

Conducting Research on Organizational Identity

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Abstract

The concept of organizational identity has its roots in the exploration of identity in an individual level. The concept of organizational identity was introduced by Albert and Whetten in 1985. They suggested that organizational identity embodies the characteristics of an organization, that its members perceive to be central, distinctive, and enduring (or continuing) in an organization when past, present and the future is taken into account. Organizational identity seeks to answer to the question of "who are we as an organization". Researchers have explored the characteristics of organizational identity. Especially the features "distinctive" and "enduring" as characteristics describing organizational identity has been subjects of critical investigations. At the individual level, identity research has been conducted rather extensively in the fields of psychology, social psychology, symbolic interactionism, and psychodynamics. Recently more and more research has been conducted at the organizational level. However the concept itself still has varying meanings and interpretations to it. Conceptually, two levels (that have a reciprocal relationship) of an organizational identity can be recognized, the inner level and outer level. The levels limit the main interest area of the researcher and the study in hand. In addition, differing statements among organization theorists and researchers trying to analyze organizational identity arise from differing paradigmatic assumptions about the ontology and epistemology of organizations.

When organizational identity is being studied through different basic assumptions, it is being understood differently both in terms of a concept and as a phenomenon of social reality. Therefore studies leaning to different paradigmatic assumptions have different interests in terms of objectives of the study. Identity is a multilevel notion that can be explored at individual-, group- and organization level. Organizational identity can be considered as a construct, question or as a metaphor. Organizational identity has found to lend insight into the character and behaviour of organizations and their members. There are several intriguing and current questions related to identity at organizational level that seem to be as yet inadequately explored but which constitute an ambitious agenda. In addition it is also significant to continue exploring the concept theoretically.

Keywords

Identity, organizational identity, research

From individual level exploration to exploring identity in an organizational context

Identity as a phenomenon has interested early philosophers and psychological and sociological thinkers for a very long time. Thereby it can be stated that the concern with identity is literally an ancient one. The concept of organizational identity has its roots in the exploration of identity in an individual level. Later researchers' started researching identity within groups and finally in an organization context. The concept of organizational identity was introduced by Albert and Whetten in 1985. Based on their empirical research results, they suggested that organizational identity embodies the characteristics of an organization that its members perceive to be central, distinctive, and enduring (or continuing) in an organization when past, present and the future is taken into account. According to Ashforth and Mael (1996), the central character of the organization is rooted in the "more or less internally consistent system of pivotal beliefs, values, and norms, typically anchored in the organizational mission that informs sense-making and action". (Ashforth and Mael, 1996). Therefore, according to Empson (2004), the concept of centrality reflects the needs and preferences of the senior management but only to the extent organizational members in general share that understanding. Ashfort and Mael continue, that the member's perceptions of the distinctive character describing identity on an organizational level are formed on the basis of comparison with referent organizations, mostly the companies considered as main competitors. As with characteristics of both central and distinctive, conceptualisations of the enduring characteristics are open to selective perception and interpretation by organizational members. According to Elsbach and Kramer (1996), for organizational members, organizational identity may be conceptualized as their cognitive schema or perception of their organization's central and distinctive attributes, including its positional status and relevant comparison groups. According to Whetten (2006), attributes signify

organization's self-defining unique social space and in practical level, organizational identity claims "function as organizational identity referents for members when they are acting or speaking on behalf of their organization." (Whetten, 2006) Organizational identity is trying to answer to the question of "who are we as an organization", which leads to characterization of organizational identity being a "self reflective question". Organizational identity, in the phenomenological sense, captures the essential features of an organization. (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Gioia, 1998) Research results indicate that identity is the key concept that can provide an organization with a viable framework for understanding an action. Organizational identity can simultaneously filter, constrain and shape organization members interpretations and action. (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Gioia, 1998; Whetten, 2006)

When Albert and Whetten published their research results, several researchers became interested in investigating organizational identity. The initial definition of organizational identity has strongly characterized research conducted. However, it has resulted in certain critics, too. Especially the "distinctive" and "enduring" characteristics have been targets of a debate. Researchers such as Gioia and Thomas (1996), Gioia (1998), Fombrun (1996), and Ojala (1996), have questioned distinctiveness as a characteristic describing identity with the argument that nowadays organizations seem very much alike with a notion that similarity seems to be intentional. Enduring as a characteristic describing organizational identity on the other hand, has been found problematic due to the fast changing pace of business life nowadays. With all changes occurring, how could there be something unchanging within an organization? Researchers that have contributed especially to this debate are for example Poikolainen (1994), Gioia and Thomas (1996), Whetten and Godfrey (1998), Pitkänen (2001), Brown and Eisenhart (1997), Gustafson and Reger (1995), Barney et al. (1998), Gioia et al. (2000), and Hogg and Terry (2000). Most researchers, however, use Albert's and Whetten's original definition of organizational identity as the basis for their research. Despite that the definition has furthered investigations, it can also have limited the exploration of the concept's richness and dynamism.

Organizational identity domain – what do we know about identity so far?

Organizational identity is a rich domain with a huge potential for exploration. However, given the apparent explanatory power of the concept of organizational identity, there still is only relatively little investigation on the topic in organization context. (Gioia, 1998; Reger, 1998; Stimpert et al., 1998) Identity research both at the individual level¹ and the organizational level appears frequently in the literature of organization science, but many questions about organizational identity still remain open. According to Brown (2001), while research linked to notions of identity has a lengthy pedigree in organization studies, it is only in more recent years that the term identity itself has become widely deployed. A wide acceptance and usage of the notion reflects a new interest in issues centred on identity not only at the individual level, but also as the concept applies to collectives. At the individual level research has been conducted rather extensively in the fields of psychology, social psychology, symbolic interactionism, and psychodynamics². Researchers have very often explored identity from a cognition point of view. Organizational identity research in a social psychology perspective has focused on the development and maintenance of collective identities and their relation to individual identities.³ According to Empson

(2004) organizational identity at the individual level represents the distinctive attributes, which individuals associate with their membership of a particular organization. At the organizational level, on the other hand, identity is formed by the agglomeration of the distinctive attributes of individual members. Therefore it can be stated that organizational members both shape and are shaped by their organizational membership through this dynamic dialectic process. At the group level the theoretical frame has been based on the social identity theory and various perspectives on genre, racial or national identities. (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Ashforth and Mael, 1996; Albert et al., 2000; Hatch and Schultz, 2002; Ravasi and Van Rekom, 2003) Exploration of the features of individual identity supply the basis for the extension of the notion to organizations. However, despite of the research conducted so far, the concept of organizational identity can still be perceived as somewhat problematic due to the fact that there are many definitions proposed. Given definitions differ from one another by their very basic assumptions concerning the ontology and epistemology of the phenomenon. Therefore several different meanings are being related to the concept of organization identity. In addition, for example Albert (1998) suggests that identity cannot be measured with all of the connotations of measurement. Instead, identity at both individual and organizational level may be "the last refuge of the qualitative in a world of invading armies wielding rulers and compasses. In other words, an identity may express a need for uniqueness and privacy. It honours the ineffable". (Albert, 1998) In addition, due to the fact that identity is a multilevel notion that can be explored at the individual-, group- and organization level and that the concept of organization identity has its origins in self-identity, has led to conceptual confusion. Researchers from different fields of study understand the concept in various ways. Even researchers within the same study field link various meanings into the concept of organizational identity and therefore understand the concept and the phenomenon differently.

In order to clarify and understand different meanings related to the concept of organizational identity, I explored the various meanings systematically by using concept analysis as a method. The objective was to analyze and to increase understanding of the concept. I analyzed its interrelation with related concepts such as self-identity, identification, organizational culture and organizational image in order to understand how the concept of organizational identity differ in terms of content in comparison to its related concepts and thereby, what features can be determined to be the critical characteristics of the organizational identity concept? I also studied how the concept can be understood according to the assumptions of three different research paradigms, functionalist-, interpretative-, and post-modern perspectives.

Based on the research one can conclude that the concept of organizational identity is a multilevel notion that holds many meanings. Its multilevel notion refers to the fact that identity can be studied or posed at any level of analysis, for example individual, group, organization or at the industry level. Conceptually, two levels can be distinguished from the concept, the inner level and outer level, which limit the main interest area of the study. The outer level is related to the study field of marketing. By concentrating exploring the outer level of organizational identity, researcher perceives identity visually and with the help of intentional marketing communication. In other words, external and visual signs of identity are of interest. Such signs could be organizational logos, symbols, name or the brand. With this interpretation, by nature it is assumed, that organizational identity can be (at least to some extent) managed and "outsourced".

This refers to using the services of for example consultants and marketers in building identity to an organization. The goal of creating such visual identity is to help organization's stakeholders and shareholders both to identify the organization and to distinguish it from other companies with the help of external characteristics. When identity is perceived with this frame of reference, it also helps understanding and analyzing the desired-image of the organization and thereby organizational identity can be understood having a close relation with organizational image too. (Albert, 1998; Puusa, 2005)

The inner level of organizational identity on the other hand relates to organization behaviour studies, mainly to the issues of management, human resource management, performance management and strategy. Inner level of organizational identity can be explored from the point of view of management, personnel or as an organizational level phenomenon. Organizational identity is perceived as a development process that takes place within an organization. It cannot be outsourced. The most crucial characteristics of identity is centrality. Very often the concepts of meaning, understanding, identification and interpretation are central in the attempts to understand the inner level of organizational identity. Organizational identity is understood to be collective by nature, which leads the researcher to explore its distinctiveness characteristic. When perceived with this frame of reference, there are varying opinions whether or not identity can be managed. At both ends, researchers agree that even though identity could not be managed per se, there are different means and ways to try to affect it. (Puusa, 2005)

Potentially differing statements among organization theorists and researchers trying to analyze organizational identity arise from differing paradigmatic assumptions about the ontology and epistemology of organizations. A functionalist perspective has mainly dominated the conceptualization and research of organizational identity. (Gioia, 1998)

An analysis of the concept of identity according to different research paradigm assumptions reveals that in research it is more relevant to clearly report the basic assumptions made by the researcher than to present a precise definition of the concept of identity. (Puusa, 2005) When organizational identity is being studied with different basic assumptions, it is being understood differently both in terms of a concept and as a phenomenon of social reality. Therefore studies leaning to different paradigmatic assumptions have different interests in terms of objectives of the study. Organizational identity can be considered as a construct, question or as a metaphor. Understanding identity as a construct leads to the question of whether or not it can be measured. However, if one considers identity to be a question leads the approach to discussions of identity's relevance and importance in a chosen context. Furthermore, if organizational identity is understood being a metaphor rather than a construct, an interesting question is which metaphors individuals within a particular context choose to apply when trying to describe their organization. (Albert, 1998)

Organizational identity domain – what should we explore even further?

When exploring organization identity, one can explore its features and characteristics as well as different meanings related to it⁴. One can also study organization identity's significance in the relation to change⁵. An interesting research topic is also organizational identity's relevance in crisis situation.⁶ In addition, exploring identity and its manifestation within an organization is a very interesting and revealing research agenda. This kind of re-

search concentrates on analyzing if there occurs one or multiple identities within same organization context simultaneously and seeks to understand the effects of such manifestation.⁷ Ravasi and Phillips also suggest that further investigation of the factors that make a monolithic or a pluralistic identity beneficial to the organization could be a promising path for future research⁸. Brown (2001) suggests that the exploration of organizational identities may also assist both empirical and theoretical explorations of organization-environment relations. Whether or not organizational identity can be managed is also an interesting theme, as well as is management's influence on organizational identity and its formation⁹. Understanding organizational identity as a valuable and socially complex resource that can be a source of competitive advantage is a compelling idea that needs further investigation. In other words, questions such as "how is organizational identity related to strategy" or "what kind of a role does organizational identity play in creation of competitive advantage" should be explored further¹⁰. Organizational identity and organizational image have a reciprocal connection. Does a change in identity affect image? How about vice versa? According to Ravasi and Phillips much more study is needed to explore the dynamics to provide a deeper and broader understanding of the dynamics of identity and image and of their management. In addition, studies on identity change have pointed to problems arising from a discrepancy between the images an organization projects and the expectations of external constituents¹¹. Also this topic needs to be explored further. All and all, it has been stated by several identity researchers that research should concentrate more on exploring organizational identity instead of exploring self-identity in organization context. Only that way the impression of organizational identity as a seriously taken and revealing and analytic phenomenon that it truly and fundamentally is, would enhance. (Gioia et al., 2000).

Due to the fact that organizational identity still does not have a firm footing in organization- and management literature, it is therefore still significant to explore the concept also theoretically. In that line of study attention should be paid to at least to the following issues: What makes the concept of organization identity unique? How does the concept differ from its related concepts? Can identity be explored as a process or as some kind of concrete phenomenon or as an organization's resource? Is identity about behaviour or is it about cognition? Most of the known identity theories rely on the assumption that identity is somewhat a combination of all of those. It combines cognitive processes, different interpretations and constructions, shared understanding, feelings and common values. (Albert, 1998; Brown, 2001; Ravasi and Van Rekom, 2003; Puusa, 2005).

To sum up, questions are at the heart of the academic endeavour. According to organizational identity researchers (Bouchikhi et al., 1998) there are several questions related to identity at organizational level that seem to be as yet inadequately explored, but which constitute an ambitious agenda. They raise for example the following research topics: What are the processes that facilitate or inhibit the evolution of organizational identity? What is the role of power and politics in the construction, maintenance, and alteration of identity? How, if at all, will organizational identity tend toward hybrid identities as organizational environments become increasingly complex? How does identity facilitate or hinder organizational change? What are the empirical relationships among identity and the concepts in identity's nomological net: image, reputation, culture etc.? What are the implications of gaps or discontinuities between identity, image, and reputation? What are the implications of asserting that identity is simultaneously an internal and

an external concept?

Discussion

According to Brown (2001) one of the most interesting developments in organization theory to occur in recent years is the appropriation and application of the concept of identity to groups and organizations themselves. However, there are fundamental issues about organizational identity that are very fluid. In recent years organizational identity has become a subject of rather intensive organizational study. The applicability of the concept at multiple levels of analysis and its capacity for integrating analytical insights at the micro-, mid- and macro-levels further underscores its cohering potential. Organizational identity has found to lend insight into the character and behaviour of organizations and their members. I hope this review on the literature and research concerning organizational identity will encourage more researchers to explore organizational identity both conceptually and empirically.

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- ⁴ Barney et al., 1998; Puusa, 2005.
- ⁵ Whetten and Godfrey, 1998; Markkanen, 1999; Hatum and Pettigrew, 2004.
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