 1b), which is to adopt primary group identity and all other potential identities are subordinated, (3) compartmentalization (Figure 1c), which is to activate and express specific identity through a process of differentiation and isolation, and (4) merger (Figure 1d), which is to recognize and embrace multiple identities simultaneously in their most inclusive form.

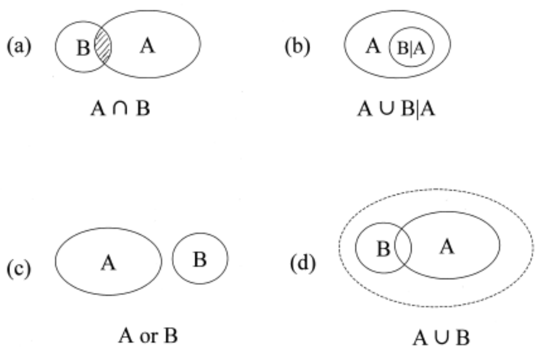

Figure 1 Roccas and Brewer's (2002) Representation of Multiple Identities

Since organizational members' identities consist of their personal identity and social or organizational identity (Tajifel & Turner, 1979, 1986), they should achieve organizational identification from (1) believing their identities as the common ground between personal identity and organizational identity, or (2) adopting either personal or organizational identity and place the other within the adopted identity, or (3) maintaining differences between personal identity and organizational identity, and or (4) considering both personal and organizational identities as their identities.

The first way can be related to ambivalent identification since only some parts of organizational identities are internalized as members' identities. The second can be applied to positive identification, and if organizational identities are dominant, it can be considered as depersonalization (Hogg, 2004). The third may be related to disidentification, since organizational members attempt to separate their identities from organizational ones. Finally, the fourth mechanism can be considered as deidentification. Still, it is different from the second mechanism since two identitiesare treated as equal, which means the members of this structure will not experience depersonalization.

These four ways can be clustered into two types according to their subjective representation of multiple ingroup identities, or social identity complexity (Roccas & Brewer, 2002). Specifically, the first two ways (e.g., intersection, dominance) are classified as relatively low-complexity representation, which means that multiple identities are subjectively embedded in a single ingroup representation, and the latter two ways (e.g., compartmentalization, merger) are classified as relatively high-complexity, which involves acknowledgement of differentiation and difference between ingroup categories.

Importantly, it is known that people vary according to their preference for confronting complex and ambiguous information; for example, some people are more certainty-oriented and develop a style that actively avoids confronting uncertainty while other people are more uncertainty-oriented and develop a style that accept confronting uncertainty with ease (Sorrentino & Roeny, 1999). Similarly to this, psychologists have identified individual difference factors such as the need for closure (Kruglanski, 1990), tolerance for ambiguity (Norton, 1975), personal need for structure (Neuberg & Newsome, 1993). Therefore, organizational members with certainty-orientation should avoid recognition of nonconvergent identities, and represent their personal identities and organizational identities as single forms such as an intersection or ambivalent identification and dominance or depersonalization. On the while, organizational members with uncertainty-orientation should be willing to seek out information about themselves and organizations, and represent their personal identities and organizational identities as separate forms such as compartmentalization or disidentification and merger or deidentification. Together with the previous discussion about the relations of identification and social identity complexity, organizational members' differences in uncertainty orientation can yield following propositions:

Proposition 4: Organizational members who are certainty-oriented will experience more ambivalent identification and depersonalization than those who are uncertainty-oriented.

Proposition 5: Organizational members who are uncertainty-oriented will experience more disidentification than those who are certainty-oriented.

Note that positive identification can occur to organizational members of both certainty-orientation and uncertainty-orientation. However, there is still a difference between them in that depersonalization may occur only to the members of certainty-orientation.

4. Toward an Alternative Framework of Organizational Identity and Identification

This paper discussed issues regarding "*how do organizational members make sense of organizational identities and internalize them in the contemporaryturbulentenvironment?*"In this paper, I showed that approaches from traditional social identity theory may not be sufficient to apply to contemporary organizations, especially when they are not distinct and have vague boundary with others, and proposed a couple of paths for how organizational members develop, interpret, and internalize organizational identities: *when organizations are perceived as distinct and salient, members can make sense of the organizational identities through categorization*. However, *when organizationsare perceived as vague and members cannot easily find their organizational boundaries, members can make sense of organizational identities by comparing organizational culture, image, and their personal experiences in organizations*. In addition, when members can use categorization to interpret organizational identities, organizations can engender members' identification through consistent and congruent actions, and controlling the flows of events. When members cannot use categorization or relate what they experience to organizational images and culture, organizations can facilitate members' identification through managing socialization and sensegiving tactics.

Furthermore, this paper dealt with individual factors regarding organizational identification. Based on structural symbolic interactionism (Stryker, 1980), I proposed that the type of identification may be determined by members' attitudes for uncertainty: Those who have high-uncertainty orientation will experience deidentification more frequently, and those who have low-uncertainty orientation will experience ambivalent identification or depersonalization more often.

Next, I will discuss a couple of important implications this paper suggests.

4.1 Whether or not Organizational Identities Are Stable and Enduring

Some scholars continue to challenge Albert and Whetten's (1985) definition of organizational identity, and argue that organizational identity is not stable and enduring (i.e., Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Corley, Gioia, & Fabbri, 2000; Hatch & Schultz, 2002). For example, Corle, Gioia, and Fabbri (2000) insisted that strong organizational identity can be liabilityto organizations because it hampers organizational change and transformation. Furthermore, Gioia, Schultz, and Corley (2000) argued that, because organizations often use the same labels for decades to describe who they are, their identities may not appear to change. However, organizational identity does change due to the fact that the meanings and interpretations of the labels used to describe the identity shift over time. The authors claimed that these shifts in interpretationsallowed organizations to adapt to ever-changing environments, while preserving a stable sense of self — a state of adaptive instability.

This debate may result from the attempt to applying social identity theory, which may be best applied to stable contexts with distinct boundaries, to changing environments. If we consider organizational identities to be related to organizational culture and image, this contradiction may be re-written in a relational way: Organizational identities are less stable than culture, but more stable than images.

4.2 Whether Organizational Identities Are "What Organizations Have" or "What Organizations Are"

Pratt and Foreman (2000) argued that identity refers to a set of concepts from a variety of fields, such as social identity theory, psychodynamics, postmodernism, and symbolic interactionism. Similarly, Gioia (1998) made it clear that there are three lenses for understanding organizational identities: functional, interpretive, and postmodern. This study attempts to incorporate these three lenses, and argues that organizational identity may be an organization itself in that it can be understood by perceiving family resemblances between culture and image. It also suggests that organizations have organizational identities that can be manipulated with tactics such as socialization, culture management, consistent actions, and sensegiving. Control of information flow can impact its development, construction, and internalization.

Although the propositions provide some guidance to future research and practical management, they also pose a new set of questions for the researchers. First of all, empirical studies on these propositions are required. Because identity is idiosyncratic by nature, quantitative approaches with limited questionnaires may not be relevant. The perception of family resemblances from relational differences may be especially difficult to evaluate quantitatively. Therefore, future empirical studies may employ qualitative approaches with polar types of organizations, such as organizations with exceptionally distinct boundaries and organizations with exceptionally ambiguous boundaries, as Eisenhardt (1989) suggested.

Also, integration of the effect of organizational characteristics and individual factors on organizational identification may be interesting. Two critical dimensions, (1) whether or not distinct boundaries between belonging organizations and others are perceived by members, and (2) whether or not members are certainty-oriented, can be used for the building matrix. This matrix can explain the antecedent of diverse identifications, as well as predict the consequences of it.

Finally, cultural contexts may be related to making sense of organizational identities and identification. According to Nisbett (2003), there is no strong cultural obligation for Asians to feel that they are special or unusually talented. Therefore, Asian organizational members will be likely to perceive themselves and their organization as non-unique. In addition, because Asians believe that nothing can exist alone, and all actions must be in the form of interactions (Shih, 1919), Asian organizational members will be more likely than Western members to make sense of their organizational identities through comparisons of organizational culture, image and experiences.

Identity is arguably one of the most fundamental concepts to human beings. Perhaps no other concept can compete against the significance of identity, since identity is the criterion which separate man from other species. However, most of extant literature in this area fails to provide a sufficient and applicable explanation about how members of today's ambiguous, complex, and dynamic organizations develop and internalize their social identity. This paper attempts to fill this gap by extending the scope of current theories and proposing an alternative theoretical perspective of organizational identification. This alternative perspective should provide a starting point and direction for the future research in this area.

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