3. ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY, CULTURE AND IMAGE

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Abstract

The concept of organizational identity is often confused with similar concepts such as organizational culture or organizational image. This confusion depends in part on the inconsistent use that scholars have made of these terms in the past. This chapter reviews the literature that has discussed how these concepts differ and how they are interrelated, and proposes an integrative framework that summarizes the most widely accepted definitions. It focuses in particular on research on dynamic interrelations between organizational identity and culture, and highlights how these interrelations affect organizational stability and change.

Key words: Organizational identity, organizational image, organizational culture, identity dynamics, organizational change

When presenting one's research to colleagues or introducing organizational identity to students or executives, it is not uncommon to be asked about whether and how this concept really differs from more familiar and established ones, such as image or culture. In this chapter, I first briefly discuss the prevailing view among organizational identity scholars about how organizational identity differ from organizational image. I then focus on the more debated issue of whether and how organizational identity and culture differ and interrelate, and review past work investigating the dynamic relationships between these two constructs. I conclude by highlighting how interrelations among the three constructs affect dynamism in organizational identities.

Organizational identity and image

Organizational identity scholars generally agree to use the term "organizational identity" to refer to (internal) members' perceptions, and to use the term "organizational image" or "reputation" to refer to (external) stakeholders' perceptions (see Brown, Dacin, Pratt &

Whetten, 2006; Corley et al., 2006; Whetten, 2006; Price & Gioia, 2008; Gioia, Hamilton & Patvardhan, 2014). Gioia, Schultz and Corley (2000) further propose to distinguish between the "transient impressions" of an organization that a specific action or event leave on stakeholders, and the "reputation" of an organization, understood as the "relatively stable, long-term, collective judgements by outsiders" (p. 67). This distinction, however, is not universally accepted, and some scholars use either the term "image" (e.g. Hatch & Schultz, 1997, 2002) or "reputation" (e.g. Whetten & Mackey, 2002; Brown et al., 2006) to label external perceptions, with no further distinction.

Scholars also use the term "construed external image" to refer to member's beliefs about the perception of external audiences (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail; 1994). They use the term "intended image" (Brown et al., 2006) or "desired future image" (Gioia & Thomas, 1996) to refer to member's aspirations about how their organizations is perceived externally, and the term "projected images" to refer to the content of communicative actions aimed at achieving these aspirations (Rindova, 1997).

Occasionally, organization scholars use the term "corporate identity", borrowed from the field of corporate communication (Olins, 1989), to refer to a relatively coordinated set of visible and tangible representations of an organization (logos, products, visual communication materials, building features, design of uniforms, etc.) (Rindova & Schultz, 1998); these representations influence how an organization is perceived externally – that is, its image – and should therefore be carefully orchestrated (Olins, 1989).

Recent developments in organizational sociology threaten to blur the conceptual distinction between identity and image as an internal vs. external issue. As exemplified by Zuckerman's chapter in this Handbook, macro-organizational sociologists have adopted the term "identity" to refer to socially constructed categories used by stakeholders to "classify" organizations (Hsu & Hannan, 2005) and to decide whether they are worthy of their attention

and support (Zuckerman, 1999). These developments may be reflected in the occasional distinction between "internal identity" and "external identity" (e.g. Tripsas, 2009).

Gioia and colleagues, however, argue that this use of the term is "a mis-labeling of the concept of image" (Gioia, Patvardhan, Hamilton & Corley, 2013; 127) and it is incompatible with current theories of organizational identity. While macro-level research now widely uses the term "identity" to examine how audiences categorize organizations, recently published studies investigating organizational identity at meso- and micro-level (organization, group, individual) still tend to conform to the traditional terminology, and use "identity" to refer to internal perceptions, and "image" to refer to external ones (e.g. Ravasi & Phillips, 2011; Drori, Wrzesniewski & Ellis, 2013; Hoon & Jacobs, 2014).

Several studies explored the dynamic interrelations between different types of image and identity. Dutton and Dukerich (1991) first observed that construed images reflecting media coverage of organizational actions may induce members to reassess the appropriateness of these actions in light of a re-examination of the identity of the organization ("Is this who we really are"?). Elsbach and Kramer (1996) revealed different cognitive tactics that members use to preserve a sense of who we are in the face of images that question their self perceptions. Later work argued that a discrepancy between current and desired images may drive changes in strategy (Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Ravasi & Phillips, 2011) and identity (Gioia et al., 2000). Research also shows how external images tend to be sticky and inertial (Tripsas, 2009), and that members may be "captivated" by particularly attractive images and unable to adapt identity to changing internal and external circumstances (Kjærgaard, Morsing, & Ravasi, 2011).

Organizational identity and culture

Clarifying the difference between organizational identity and culture has been a recurrent preoccupation of identity scholars (e.g. Fiol, 1991; Hatch & Schultz, 1997, 2002; Fiol, Hatch & Golden-Biddle, 1998; Corley et al., 2006; Whetten, 2006) and culture scholars alike (e.g. Martin, 2002; Alvesson, 2013). In fact, as Alvesson and Robertson (2016) illustrate in their chapter of this book, some scholars wonder whether, after all, organizational identity scholars are simply using a different terminology to describe what previous work investigated as "culture". This confusion is understandable, because organizational culture, as I discuss later in more depth, is an important referent for the self-referential claims and understandings that constitute what we commonly refer to as "organizational identity."

In the last two decades, scholarly understanding of organizational identity and culture has evolved, as identity scholars gradually disentangled the various facets of the phenomenon (Ravasi & Canato, 2013) and culture scholars explored alternative views of culture (Weber & Dacin, 2011). At the same time, empirical research gradually illuminated not only the distinction, but also the dynamic interrelations between these two constructs (e.g. Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Rindova, Dalpiaz & Ravasi, 2011; Canato, Ravasi & Phillips, 2013; Hatch, Schultz & Skov, 2015). This line of inquiry sharpened our understanding of the theoretical differences between these constructs, and showed the importance of this theoretical distinction for our capacity to understand organizational phenomena.

Organizational scholars generally view organizational culture as composed of ideational and material elements (e.g. Smircich, 1983; Martin, 2002). Ideational elements are embodied in the knowledge structures that members use to interpret their organizational reality (variously referred to as beliefs, assumptions, frames, categories, schematas, etc.) and define "the correct way to perceive, think, and feel" about this reality (Schein, 1985). These ideational elements are in turn manifested in various cultural forms (symbols and artefacts, stories, language, rituals, etc.), formal practices (policies, structures and systems), and

informal practices (unwritten norms and conventions) (Trice & Beyer, 1984; Martin, 2002) that shape behavior within an organization[1].

Attempts to establish a theoretical difference between identity and culture observed that, compared to the broader notion of culture, organizational identity refers to a narrower set of meaning structures focused on "how members develop, express, and project their organizational sense of self" (Hatch & Schultz, 2000, p. 23). These structures are inherently comparative and self-reflective (Pratt, 2003; Corley et al., 2006), in that they shape members' understanding of how their organization differs from comparable ones. It has also been argued that the more explicit nature of identity claims distinguishes them from the largely tacit nature of cultural meaning structures (Hatch & Schultz, 2000).

Based on these ideas, empirical research has investigated the dynamic interrelations between the two constructs. Some studies built on Albert and Whetten's (1985) early idea that culture serves as an important referent for organizational identity, and investigated how culture affects members' understandings of "who we are as an organization", and helps them preserve a sense of continuity amid changes (Corley, 2004; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Other studies built instead on the idea that organizational identity contextualizes members understanding of cultural norms (Fiol, 1991), and examined how new organizational identities may foster organizational and cultural changes (e.g. Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Rindova et al.,

[1]Over the years, as the study of culture gained popularity, different interpretations of this concept proliferated (see Giorgi, Lockwood & Glynn, 2015 for a recent review). Two perspectives, in particular, offered contra-posed views of culture as a "constraint on action versus a resource for action" (Weber & Dacin, 2011: 289).

Early conceptualizations of organizational culture described it as a relatively stable set of taken-for-granted elements that shape members' thoughts and actions in a coherent and predictable way, and provide the structural stability fundamental for the everyday functioning of an organization (Geertz, 1973; Schein, 1985). Later research drew attention to the possible co-existence of multiple sub-cultures associated, for instance, with different professional communities or organizational units (Meyerson & Martin, 1987; Sackmann, 1992), but did not question the fundamental idea of culture as a set of relatively shared beliefs and norms prescribing or proscribing behaviour within a particular group (*culture-as-values*).

Building on an increasingly influential perspective in cultural sociology (Swidler, 1986; DiMaggio, 1997), more recent developments have begun to question the idea of organizational culture as a system of norms and beliefs constraining action. While not denying the idea that culture resides in relatively shared knowledge structures (DiMaggio, 1997) that influence how people make sense of their organization and environment, and structure relationships inside the organization (Schein, 1985), this rising perspective assumes that individuals may flexibly use culture as a repertoire of resources (ideas, symbols, stories, words, rituals, etc.) to pursue their own strategies of action (Swidler, 1986; Weber, 2005) (*culture-as-toolkit*).

2011; Hatch, Schultz & Skov, 2015). I discuss these two lines of inquiry and their apparently contradictory findings.

Organizational culture as an identity referent

Establishing the theoretical distinction and empirical relations between organizational identity and culture was central to early efforts to theorize the former. When first introducing the concept of organizational identity as members' claims about central, distinctive, and enduring features of their organization, Stuart Albert and David Whetten (1985) acknowledged that culture could be an important *referent* for these claims. In other words, when members try to answer the "identity question" ("Who are we?"), Albert and Whetten observed that culture – or, more appropriately, some elements of the organizational culture – could be part of the answer, and that whether or not members use culture as an identity referent is an "empirical question."

This observation echoed findings from early research on organizational culture, indicating that "cultural manifestations such as stories and rituals serve as vehicles for claims of uniqueness" (Martin, Feldman, Hatch & Sitkin, 1983, p. 49), and that "shared values define the fundamental character of the organization, the attitude that distinguishes it from all others. In this way, they create a sense of identity for those in the organization" (Deal & Kennedy, 1982, p. 23) (see also Collins & Porras, 1994). Collectively, these studies proposed that a subset of cultural values – celebrated in organizational folklore and corporate narrative – shape how members think about "who we are as an organization" or "what makes us different from our competitors."

Some disagreement, however, remains between leading scholars in the fields of culture and identity. Whereas Ed Schein proposes that organizational identity is rooted in the deeper, tacit layer of cultural assumptions that "provides members with a basic sense of identity and

defines the values that provide self-esteem" (Schein, 2010, p. 29), David Whetten argues that culture and identity do not completely overlap, and may do so only temporarily:

> When member agents invoke elements of their organization's culture in ways, for purposes and at times that are consistent with the specified uses of legitimate identity claims, then these cultural elements are functioning as part of the organization's identity (2006, p. 228).

Corley and colleagues concur with Whetten, observing that "when organizational identities do contain some of the organization's values, these values are part of what is believed to be central, distinctive and continuous about the organization" (Corley et al., 2006, p. 88). In fact, research shows that, while important, organizational culture is not the only referent for identity, as members' claims and beliefs may also be influenced by organizational images (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991), social categories (Glynn, 2008), status (Elsbach & Kramer, 1997), or any other feature they perceive as central, enduring, and distinctive. Also, not all the beliefs and norms that constitute an organization's culture are equally likely to become identity referents; some will be common to other organizations in the same industry (Porac, Thomas & Baden-Fuller, 1989; Phillips, 1994) or in the same country (Hofstede, 1980).

A study of how Bang & Olufsen, a Danish producer of audio-video equipment, responded to what members perceived as identity threats substantiated and extended the idea that culture serves as a referent for identity (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). It did so, by showing how, when current claims and understandings about central and distinctive features are threatened by changes that question their validity and/or their prospective viability, members look at established cultural practices and artefacts as a source of stability, to provide an answer to the question "Who are we, *really*?" or "Who do we want to be?" that maintains a sense of continuity with the past. This study foreshadowed later proposals to view culture as a "toolkit" for the construction of organizational identity (Weber & Dacin, 2011), by observing how members "find in these visible and tangible elements of their organization's culture a

reservoir of cues supporting and mediating interorganizational comparisons" (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006, p. 451).

Research also shows that the tendency to turn to the organization's culture to answer identity questions seems to be stronger for employees at lower levels in the hierarchy than for top managers, who instead tend to see the identity of the organization as "an outgrowth of the organization's strategy" (Corley, 2004, p. 1157). The idea that – especially in times of change (see Gioia & Thomas, 1996) – top managers' decisions may be driven by a prospective, aspirational understanding of the organization is exemplified well in a recent study of Carlsberg, a Danish large producer of beer, showing the difficulties initially encountered by the CEO as he tried to encourage the organization to "being more like a FMCG [fast-moving consumer goods] company" (Hatch et al., 2015, p. 7), as part of a strategy of global expansion. These difficulties partly reflected the resistance of members – whose understanding of the organization was more firmly rooted in its history and culture – to a "new" identity that they perceived as betraying traditional values associated with passion, craftsmanship and local roots.

Not all scholars, however, agree with this idea, and Ashforth and Mael (1996) remind us that "self-definition and strategic choice are intertwined such that an organization may *enact* and *express* a valued identity through strategy and may *infer*, *modify*, or *affirm* an identity from strategy and the responses it evokes (p. 33, italics in the original)."

Organizational identity and the contextual understanding of cultural norms

Marlena Fiol introduced a parallel take on the interrelation between organizational culture and identity, arguing that new identities may facilitate changes in organizational culture, understood as a system of "rules", to the extent that managers "decouple new behaviour patterns and their related identities sufficiently from traditional organizational values" (1991,

p. 206). Her theoretical arguments shift attention from the assumptions and values that shape how members think, to the collective norms that guide how they act (Cooke & Rousseau, 1988), understood as "behavioural expressions of those values" (Fiol, 1991, p. 193).

Rindova, Dalpiaz and Ravasi (2011) elaborate these ideas by showing how new organizational identities shape members' "contextual understanding" (Fiol, 1991) of established or emerging rules by suggesting a categorization of the organization that justifies and legitimizes the enforcement of these rules. Their longitudinal study of Alessi, an Italian producer of kitchenware, shows how this categorization may be interpreted literally (as in, "This organization IS an industrial manufacturer, so we should behave like one") or analogically (as in, "This organization should also ACT LIKE a publisher, in the way we relate to renowned designers"). Organizational leaders, then, can use new identity claims that draw analogical connections with other types of organizations to give sense to desired changes in cultural norms and beliefs (Rindova et al., 2011). As the case of Carlsberg mentioned earlier suggests, however, these efforts may need to be supported by specific mechanisms for cultural change (see Hatch et al., 2015), to the extent that members perceive new identities as clashing with values that are a source of personal or organizational pride.

Categories and features, and the dynamic interrelation between identity and culture

It could be argued that the two perspectives on the interrelations between organizational identity and culture outlined in the previous paragraphs appear contradictory: Does culture help members make sense of identity, as Albert and Whetten (1985) initially claimed? Or, as Fiol (1991) argued, does identity help members make sense of culture? In fact, this contradiction is only apparent, and can be resolved by acknowledging the dual nature of organizational identity as being constituted by social categories (invoked to substantiate claims of similarity) and organization-specific features (claimed as distinctive),

and the temporal dynamism that characterizes the relationship between culture and identity (Hatch et al., 2015).

Organizational identities "classify" organizations by specifying "what kind of organization this is" and "how this organization differs" from other comparable organizations (Gioia, 1998). Using terminology borrowed from cultural sociologists, we can see organizational identity as composed of the different *categories* – or types of organizations – that an organization is believed or claimed to belong to (Glynn, 2008; Pratt & Kraatz, 2009), and a number of organization-specific *features* that members see as distinguishing them from other organizations belonging to the same category. Categorical membership requires organizations to conform to institutionalized expectations about appropriate goals, structures, policies, practices, etc. (Zuckerman, 1999). Distinguishing features pressure organizations to "act in character" or "honour the past" to preserve a distinctive and valuable social position and satisfy members' needs for continuity and self-enhancement (Whetten, 2006).

Acknowledging the dual nature of organizational identity as being simultaneously about similarity and difference (Whetten, 2006) helps us bring together different perspectives on the dynamic relationship between culture and identity. On the one hand, idiosyncratic patterns of thought and behaviour that characterize an organization's culture may help members make sense of foundational, distinguishing and enduring features that contribute to define "who we are as an organization". When pressured by competitors' moves that threatened their perceived distinctiveness, for instance, Bang & Olufsen turned to its cultural practices and artefacts to articulate the unique way in which they approached the design of audio-video equipment, and re-defined their claimed uniqueness in terms of what they referred to as "corporate identity components" (e.g. "Essentiality", "Domesticity", "Inventiveness", etc.), and later "fundamental values" ("Excellence, Synthesis, and Poetry") (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006).

On the other hand, "categorical self-descriptors" (Whetten & Mackey, 2002) may help members make sense of appropriate norms and practices – and related assumptions – by linking these norms to institutionalized understandings of how a certain kind of organization should (or should not) be structured and operate. In this respect, the incorporation of new categorical claims in organizational self-referential discourse may encourage members to change deeply ingrained (cultural) patterns of thought and action because they are no longer appropriate for the kind of organization that it now is (as, for instance, in the case of privatization or listing on the stock exchange) or that members want it to be (Gioia & Thomas, 1996). New claims can be used literally by top managers – e.g. Penn State becoming "a Top Ten University" (Gioia & Thomas, 1996) or Carlsberg becoming a "FMCG company" (Hatch et al., 2015) – to encourage modification in goals, structure and policies to conform to different categorical requirements. They could also be used analogically – e.g. kitchenware manufacturer Alessi acting like a "publisher", or motorcycle producer Ducati being an "entertainment company" – to justify the introduction of new hybrid practices combining elements from multiple organizational forms.

These examples show that while culture, as a set of values perceived as core and unique by organizational members, may act as an "anchor" and a source of stability for claims and beliefs about central, enduring, and distinctive features (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006), new categorical identities could be used instrumentally to encourage cultural changes. New categorical claims can be used to facilitate the acceptance and assimilation of new beliefs and practices associated with a different type of organization – e.g. a publisher or an FMCG company – as a new "way we do things around here", by drawing on consolidated expectations and assumptions about what is appropriate for this type.

As the case described by Kenny and colleagues in this Handbook indicates, however (Kenny, Whittle & Willmott, 2016), members – at least some of them – may resist a proposed

"re-categorization" of an organization that implies a redistribution of power, status, or resources, and/or that threatens their personal or occupational identity (see also Humphreys & Brown, 2003; Nag, Corley & Gioia, 2007). In these circumstances, "identity struggles" – internal conflicts between different groups over the categorization of the organization – may reflect more profound conflicts over the distribution of material and symbolic resources in organizations (see Glynn, 2000 for an example).

Recent research on the implementation of Six Sigma at 3M between 2002 and 2007, also point to the difficulty of changing deeply ingrained and emotionally laden "core values" – reflected in celebrated and enduring organizational features that infuse members with pride – and that these values define the boundaries of acceptable change in organizations (Canato et al., 2013). This study suggests that the culture of an organization may be more malleable than currently assumed (e.g. Ogbonna & Harris, 1998). However, resistance will intensify if the displayed effects of organizational changes begin to threaten a deeper layer of cultural beliefs that, in members' eyes, define what the organization is and stands for – that is the organizational identity – as well as their own identity within the organization (Canato et al., 2013). Schein locates these identity-defining cultural beliefs at the most tacit and taken-for-granted level of basic assumptions (Schein, 2010). In contrast, this study indicates that identity-defining beliefs may also be quite explicit, corresponding to what Schein refers to as the level of "espoused values". It suggests also that the identity-relevance of cultural norms and beliefs, rather than their degree of tacitness and taken for-grantedness, may really explain whether and how members will resist managerial attempts to alter these norms and beliefs (Canato et al., 2013).

Collectively, the studies reviewed in these paragraphs illustrate and begin to unpack the mutual interrelation between identity and culture first theorized by Hatch and Shultz (2002). On the one hand, they do so by showing how, at any point in time, organizational

identities may *express* elements of the organizational culture, embodied in an organization's products, structures, practices, and symbols. On the other hand, they show how the suggested introduction of new identities, in addition to or in the place of current ones, triggers a *reflection* on the prospective viability of cultural beliefs and practices, and may ultimately result in their modification. These findings suggest that future studies may investigate the tension between identity and culture not only as a potential problem for organizations but also as a fundamental driver of change.

These studies also suggest, more generally, that a reconceptualization of both organizational culture and identity may be in order to account for the different degrees of malleability that elements of both constructs seem to exhibit. Both constructs seems to be characterised by a deeper layer, whereby members make sense of a set of enduring cultural norms and practices – celebrated as foundational and distinguishing – as "core values." These core values, in their eyes, define what the organization "is" and "stands for", and how it differs from other comparable organizations, and are highly resistant to change.

Similarly, both constructs may be characterised by an outer layer, which, in the case of culture may take the form of a "repertoire" of ideas, symbols, rituals, and patterns of interaction that members draw upon flexibly as they perform their tasks or pursue their interests (Swidler, 1986). At the same time, multiple categorical identities may be available to members to make (or give) sense of what they do, in ordinary or specific circumstances. These categories may be less emotionally charged than identity features, and their use more situational and fluid (Brown, 2006), as they are invoked to envision and justify the use of particular cultural resources – engagement in particular practices – to support a particular course of action. Future research could incorporate these ideas in further investigation of the conditions under which organizational identities facilitate or oppose cultural changes, and vice versa.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have reviewed available theoretical and empirical work addressing the distinction and interrelations between organizational identity and image, and organizational identity and culture respectively. These interrelations, however, are often dynamically related, as first observed by Hatch and Schultz (2002). Their insightful model applied Mead's theory of the dynamic interaction between the "I" and the "me" to understand interrelations between identity, image, and culture. Figure 1 offers a simplified representation of these interrelations, reflecting the multiple facets of these constructs highlighted by later studies and presented in this chapter. In line with theoretical (Giorgi et al., 2015; Patterson, 2014) and empirical work (Canato et al. 2013) suggesting reconciliation between the notions of culture-as-values and culture-as-toolkit, it highlights a general distinction between a broader set of cultural resources (artefacts, rituals, language, ideas, etc.) available to members, and a more deeply-held and affectively laden set of core values, serving as identity referent and shaping members' use of the organizational cultural repertoire.

Figure 1 about here

Collectively, the studies reviewed in this chapter suggest an understanding of organizational identity as the result of the interaction between the destabilizing influence of external images (Gioia et al., 2000) and the stabilizing influence of culture (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006); the former encouraging members to reconsider their identity in the face of their deteriorating (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991) or in search of more attractive ones (Gioia & Thomas, 1996), the latter offering them a cognitive (and, perhaps, affective) anchor to cling to when the organizational identity is threatened or called into question (Canato et al., 2013). Current theories, however, cannot explain yet whether the result of this interaction will be a

reaffirmation of the current identity (and culture) or the beginning of more profound cultural changes triggered by an image-identity gap. Both outcomes have been observed in past studies. Producing a more fine-grained understanding of how organizations address and resolve these tensions offers an interesting theoretical challenge for future research.

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Figure 1. Interrelations between organizational identity, image and culture in past research (a simplified visual representation).