

***THE RELATIONSHIP OF ORGANIZATIONAL
IDENTITY AND MEMORY IN KNOWLEDGE
CREATION***

Theme: The Nature of Learning and Knowledge

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Abstract

Organizational identity and memory have been linked with the ability of an organization to adapt and learn. Drawing on recent sociological theory, this paper explores the mutability of organizational identity as well as the presence of multiple identities as reflected in collective memories in organizations. Implications for organizational learning are discussed.

Organizational identity is characterized as “the features of an organization that describe its essence, that distinguish the organization from others, and that exhibit some degree of continuity over time” (Albert & Whetten, 1985: 5). Although this seminal definition implies an enduring and stable identity, or one that is continuous, other definitions suggest that identity is a dynamic feature of organizations where the label of the identity may stay the same but the interpretation or meaning of that label changes over time allowing the organization to adapt (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000) and learn (Brown & Starkey, 2000). Current models of identity also suggest that the existence of multiple subidentities (Pratt & Foreman, 2000) may be linked to the adaptation process. Whether described as continuing or enduring, continuous temporally, or mutable and changing, identity is proposed as a filter or schema that guides how organizations interpret issues (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991), and determines future actions (Sarason, 1995).

One factor that appears to reflect and influence the emergence of identity is organizational memory (Tobin, 2003; Nissley & Casey, 2002). Similar to organizational identity, early theorizing on organizational memory draws from psychology and sociology while more recent work is framed in information systems and knowledge management literatures. Organizational memory has been linked to organizational change (van der Bent, Paauwe, & Williams, 1999), new product development (Sutton & Hargadon, 1996; Moorman & Miner, 1997), improvisation (Moorman & Miner, 1998), and to organizational learning (Casey, 1997; Kloot, 1997; Fisher, & White, 2000; Miner, Bassoff, & Moorman, 2001) as memory of past events is seen as a critical link in predicting and understanding future actions of organizations.

Gioia, Schultz and Corley (2000) propose that revisionist history theories support the mutability of organizational identity. This paper extends and expands this connection between organizational memory and identity in three ways. First, it presents recent sociological work on collective memory and identity to further our understanding of the recursive relationship between these constructs. Second, drawing from this work, it offers insight into the dynamic stability of the central aspects of identity as well as the adaptive instability of peripheral elements of identity over time. Third, it offers support for the presence of multiple subidentities in organizations as reflected in collective memories. Finally, implications for organizational learning are discussed.

Foundations of organizational identity and memory

Organizational identity

Modern foundations for identity theory were established by Cooley (1902), James (1918), and Mead (1934) who, although focusing primarily on individual identity from a psychological perspective, set the foundation for the later development of identity theories at

the collective level. For example, James (1918) talked about the “real me” and later challenged the conventional assumptions of a holistic identity arguing that a person has many different “social selves” appropriate for different audiences. The current debate surrounding multiple identities in organizations draws from this literature.

Social identity theory extended the study of identity to the group level. James (1918), Erickson (1964) and others paved the way, recognizing the social nature of identity and social identity theorists (i.e. Tajfel, 1974, 1978, 1982; Turner, 1975, 1978, 1982) took this a step further asserting that identity is wholly social and providing a theoretical framework to support their assertions. Social identity theory assumes that people construct themselves as having some set of essential characteristics that they indicate as defining their self-concepts and that they engage in activities to affirm those self-concepts over time. Social identity theory also assumes that people tend to emphasize their distinctiveness from others and engage in practices where they compare themselves to like individuals to find similarities within the group that they identify, while emphasizing contrast with those groups with which they are not a part (Tajfel, 1974, 1978, 1982; Turner, 1975, 1978, 1982). Tajfel (1982) also applies this to groups asserting that group identity is maintained primarily through intergroup comparisons. Thus, social identity theory operates at both the individual and the group level and provides a foundation for organizational identity which is defined, in a large part, by what makes an organization distinct.

Organizational memory

The theoretical foundations of organizational memory draw from psychology (Bartlett, 1932; Tulving, 1985, 1993), sociology (Douglas, 1986; Durkheim, 1938/85; Halbwachs, 1950/80; Schwartz, 1991, 2002), history (Crane, 1997; Katriel 1994; Sturken, 1997), and economics (Nelson & Winter, 1982). The assumptions about organizational memory as a collective phenomenon or whether it is primarily based in individual memory are in part reflective of the discipline from which the definition of the construct is developed.

Early discussions of the social nature of individual memory are found in the psychological research on groups conducted by Bartlett. This research recognized the social influences on individual memory and describes memory “in the group” and memory “of the group” with the former being the social process of constructing memory while the latter was a supraindividual view of memory. Bartlett also recognized the significance of schemas in how people remembered and made sense of information.

Schemas or knowledge structures are a generic term for a template that organizes information and the connections between information and facilitates meaning. Schemas have been researched at the individual, group, organization (Bartunek, 1984; Bartunek & Moch, 1987), and industry (Spender, 1989) levels and are proposed to be critical factors in what and how memory is recalled. Types of schemas range from broad frameworks that guide action to scripts that are patterns of action for particular types of situations. In recent work on collective memory in organizations, identity schema and related factors (mission, essential work of the organization, crises and threats to identity) influenced what and why events were recalled in an organization’s history and how these recollections influenced action (Casey, 1997).

Collective memory

Organizational memory also has roots in the well-developed sociological research on collective memory. Grounded in Durkheim's work (1938/1985), Halbwachs depicted collective memory as a process by which the substance or essence of a story, but not the verbatim account, is remembered by those who experienced it. Halbwachs (1941: 7) maintained that "collective memory is essentially a reconstruction of the past [that] adapts the image of ancient facts to the beliefs and spiritual needs of the present" (cited in Schwartz, 1991b: 111).

Schwartz (1991a, 1991b, 2000) outlines three theoretical approaches to collective memory based on his research on collective memory of historical figures such as Lincoln and Washington.. The revisionist approach is representative of Mead (1934) and Halbwachs (1950/1980), and proposes that the images of historical figures are reconfigured within the concerns of the present. An alternative approach is grounded in Durkheim's (1938/1985) view of the significance of commemoration and the need to reproduce the past through generations through rituals that confirm and support commonly held beliefs. Rituals bring groups or societies together through common action. This action is directed toward the support of a common reality (Schwartz, 2000) based on history.

Schwartz suggests a compromise between these two approaches. He proposes the past is perceived through biased cultural frames or schemas. These frames guide the selection of events to commemorate yet the recollections consist of "facts (assertions of varying reliability and generalizability) whose interpretation is constrained in evidence" (Schwartz, 2000: X). Schwartz (2000:20) theorizes about how and why elements of the past are recalled and remain the same even with radical changes in political structures. He proposes that collective memory is a cultural system (Geertz, 1973) and like "all cultural systems is a pattern of 'inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life' (Geertz, 1973: 89 as cited in Schwartz, 2000).

History and commemoration, according to Schwartz (2000), represent the core elements of collective memory. Once stabilized, central elements or evidence in a history remain the same while peripheral elements may change to meet present needs and understanding (Schwartz, 2000). Commemoration selects events from history that are most reflective of the identity of the collective and "affirms its members' mutual affinity and identity" (Schwartz, 2000:10) yet, at the same time, commemoration is grounded in historical evidence or knowledge (Schwartz, 2000). Commemoration leads to new patterns of perceptions and new ways of thinking about a culture or society while maintaining old ones. Schwartz notes there is a dual need to sustain and keep heroes' images yet also the need to revise them to match current conditions. To fulfill this need, aspects of identity may shift over time but with the "core elements overlaid by constantly changing peripheral ones" (Schwartz, 2000:300).

Current discussions in the literature

The nature of organizational identity

Much of the work related to organizational identity has focused on Albert and Whetten's (1985) definition which implies that identity is stable and enduring. Gagliardi (1986) is among the theorists who argue that identity is a static entity and that the strategy of an organization is usually geared toward maintaining its identity.

Both empirical and theoretical research have explored the impact of organizational identity asserting that it influences the way organizations define themselves to customers, employees, suppliers, and investors and also the way these varied stakeholders develop an image of the organization (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). Additional factors that have been linked to organizational identity include motivation of employees (Stimpert, Gustafson & Sarason, 1998), decision-making (Barr, Stimpert & Huff, 1992; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994), strategic change (Gioia & Thomas, 1996), multiple identities (Foreman & Whetten, 2002) and resource allocation (Stimpert, Gustafson & Sarason, 1998).

More recently, others have asserted that identity is a dynamic structure that changes and adapts to its environment (Gioia et al., 2000; Scott & Lane, 2000). Gioia et al. (2000) argue that "the strategic concern of management is no longer the preservation of a fixed identity but the ability to manage and balance a flexible identity in light of shifting external images. Maintenance of consistency becomes the maintenance of dynamic inconsistency" (p. 17). Gioia et al. (2000) propose that organizational identity is "mutable" and that the labels of identity may stay the same but the meanings of these labels change over time through interactions with the environment. This mutability creates an "adaptive instability" in an organization allowing it to change in turbulent environments (Gioia et al., 2000). Gioia et al. (2000:71) suggest that "revisionist history offers a compelling demonstration that members typically reinterpret the past in light of current insider beliefs and outsider perceptions" and that these revisions of the past facilitate the dynamic, adaptive instability of identity in organizations as histories or stories of "who they are" are revised in order to meet the needs of the changing present.

Iterative relationship between identity and image

Part of the malleability of identity is a result of the iterative relationships between organizational identity and image (Gioia et al., 2000; Hatch & Schultz, 1997). While organizational identity has been described as "...what members perceive, feel and think about their organizations...a collective, commonly-shared understanding of the organization's distinctive values and characteristics" (Hatch & Schultz, 1997), organizational image has been described as the perceptions held or communicated by insiders (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991), the images portrayed by the organization (and, more specifically, 'organizational elites') in order to achieve strategic objectives (Gioia & Thomas, 1996), or the collective judgments made by outsiders of an organization's actions and achievements (as frequently described in the impression management literature). Although the definitions of organizational image are varied, it is clear that organizational identity and image are two distinct, yet related, constructs.

Hatch and Schultz (1997) describe the way in which identity and image interact. They assert that when an organization looks in the metaphorical mirror, it sees itself refracted through the images held by others. “This means that organizational identity is at least partially socially constructed through interactions between organizational members and those who give them feedback about the organization” (Hatch & Schultz, 2002: 984). Thus, there are two factors that influence the organization’s image: the identity the organization attempts to impress on others and the identity of those external to the organization (Hatch & Schultz, 2002).

Gioia et al. (2000) have also written about the relationship between identity and image. They assert “construed external image...is key to the process of initiating changes in identity; it represents the organization members’ interpretation of the feedback received from outsiders regarding the organization’s fulfillment of expectations. It also represents the medium through which members determine how outsiders perceive the organization, thus affording a benchmark against which they can compare their own sense of the organization. In this way, construed external image acts as the primary concept linking organizational self-definition through self-reflection with self-definition through other reflection” (2000: 71). Central to the above description is the idea that the interaction between identity and image results in modifications to both constructs. Gioia et al. (2000) assert that a discrepancy between identity and image often leads to change and this interaction serves an essential function for the organization as it adapts to respond to the changing environment.

Multiple and subidentities

Within the organizational theory literature, the concept of multiple or subidentities has also been addressed although there is still much debate as to whether multiple or sub-organizational identities can co-exist (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Scholars who believe that multiple identities exist assert that organizations with multiple identities usually have the capacity to meet a wider range of expectations and demands than organizations with only one identity (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). In addition, multiple identities allow them to filter information through more than one lens and also promote the acquisition of information from multiple sources. Both of these scenarios could facilitate the creation of new organizational knowledge i.e. organizational learning.

In contrast, however, it is important to recognize that multiple identities may lead to organizational inaction or vacillation (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). For example, organizations with multiple identities are likely to ignore interorganizational conflict and/or use valuable resources in negotiating the different identities (Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997). Although this negotiation process could create new knowledge about the different aspects of the organization, multiple identities can cause ambivalence, preventing organizations from taking actions to pursue goals (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Finally, if an organization allows the priority of one of their identities to take precedent over another, they may alienate a group of stakeholders (Pratt & Foreman, 2000) and in doing so, dampen the amount of new information begin obtained from these groups. Thus, multiple identities, if they do exist, can have potential implications for organizational learning.

The nature of organizational memory

A detailed conceptualization of organizational memory by Walsh and Ungson (1991) brought organizational memory to the attention of researchers. Walsh and Ungson (1991) defined

organizational memory as “stored information from an organization’s history” (p. 61) and addressed how this memory might be structured, stored, and used in the information acquisition process as well as how it might influence organizational decisions. They proposed that organizational memory is housed in five internal bins (individuals, culture, transformations, structure, ecology) as well as external archives. Since 1991, many of the definitions of organizational memory have maintained this repository image (Huber, Davenport, & King, 1998; Moorman & Miner, 1998; Stein, 1995). Empirical work has primarily addressed four aspects: routines (Cohen & Bacdayan, 1994) or scripts (Gioia & Poole, 1984), stories (Casey, 1997; Boje, 1991), information systems (Olivera, 2000; Stein & Zwass, 1995) and more recently, social networks (Cross & Baird, 2000).

The process of how organizational memory is created was studied by Casey (1997) in her work on collective memory in organizations. Factors that appeared to influence the process of collective memory in organizations were primarily internal, including the identity, mission, and values of the organization (Casey, 1997) and external funding crises. Organizational schemas representing survival and family emerged in her study. The schemas appeared to be sustained over time while the number of scripts increased and were used in different contexts. Based on the findings in this study, it appeared that the schemas were critical in determining which “lessons learned” were transferred in collective stories and also shaped the interpretation of the future.

In a related area, research on organizational stories and storytelling has surfaced in the past two decades, producing insights into corporate culture, organizational change, and organizational identity. Organizational stories are often used to predict, empower, and even create change and may be told with greater frequency during turbulent times (Boje, 1991; Boje, Luhman, & Black, 1999; Boyce, 1995). Practitioners and theorists acknowledge the power of stories in orienting new employees and describe how leaders use stories to communicate ideas about the organization and its identity (Kitchell, Hannan, & Kemption, 2000) and to facilitate organizational change (Hansen & Kahnweiler, 1993; Kaye & Jacobson, 1999). These stories are one form of the collective memory in organizations.

Relationships between organizational identity and memory

Sociologists propose three primary views regarding collective memory and its relative permanence or mutability over time (Schwarz, 2000). The revisionist perspective view suggests that memory is created and re-created to meet the needs of the present. Frequently, power is identified as a major factor in how memory is reshaped. Gioia et al. (2000) propose that revisionist memory theory supports the mutability or adaptive instability of organizational identity.

A second view of collective memory builds from Durkheim and Shils’ work and proposes that collective memory crosses generations based on processes of tradition, ritual and commemoration. This approach draws on theories of culture (Geertz, 1973; DiMaggio, 1997) suggesting cultures sustain themselves over time. This approach to collective memory supports organizational identity theories that suggest organizational identity is stable or enduring over time. This theoretical approach to memory also supports recent research that suggests the development of organizational identity is influenced by an organization’s history (Tobin, 2003).

The third view of collective memory as proposed in Schwartz' research implicates a critical recursive relationship between the formation and stability of core elements of collective memory and identity over time, the mutability of peripheral elements, and the presence of multiple subidentities in collective memories. Schwartz' research found that the collective memory of a national figure such as Lincoln varies from one generation to another and within subgroups in a generation. yet it reflects elements of a common identity of a culture through generations. Schwartz (2000: 301) notes that "Lincoln highlighted the continuity of the past and present because his identity had changed enough to accommodate new concerns and preoccupations but not enough to negate what it previously represented." Those in power, as well as subgroups in a culture, can promote various aspects of Lincoln to address present social concerns only if these aspects retain core elements of its original identity.

At an organizational level, this theory and research suggests that collective memories of critical events or figures in organizations may shift or change over time as the organization responds to its external environment yet core elements of these memories will remain constant reflecting the core elements of the identity of the organization. Other more peripheral or conflicting elements of the identity may be highlighted in the same stories at other points in time as the organization adapts. Elements of what is recalled about these events or figures may change and some events may rise to the surface and while others recede, yet the central thread of identity is what makes them memorable. "In most cases as in the contemplation of Lincoln, we find the past to be neither totally precarious nor immutable, but a stable image upon which new elements are intermittently superimposed" (Schwartz, 2000: 303).

This theory of collective memory also supports the presence of multiple sub-identities. In his work on Lincoln, Schwartz notes the presence of multiple images in collective memories of Lincoln depending on which subgroup of the population was commemorating him. "Since Lincoln's image legitimates changing social realities by retaining its original identity as it adapts to new conditions, twentieth-century Americans came to know the Lincoln known in the late nineteenth century while pressing him selectively to their own service" (Schwartz, 2000: 299).

Cooley believed "that collective memory is at once a mirror and lamp, reflector and template, for society" (as cited in Schwartz, 2000: 306). Schwartz agrees suggesting that collective memory is transposable i.e. it can change "its position in a system or sequence without altering it essentially" (Schwartz, 2000: 308) and that this transposability gave the Lincoln myth its double aspect of mirror and lamp without altering its essential meaning. This essential meaning of Lincoln was represented in various collective memories throughout generations and through multiple subcultures of the United States and the essential meaning was drawn from the core elements of the heritage of the country.

Implications for Organizational Learning

Organizational memory (Hendry, 1996; Casey, 1997) and identity (Gioia et al. 2000) are acknowledged as contributing factors in organizational learning models (Schwandt, 1997) yet there is limited understanding of their role and function in these processes (Casey & Olivera, 2003). Memory and identity are often described as filters that screen new information coming into a system which influence the meaning attributed to this information (Dutton & Dukerich,

1991) and may be aspects of a broader cultural system (Fiol, Hatch & Golden-Biddle, 1998; Casey, 1997). Gioia et al. (2000) suggest that the mutability of organizational identity provides an adaptive instability which may facilitate organizational learning.

Schwartz' (2000, 2002) research on memory asserts that collectives compare their memories of past events with current realities to understand or create meaning about the past, present and future. Within these memories, there are stable core elements that serve as a foundation for these memories and ultimately for understanding. Peripheral elements of these collective memories may be changed or modified to meet the needs of the present but the core elements of the recollection remain. Historical figures such as Lincoln remain "timeless symbols by changing on one level remaining the same on another" and that this continuity represents the heritage of a society (311). This paper proposes these deeply rooted patterns or heritage reflect the central or core aspects of identity that remain through time and the less central or peripheral elements of identity shift over time to reflect present concerns or interests. These mutable elements may be in response to an organization's attempts to maintain its distinctiveness in changing environments. These core stable elements of identity as well as the peripheral mutable ones are reflected in and sustain collective organizational memory and this memory in turn supports the stability and mutability of the identity.

Conclusion

Grounded in sociological research, this paper proposes that organizational identity has a dynamic yet stable core framed by adaptive unstable peripheral elements allowing the organization to re-create its distinctiveness in changing environments. Both aspects of identity influence organizational learning as they serve as a filter for new information and a foundation upon which to create new knowledge. Collective memory in organizations reflects these elements of organizational identity and is supported by them, and in turn, influences how organizations learn.

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