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ABSTRACT

**Identity Management in a Community-of-Practice:
An Identity-based View of Organizational Behavior**

by

William C. Bailey, Jr.

**Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree of
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ABSTRACT

Organizations require the transfer of a great deal of embedded knowledge—ideas, policies, procedures, behaviors, and values—among members. This process is not always effectively framed by functional and structural views of organization. Such models also provide little insight as to why one organization creates a successful communities-of-practice and another fails.

In response, this research evaluated whether the concept of identity-in-organization – how members of an organization see the organization - provides a practical approach to the management of embedded knowledge and the support of future change. Fifteen professional aircraft maintenance managers of a federal Contract Maintenance Monitoring Team (CMMT) were interviewed on their views of the organization as collective entity. The research questions focused on: how meaning and perception are used by members to construct an identity-in-organization, how identity/performance interactions are used to define a community-of-practice, and what opportunities an articulated identity and identification provide for planned change — continuous process improvement.

The research found the following: inter-subjective interaction – the transition from ‘I’ thinking to ‘we’ thinking - allowed individuals to integrate desired internal identifications and to externally differentiate undesirable images to enhance their sense of belonging; identity processing was beyond the domain of any individual and was sustained by continuous group interaction, and members shared a vested interest in identity management. These concepts of identity/performance support effective

managerial intervention, including the transfer of embedded knowledge and planned change.

The positive social impact of this research exposed a different way of seeing an organization capable of embracing contemporary complexities. Identity-in-organization is such a model and can provide valuable insight for planning, implementing, and evaluating organized social change. When applied to understanding organizational behavior, identity-in-organization may ultimately redefine our thinking about how individuals behave in such organizations.

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Is organizational identity the same thing as organizational culture? Is identification with an organization the same as commitment to that organization? These questions have been discussed by a broad spectrum of those who research what identity means to an organization (Whetten, 1998). The critical issue was whether the theoretical premise of “identity-in-organization” is worthy of rigorous investigation. Their finding was that identity-in-organization may provide a better means of understanding the complexities of contemporary organization.

Organizational identity attempts to make sense of dynamic processes that synchronize activity among diverse members of an organization. As the impact of corporate image and symbols invades ever deeper into contemporary life, the attempt to understand organizational identity, and how best to manage its influence, takes on new meaning.

The chapter begins with a short topic background, followed by a statement of the research problem. Three research questions are then framed to focus and limit the investigation. A depth of analysis section provides an outline of the study. The chapter then concludes with a discussion of the study’s importance, including significant terms and definitions.

Organizational Identity: A Background

What is organizational identity? Jay Barney describes it as “the theory members of an organization have about who they are” (in Whetten, 1998, p. 103). Barney prefers

the notion of theory, because it incorporates dual interpretations--those that individuals clearly express and those they take for granted. What members stand for, and who they collectively are, cannot be separated from their personal interpretations (Bolino, 1999).

The mechanized and impersonal organizational schemes used to explain 20th century industrialization are not as inclusive as they once appeared. This approach defines organization as a highly structured and mission-oriented process (Handy, 1993; Mintzberg, 1989). Operations and functions remain tightly controlled by authoritarian, top-down management. Products and services are well defined, but are always presented from an overriding perspective of top management (Bergquist, 1993; Peters, 1992).

Arrow, McGrath, and Berdahl (2000) proposed a better way to view organization is as a social network capable of simultaneously developing multiple identities. Individual level identity (*local dynamics*) involves the coordination of people, tasks, and tools. As individuals transition from self to group identity, there is a continuous pursuit of both individual and group goals. At the organizational level (*global dynamics*), identity effects impact the group as a whole. Identifiable patterns of interaction create defining relationships among performance, cohesiveness, conflict, and conformity.

As knowledge and information become ever more critical to effective organizational performance, it is even more important to change the thinking about organization. Mass mergers and divestitures of the '80s foreshadowed that need. Organizational processes (how employees are managed, how decisions are made, and how products and services are provided) are now related directly to the success of each

employee's performance (Bergquist, 1993; Brown & Duguid, 2000; Handy, 1993; McDermott & O'Dell, 2001; Peters, 1992).

Identity research is asking how individuals, both those inside and outside of an organization, sustain communities-of-practice (Wenger, 2002). As an example, employees no longer experience lifetime job security simply because they give allegiance and loyalty to a company (Craig, 1995; Ghoshal, 1996). On the other hand, companies no longer acquire an individual's commitment simply by providing financial and structural networks (Copper, 1995; Marshall, 1994; Newhouse, 1996). In short, the contemporary social terms by which individuals make sense of their organizational life are also in transition.

If organizations develop unique identities--and that is an assumption of this research--then perhaps discernable characteristics of that identity may reveal an organization's propensity toward predictable behavior or action. Little is really known about how shared identities are created and what aspects may purposively be managed to enhance desired outcomes (Harrison, 1999; Whetten, 1998; Wenger, 2002).

Borrowing from social identity theory, people construct identity as essential sets of self-selected characteristics (Whetten, 1998). People value distinctiveness, even if it is only self-interpreted, and they act on their personalized image of that distinctiveness. Organizations may also recognize they have differences, and in a similar manner construct unique identities (Beer, 1996; Brown, 2000).

By comparison, individuals maintain internal similarities (identification of beliefs, values, and norms) and external differences (avoidance of non normalized behavior) that

may articulate a shared sense of identity-in-organization (Copper, 1995; Gardner, 1996; Harris, 1996; Kim, 1993). Organizational identification is a complex, dynamic social process. Shared social attributes, such as identity-based values, perceptions, and attitudes are easily overlooked as a unique product of an organization's self-interpreted distinctiveness.

Why is the problem of organizational identity worthy of being studied?

Conceptualizing organizations and their environments in ways that stress identity is controversial and not always taken seriously. As an interpretive paradigm, identity-in-organization brings focus to the central activities of constructing and sustaining organization (Cross, 2002; Weick, 1995, p. 111).

Organizing is a neutral social process, but it can create a system infused with authority and power. An organizational system is a group of interacting, interrelated, or interdependent elements that form a complex whole. Once created, such a system or organizational *persona* can take on a life of its own and become independent, uncontrollable, and destructive.

Interpreted as a nonphysical persona (an identity-in-organization), an organizational system may do things that its creators never intended and create unimagined problems. The implication for social change is that problems such as gross corporate financial misconduct, government civil rights violations, police corruption and brutality, and institutional discrimination are better understood through identity-in-organization and the influence identification holds over organizational behavior.

A few years ago, while evaluating the performance of Naval Aviation Maintenance Facilities throughout the Atlantic Fleet, the researcher first encountered the identity phenomenon. Even when maintenance facilities were similarly manned, had equally skilled technicians, applied the same maintenance procedures, and used the same support equipment and tools, the quality of their performance varied greatly. If everything was the same, what could account for such variation? What seemed most likely was some effect related to a difference of identity-in-organization experienced among these organizations.

How can the theory that what members of an organization perceive about who they are lend itself to viable investigation and add to the understanding of organizations? That is the question this paper will study.

The Research Problem

Members' perceptions of "who" their organization is (identity-in-organization) ought to reveal behavioral patterns and interactions (community-in-practice) and be subject to managerial intervention (planned change).

Where does the framework for this problem come from, and what meaning do the variables hold? Scott's (1987) analysis of organization, in conjunction with Wiley's (1988) theory of macro sense-making provide theoretical foundation and meaning to the variables of community-of-practice, and identity-in-organization.

Scott's research led to the theory that organization exists in one of three categories of systems: rational, natural, or open. Rational systems are collectivities oriented to the pursuit of relatively specific goals and exhibit relatively highly formalized

structure. Natural systems are collectivities whose participants share a common interest in the survival of the system and who will engage in informal activities to secure this end. Open systems are coalitions of shifting interest groups that negotiate goals and where outcomes are still strongly influenced by environmental factors.

Scott predicted a wide difference among organizations in terms of their input and throughput capacities. An indicator of this effect is the variation expected between community-of-practice and identity-in-organization. As such, these variables are best thought of as processes of organization. Put another way, they represent unique outcomes associated with inter- and intra-personal meaning and interpretation (inputs) that are collectively sustained by the forces of organization (Weick, 1995).

The issue is whether an organization's community-of-practice can be managed by how members construct a collective sense of identity-in-organization. Since the purpose of this study was to assess this relationship, Wiley's (1988) theory can also shed insight on how these variables were expected to interact.

Wiley's research focused on how collective sense-making takes place. In particular, he worked to define collective interaction at a macro level above individual levels of analysis. He described two processes that are useful in understanding the study problem: "inter-subjective" sense-making and "generic-subjective" sense-making (Wiley, 1988).

Inter-subjective sense-making is meaning derived when individual thoughts, feelings, and intentions merge or synthesize. It represents a transformation from "I" to "we" thinking. During this study, identity-in-organization was assumed to emerge from

inter-subjective interaction (sense-making). It is a collective process of interpreting actions and events as the processes are measured by organizational standards (Weick, 1995).

Community-of-practice, on the other hand, is more likely to take place at what Wiley described as generic-subjective meaning. Concrete human beings (objective subjects) are no longer present, and “we” thinking dominates. Social structure ensures parts become interchangeable, and organization becomes subject to abstract and categorical meanings. Generic subjectivity allows the evolution of scripts, standard plots, and repetitive action necessary for people to substitute for one another in a sustained community-of-practice (Wenger, 2002).

The significance of framing the problem as such is that inter-subjective and generic-subjective sense-making unfold in an ascending fashion--from lower (inter-subjective) to higher levels (generic-subjective). It appears reasonable, therefore, that an operative theory of who an organization is (identity-in-organization) should guide generic-subjective meanings in formulating patterned relations and actions (community-of-practice).

Seeing the problem this way, it matters little what type of organization one observes-- rational, natural, or open. A great deal of both self-discovery and self-invention of who and what an organization is will underlie any community-of-practice (Weick, 1995).

The problem statement implied, therefore, is that an organization’s ability to create and use knowledge as a community-in-practice depends on how well personal

meaning and theory (identification) are shared. Given the magnitude and complexity of this research problem, it became necessary to limit the scope of investigation.

The Research Questions

Working with a small group of professional military aircraft maintenance managers assembled as a government contract maintenance monitoring team (CMMT), this study examined the relationship between their community-of-practice and identity-in-organization. Hence, three research questions emerged and focused the investigation during this study.

First, how are *meaning* and *perception* used by members of the CMMT to construct their sense of an identity-in-organization?

Analyzing personal meanings and perceptions that members disclosed while talking about their sense of identification gave definition to who they thought their organization was, relative to other people. Through meaning and perception, central tendencies, core values, and inter-subjective attributes revealed themselves to frame a unique, self-defined theory that CMMT stood for identity-in-organization. These variables are qualitative operatives of local dynamics (Arrow, 2000, p. 91). The question also focused upon how the group unearthed, generated, and shared collective perceptions to construct a unique sense of identity within the functional units of subgroups, multiple identities, and organizations.

The second question asked how *identity/performance interactions* are used by members of the CMMT to define their sense of a community-in-practice.

In this study, identity/performance interactions are the categorical and abstract aspects of strategy, culture, decision-making, sense of community, and organizational learning that members espoused to describe how things were actually done. As a variable, the interactions represent the collectively acquired and perpetuated sense of organizational understanding held by the CMMT. Behind this type of coordination are shared sets of expectation necessary to understand how members ought to act, how to determine if members are fulfilling assigned roles, and how well implicit agreements--the results of Wiley's (1988) process of generic-subjective sense-making--reveal a unique sense of CMMT community-in-practice.

The third question asked how an *articulated identity* and *identification* impact opportunity for planned change, given the identity-in-organization and community-of-practice, revealed during this investigation.

These two variables, articulated identity (shared ideas of distinct, collective purpose) and identification (affinity for group membership) are what Arrow (2000, p. 254) termed "within-group" temporal patterns. Qualitatively embedded within ongoing experience, both are subject to fluctuations over time associated with changing states of organization. In this study, these variables directed attention to the interchange between inter-subjective and generic-subjective sense-making.

In other words, it is members' theories of who the CMMT is (identity-in-organization) from which patterned relations and actions (community-of-practice) arose, that in turn constrained subsequent adaptation of their organizational behavior. As such,

attention remained focused on interdependent patterns of self-conscious and significant traits that defined what sense of identification insiders actually shared.

The Depth of Investigation

This section outlines the assumptions, limitations, purpose, and scope of the investigation underlying this study. Facts are never independent of theory, and it is often necessary to identify grounding assumptions to ensure there is a clear understanding of the complexity and depth of the investigated problem. This also provides a realistic means to establish adequate research boundaries.

Assumptions

Three assumptions were taken as valid, based on their common acceptance in the literature reviewed for chapter 2. In short, any degree of generalization is a direct function of a study's underlying assumptions, contextual settings, and interpretive judgments. In this perspective, therefore, this study's guiding assumptions included:

1. The concept of identity-in-organization describes a perpetual, dynamic process of human interaction and exchange. It can simultaneously occur at multiple levels of social organization (individual, group, corporate, industry, or national) (Craig, 1995; DiBella, 1996; Grabowski, 1997; Garrison, 1997).
2. Social forces of attraction and repulsion govern various patterns of identification and emerge from the meaning individuals use in making sense of their own personal experience with an organization (Gioia, 1996). Further, these forces operate at two distinct levels: as localized social constructs of individualized, but highly shared sets

of expectations (local dynamics) or as global social constructs of collective relationships locking interacting parts of an organization together (global dynamics).

3. Identification with an organization links a cognitive sense of meaningful effects, behaviors, and expectations to the roles an individual will accept or reject as a condition of his or her participation in an organization (Frooman, 1999; Lawrence, 1999).

Limitations

The problem statement and subsequent research questions imply that identity and identification affect an organization's development and behavior. Analysis was limited to understanding what sense of organizational identity existed and learning how that identity affected the target organization. Relative small size severely limited generalizations of findings and conclusions, since the organization studied consisted of only 15 members. The primary source of data admitted for analysis was also restricted to the self-defined perceptions and attitudes expressed by these insiders. Observation data were used only to validate or refute findings extracted from the primary data.

During the study, no attempt was made to control or manipulate environmental conditions or the group interactions that were subsequently observed. Since the study problem was framed as a dynamic systems process, the investigation was limited to a use of subjective qualitative methods of analysis. Qualitative precision currently doesn't match that of a purely quantitative analysis. In short, this limited the focus of investigation to discovery of local structures and patterns rather than more quantitative measures of the identity and identification phenomena.

Furthermore, the study's subjective measure and analysis of data were subject to inherent problems of human instrumentation. Faulty interpretation was a constant concern, since both participants and researcher are likely to introduce this type of ambiguity. Since interpretation could not be avoided in dealing with the study's rich descriptive data, control and precision were limited. This implies that generalizing beyond the context of this study is unreasonable.

Delimitations

The focus for this study remained beyond simply defining static identity relationships. Although spanning a conceptual breadth of organizational identity, the introduction of empirical evidence was limited to a target population of only 15 individuals. In addition, no attempt was made to adjust for reactivity between researcher and participant, a phenomenon in which responses are linked to mutual expectations. Since results were obtained this way, the study is delimited by producing insights that generalize only to situations where reactivity is not a constraint.

The researcher sought qualitative data related to how individuals construct their sense of organizational identity. There was no evaluation of fit between any revealed identity-in-organization and the performance of the organization under investigation. This delimited the study further, since it is impossible to reliably distinguish whether participants revealed identity fantasy or identity reality.

Scope

The breadth of study considers both functionalistic and interpretivistic perspectives of organizational identity. Each view contends that identity-in-organization

is a complex interaction among various attributes and social interactions, but they differ greatly when approaching the study of identity-in-organization. Although often thought as conflicting and incompatible, it may be more productive to see them as complementary, holistic constructs of a complex phenomenon.

To investigate the study's particular problem, the depth of analysis turned to an interpretivistic perspective. This opened significant data to treatment in ways that contextually captured insider meanings as nonlinear, recursive, and systemic relationships.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to investigate, within a real world setting, what practical application a collectively shared sense of identity and identification held for members of a select organization. This way, insight was acquired that contributed to digesting the complexity of the research problem into discernable, empirical evidence.

Although limited to the context of one particular organization, this investigation purposively sought to fill a gap in current identity research. The literature review revealed that organizational identity has not received broad attention as a normalized construct of operational value. To address that shortcoming, this study bridged conceptual thinking and framed a practical application using the everyday interactions of a real-world organization.

In this same perspective, another purpose of this study was to bring identity problems out into the open. This is necessary to stimulate further inquiry and conceptual development. Organizational identity and identification currently are not sharply defined

concepts. Their core meaning and essential character are difficult to pin down in scientific tradition. As an intellectual discipline, identity-in-organization is in its infancy and is still plagued by conceptual disputes and operational uncertainties.

Rationale

The fundamental need for such a study was to expand upon the current level of identity knowledge. Ackerman (2000) contends our culture has become fixated on organization, and people are relentlessly moving toward an inevitable need to understand the laws of organizational identity. A great deal of study has gone into economics, markets, culture, business processes, and organizational behavior. Even so, the underlying reasons for organizational success or failure often go unrealized.

Identity-in-organization presents a new way of looking at organization. As a change of paradigm, there is a need for conceptual development. This study was an attempt to produce empirical evidence. This type of information is necessary to determine whether the identity concept will ultimately prove valuable to the organizational sciences.

Identity-in-organization is a way of understanding the social experience of participants. By trading precision and prediction for understanding, an interpretivistic approach challenges the dominant mode of thinking often applied in organization sciences. Organizational identity is tied to questions of meaning, and as Steward Albert (1985) argued, one does not measure questions. Rather, a person assesses their significance in understanding a problem (in Whetten, 1998, p. 10).

Identity and identification can be linked to several questions. What sense do people hold of who their organization is? What do people believe about their