Identity and the Modern Organization: An Invitation

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Few social contexts compare to the modern work organization in terms of their ability to highlight the importance of identity issues. Not only do organizations themselves possess identities, but they are also composed of a myriad of subgroup and individual identities, which are structured around industry, geographic and functional divisions, occupations and professions, gender, race, religion, education level, and nationality, among others. These many identities come together in organizational contexts and establish for individuals and organizations alike a profound sense of who they are. In turn, these diverse and varied identities shape organizational functioning, imbuing human and organizational action with agency, coherence, and purpose.

For nearly two decades, organizational scholars have recognized that the concepts of identity and identification hold great promise as a theoretical framework for understanding the dynamics within and between organizations as well as the groups and individuals who comprise them. Although Ashforth and Mael (1989)
and Albert and Whetten (1985) are appropriately credited with initiating this stream of work at the individual and organizational levels, respectively, theorizing that predates these seminal pieces also suggested that personal and collective identities affect important organizational outcomes (e.g., March & Simon, 1958). Yet there is little question that the major research developments in identity in organizations have been relatively recent phenomena and that the momentum of such research is building rapidly.

In this introductory chapter we use this unique opportunity to discuss the study of identity in somewhat broader terms than is typical. In particular, we propose some explanations for why identity has become such a popular lens for examining modern work organizations, and try to explain the context that may have led both the researchers in this volume as well as many, many others to devote their energies to the study of identity. We then provide an overview of the contributions in this volume to the study of identity in modern organizations, and wrap up with our own insights about the direction of research on identity in organizations.

IDENTITY AND THE MODERN ORGANIZATION: WHY NOW?

Trends in academic research do not exist in isolation, but rather they reflect the intellectual and societal context in which they occur. For example, within psychology, some have argued that the previous focus on behaviorism was born in reaction to the dominant focus on psychodynamic processes. Similarly, social psychology and its early emphasis on issues such as conformity in groups and acquiescence to authority developed as a reaction to the events of World War II, and modern approaches to management research developed in reaction to an overemphasis on Tayloristic methods for managing and understanding employees. Understanding the context in which academic research develops tells us a lot about why researchers ask the questions they ask and provide the answers they provide. As such, it is both interesting and informative to consider the recent factors that have given rise to the popularity of identity research and its particular role in helping to understand the modern workplace.

Certainly, one dominant explanation for the rise of identity research is that it provides a useful framework for conceptualizing the relationship between individuals and organizations, in terms that go far beyond the basic contractual understanding suggested by traditional economic theories. Of course, organizational scholars in many domains have been moving beyond assumptions of economic theories in their work for some time. However, research in the identity domain is an especially useful contributor because it provides a deep understanding of the bond between employees and their organizations, the antecedents of those bonds, and several important outcomes of those bonds. In this regard, identity joins a number of other theoretical domains in the organizational sciences that have enriched our understanding of people's relationship with their work organizations, including research on psychological contracts and organizational commitment. But it does so by providing a particularly rich basis for understanding why and how members connect to their organizations. So perhaps one reason that identity research is growing is that it lends insight to our emerging recognition that people's connection to their workplace is not one based purely on economic concerns. This recognition, in turn, is possible due to the increasing levels of prosperity for many that make a sole focus on basic economic needs incomplete.

Yet to simply chalk identity's popularity up to this trend would be to ignore a far broader set of factors that have stimulated an interest in questions of "who am I" and "who are we" in organizations. The last 40 years have seen a near-revolution in the conception of diversity. Legal protections, societal norms, and policy changes throughout the United States reflect an unprecedented regard for people's right to hold and express those identities with which they "identify." Further, in this time of ever-increasing diversity in our society, our institutions—the schools our children attend, the work places we enter every day, and the governmental organizations that impact our daily life—are increasingly populated by people from different backgrounds. Together, these trends indicate that just as our society is becoming more diverse, the prevalence of policies and norms that embrace that diversity are on the rise. And as people are exposed to—and expected to accept—an increasingly heterogeneous world, issues of identity become more salient. Further, new forces are emerging that add to the complexity of identity issues. For instance, although on the one hand diversity is increasingly embraced, informal as well as legal pressures to "cover" one's subgroup identity and assimilate to the superordinate group (Yoshino, 2006) make issues of identity particularly complex and confusing, because the questions expand from "Who am I?" and "Who are we?" to "Who am I expected to be?"

The increasingly dynamic nature of organizational life also makes the study of identity particularly interesting. The past quarter century has seen major changes in how, when, where, and with whom individuals carry out their work. New technologies have transformed the way that organizations conduct their activities, allowing individuals and groups to perform their work any time and in any place, across national borders and time zones. A far broader range of work arrangements now allows people to do their work from home or satellite offices, and as temps, contract workers, and free agents. In addition, the current climate of increased job mobility has led to remarkably frequent changes in whom one works for and the organizations with which one identifies. Each of these shifts alters the identities people draw from in their working lives and their identification with their work organizations.

The trends that impact identity at the individual level are complemented by trends that make identity more complex at macro-levels of analysis. The increasingly competitive nature of the global economy has forced organizations to change their identities at unprecedented speed. The dynamic nature of many industries
makes critical the development of corporate and business-level strategies that differentiate the organization, which in turn makes the development and maintenance of identities that support those strategies particularly important and complex. Further, continual activity in mergers and acquisitions not only brings to light the importance of identity development and maintenance, but also raises the complex issues of identity change and integration.

Of course, understanding the impact of such broad trends is a complex matter, and we can only raise them as possible explanations for why such a strong focus on identity in the modern organization has developed. But perhaps the most interesting observation is that these developments toward greater heterogeneity (at both the individual and organizational levels) might just as easily have been expected to result in a decreased focus on identity. Indeed, to the extent that identity becomes increasingly dynamic and idiosyncratic to specific individuals and organizations (i.e., as "we" turns more to "me," and as "us" changes from day to day), it would have been just as plausible to expect that interest in the study of identity would wane. Had the popularity of identity research taken a different turn, we might be arguing that these same trends foreshadowed the demise of an interest in identity. Yet it is clear that this is not what occurred. Why? One possibility is that despite these trends toward greater uncertainty about who exactly "we" are and who "I" am, people and organizations nevertheless remain beholden to their defining characteristics and memberships (and perhaps they become even more beholden to these memberships in reaction to increasing levels of change, uncertainty, and idiosyncrasy). Evidence for this proposal lies in the observation that when such individual characteristics or group memberships come under threat, strong reactions that affirm identity follow. This suggests that identity is truly fundamental.

IDENTITY AND THE MODERN ORGANIZATION: THREE FUNDAMENTAL ISSUES

As we note in the Preface, our goal in this volume was not only to highlight trends in how identity is studied in the context of the modern organization, but also to try to integrate diverse streams of identity research and provide structure to the current landscape of identity research. As a result, we have organized this volume around three core questions related to identity in the modern organization:

1. How are identity processes affected by (and in turn affect) the motivations of individuals and organizations?
2. How do identity and identification shape the social processes that unfold between individuals and groups, particularly as individuals and groups become more diffuse and have less contact with each other?
3. And, how do strong (and weak) contexts affect identity processes, especially as the boundaries of organizations and the social categories within them become more permeable?

Each of these questions is represented in a different part of this volume. Within each part, we feature research that considers these questions at the individual, group, and organizational level of analysis.

Furthermore, as part of our effort not only to present cutting-edge work on identity but to also advance the study of identity, we invited experts in the field of organizational behavior to write a commentary chapter for each part of the volume. Commentary chapter authors were asked to provide their insights regarding the chapters in each of the sections, with little guidance beyond that. Their comments are especially interesting and provide helpful food for thought about where future research should be headed in each of these areas. Finally, the volume concludes with a capstone chapter from David Whetten, a renowned expert on organizational identity who provides important insights and challenges for researchers to consider as identity research advances.

Identity and Social Motivations in Modern Organizations

Part II of the volume includes three chapters about the interface of identity and motivation in organizations, considered at multiple levels of analysis. The chapters entertain the question of this interface at the level of organizational fields, the individual, and the group. Together, they raise important questions about the impact of multiple forces in shaping the identities that are chosen, claimed, or named within complex contexts.

In Chapter 2, Glynn and Marquis explore the motivational forces that shape organizational identities over time. Their chapter takes on the universal problem of organizational names—all organizations must have them, thus, in the choosing and adoption of a name, motivational forces are likely to play a role. By focusing on the power of institutional logics to affect naming conventions of financial organizations across historical periods, they convincingly show that the kinds of names that organizations choose for themselves follow clear patterns that are driven by social motivations to claim legitimacy. These authors choose to focus on the organizational level of analysis, and in so doing they add a necessary and helpful focus on the power of institutional demands in shaping the decisions that organizations make. Their work advances our understanding of organization-level identity by highlighting the influence of historical forces and need for legitimacy on the development of organizational names, perhaps the most visible marker of identity that an organization can have.

In Chapter 3, Hogg considers the ways in which the rapidly changing context of life in modern organizations affects the levels of uncertainty that individuals must contend with in their work lives. He uses a rich history of powerful findings from uncertainty reduction theory to argue that individuals are more likely to emphasize their memberships in groups and organizations as a central way to manage their uncertainty. Hogg makes the provocative and insightful argument that this propensity to identify more strongly with collectives when faced with uncertainty results
in individuals' increased likelihood of being affected by groups and their leaders, for better and for worse. He convincingly argues that the organizational contexts we live in may provide powerful motivation to privilege our collective identities over our individual ones. By considering the impact of uncertainty reduction theory in times when organizational memberships and occupational trajectories are less and less predictable, Hogg highlights the social psychological forces acting on identities in modern organizations.

In Chapter 4, Blader bridges the psychology of individuals and groups to consider the motivational crossfire that individuals experience in organizations. He captures a fundamental challenge of identity in organizations—that individuals concurrently experience motivations related to their individual identities and their group identities. By studying the organizational dynamics that bring these two sets of social motivations into conflict, he begins to uncover a motivational model that realistically crosses levels of analysis in organizational life. In doing so, he raises the bar for future identity research in this area by combining multiple motivations for study as they exist in everyday organizational contexts. His research findings take seriously the notion that we are at once social and individual beings, who struggle with the challenge to believe in the value of our group identities, while also believing in the value of our individual identities.

Finally, the commentary by Ashforth in Chapter 5 draws several important themes from the set of chapters in Part II. He explores the elasticity of the concept of identity, tracing its roots through time and the different areas of emphasis it has enjoyed. Ashforth plays with the idea that boundaries between identities may be distinct, overlapping, embedded, or holistically joined, raising helpful questions to guide future research. In addition, he takes on the challenge posed by organizational motivations to be both similar to an industry identity group, while having an identity that stands apart. Finally, he considers the role of increasing societal uncertainty in fomenting organizational fundamentalism, helpfully advancing several possibilities for how such forces are likely to manifest themselves in organizations.

Identity and Social Processes in Modern Organizations

In Part III, we consider the processes by which identity unfolds and is managed in group and organizational contexts.

Pratt and Corley (Chapter 6) begin by considering the processes by which organizations help their members manage the multiple identities that often come with membership. This is a particularly timely issue, because organizations are increasingly in flux with regard to the businesses they operate in and the business-level strategies they employ, not to mention the frequent mergers that fuse organizational identities marked by differences in values, practices, and norms. These authors discuss how the identity-management processes employed by organizations can actually result in psychological benefits or psychological harm for members. More specifically, they highlight a number of interesting propositions that are rich for their recognition that 1) characteristics of the multiple organizational identity management process itself, 2) members’ identity sets, and 3) members’ patterns of identification all matter in determining whether psychological harm or benefit results from the identity management process. Their chapter thus highlights some key considerations for organizational efforts to help members manage multiple identities and sheds light on an increasingly important identity-related process that has received little attention in the literature.

Bartel, Wrzesniewski, and Wiesendfeld (Chapter 7) then present their work on the processes that shape remote workers’ identification (or lack thereof) with their organizations. Their findings highlight the obstacles to developing a sense of membership among employees for whom membership resides primarily in psychological, not physical, space. Importantly, beyond simply noting that identification is less likely to develop when employees are not co-located, Bartel and her colleagues also explore the particular mechanisms that make identification more elusive for these employees. In so doing, they find that the give-and-take process of membership claiming and granting captures the central barriers to identification for the remote workers they study. That is, they find that barriers to identification reside in both remote workers’ efforts to claim membership and in other organizational members’ willingness to grant them membership. Their research provides a compelling example of how identity processes can both influence and be influenced by an issue of increasing importance to modern organizations, as remote and other innovative work arrangements become increasingly prominent.

In Chapter 8, Haslam and Reicher present some results from their widely known experimental case study, the BBC Prison Study. This study, which they appropriately describe as the largest social psychology study in the last three decades, created a social system that lasted for 8 days, in which 15 participants were assigned to roles of either prison guards or prisoners. What unfolds is a complex and highly textured series of events that provide an in vivo examination of social identity processes in social contexts marked by prominent power and privilege hierarchies. Their method provides an exceptional opportunity to observe social identity processes in action, standing in contrast to more typical methods that only examine static snapshots of particular components of the social identity process. Their findings are heartening, for much of what we have learned from these “snapshot” approaches does appear to hold true when examined as part of a broader social identity process. But the real gem of this research is the story it tells as we watch the social identity process unfold and shape group members’ experiences of being in a group. Indeed, the spotlight shines brightly on the issue of process in this chapter, because, as the authors note, identity as a vision will have little impact unless it interacts with an identity-clarifying structure. When there is such interaction, and when that structure consists of the appropriate sense of group boundaries and history, we see the social identity process develop and facilitate positive organizational behaviors, reduced stress, efficacious leadership, and organizational viability.
Identity and the Contextual Landscape of Modern Organizations

Part IV of the volume focuses on social contexts as they relate to identity and identification processes. This part begins with Chapter 10 by Spataro and Chatman, who question whether dynamic, organizational level factors might affect individuals’ identity-based commitment to their work organizations. Specifically, these researchers focus on the role of interorganizational competition. Organizations, by definition, must compete with each other in the marketplace to succeed and survive. A well-established finding in social psychological research on laboratory and sociodemographic social groups is that intergroup competition promotes identification with one’s ingroup. For organizational groups, it therefore follows that interorganizational competition should bolster individuals’ identity-based commitment to their work organizations. Yet, Spataro and Chatman astutely note that prior theory and research generally has viewed competition in dichotomous terms, assuming that it is the presence or absence of such a threat that matters. Such a conceptualization, however, is a less accurate portrayal of the realities of competition in organizational settings. Competition is a given in organizations, but the intensity and degree of threat created varies widely between organizations and over time. Spataro and Chatman hypothesized and found that low to moderate levels of interorganizational competition positively affect individuals’ identity-based commitment, whereas higher levels of competition negatively affect identity-based commitment. These researchers thus point out an important qualification to the long-standing effect of competition on identification, which was discovered by examining a social context in which the real or imagined threats of competition are experienced more or less intensely. These findings have important implications not only for how individuals’ identity-based commitment to their work organizations may fluctuate over time as competition intensifies and subsides, but also for when individuals may decide to leave their organizations.

In Chapter 11, Seyle and Swann argue that self-verification motives, defined as the drive to receive feedback that confirms existing self-views, offer radically different accounts of self and identity than those motives implicated in traditional social identity theory. These authors review mounting evidence that self-verification strivings are important in predicting not only which organizations individuals join and remain committed to, but also in explaining the potential windfalls and pitfalls of diversity in organizations. Notably, self-verification theory suggests that when individuals feel personally verified in their social interactions, they feel more at ease in those interpersonal situations and more committed to the interpersonal context. Whereas social identity theory focuses on the shared group identity as one means to group commitment, self-verification argues that the exact opposite approach may also garner commitment. Specifically, rather than telling individuals to silence or hide aspects of their personal or social identities, self-verification theory encourages individuals to establish support for their existing self-views as a means of unlocking the potential value in diversity. Such a perspective has important implications for organizational contexts that activate a whole host of different identities. In any given day, individuals may define themselves as a unique person, an occupant of a role, a member of one or more work groups, or as an organizational representative. As organizations become increasingly diverse with respect to roles, work arrangements, as well as workforce composition, self-verification provides a critical window onto how individuals can have positive experiences of their multiple identities in the workplace.

In Chapter 12, Ashford and Barton explore identity and identification as potential motivators of voice and issue selling in organizations. These researchers begin with a keen observation that extant theory and research depicts individuals as calculative in their decisions about whether and when to speak up. Such an instrumental perspective thus depicts individuals as motivated to speak up and raise issues when doing so will benefit them directly. Notwithstanding the potency of tangible gains, these researchers question whether individuals are always pragmatic in these decisions. Rather, the decision to speak up and sell issues also may stem from individuals’ epistemic motives to act in ways consistent with their personal and organizational identities. That is, individuals are more likely to speak up when their personal identity includes attributes that make issue selling a logical expression of that identity. As well, issue selling should be enhanced when individuals identify strongly with their work organization, because such actions help protect or fortify the group. Ashford and Barton lend insight into how voicing and selling issues partly derive from identity dynamics that are activated in organizational contexts. This is an important insight, as identity effects are likely to be far-reaching. In contrast to situations in which issue selling might bring extrinsic rewards to an
individual, there are probably more contexts in which individuals view the act of issue selling as generally consistent with their identities or as having positive implications for the broader organization.

This part concludes with commentary from Dukerich (Chap. 13). Dukerich highlights how the three chapters each fuse identity research with other literatures, and, in doing so, provide alternative points of view to conventional assumptions or approaches within these literatures. For example, Spataro and Chatman complicate perspectives on interorganizational competition by noting that it is important to consider not only whether it is present (yes-no) but also how much (extent and intensity). Seyle and Swann counter perspectives on diversity in the workplace that emphasize increasing perceived similarities between people by creating superordinate groups or memberships, whereas Ashford and Barton challenge perspectives on voice behavior and issue selling that emphasize extrinsic motivations for these often risky actions. By using an identity lens to understand contextual conditions involving competition, risk, and diversity, Dukerich brings to the foreground the ways we are able to see different processes and outcomes at work.

CONCLUSION

Together, these chapters provide a rich description of some of the latest work being conducted on how issues of motivation, social interactions, and organizational context affect identity and identification in organizations. They also highlight broader implications for how research on identities in organizations should evolve, a theme that is well explored in Part V, Chapter 14 by Whetten. The core argument advanced in this capstone chapter is that the concept of organizational identification is uniquely qualified to serve as a cross-level bridge, spanning the identity of organizations and individuals. Yet, Whetten cautions scholars to be careful in their applications of social identity theory because there are unique aspects of organizations that complicate or alter traditional social psychological views on membership, identity, and identification.

For example, Whetten argues that because organizations are not social categories, it would be inappropriate to treat organizational membership as a categorical property. Rather, organizational memberships are more appropriately conceived in terms of degree of involvement rather than a sharing of similar attributes. Also, Whetten questions whether researchers tend to overestimate the prevalence of identification by viewing identification as a member-organization psychological bond. Rather, identification with work organizations may be more appropriately conceived as internalization such that there is alignment of individual and organizational identities. In highlighting the distinctive qualities of modern work organizations, Whetten urges identity researchers to consider how these contexts create unique opportunities for generating contributions to theory, rather than of theory. Thus, he opens up the exciting possibility that information gained from novel applications of social identity theory to modern organizations

REFERENCES


