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Beyond Text: Constructing Organizational Identity Multimodally

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Organizational scholars have proposed a broad range of theoretical approaches to the study of organizational identity. However, empirical studies on the construct have relied on text-based organizational identity descriptions, with little exploration of multiple intelligences, emotions and individual/collective identity representations. In this paper, we briefly review the empirical literature on organizational identity, and propose a novel method for empirical study involving structured interventions in which management teams develop representations of the identities of their organizations using three-dimensional construction toy materials. Our study has five main implications. By engaging in a method that draws on multiple intelligences, participants in this study generated multifaceted and innovative representations of the identities of their organizations. The object-mediated, playful nature of the method provided a safe context for emotional expression. Because it involved the collection of both individual and collective-level data, the technique led to collective constructions of highly varying degrees of 'sharedness'. Finally, the organizational identity representations integrated unconscious or 'tacit' understandings, which led to the enactment of organizational change.

Introduction

In the slightly more than 20 years since Albert and Whetten (1985) launched the study of organizational identity, the field has become a prominent domain of inquiry in the management literature, inspiring numerous scholarly articles, edited books (e.g. Whetten and Godfrey, 1998) and a special topic forum of *Academy of Management Review* (January 2000). A variety of explanations have been proposed for this intense interest. The notion offers a conceptual bridge across traditional analytical distinctions such as micro and macro, agency and structure, and individual, group and organizational levels of research (Porter, 2001). The phrase 'organization identity' is understandable and salient to both academic and practitioner audiences, providing scholars with the tantalizing possibility of a concept that can cross the theory–practice divide (Gioia, Schultz and Corley, 2002a) or link disparate social scientific communities (Brown, 2001). As workforces become increasingly heterogeneous and externalized bureaucratic structures are dismantled, the notion of an internalized cognitive structure or 'rudder' of what the organization stands for – residing in the heads and hearts of its members – has become attractive (Albert, Ashforth and Dutton, 2000).

Despite a considerable amount of scholarship, the concept of organizational identity has been defined in a variety of ways (Corley *et al.*, 2006), and the topic's ontological and epistemological status remains the subject of debate. A recent discussion in this journal focused on organizational identity's usefulness as a knowledge generating metaphor in organization studies (Cornelissen, 2002a, 2002b; Gioia, Schultz and Corley, 2002a, 2002b). Others have subsequently argued that instead of an imperfect organization–person metaphor, organizational identity is one form of *social* identity, and thus describes a social reality of organizational life (Haslam, Postmes and Ellemers, 2003). Such a perspective appears to be supported by Luhmann's theory of social systems, which claims that organizational features do not have to be traced back to individual features but can be considered real *sui generis* (Seidl, 2003).

These debates over the nature of organizational identity have generated an impressive volume of theoretical work. While the number of empirical studies has increased significantly of late, several areas of theoretical discussion have yet to be extensively explored empirically. In this light, our purpose in this paper is twofold. First, we briefly review the existing *peer-reviewed* empirical studies on organizational identity, noting the reliance on text-based descriptions of the concept. Second, we complement this work by exploring a novel, non-text-based method for generating identity descriptions among practising managers in organizations. Using a standardized technique that involves constructing organization identity using hands-on, playful construction materials, we conducted interventions in three organizations to generate identity descriptions quite different from those possible through use of traditional text-based techniques alone. We report our findings in this paper and propose implications with the potential to shed light on the empirical study of organizational identity more broadly.

What is meant by organizational identity?

Organizational identity was originally defined as that which members believe to be central, enduring, and distinctive about their organization (Albert and Whetten, 1985), although more recently the extent to which an identity must be enduring has been questioned (Corley *et al.*, 2006; Gioia, Schultz and Corley, 2000). Other definitions of organization identity state that it reflects an organization's central and distinguishing attributes – including its core values, organizational culture, modes of performance, and products (Elsbach and Kramer, 1996) – or refers to a collective, commonly shared understanding of the organization's distinctive values and characteristics (Hatch and Schultz, 1997).

The definitional variety stems from some fundamental dichotomies related to whether one sees organizational identity as shared beliefs or institutionalized claims (Whetten and Mackey, 2002), a process or a thing (Ravasi and van Rekom, 2003), a macro or micro phenomenon (Brickson, 2000), or a social construction or core essence (Corley *et al.*, 2006). Others have classified studies of organizational identity into three broad ontological/epistemological perspectives (Gioia, 1998, p. 25; Gioia, Schultz and Corley, 2000); that is, functionalist or social realist studies (e.g. Elsbach and Kramer, 1996), interpretative or constructionist studies (e.g. Pratt and Rafaeli, 1997), and post-modern or semiotic studies (e.g. Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003). Such distinctions influence how organizational identity may be described and critiqued. For example, while functionalists may be inclined to evaluate organizational identity in terms of its metaphoric value (Cornelissen, 2002a), interpretivists may be more inclined to focus on its production and reproduction through social processes in organizations (Haslam, Postmes and Ellemers, 2003).

We have a social constructionist view of organizational identity, believing that organizational identity is an emergent property constituted out of the process of interaction (Weick, 1995), involving both organizational members and top management (Hatch and Schultz, 1997). It can thus be thought of as a social accomplishment rather than an essential quality of organizations – a product of intersubjective, shared perceptions and views of 'who' an organization is. These shared views in turn indicate an orientation that implies what is appropriate, natural and valued for an organization (Kärreman and Alvesson, 2001).

Despite its lack of core essence, we view the concept of organizational identity as an organizational phenomenon or social fact (Haslam, Postmes and Ellemers, 2003) having a significant impact on organizations in a variety of ways. In this respect, our ontology is consistent with scholars who have found that organizational identity influences the way issues, emotions and actions within organizations are interpreted (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991), constrains organizational actions and decision-making processes (Fombrun, 1996), provides organizations with the confidence to be proactive (Gioia and Thomas, 1996), provides institutional legitimacy necessary to attract resources (Brown, 2001), helps define issues as threats or opportunities (Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, 1994), prevents organizations from falling apart (Taylor, 1999, p. 322), constructs perceptions of core capabilities (Glynn, 2000), handles critical incidents (Oliver and Roos, 2003) and deals with the challenge of the 'collapse' of internal–external organizational boundaries (Hatch and Schultz, 1997). Although we consider organizational identity to be a social fact ontologically, we also acknowledge that shared understandings of this multifaceted concept often develop through the use of metaphors as social processes (Oswick and Jones, 2006). That is, although we see the construct of organizational identity *itself* as more than just another useful metaphor, it is often through articulation and discussion of metaphors that facets of an organization's identity may be surfaced and more widely understood.

Existing empirical work on organizational identity

To explore the extant empirical work done on organizational identity in scholarly journals, we conducted a search using EBSCO Business Source of all peer-reviewed articles that included the phrase 'organizational identity'. We subsequently narrowed down our search results to include those in which the author(s) made an explicit attempt to empirically study organizational identity in real organizations. This meant eliminating from our review those articles containing highly perfunctory descriptions of organizational identity such as 'illustrative case studies' (e.g. Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) or brief references to well-known companies (e.g. Hatch and Schultz, 1997). Although several studies and experiments on related topics such as corporate identity, image, reputation and organizational identification are indirectly relevant to organizational identity, some fundamental differences in unit of analysis limit their applicability and we thus excluded them from our empirical review. For example, although methods for measuring corporate image such as Q-sort or Kelly repertory grid techniques can generate rich qualitative results, they draw on informants external to the organization (e.g. Van Riel, Stroeker and Maathuis, 1998) and thus paint a picture of corporate identity from the outside in. Studies of organizational identification have often focused on designing or using existing measures of non-identity-specific constructs such as commitment, self-esteem, value congruence, citizenship behaviours or other related variables (e.g. Van Dick *et al*., 2004).

In total, we chose 22 empirical articles on organizational identity incorporating a range of different methods, including large-scale quantitative surveys, longitudinal case studies, action research, content analysis, studies of archival data, and a variety of multi-method approaches. In some cases, the description of organizational identity formed the basis of the study, while in other instances it constituted only a part of the overall analysis. Each article brought together a unique combination of methodological approaches and techniques of data collection and analysis, resulting in a variety of ways of describing organizational identity (see Table 1).

Despite the breadth of empirical work conducted on organizational identity, our review revealed at least three elements of the concept that have been explored in greater depth theoretically than empirically in the peer-reviewed journals. These include the following.

1. *Multiple intelligences*. All individuals have broad sets of capabilities or 'multiple intelligences' including logical-mathematical, linguistic, spatial, musical, bodily-kinaesthetic, interpersonal and intrapersonal capacities (Gardner, 1993), which they use to understand the world. However, most existing studies of organizational identity have relied heavily on textual data, verbal descriptions, logical accounts and/or quantitative measures, thus providing only a limited perspective on what is such a manifold concept (Harquail and King, 2002). We believe the field would benefit from empirical studies that draw on more than just logical-mathematical and/or linguistic intelligences.

2. *Cognitive and emotional*. Many studies of organizational identity can be situated firmly in the cognitive tradition (e.g. Foreman and Whetten, 2002; Scott and Lane, 2000). However, it has also been proposed that emotions may play an important role in the generation of meaningful organizational identity descriptions (e.g. Harquail and King, 2002). By emotional, we refer to the kinds of classifications that are subjectively salient in a person's system of meanings

Table 1. Empirical studies of organizational identity in scholarly journals

Author(s)	Organization(s) studied	Methodological approach	Data collection	Method of analysis	Identity descriptions
Dutton and Dukerich (1991)	Port Authority of New York and New Jersey	Longitudinal case study	Interviews, reports, memos, speeches, articles	Construction of issue history and theme analysis	Six identity attributes, e.g. ‘professionalism’
Elsbach and Kramer (1996)	Eight ‘top 20’ US business schools	Qualitative study	Interviews, analysis of school catalogues and biographies	Iterative qualitative analysis: theory, literature, data	Identity dimensions, e.g. ‘participatory culture’
Gioia and Thomas (1996)	372 colleges and universities in the USA	Qualitative and quantitative study	Interviews, large-scale survey	Categorical, gestalt, path analysis	Two identities: ‘utilitarian’ and ‘normative’
Pratt and Rafaeli (1997)	A large hospital rehabilitation unit	Action research	Participation, observation, interviews, free associations, formal documents	Search for dominant themes, coding and clustering	Two identities: ‘rehabilitation’ and ‘acute care’, distinguished by dress codes
Golden-Biddle and Rao (1997)	A mutual, non-profit organization	Qualitative, field-based study	Executive development sessions, participant observation, interviews, archival sources	Generation of themes, comparison of data	Two identity dimensions: ‘volunteer-driven’ and ‘family of friends’
Czarniawska and Wolff (1998)	Two European universities	Case studies	Interviews and secondary documents	Narrative accounts developed by co-authors	Two identity-related story titles: ‘one of us’ and ‘the stranger’
Glynn (2000)	Atlanta Symphony Orchestra	In-depth, qualitative field study	Semi-structured interviews, archival sources	Identity claims by organization members extracted by researcher	Two identity dimensions: normative (‘artistic excellence’) and utilitarian (‘fiscal solvency’)
Welleford and Dudley (2000)	Total Action Against Poverty (community action agency)	Single case study	Interviews, secondary publications	List of terms distilled from Executive Director letter, confirmed in interviews	Two ten-word lists describing identity, e.g. ‘education oriented’
Bartel (2001)	Pillsbury community outreach	Multi-method panel design	Interviews of convenience sample	Collection of identity attributes, analysed through factor analysis	Six identity factors, e.g. ‘cooperative’
Kärreman and Alvesson (2001)	Swedish newspaper	Ethnographic	Participant observation, interviews	Interpretation of edited meeting transcription	Descriptions of construction of customer, product and organizational relations
Labianca *et al.* (2001)	US higher-education institutions	Quantitative study	Large-scale survey	Network analysis, quadratic assignment procedure, multiple regression analysis	Two identities: ‘utilitarian’ and ‘normative’
Brown and Humphreys (2002)	Hero University, Ankara, Turkey	Ethnographic	Interviews, immersion in stream of organizational events	Generation of thick description	Organization narrative of nostalgia and hegemonic resistance

Table 1. Continued

Author(s)	Organization(s) studied	Methodological approach	Data collection	Method of analysis	Identity descriptions
Dukerich, Golden and Shortell (2002)	Physicians associated with three healthcare systems	Quantitative study	Focus groups, large-scale survey of physicians	Factor analysis	37 identity attributes, e.g. ‘cooperative with physicians’
Foreman and Whetten (2002)	Rural cooperatives in a midwestern US state	Quantitative study	Focus groups, survey of 670 rural co-op members	Hierarchical polynomial regression	Ten identity elements, e.g. price of products or services
Corley and Gioia (2004)	Spin-off of Fortune 500 company	Qualitative study	Interviews, documentation, non-participant observation	Naturalistic inquiry	Three aggregate dimensions relating to identity ambiguity, change context and sense-giving
Coupland and Brown (2004)	Royal Dutch/Shell	Case study	Email exchanges on company web forum	Discourse analysis	Identity as contextualized argument and persuasion
Chreim (2005)	Canadian bank	Narrative	Annual reports	Content analysis	Identity themes, e.g. ‘first bank’, ‘commitment to employees’ etc.
Brickson (2005)	Organizations in legal services and non-alcoholic beverages	Qualitative and quantitative study	Large-scale survey	Multilevel modelling	Three identity orientations: individualistic, relational, collectivistic
Martins (2005)	Business schools	Quantitative	Large-scale survey	Factor analysis	Organizational identity strength and external orientation
Brown, Humphreys and Gurney (2005)	Tour operator	Ethnographic	Interviews, documentation	Grounded theory	Three identity narratives: utilitarian, normative and hedonic
Alvesson and Robertson (2006)	Consulting firms	Exploratory qualitative case study	Interviews, non-participant observation	Development of vignettes	‘Elite status’ as global club, zealous community, entrepreneurial band, or aristocracy
Brown and Humphreys (2006)	College of Further Education	Ethnographic	Interviews, observations, documentation	Discourse analysis	Roles of place, nostalgia and fantasy in identity construction

(Olin-Wright, 1997, p. 495). Organizational identity is a construct that can be felt as well as mentally contemplated, and is located in the head *and hearts* of organizational members (Albert, Ashforth and Dutton, 2000, emphasis added). While the connection between identification processes and emotion has been explored (e.g. Harquail, 1998), the linkage between emotion and organizational identity has generated less empirical attention.

3. Individual and collective. Most studies of organizational identity involve aggregation by the researcher of individual informants' views on what is a collective construct (e.g. Elsbach and Kramer, 1996) although some attempts have been made to examine collective organizational identity claims directly (Chreim, 2005). Less explored has been the connection between the two: the emergent, iterative, individual–collective processes by which human beings strive for convergence around collective organizational identity meanings (Whetten and Godfrey, 1998, p. 42). In this respect, there have been calls for more organizational identity studies that focus more on commonalities and differences between the individual and organizational levels of analysis (Pratt, 2003; Ravasi and van Rekom, 2003).

Methodological considerations

In this study, we explore how the existing empirical literature might be extended through an alternative methodology for studying organizational identity. Our ontological and epistemological beliefs about organizational identity – grounded in the constructivist paradigm – imply that organizational identity is often highly contested, and develops through a process of negotiation and comparison with others. Thus, our methodological objective was not to test hypotheses or measure organizational identity in the functionalist tradition. Because organizational identity may lack sufficient substance and discreteness to be captured in questionnaires or single interviews and to be measured and counted (Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003), asking informants to convey information about organizational identity in exclusively verbal and/or textual form ignores a rich variety of possibilities that may result from other modes of expression.

We sought to understand how managers made sense of their organizations against the background of deeper cultural meaning systems. We extended the media of identity-related information beyond verbal language or routinized behaviours (Pratt, 2003) by inviting participants to build representations of their organization's identities using construction toy materials. The process draws on multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983), and bears some resemblance to cognitive sculpting for organization change (Doyle and Sims, 2002), image-based strategy generation (Bürgi and Roos, 2003) and developing embodied metaphors in the context of organizational development (Jacobs and Heracleous, 2006).

Beyond the act of constructing, however, we invited participants to interpret and question identity elements built by others. In this way we created a forum for conversation mediated by the constructed identity representations, following the tradition of organizational scholars who have used analogically mediated inquiry to reveal problems and unconscious processes in organizations (Barry, 1994; Campbell, 1998). We thus attempted to move beyond textual and cognitive organizational identity descriptions by drawing on humanistic psychology (e.g. Jung, 1961; Rogers, 1961), the use of play (Huizenga, 1950; Sutton-Smith, 1997) and expressive arts in therapy (e.g. Rogers, 1993), and symbolic communication (e.g. Axline, 1947), to reveal what pure intellectual reasoning may not. Thus, we hoped to create a context in which tacit and often emotional understandings of organizational identity might emerge. By using an approach based on these ideas, we hoped informants could see the familiar in new ways and also be encouraged to develop entirely new insights. We employed elements of 'serious play' (Roos and Victor, 1999; Roos, Victor and Statler, 2004), which combines three-dimensional media with the mode of play to create the context in which informants build models of organizational identity with their hands. Our intention was to help generate, and then observe and record, rich data about sensemaking processes surrounding organizational identity.

Structure of interventions

The centrepiece of our exploration into organizational identity involved facilitated interventions using a standardized set of thousands of mixed construction toy pieces of various colours, shapes and sizes in a stepwise process. Following in the tradition of creative arts therapy (e.g. Rogers, 1993) each intervention began with 'warm-up' exercises, followed by the main organizational identity building experience and subsequent debriefing. We ran three warm-up sessions with the intention of familiarizing the participants with what may have seemed the surprising task of using playful toy materials in a serious context at work. Our three warm-ups included (1) an introductory exercise designed to improve participants' building skills by building a tower under tight time constraints, (2) an exercise designed to familiarize participants with use of metaphors by inviting them to build and then describe a construction using metaphoric language, and (3) an exercise designed to improve their ability to create a story by constructing and describing a representation of their jobs.

Following these warm-ups, we shifted the unit of analysis to the organization, and asked participants to individually construct a representation of their organization's 'identity' that would answer the question 'who is your organization?' In order to reduce the likelihood that they would build aspired to or ideological organizational representations, we encouraged them to build the organization as they 'really saw it' at that moment, rather than as it 'should' be. After 30 minutes of building time, each participant presented his or her individual representation of the organization's identity to the other members of the group.

Because an important element of collective identities is their 'sharedness' (Pratt, 2003, p. 169), we then asked participants to work together to build a single, joint version of their organization's identity. As facilitators, we intervened occasionally during this process to ask a participant to clarify or elaborate on a statement, or to push for additional information or underlying stories behind the emerging constructions. Ultimately, an integrated representation emerged in each group that included some notions from the individual constructions along with novel elements that emerged during the collective construction process. In an attempt to establish the face validity of the representations, at the end of the building process the facilitator asked all participants whether or not the finished construction accurately captured the key elements of their organization's identity as they saw it. Once completed, a volunteer from each group explained the collective model overall, a process which was documented and fed back to the participants by the facilitators following the workshop, together with photographic images of the final identity representation.

Data collection

Our study can be characterized as an exploratory, multiple case study using participant observation and interview data. We collected participant-observer data from divisional management teams of three multinational companies from different industries (packaging, chemicals, and software). Each team consisted of between six and ten participants and was responsible for the management of a company division – thus similar in terms of organizational hierarchical level – and included representatives from a variety of divisional functions.

In two of the cases, the co-authors conducted the interventions together; in the third case, one of the co-authors conducted the intervention with a third researcher who agreed to participate in this study. The interventions were videotaped in their entirety and researchers took notes and photographs during various stages of the process. Additional data were collected through pre-intervention, semi-structured telephone interviews in which participants were asked to describe their organization, its decision-making style, how it compared to competitors, and what challenges it faced. Two weeks after the interventions, participants were sent a list of questions by email in which they were asked to evaluate the session and describe any impact it may have had on how they viewed their organization. Participants were also provided a space for additional comments, and many provided such commentary.

Data analysis

We began analysing the data by reviewing our notes and photographs from the interventions and re-examining the videotapes. These data, together with the pre-intervention interviews and the post-intervention emailed questions, were independently classified into 'coding families' of context, situation definition, perspectives, ways of thinking about people and objects, process, activities, events, strategies, relationships and social structures, and methods, based on Bogdan and Biklen (1992). This process facilitated the organization of the considerable volume of data collected in order to allow for the development of categories.

Because one of the purposes of the paper was to explore three elements of a new methodology for the study of organizational identity (multiple intelligences, emotion, multiple levels), we began coding using these three 'process' categories, and assigned textual data to each category. For example, we noted instances where multiple intelligences were drawn upon (such as when objects were physically moved in seemingly significant ways) in developing our first process implication. We also engaged in open coding to generate preliminary additional categories based on particularly interesting phenomena to which we assigned textual data (Dey, 1993), which led to the development of two new 'content' categories also reported in the Implications section. For example, we labelled one of our open codes 'expressions of surprise', and such instances proved to be so numerous that they contributed to the formulation of our first content category. Once completed, all five categories were compared and discussed to generate this paper's implications, which were subsequently evaluated against existing literature with the aim of raising the work's theoretical level (Eisenhardt, 1989).

We present our findings in two stages. First, we recount three summary case studies that describe background elements of each intervention: who participated, information on the firm, key issues faced and key elements of the identity construction exercises in each company. Second, we present the three process and two content implications of our effort, which tie this work into the existing literatures on organizational identity and related fields.

Research context

Each management team studied was confronting a key organizational issue, and agreed to participate in the organizational identity construction exercise as a means of helping to resolve this issue. Two of the management teams agreed to participate in the hopes of generating organizational-identity-related input for their strategy-making processes, and the third agreed on the understanding that the intervention might lead to improved teamwork among the senior management team. In the next sections, we briefly review each of the three interventions, with additional case material presented in the subsequent Implications section.

Case 1: PackCo[1]

The first intervention was conducted in April 2001, for the senior management team of the French country operation of a multinational packaging company. Seven functional heads and the managing director participated. PackCo was organized as a series of autonomous country operations, although pressure to centralize some key processes had been building. The company was confronting new competition from a variety of alternative packaging materials, and had announced its intention to diversify away from its core product.

When beginning the individual organizational identity constructions, the participants remained in their seats and joked with each other in French about the process. Seven out of the eight individual representations of PackCo's identity consisted of fortress-like constructions, for example a pyramid, a castle, Fort Knox and a temple. These constructions all included solid walls protecting the company from the outside world and organizational members defending the fortress from 'enemies'. The eighth metaphor was that of an old tree, emphasizing the organization's solidity and stability. Although the individual identity constructions were remarkably similar in nature, a number of debates arose among participants as they moved to construct a combined identity representation. For example, one participant attempted to add the tiger figure to the construction as a metaphor for what he perceived as the company's aggressiveness, although whether this symbolized an element of the organization's *identity* was disputed and the figure was ultimately withdrawn. The building experience was marked by periods of relatively quiet, individual-level construction punctuated by bursts of collective activity and occasionally laughter

[1]The names of 'PackCo', 'ChemCo' and 'SoftCo' have been disguised by agreement with the informants.

following the addition of a new element to the model. For example, the addition by one participant of a lonely 'scout' figure to represent members of the organization charged with exploring new technologies was quickly followed by another participant's placing an oxygen mask over the figure's head to indicate the lack of 'air' or 'support' from head office, and another's addition of a spear to indicate the figure's need to be 'aggressive'. One participant commented: 'People are doing this alone, without much support from the parent company'. A control tower was added to the top of the fortress, from which top management closely surveyed what was going on both inside and outside. In addition, although the main component of the shared identity representation was a 'fortress', the managing director conveyed his belief that the organization was in fact more vulnerable than a fortress, stating: 'the foundations are not as solid as we think'. All members of the group then participated in lifting the model and putting the entire structure up on 'pillars', to better convey the notion of an organization on rough seas.

Case 2: ChemCo

This intervention was conducted in February 2002, at the offices of a mid-sized specialty chemical company based in Switzerland. Six participants from one of the company's three divisions participated in the exercise, including five functional managers and the vice president of strategy. Although the division was profitable, its returns were lower than the company's other divisions, and its customer base was fragmented and rapidly changing. All six participants had recently participated in the development of the division's three-year strategic plan.

Individually, participants constructed their models quietly, only occasionally showing some new feature to a colleague, which at times led to laughter. The resulting individual identity constructions were quite diverse, including a magician operating behind a barrier, a highly mobile vehicle, a surveillance tower surrounded by threatening polar bears, and a factory controlling scattered sales people through use of an antenna. Despite encouragement from the facilitators, the group was initially unable to come up with a single, shared overall identity representation. Some participants tried sliding various components of the individual models into the centre to try out ideas, with some receiving confirmatory comments by others and others not. The group used several of these components to build representations of the organization's three market-based business units oriented to the outside world, each of which included a variety of figures representing personnel, strengths, weaknesses, and management techniques. The group then built a narrow set of communication channels to the support departments, which were clogged with a stream of information requests far in excess of the 'bandwidth' available for them to be dealt with. After 15 minutes of further discussion, the group decided that, as this operational complexity was common to all three business units, it had to become part of the overall identity representation. The notion of 'complexity' would go on to guide subsequent discussions. For example, the sales manager accused the logistics department of poor delivery, while the logistics manager replied that the sales department had little appreciation of the complexity involved in putting together specialized orders at short notice. Towards the end of the session, a few participants overlaid the construction with three plastic tubes representing clear communication channels, representing a few places where managers had been able to implement key account management and overcome the organization's complexity. The physical addition of these 'tubes' to the model led to a great deal of discussion, with some group members surprised to realize that the organization's identity also might include elements of efficiency and customer orientation. Several participants – including the division's head of strategy – resolved that the group needed to 'build more tubes'.

Case 3: SoftCo

The third intervention was conducted in June 2002, for ten members of the senior management group of software company SoftCo's regional Northern European division. Participating in the session were six country managers, three functional managers and the managing director of the division. Prior to the session, participants described the company as an 'American style' matrix organization with country managers and international product managers each having separate profit and loss responsibility. The managing director wanted to try to move beyond a 'hub-and-spoke' management system with him at the centre and explore whether or not these country and functional managers could become more of a peer-to-peer 'team'.

The individual identity construction process was largely quiet and body language constrained, with each participant building a careful representation of the organization as he saw it. The resulting representations were quite diverse, including people with 'road construction' between them, animals surrounding a farmer, and a circle of countries surrounding Sweden (the managing director was Swedish). When asked to build a shared identity representation, the participants sat in their chairs and talked about various ways to do this. After approximately 20 minutes, the group agreed that each member would build his own operation and push it into the middle of the table to be connected with the others. The final group construction showed six independent country operations with the key feature of individuals linked through 'antenna relationships', meaning that they could call each other up to talk while remaining physically distant. Another key element was the connection between the Northern Europe operation and the parent company. The group became absolutely silent when the general manager constructed this link, and told a very personal story concerning his position and relationship with his boss in the parent company. This personal story led to a subsequent burst of building activity on connections, which ultimately led the group to agree to add the 'antenna relationships' to the model, agreeing that this represented a key facet of the organization's overall identity. However, there was variation among individuals concerning the degree to which this particular group should function as a team. Those from less developed market operations expressed the most interest while those from larger, more established markets showed greater scepticism, continuing to view each other as potential competitors for resources rather than as collaborators in organizational learning.

Implications

Our analysis of the data led to the development of three process and two content implications comparing this method with more traditional text-based techniques. The first three process implications explore the impact of changing the process of developing organizational identity descriptions to include multiple intelligences, emotion, and individual/collective data. The two content implications describe how the actual content of the organizational identity descriptions differed from those typically resulting from text-based approaches.

Process implications

1. Multiple intelligences led to innovative organizational identity representations. The technique under study involved having participants physically construct and move around organizational identity representations, in addition to speaking or writing about them (see Figure 1). It thus drew on multiple intelligences (Gardner, 1983), namely visual-spatial intelligence through the active creation of new images and constructions, bodily-kinaesthetic intelligence due to the use of the hands in the construction activity, interpersonal intelligence through the process of negotiating identity meanings, as well as linguistic intelligence through the explanations individuals provide for their constructions, By constructing the striking image of an overseeing 'control tower', the PackCo managers were able to non-verbally highlight an important element of their

Figure 1. Placing tubelike structures

organization's identity. In ChemCo, the placement of tubelike structures overshooting the organization's complexity foregrounded an element of the company's identity that had initially been less apparent when the focus was on ChemCo's complexity. The physical construction of SoftCo as separated islands of activities connected only by radio control rendered visible the perception that SoftCo consisted of a collection of autonomous parts with fragile connections. The use of hands in the construction process appeared to bring about a variety of surprising new insights consistent with the work of Wilson (1998), several of which will be described in more detail below.

The object-based nature of the technique also appeared to change the way interpersonal intelligences were used by participants, particularly when sharing meaning, negotiating and ultimately reaching collective decisions on which symbols were most relevant in describing their organizations. A SoftCo manager commented: 'I think there was great value in seeing our company in a 3D perspective . . . better than just having the stuff on a whiteboard'. This supports earlier findings by Bürgi and Roos (2003) and Bürgi, Jacobs and Roos (2004), who contend that externalizing individual viewpoints using three-dimensional metaphors can allow for a physical experience of the relatedness of concepts.

2. *The object-mediated and playful nature of the technique provided a safe context for emotional expression.* This technique embraced emotional considerations because it developed an operating framework based on play, which has been claimed to facilitate emotional expression on a number of levels (Winnicott, 1971). The playful, object-mediated nature of the process enabled participants to temporarily step outside the daily realities of their jobs and communicate about difficult identity issues through use of the play materials rather than through face-to-face confrontation. Managers were observed pointing (see Figure 2) and even talking to the model in question rather than to other participants when sensitivities surfaced, allowing frustration to be more freely expressed. In this sense, the model itself became the object of a temporary transference of hidden feelings and beliefs – a sort of 'positive scapegoat' for participants (Barry, 1994). For example, when citing examples of problems in delivery of products, the participant

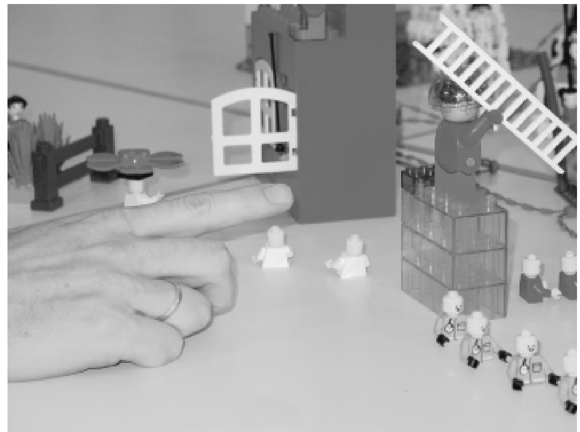

Figure 2. Object-mediated inquiry

from the sales department of ChemCo pointed to the logistics part of the model in identifying and describing the problem, rather than to the logistics manager present in the room. The managing director of PackCo commented after a few weeks that he was surprised at the level of openness and frankness during the discussions about even very sensitive issues. A ChemCo manager reflected after the session: 'I found it also to be a very interesting way of expressing subjective views, and I was amazed at how emotional it could be. There were hundreds of ways of representing this person or role, or this department, and the way that was chosen was always very communicative, and very funny.' The head of logistics from ChemCo reflected: '(logistics) was very strongly challenged in the building session, and since I am part of it, I felt it strongly'.

The technique appeared to foster an appreciative context within which a 'generative metaphor' representing the organization's identity could be constructed, by overcoming defensiveness and cutting through constrictions of habit and cultural automaticity (Barrett and Cooperrider, 1990). Consistent with Johnson-Laird and Steedman (1978), participants seemed able to experiment with alternative views in a seemingly safe way without fear of being reprimanded or held back by seniors or peers. The organizational identity representations appeared to include both thoughts *and feelings* about the identity of the organization as authentically perceived by participating managers at that moment in time. By providing an object-mediated method for these feelings to be expressed, the process provided a safer means of adjudicating these differences.

In this light, techniques of this nature may be helpful in further exploring the emotionality and politicality of organizational life in general (Brown, 2001), and identity in particular.

3. The degree of 'sharedness' of collective data varied across the firms. The technique allowed organizational identity to be explored at two levels – individual and collective – by asking participants to build individual notions of organizational identity *before* participating in the co-creation of a shared group representation of organizational identity. In the first phase, participants independently voiced their own views of the firm; in the second phase, they developed a collective construction. Unlike techniques such as cognitive mapping (Daniels, Johnson and de Chernatony, 1994; Huff, 1990), the aggregation of views occurring in the second phase was conducted by the informants themselves, rather than by researchers. Both homogeneity and heterogeneity of cognitive and emotional standpoints were observed and debated in each group. In one case, the collective constructions were relatively easy to develop (PackCo), while in the other two they were very difficult (ChemCo and SoftCo). Thus, both the process by which shared meanings were generated and the degree to which organizational members expressed homogeneous views varied significantly across the three organizations. Although beyond the scope of this paper to consider, such differences may be linked to varying degrees of identity 'strength' (Gioia and Thomas, 1996) in each organization.

In all three cases, the process laid bare some of what was known collectively but not individually (Taylor, 1999, p. 321) – local adaptations essential to successful functioning that the organization knew without knowing them. Rather than simply converting tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge, the process appeared to enable a novel means of interacting, distinguishing and connecting (Tsoukas, 2003) that led to modified praxis, which is discussed further in the following section.

Content implications

In addition to the above process findings, our exploratory study also revealed two important differences in the content of the organizational identity constructions compared with previous characterizations gleaned from participants in pre-interviews, and indeed from descriptions of organizational identity reported in many previous empirical studies.

1. The organizational identity representations integrated unconscious or 'tacit' understandings. In each of the three cases, a number of what appeared to be unconscious concerns and aspirations emerged in the discussion, as participants spoke up and made surprisingly frank statements about their organization. Either during the interventions themselves or in follow-up responses, participants from all groups reported having been surprised by what they themselves had constructed, as well as at what others at the table had constructed, despite the fact that in all cases participants worked together, in many cases for several years. The construction of PackCo 'scouts' as walking a lonely path far from the 'fortress' and needing oxygen to survive struck many participants as a surprisingly harsh organizational reality, far removed from the 'technology leader' company description articulated by participants in many of the pre-interviews. However, this new element remained present in the group's final representation of the organization's identity. In ChemCo, the extent of the business's complexity appeared to overwhelm some participants, while the surprising and sudden appearance of 'tube relationships' – clear communication channels – provided some unexpected guidance for how the organization could improve its situation. The managing director of SoftCo was able to present previously hidden opinions and impressions he had about the high and low points of his relationship with his boss to his closely listening team, through use of a string upon which many metaphoric 'attributes' were hooked.

The fact that people expressed frequent surprise – yet agreement with – certain organizational representations may be an indicator that the images constructed extended beyond their conscious realms of thought about the identity of their organization and drew instead on subconscious understandings. As in other contexts, use of metaphors to describe an organization's identity is not always deliberate, and can draw on the unconscious or cognitive processes we use to analyse the world (Marshak, 2003). Because participants were asked to create symbolic organizational identity representations, they had to move to a different mental space from their usual workplace reality, which may have reduced resistance mechanisms and enabled repressed material to be expressed (Barry, 1994). A variety of conscious and unconscious material was indeed *projected* on the symbolic analogues created during these interventions, similar to what frequently occurs in various forms of 'art therapy' (Case and Dalley, 1992). We witnessed participants moving beyond their discursive consciousnesses to more practical consciousness, engaging in reflexive monitoring more difficult to verbalize (Giddens, 1984, p. 45).

2. The new organizational identity representations contributed to the enactment of organizational change. By requiring managers to systematically change their way of describing the identity of their organizations using new metaphors, the technique appeared to enlarge the capacities of these managers to engage in novel interpretations (Smircich and Stubbart, 1985), fostering a process of organizational change. When the PackCo team adopted the metaphor of solitary astronauts heading off with limited oxygen to describe its scouting activities, it became clear that these individuals were vulnerable and marginalized, despite the organizational rhetoric to the contrary. Our follow-up indicated that the organization did proceed to integrate its scouting activities more closely with the rest of the organization. At ChemCo, the head of logistics indicated in his post-intervention responses that he would simplify his organization, explaining: 'The amplitude of the problem was made so strongly by our being able to look at the big picture of the whole division . . . things will be put into place to improve the clarity and transparency about what we actually do'. By agreeing on the 'antenna' metaphor, the SoftCo managers (with the exception of the leader) enacted the notion that the managers were not a closely knit team, and were unlikely to become one easily. Follow-up responses revealed that the managing director of SoftCo subsequently moved away from his aspirations for team-like behaviour from his managers.

The generation of new metaphors can have a powerful influence on how individuals see a situation, and thus can be extremely useful in effecting organizational change (Marshak, 1993). Furthermore, the phenomenon of transference to external objects can be a critical part of a change process (Kets de Vries, 1991), by allowing repressed issues to emerge and ultimately be integrated by participants. The variety of meaning and the significance projected on the images and metaphors developed in each organization appeared to contribute to each organization's sense-making (e.g. Lakoff and Johnson, 1980) and transform existing thinking to generate new insights (Oswick, Keenoy and Grant, 2002). More than simply describing an external reality, metaphors can help constitute that reality and prescribe how it ought to be viewed (Tsoukas, 1991). In addition to contributing to a rich new representation of the organization's identity, the metaphor-rich sense-making fostered by this technique appeared to lay the foundation for subsequent organizational changes.

Conclusions

Organizational identity is an empirical, theoretical and practical construct that can be used to enhance understanding of organizational processes (Haslam, Postmes and Ellemers, 2003), and appears to hold great promise for crossing many boundaries in the management literature. At this stage, the field is still experimenting with a wide variety of approaches to the concept on both theoretical and empirical levels. Our review in this paper of empirical studies of organizational identity revealed that most of these studies involve the generation of textual descriptions to generate identity descriptions.

With this review as our starting point, we explored the use of a standardized technique involving playful three-dimensional construction materials as a multimodal method with which management teams could describe the identities of their organizations. In doing so, we modified the identity 'media' (Pratt, 2003) – the form that identity-related information could take – which extends beyond verbal language or routinized behaviours. We did this because we believe that much like other organizational phenomena such as decision-making processes (e.g. Oliver and Roos, 2005) organizational identity is an emotional as well as cognitive phenomenon. More than a purely conscious and verbal construct, we also believe it can be unconscious and capable of being expressed in a variety of ways.

We found that by drawing on multiple intelligences, the method led to innovative organizational identity representations. The playful and object-mediated context of the identity construction process appeared to create a zone of safety within which participants could more freely express emotions, and indeed build these feelings into the constructions themselves. The technique also allowed for individual and collective data collection and might provide further scope to explore the degree of 'sharedness' of organizational identity within firms. Furthermore, the content of the representations developed differed from previous activities in each organization, because it integrated unconscious or 'tacit' understandings of the organization. These new understandings subsequently spurred on organizational change.

Some limitations to this study should be noted. As a preliminary attempt to explore multimodal techniques for generating rich identity descriptions, we involved only senior managers in this study. Although focusing on top management teams for organizational identity articulations has a long tradition in this field, the ability of the top team to provide a full description of multifaceted organizational identities is clearly limited. Future studies might focus on generation of identity descriptions across firm levels. In addition, we acknowledge that many insights may have been so completely internalized by participants that they were not verbalized to us either during or after the session. To some extent this is a weakness inherent to interpretive research. We attempted to reduce the extent of this phenomenon by including both reports from informants themselves and our research interpretations of what appeared to be happening in this study. The interpretive nature of this research clearly limits its generalizability, although the fact that several similar phenomena were observed and reported in all three cases may hint at relevance of the implications beyond the scope of this immediate study. Finally, our study is limited by the materials we chose to use with these management teams; further research may allow the technique to be extended to include hard *and* soft materials combined with non-scripted drama techniques (Roos, 2006).

In a world in which an organization's identity is increasingly decoupled from its products or specific technology (Christensen and Cheney, 2000), the ability of firms and their managers in particular to construct rich representations of the identities of their organizations may be more relevant than ever to improving organizational processes such as decision-making, teamwork, strategy development and commitment. Following this exploratory study, it is our hope that further empirical work will extend the study of organizational identity beyond the realm of text in the hope of better understanding its place as a multifaceted source of meaning in organizational life.

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