ON THE TOPOGRAPHY OF SHARED ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY MEANINGS IN SOCIAL NETWORKS

This theoretical paper examines the distribution of multiple identity meanings in organizations by juxtaposing configurations of intra-organizational networks and identity communities. The framework proposes that the joint topography of those networks and communities has significant implications for a variety of organizational processes.

The identity of an organization can be understood to rest on a consensually shared perception of meaning: If the collective has an identity, why not presume that all of its members experience that identity on the same basis, or at least on the basis of a substantively similar essence? An organization united by a widely shared and commonly held identity is believed to possess an effective foundation for performing collective efforts, realizing organizational change, and weathering times of crisis (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Hatch & Schultz, 2002). Yet all organizations, and especially business organizations, are likely to feature differences of perspective, disagreements, and contestations among factions, across strata, or between individuals about who the collective is, especially in response to different situations and issues or at different points in time (Chreim, 2007; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Nag, Corley, & Gioia, 2007). Equally important, the diversity of organizational stakeholders and turbulence in organizational environments frequently demand the ability to forge novel or improvised interpretations of collective identity (Brown, 2006; Hargrave & Van de Ven, 2006; Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005) and dispatch representations with an appropriate modality or style of expressing that identity (Coupland & Brown, 2004; Carter & Deephouse, 1999).

In this theoretical article, I address the issue of how organizational identity is shared, or not shared, among the membership of an organizational collective. A conventional way to understand sharing is to ask how much consensus is enough for an organizational identity to attain legitimacy among the membership (e.g., Corley et al., 2006). An alternative way is to assume that the whole is divided into different parts, each featuring degrees of similarity and difference in identity perceptions that nevertheless congeal into a meaningful whole (Thompson & Fine, 1999). An analogy is the sharing of a meal, where members of the group each receive different amounts and different types of the victuals on offer (Hatch, 1997). The key question I ask is not about some threshold of consensus beyond which one can reasonably speak of a shared organizational identity but about the distribution of similarity and variation in identity meanings across different subgroups of organizational membership. This question is not entirely novel, having been explored in research on multiple identities (Pratt & Foreman, 2000), identity narratives (Brown & Humphreys, 2006; Chreim, 2007), and Albert and Whetten’s seminal (1985) reference to hybrid identity organizations. Yet conceptual work about the structure of diverging identity perceptions in complex organizations has lagged behind efforts to understand the dynamics through which organizational identities emerge or are contested.

---

1 This work was financially supported by grant #NC-99045 from the Fond Quebecois de la Recherche sur la Société et la Culture. The author acknowledges the useful comments on an earlier draft by Blake Ashforth, François Bastien, Pursey Heugens, Marc-David Seidel, and Ulrich Wassmer, as well as the research assistance by Marco Morelli.
The main thrust of the paper rests on two key points, one at the micro level and a second at the macro level of analysis. First, because organizational identity is socially constructed as an inter-subjective phenomenon (Ashforth & Mael, 1996), it can be modeled as a shared social cognition that is enacted in the context of intra-organizational networks that link members to each other (Erickson, 1982; Thompson & Fine, 1999). Second, inter-organizational networks are institutional arrangements with organizational identities in their own right (Human & Provan, 2000; Sydow & Windeler, 1997). In reversal of this logic, I propose that organizational identities could thus be understood as organized into networks. Building on these ideas, I explore the spatial features that are likely to emerge from the social construction of organizational identity (e.g., Clegg, Rhodes, & Kornberger, 2007). Specifically, my aim is to map a terrain of social relations and social meanings that are linked to each other as identity communities in complex organizations. The intent is not to postulate a new ontology of organizational identity, but to view organizational identity from a relational structure vantage point, outlining a topography of the networks that captures how OI meanings are differentially and systemically distributed across these communities. I aim to be inclusive in this endeavor, assuming that identities are rooted in social perception, a position that is compatible with essentialist (Whetten, 2006), constructionist (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006), and narrative (Brown & Humphreys, 2006) views of OI.

The paper proceeds in three parts. First, I will present a review of the literature on organizational identity, highlighting some key properties and identifying reasons why an investigation into the varied organization of shared organizational identity is both appropriate and relevant. Second, I will introduce a number of basic ideas relevant to the study of social networks and knit a foundation for integrating research on organizational identity and the study of social networks. I then present a number of ideas about the structural configurations of identity communities in the third part of the paper, and discuss new avenues of research for identity scholars in the final part.

**Organizational Identity**

Organizational identity (OI) comprises a set of central, distinctive, and enduring attributes about the character of an organization that are shared among and claimed on behalf of the collective by its members (Albert & Whetten, 1985). A functional outcome of such claim is the organization’s classification in a relevant category (Whetten, 2006), which becomes a source of meaning, guidance, and attachment for the members (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Gioia & Thomas, 1996). Some debate exists in the current literature about the ontological nature of OI – as ongoing social construction among members of the collective or as an institutionalized property of the collective itself (Corley et al., 2006; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Whetten, 2006). Some scholars argue that OI resides in the socially constructed beliefs among organizational members, which may continually shift as different experiences raise the salience of different meanings and interpretations (Corley, 2004; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000). A constructivist view is also espoused in the narrative approach (Brown, 2006), the key distinction being that social construction unfolds through discursive rather than cognitive processes. In contrast, essentialist views suggest that OI exists independently of member enactment and resides in the institutionalized roles an organization enacts and the lasting commitments it affects, which serve as categorical markers to account for its status as a legitimate social actor (Glynn & Abzug, 2002; Whetten, 2006). Corley et al. (2006) and Ravasi and Schultz (2006) have advocated the position that the two perspectives represent two sides of the same coin and can help understand different functions and recursive dynamics of OI. In this paper, I adopt this integrative view of OI. Social construction derives from sense-making that produces *shared meanings* about OI among organizational members, while institutionalized categorical labels constitute a repertoire of attributes that furnish the legitimate raw materials for sense-giving about OI.

Organizations can have monolithic or pluralistic identity, and I focus on the multi-faceted nature of OI. There are two ideas that represent the latter perspective. *Hybrid OIs* combine two apparently
antithetical identities into a precariously dynamic whole (Albert & Whetten, 1985), while multiple identity organizations contain two or more identity faces that may or may not be in conflict with each other, and which may or may not have potential for synergy if combined (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Multifaceted OI may be holographic, meaning that all members simultaneously perceive the same multiple identities for their collective (e.g., Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997; Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997), or ideographic, meaning that the collective is divided into different groupings that each hold distinct identities for the collective as a whole (e.g., Glynn, 2000; Nag, et al., 2007). The narrative view of OI adopts a primarily ideographic perspective and emphasizes the discursive processes through which members of organizational subgroups seek to establish parochial OI meanings as collective truths (Brown, 2006; Rodrigues & Child, 2008). Empirical work suggests that multiple organizational identities are frequently associated with the collective identities of professional groups (Glynn, 2000), organizational strata (Brown & Humphreys, 2006; Corley, 2004; Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997), organizational generations (Chreim, 2007; Maguire & Phillips, 2008), stakeholder groups (Coupland & Brown, 2004; Rodrigues & Child, 2008) and functional divisions in an organization (Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997; Nag et al., 2007). In addition, ideological dimensions of organizational form, such as utilitarian or normative (Etzioni, 1961) as well as geographic location (Brown & Humphreys, 2006) may constitute anchor points for multifaceted OI (Whetten, 2006).

Several scholars have suggested that, as a macro level construct characteristic of the whole organization, OI can be modeled as shared social cognition (Corley et al., 2006; Pratt, 2003). An extensive review of the vast and varied literature in social psychology and sociology on socially shared cognition by Thompson and Fine (1999) concluded that group interactions give rise to socially shared meanings, comprising cognition, affect, and behavior. This conclusion parallels my position above and accommodates the varied responses to OI by organizational members, such as identification, expression, loyalty, and commitment (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Oliver & Roos, 2007). Hence, I build on the idea that OI connotes socially shared meanings of attributes ascribed to the organizational collective that become an “inter-subjective reality” among organizational members (Clegg et al., 2007: 497). This conceptualization provides a basis for the differentiation of OI, as variation in meaning about attributes is shared among different subgroups of an organization and projected toward different audiences (Albert & Whetten 1985). Furthermore, OI attributes are sufficiently generic and ambiguous to permit tacit consensus about meaning during normal times yet variation of interpretation and the deployment of different faces in response to different stakeholder expectations, evolving organizational needs, organizational conflict, or event-based exigencies (Brown & Humphreys, 2006; Carter & Deephouse, 1999; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Fiol, 2002; Gioia & Thomas, 1996).

A number of questions arise in relation to the above ideas. How can we model the patterns of socially construction among organizational members as constellations of shared but varied meanings that still capture a holistic essence? If organizations have multiple “faces” of identity, how can we model the distribution of these multiple faces across organizational sub-groups? How might organizational leaders know which members share which faces of OI and how shared OI meanings among multiple organizational sub-groups can be coordinated beyond formal routine to encourage innovation, deal with conflict, and implement organizational change? Thompson and Fine’s (1999) work suggests that the phenomenology of OI construction is rooted in the interactions and relations among social actors. I propose that these relations and interactions can be modeled as social networks, the idea being that organizational members experience OI in the context of their ongoing exchanges with each other and within the context of an overall configuration that characterizes who in the organization shares what meanings about OI. My focus is on the structure of shared OI meanings across the networks of interpersonal relationships within an organization. By structure I mean the constellations of identity communities – groupings of organizational members that share overlapping and diverging OI meanings – and the social networks that link those individuals into configurations. I turn next to the literature on
social networks and explain the conceptual foundation that justifies the ensuing exploration of such configurations.

**Social Networks and Organizational Identity**

A social network is defined as a set of nodes, which can be people, groups, organizations, and nation states, or any other identifiable social entity, that are linked to each other by one or more types of ties (Borgatti & Foster, 2003; Wasserman & Faust, 1994). The dyadic tie is the key unit of observation, through which social actors exchange information, affect, or any other resources, symbols, and sentiments. A focus on the qualities of a dyad, or pair of individuals, makes network analysis different from traditional organizational research, in which attributes of the individual are of key concern (Borgatti & Everett, 1997). The network is also more than the aggregation of its individual nodes and the dyadic ties between them: A basic assumption in network analysis is that the configurations of shapes and patterns that link nodes into an overall structure contribute significantly to an understanding of collective and individual thought or behaviour (Erickson, 1982; Krackhardt & Kilduff, 1990; Nelson, 2001; Wellman, 1988). For example, Figure 1 shows how the ties that link actors (i.e., circles) at the dyadic level cohere into a whole that features apparent groupings and cleavages. As I argue below, the focus on dyads provides a basis for linking social networks with the social construction of OI, while the importance of whole structures permits investigating OI as a property of the organization.

![Figure 1: Social Networks and Identity Communities](image)
The social construction of OI meanings can be understood in reference to social contagion models of network structure, which focus on how ties among actors help explain the spread of social information and the emergence of inter-personal agreement (Marsden & Friedkin, 1994; Rao et al., 2000). Thus, I argue that the dyadic ties between organizational members allows them to engage in social construction to jointly generate consensus and agreement about what the legitimate OI attributes for their organization are (Ibarra et al., 2005). Social construction may involve unilateral or reciprocal social influence that leads to consensus between actors, or it may unfold through the mutual experience of ambiguous events and the joint effort to construct meaning that helps both members in a dyad comprehend and commit to a shared interpretation of the collective character (Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Meyer, 1994; Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). Given that it is common to understand social network ties as conduits for communication (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003; Johanson, 2000), an alternative way to express this idea about social construction would focus on the convergence of reciprocal narration and story telling by the participants in a relationship. These forms of social contagion can be characterized as the development of socially shared meanings on the basis of “partaking in agreement” (Thompson & Fine, 1999: 280). Social contagion in networks may also produce shared meaning through experience of the same social relations, relationship contexts, and relational role sets, leading to OI meaning convergence by way of relational ecology (Galaskiewicz & Burt, 1991; Marsden & Friedkin, 1994). This form of building socially shared perception can be described as Thompson & Fine’s (1999) “holding in common” and does not involve direct interaction between actors but their similar interaction with similar third-party actors or groups.

An important assumption in the above articulation is that convergence in OI meaning occurs through a network of relations with positive sentiment. This assumption is warranted, given that past research has shown how contagion in relationships with positive interaction content homogenizes relevant ideational phenomena (Borgatti & Foster, 2003; Krackhardt & Kilduff, 1990; Podolny & Baron, 1997). Nevertheless, the narrative view’s focus on diverging or conflicting OI meanings (Chreim, 2007) and the use of power to assert the adoption of new ones (Rogrigues & Child, 2008) suggests that social networks of negative sentiment may also be conduits for the social construction of OI meanings (e.g., Labianca, Brass, & Gray, 1998). Interestingly, OI meaning construction would be different in direct interaction between dyad members compared to interaction with the same third parties. Direct social interaction in a dyad with negative affect will likely lead to “partaking in disagreement” and subsequent divergence of OI meanings. Conversely, following the adage that my enemy’s enemy is my friend, interacting in a negative relationship with the same third parties would produce the expected “holding in common.” Negative affect between groups is likely to be associated not only with interpersonal differences in OI meaning between members of different groups but also accentuated within-group homogeneity (Coupland & Brown, 2004; Brown & Humphreys, 2006).

Other empirical evidence supports the idea that shared OI meanings are likely to arise in the context of positive network ties. According to Rao et al. (2000), social ties help make identities of groups and their attributes salient by raising relevant categories as important standards of social comparison. “Networks are sources of identity” (Rao et al., 2000: 288), as shared meanings about OI attributes flow through the social ties that link organizational members to each other in the form of social cues about markers of the group and its identity. At the inter-organizational level, Porac and his colleagues (Porac et al., 1989; 1995) have shown that the inter-firm network of mutual rivalry maps onto a shared cognitive model of identity categories in the Scottish knitwear industry. At the intra-organizational level, Krackhardt and Kilduff (1990) have shown that perceptions of organizational culture vary systematically with the network of expressive friendship ties among the membership, and the implication is that OI meanings may similarly be manifest in the networks of an organization.

Having argued that OI is socially constructed in dyadic network relationships, it is equally important to argue that a network model of shared meanings about OI attributes also captures something essential about the organization as a whole. The idea I wish to articulate is a reversal of the logic
underlying the inter-organizational network, which is a unique organizational form in which three or more independent organizations engage in mutual collaboration and interaction to achieve collective goals (Human & Provan, 2000; Provan, Fish, & Sydow, 2007). A key aspect of this kind of network is that effective functioning rests in part on its internal legitimacy as a meaningful collective with an identity of its own that is experienced and perceived as such by member organizations (Human & Provan, 2000). Sydow and Windeler argue that inter-organizational networks resemble “intraorganizational relations” (1997: 266) and develop symbolic meanings that individual social actors use to “monitor and rationalize action, processes, and contexts” (1997: 268). Network members act toward each other and toward outsiders with the understanding and orientation that they are a part of and represent a larger collective. That understanding and the being connected to each other in a network of relations constitute two sides of the same coin. Hence, if the social construction of a network rests in part on the manifestation of shared identity meaning among its membership, then it could be argued that the social construction of OI meaning rests in part on its manifestation in the network of relationships among organizational members.

I propose therefore that the identity attribute of an organization becomes institutionalized as its property when a meaning of that attribute diffuses and is shared throughout various portions of the organization’s social networks (Thompson & Fine, 1999). The holistic qualities of such meanings are manifest in the shapes of the whole network (Provan et al., 2007) and the understandings network members have of that structure as well as the stories they can narrate about it (Brown & Humphreys, 2006; Kilduff & Tsai, 2003). Network shapes are constellations of organizational sub-groups created by organizational members’ shared claim, experience, or perception of OI meanings. Member understandings of those configurations, which may include cognitions of reciprocity and network balance or cognitive maps of the whole network (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003; Krackhardt, 1990; Fiol & Huff, 1991), are likely to be linked to the images that constitute OI perceptions and other cognitive representations of the collective (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994).

Distribution OF Organizational Identity Meanings across Whole Network Structures

There are different ways to classify the social network literature (Borgatti & Foster, 2003; Wasserman & Faust, 1994; Wellman, 1988), and I will focus in this paper on the differences between one-mode and two-mode network analysis (Borgatti & Everett, 1997). The most common way to study a network is called one-mode analysis, in which a set of actors is linked by ties, as described above. This type of analysis is called one-mode because there is only one set of social entities in the network (i.e., the actors), and a tie may potentially exist between all pairs of actors in the set. In two-mode social networks, there are two different sets of social entities, where explicit ties exist only between members of different sets. Common two mode networks in organization studies are underwriting syndicates (Baum, Rowley, & Shipilov, 2004), where investment banks form one set of social actors that are linked to business firms in the second set through participation in IPO deals for those firms. Banks do not underwrite the IPO of other banks and firms are not involved in each other’s IPO. Another example is the indirect corporate interlock, where managers from a set of firms (e.g. Fortune 500) sit on the boards of directors of organizations in a different set (e.g., banks) (Mizruchi, 1996). Note here that entities in the one set are implicitly linked by their common association with the entities in the other set (Wasserman & Faust, 1994). More generally, two-mode networks belong to a class of networks called overlapping group affiliations (Wasserman & Faust, 1994), in which a set of actors feature common memberships in the same social groups, joint participation in the same social events, or mutual affiliation with the same collective interests. Two mode networks can be converted into one-mode sets by computing a measure of dyadic linkage between pairs of actors, such as the frequency of participation in the same events (Baum, et al., 2004), the number of memberships in the same groups (Mizruchi, 1992), or the extent of congruence in valuation of a set of social entities (Galaskiewicz, 1985; Galaskiewicz & Burt, 1991; Mahon, Heugens, & Lamertz, 2004).
I will use ideas related to both one-mode and two-mode networks to illustrate ideas about the topography of shared OI meanings. I commence by modeling the distribution of OI meanings among the members of an organization as a two-mode network. This first step permits the detection of identity communities, or groups of individuals who are socially proximate to each other through their sharing in a common set of meanings about the central, distinctive, and enduring attributes that characterize the collective. This idea is a derivation from the notion of overlapping group affiliations, where one mode of actors in the network comprises all members of an organization, and the social entities that make up the second mode are identity attributes that are institutionalized in the external environment of the organization and can therefore legitimately claimed as meaningful for its identity. In other words, the risk set of potential attributes in reference to which an identity community may emerge through a shared claim of OI is anchored to the collective rationalities and legitimate meanings available in an organizational field (Meyer & Rowan, 1977; DiMaggio & Powell, 1983).

For example, Phillips (1994) found that the OI of museums and wineries were rooted in different taken-for-granted assumptions unique to each field but consistent across organizations, while Porac et al. (1989) and Lamertz et al. (2005) found different identities in the Scottish knit wear and Canadian beer brewing industries, respectively, which were rooted in a limited set of category dimensions and characteristic of sub-groups of organizations. Field-specific strategic orientation (Maguire and Phillips, 2008; Peteraf & Shanley, 1997), professional identity (Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997; Sudabey & Greenwood, 2005), technology and equipment (Chreim, 2007), or key stakeholder interests (Rodrigues & Child, 2008) provide additional examples of OI attributes that are anchored in the meaning system of organizational fields. The point is that for identity attributes to be considered as independent social entities in a two-mode network of identity communities, they must be understood in the field as legitimate for an organization to claim (Hsu & Hannan, 2005). Some important points to note about this conceptualization are: (1) it is consistent with the ideational nature of OI as a socially constructed phenomenon; (2) an OI attribute may exist in a field but not be claimed by any members of a given organization, in which case it may be perceived as the imagery of competitor organizations (Porac et al., 1989) or be a basis of disidentification (Elsbach, 1991); (3) OI attributes that arise within the culture of an organization (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006) are often claimed to be unique but typically reflect a transmuted interpretation of more general themes shared in the organizational field (Martin, Feldman, Hatch, & Sitkin, 1983); (4) While an individual may independently perceive legitimate attributes to characterize the identity of an organization, they must be socially validated through interaction with at least one other person to be considered OI (Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978).

To illustrate OI communities in an organization, consider the network in Figure 1, which features a number of identity communities demarcated by the dotted lines. There is a holographic OI community (1) comprising nearly all members and containing within it several additional communities that are either clearly ideographic (e.g., communities 5, 6, and 7) or feature a combination of holographic and ideographic OI meanings (communities 3 and 4, which together also constitute community 2). Figure 1 also shows a community of actors created by relational ecology, denoted by black circles, whose shared OI meaning is rooted in their common position to link the central cluster with the surrounding communities. Please note that these ideas presume that an OI can have both holographic and ideographic components, such that the entire organization is characterized as a particular organizational form, while different groupings may also share OI meanings of, for example, a strategic orientation, professional association, or production values as additional characteristics. This presumption recognizes the potential conflicts and dissonance members of an organization may perceive not just toward each other’s OI meanings but also within themselves about what is central, distinctive, and enduring about their

---

2 An alternative is to model shared cognition of OI as a one-mode network, with a given attribute meaning serving as the content of the relationship among the set of actors.
organization (e.g., the son in a family-owned fine furniture manufacturing firm who is a professional accountant, realizes the economic imperative of business survival but identifies with the aesthetic aspects of artisan production). A key point here is that the two-mode OI network is modeled as a system containing social actors and their shared OI attributes.

Shared OI meanings are distributed differentially across different parts of the organizational membership, and different identity communities share somewhat different yet partially overlapping sets of meanings that are accessible to the organization as a whole at different times and in different situations. Whereas problems of product quality may be dealt with and are delegated to the members of the production department, whose shared ideographic understanding of OI may revolves primarily around craftsmanship, efficiency, or product variety, strategic direction is the concern of top management, whose more holographic identity understandings may focus on issues of governance or competitiveness. A study by Nag et al. (2007) provides an interesting example of how members in the productive core of an organization constituted a different identity community than a group of business development administrators, and how the absence of shared OI meanings undermined their ability to interact effectively with each other, resulting in organizational failure. Milton and Westphal (2005) have shown how perceptions of social identity confirmation between actors and between subgroups in a network are related to cooperating behavior and performance. Thus, different groupings of organizational members can be likened to stewards of specialized OI meanings that are important to those members, and the networks of relations between and within groups make those meanings salient to group members and denote the groups as reference points for comparison (Brown & Humphreys, 2006; Erickson, 1982; Rao et al., 2000). The implied differences in perceptions or narration between groups suggest that compatibility between meanings across groupings (e.g., Pratt & Foreman, 2000) is an important factor for understanding organizational coordination and cooperation (e.g, Haslam et al., 2003).

**Figure 2:**

Whole Network Configurations

![Whole Network Configurations](image-url)

(1) Isolated Cliques

(2) Connected Cliques
Implicit in Figure 1 is the idea that the distribution of OI meanings across the organizational membership somehow relates to the structure of the social network in the organization. The second step in building the network topography of OI is therefore an examination of how different whole network configuration might represent maps of different constellations of identity communities. Figure 2 presents different network configurations that are likely to give rise to different community configurations with varying implications for organizational processes and outcomes, and Table 2 summarizes this discussion. Panels (1) and (2), the isolated and the connected clique structures are reminiscent of ideographic multiple identity organizations, with separate communities existing in each clique and few overlaps between them. One might imagine such a network structure following mergers between firms with incompatible identity components (Chreim, 2007; Maguire & Phillips, 2008) or in a university between administrators, researchers and teaching professionals (Brown & Humphreys, 2006). Similarly, in a study of a rehabilitation clinic, Pratt and Rafaeli (1997) found that nurses whose social networks were partitioned by shift work tended to share different OI meanings for their holographic hybrid identity unit. Interaction frequency and the development of relations among shift members may thus have contributed to the congealment of identity communities. Glynn (2000) found a significant chasm in shared OI meaning between professional groups in a symphony orchestra with an ideographic hybrid identity, and although no information is available in that study about social networks, the context of labor negotiations that pitted the two groups against each other in a bitter fight suggests the presence of a clique structure.
Table 1
Whole Network Structures and Organizational Identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Identity Configuration</th>
<th>Network Implications for Organizational Identity Process and Structure</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Isolated Cliques</td>
<td>Lack of coordination across communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Inter-community conflict and mistrust</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identification with sub-groups</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connected Cliques</td>
<td>Slow coordination across communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Linking-pins integrate across communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Stratification of identities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hub and Spoke</td>
<td>Centralized control of identity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Core-Periphery</td>
<td>Effective coordination across communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Organizational identity self-critique</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Fragmented identity meanings at the periphery</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Small World</td>
<td>Creative problem solving across communities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Resilience of community configuration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fully Connected</td>
<td>Strong organizational identification</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Identity myopia and stagnation</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The isolated cliques in panel 1 are more likely to suffer from a lack of integration across identity communities than the connected cliques in panel 2, whose “linking pin” actors (circled) are in a position to facilitate cross-community communication. Such actors are similar to the middle managers in a study by Corley (2004), who were bridging between the culture-based OI meanings shared by employees and the strategy-based OI meanings shared among the upper management. Furthermore, one might expect that those managers hold in common a similar OI since their positioning between the expectations of the same management and employee groups should lead to the emergence of an OI community through social ecological process, as described above. In a multi-national geographic organizational structure, managers of local subsidiaries are likely to serve as such linking pins, bridging between the corporate identity of the MNC and a local identity influenced by national culture. Moreover, the connected cliques network structure may feature a status hierarchy of identities, in which the OI meanings supported by a dominant coalition of the organization is likely to be accorded most importance (Rodrigues & Child, 2008). The degree of inter-connectedness among this dominant coalition and its separation from other cliques are likely to be indicative of its ability to maintain a shared OI with high status, while other identity communities that maintain links to the dominant coalition may seek status by association or integration with the dominant coalition (Washington & Zajac, 2005).

The work by Corley (2004) and Pratt and Rafaeli (1997) also suggests that formal hierarchical networks are an important source of cleavage in identity communities. In each of these studies, members of separate formal hierarchical strata shared different OI meanings. Panel 3 in Figure shows a hub and spoke network configuration, which is akin to hierarchical relations and different from the connected clique structure in that groupings are connected through one central actor only. This type of network may arise in organizations where shop-floor and field-level work is done by people working independently of each other (Thompson, 1967). An OI community may develop among actors at the end points of the hub-and-spoke network through social ecological process as each relies on the communication and interaction with the same hierarchical superior. A related idea focuses on network centralization, which is an indicator of dispersion, examining the extent to which the network features one or a few actors with many connections and in key positions, whereas most others have few relations and are located peripherally
(Wasserman & Faust, 1994). High network centralization may be reflective of the influence leaders have over the diffusions of OI meanings in an organization through its networks. For example, the circled actor in panel 3 of Figure 2 has many links and is the only bridge across many different regions of the network, by virtue of which he or she may exert a significant amount of control over the spread of OI relevant information.

The core-periphery structure in panel 4 of Figure 2 is composed of one grouping of actors, the core, with many ties among each other and a second grouping, the periphery, whose members have no or few ties among each other but may maintain some connections to the core (Borgatti & Everett, 1999; Nelson, 2001). A key aspect of core-periphery networks is the capacity of the core group to coordinate and integrate activities for the network as a whole (Nelson, 2001), as might be the case for a significant holographic identity or a large dominant coalition. Key OI meanings might be generated and maintained in the core and can be diffused to the periphery. Moreover, this type of configuration may serve as a source of OI self-critique, where peripheral members that are not embedded in multiple relationships that reinforce OI meanings at the core feel less constraint to question identity or import identity innovations. For example, Golden-Biddle and Rao (1997) found that a peripheral member of a volunteer organization with a holographic dual OI was a key instigator of increased scrutiny over organizational actions. In the process of raising attention to identity-inconsistent behavior in the organization, this member violated other key identity meanings yet fell back in line after members of the core group implemented steps to address her concerns. This story line suggest that a core-periphery structure may support the maintenance of holographic OI while simultaneously preventing the dysfunctional narcissism and blindness (Hatch & Schultz, 2002) characteristic of organizations in which a strong OI is maintained by integrated cliques that mutually reinforce each other's identical shared meanings. The obverse of this scenario is, of course, an OI whose stability is constantly challenged and criticized by peripheral members who have little to lose and may contribute to OI fragmentation.

The small world network structure (Panel 5 in Figure 2) may be a source of holographic and ideographic multiple OI with good coordination and resilience. Defining features of the small world network are well connected cliques and the presence of members in those cliques that are also well connected to other cliques, establishing short paths that link all actors in the network and establishing multiple, redundant bridges across cliques. It is this redundant structure that makes small-world networks highly resistant to attrition, turnover, and external threats (Baum et al., 2005; Uzzi, Amaral, & Reed-Tsochas, 2007), and research shows that small world structures arise in contexts that link different domains, such as film or music genres and academic fields or sub-specialties (Uzzi et al., 2007). In a study of strategic identity change in academia, Gioia and Thomas (1996) report that issues of existing OI tended to be interpreted as ‘political’ by the senior university administration, reflecting the potentially diverse and divisive nature of OI meanings in an organization that houses groups from different domains. Hence, one might expect that organizations, such as research universities, as well as those that perform project-based work or rely on a team-based structure, would feature a small-world structure of identity communities that helps them deal with times of crisis or change.

The last network in Figure 2 is the fully connected network (Panel 6) – essentially one clique, as might be found in small firms or organizations with an ideological mission or holographic OI. This network is typically associated with a high degree of within-group agreement and might be linked to what is often called a strong identity, to which members are attracted and which is salient in their social identification (Fiol, 2002; Romanelli & Khessina, 2005). However, the absence of separate groupings and the consequent formation of diverging viewpoints that can be exchanged to stimulate new ideas may be the Achilles’ heel of the fully connected network, possibly leading to myopia, stagnation, and narcissism in organizations with an OI that is not also open to outside influence (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Nelson, 2001). Erickson (1988) has argued that a multiple clique structure is an essential building block for the emergence of belief systems that shape the underlying dimensions along which points of view may
diverge but which also forge the common grounding for an exchange of ideas. For example, members may have differing opinions about the strategic usefulness of a merger for a business firm, but a common grounding in the trade and business of this firm would permit them to communicate about their differences and resolve them or agree to disagree. It would thus seem that the formation of a strategically differentiated identity that can be adapted to changing circumstances needs to be built by a configuration that houses two or more identity communities.

A cognitive component can also be added to this conceptualization by considering how members of the network, especially those in leadership positions, perceive the distribution of communities in the organization. In the social network literature, the way social actors perceive the network of which they are a part is studied as ‘cognitive networks’ (Kilduff & Tsai, 2003). Past research in organization studies has examined the perceptions network members have about relationships between other actors, other actors’ positions, and other actor’s personal attributes (Kilduff & Krackhardt, 1994; Krackhardt, 1990). In the context of inter-organizational networks, Andersson, Hakkanson, and Johanson (1994) have discussed how member firms maintain perceptions about the constellation of their network connections to other firms, the type of exchanges they conduct in those relations, and the resources that are created through interactions with other firms. There also exists research in organizations that suggests members hold perceptions of the system as a whole and how it is composed of different parts that function in concert. For example, Orlikowski (2002) showed that in a large and geographically diversified organization, members learn to interact with each other across various structural boundaries in part by developing shared knowledge about who the organization is and who the key players in the organization’s networks are. Invoking the concept of “collective mind,” Weick and Roberts (1993) describe how organized activity unfolds through the “heedful interrelating” among the members of a collective, who know who does what, when, where, and how in order to purposefully coordinate their activities.

Extrapolating from these different ideas, I propose that some organizational members may know about (i.e., are heedful of) the presence, membership composition, and network configuration of the identity communities and the meanings or narratives they share in the organization. In addition to such awareness about the distribution of OI meanings across networks, key individuals may also develop ideas about the relative importance to the collective of such meanings or narratives and which ones are most appropriate for which types of situations. For example, a cognitive map depicting which regions of the organization’s network share or diverge in OI meanings may permit developing compatibility between of identity communities (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). The role of top management and organizational elites in shaping OI may derive from their privileged position at key junctures of formal information flow (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006; Rodrigues & Child, 2008) that allow them to develop an accurate picture of the configuration of OI meanings. They should have access to the repertoire of OI meanings available in their organization’s network and be able to direct activities to the appropriate communities by linking situational demands to those identity resources (e.g., Silince, 2006). There are also likely to be informally actors who occupy locations in the informal network that are central and furnish a good vantage point from which to build an awareness of the distribution of OI communities within the organization (Krackhardt, 1990).

**Discussion**

My goal in this paper was to place a structural prism in front of the existing literature on OI and explore diversity of OI meaning in complex organizations as the distribution of identity communities in intra-organizational networks. For the purpose of illustration, this discussion has focused on ideal constellations of networks and discussed them as if they were singly representative of whole organizations. However, it is likely that a given organization houses a combination of such constellations, where different parts of the organization features different constellations of community networks or where multiple constellations are simultaneously representative of the same parts of the entire
organization, as illustrated in Figure 1. One might imagine the co-existence of an ideographic community network comprising a clique or small world structure of disparate OI claims and a holographic, fully connected OI community network that focuses on a higher order characterization that serves as a basis for cross-community linkage. In universities, for example, a normative identity rooted in academic freedom and the value of knowledge may hedge against identity divisions in professional orientation, research philosophy, or disciplinary background.

The implications for future research of the work presented in this paper are best explored in reference to the primary objective of two-mode network analysis (Borgatti & Everett, 1997) to identify which organizational members are connected to which OI attribute meanings, resulting in clusters of participants that are paired with clusters of meaning. Examples of this type of investigation include correspondence analysis, dual scaling, cluster analysis, and bi-partite graph representations (Borgatti & Everett, 1997). All these techniques make use of visual representations, and the implication of the approach I am proposing is that such visual representations can be used to depict a network of relations among actors and the clustering of OI attributes in a joint social space of relationships and symbolic meaning. This joint representation permits an interpretation of the ideational directions and trajectories along which different network clusters can be distinguished or grouped. It also has implications for the dynamics of OI relevant interactions that are likely to unfold between clusters and shape OI evolution (Brown, 2006; Rodrigues & Child, 2008) and the type of symbolic management that is likely to prove effective in communicating ideational messages about OI to the organizational membership and stakeholders (Carter & Deephouse, 1999; Pratt, 2003; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006).

Consider the composite illustration in Figure 1. Each dimension of the space in the figure is associated with two contrasting meanings, one at each extremity, resulting in four broad OI meaning quadrants into which organizational members can be located based on their OI claims or narratives across the array of possible attributes. Having positioned actors into this symbolic space, relationships that exist between them can be added to examine the relational linkages that juxtapose on the distribution of symbolic identification. The resulting network in Figure 1 features several regions and combines different structural configurations, including a central region that has peripheral individuals as well as adjacent cliques, and featuring a diversity of linkages between cliques. An important point that arises out of the joint relational and symbolic qualities of the space in the figure is that one can assume that the location of all network clusters, cliques and actors relative to the central region and relative to each other is indicative of the extent of similarity or difference between the OI meanings with which network participants identify.

This depiction would enable investigation of the relational status structure and coordination between identity communities. Social network analysis enables researchers to distinguish the relational strength that links peripheral actors to the central regions of a network and model core-periphery structures with one or multiple centers (Borgatti & Everett, 1999; Everett & Borgatti, 1999). In Figure 1, there is a cluster of actors at the center of the space, whose collective claims of OI meanings falls on the right side of dimension one and is neutral on dimension 2. In addition, there are several actors and cliques in the upper region of the space that are linked to the dense central cluster with only a single relationship, whereas peripheral actors and cliques in the lower region tend to have two or more relationships with members of the central cluster. This would suggest that the relational distance between an identity community shaped by the actors in the center of the space and those at the two extremes of identity dimension 2 is different, with the upper region being more distant than the lower region. Efforts to coordinate and integrate OI relevant activities between the centre and peripheral regions may potentially be more challenging in the upper region of the space, compared to the lower region, because bridging symbolic differences should be facilitated by relational proximity.
Note, though, that a countervailing force here is that the communities in the lower region are densely connected while those in the upper region feature more hierarchical hub-and-spoke structures. As a result, clusters in the lower region may feature more group-based commitment to their local ideographic OI meanings and resist integration by the centre, producing warring factions and a loss of control by the centre (Adler & Kwon, 2002). These contingencies should help researchers and managers better understand ways to bridge cleavages in OI between different factions within an organization (Chreim, 2007; Brown & Humphreys, 2006; Glynn, 2000) and help find ways to integrate communities with disparate identities into a central community (Maguire & Phillips, 2008). For example, the amount and type of social distance (i.e., symbolic and/or relational) between identity communities may have implications for whether strategic, symbolic, or structural tactics are effective for managing OI meanings (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006) and whether diverse OI meanings can be deleted, integrated compartmentalized, or aggregated (Pratt & Foreman, 2000).

A second promising stream of research would focus on the use of power and politics in OI development (Brown, 2006; Rodrigues & Child, 2008). In their study of a Brazilian telecommunications company, Rodrigues and Child (2008) focused on the idea that the meaning of an officially espoused OI involves a struggle over dominant views and is likely to be contested among different stakeholder factions. Their research suggests that official OI emerges from the mobilization of support among and legitimation in the eyes of relevant stakeholder groups. More generally, Brown and his colleagues (Brown, 2006; Brown & Humphreys, 2006; Coupland & Brown, 2004) advocate a narrative view of OI that focuses on how the discursive construction of OI constitutes the exertion of control, domination, hegemony and resistance among different interest groups that seek to assert their version of organizational reality. Social network analysis features a rich history of investigating organizational power, politics, and conflict (Brass & Burckhardt, 1992; Krackhardt, 1990; Labianca, et al., 1998), and the ideas derived from this body of work could be fruitfully deployed to gain new insights.

For example, network locations across cleavages in the overall structure provide opportunities for brokerage and control (Burt, 1992). In Figure 1, there are many positions that bridge between cliques (e.g., B1 in OI community 3 and B2 in OI community 5), and one might expect that significant narrative plurivocity, multiple voices, fictional innovation or integration about diverse OI meanings occur at such positions (Brown, 2006) as participants in the network form, negotiate, and dissolve coalitions. The opposite narrative processes could be expected in network locations that connect otherwise disconnected others in a control exerting hub-and-spoke structure, such as can be seen in OI communities 7 and 8 in Figure 1. Differences in narratives may also be evident between central and peripheral network clusters, with the former derogating or marginalizing the OI meanings advocated by the latter while exalting and glorifying their own. Asymmetric inter-group linkages between network clusters, where members of one group express un reciprocated admiration for the members of another, may similarly be related to narrative processes and perceptions that exacerbate status differences between their respective OI meanings. Finally, the accuracy of perceptions networks members have of the whole network and its configuration of OI communities is likely to be linked to the degree of influence and control they can exert over OI.

In discussing a last potential area of future research, I wish to focus on the evolving symbolic associations created between organizational members who jointly claim, construct, or narrate similar OI meanings. Building on the ideas above, the purpose of this focus is to develop ideas about the tensions between continuity and adaptive instability of OI (Gioia et al., 2000). The basic idea is that existing OI communities are in a continual process of evolution, moving through the symbolic space as members develop new understandings or divest old ones, morphing into new clusters through mergers with each other or split into sub-communities, and re-configuring the overall distribution of organizational members. For example, consider efforts by the central OI community in Figure 1 to coordinate OI relevant activities with peripheral communities. If successful, such efforts may exert a centripetal force on the OI community 8 and pull it closer to the centre of the space, while an unsuccessful effort to coordinate
with community 5 may exert a centrifugal force and push that community to the left or the bottom of the space. In this example, the social networks within and between members and OI communities furnish the channels of communication through which they renew, develop, change, and deny OI meanings, while the positioning of communities denotes the resulting profiles of shared OI meanings. Focusing on how the one-mode network of communication channels serves as a relational infrastructure for OI narration and construction may thus allow researchers to track the paths and trajectories through which the two-mode network of OI communities in an organization evolves over time.

Kilduff and Tsai (2003) have identified two classes of network trajectory: goal-directed and serendipitous. Goal directed trajectories tend to involve a centralized network structure (e.g., hub and spoke, core-periphery) and leadership, a common objective among network members, and the development of new network member association by adaptation to reach an explicitly identified end state. In the current models, such a trajectory might unfold through the explicit communication and diffusion of OI meanings by actors with legitimate authority or other forms of power designed to give sense to official interpretation of OI (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006; Rodrigues & Child, 2008) or socialize new members (Pratt, 2003). Serendipitous network trajectories tend to involve decentralized network structures (e.g., small world, cliques), localized interests, and network development through opportunistic dyadic tie formation that predictable social processes, such as the rich get richer, homophily, and diversification (Powell et al., 2005). In OI communities, serendipitous development might involve ongoing sense-making activities among members during daily work experiences and the shifting understandings and narratives they develop about OI meanings as they respond to external events (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991) or stakeholder pressures (Scott & Lane, 2000), leading to shifting inter-actor positions in symbolic space and the resulting mutations of OI communities. The ideas about OI coordination and politics described above essentially describe goal-directed processes at the OI community level, but which may culminate in a serendipitous trajectory when considering the constellation of OI communities in the organization as a whole. In a complex organization, a combination of goal-directed and serendipitous trajectories of OI community evolution may thus involve the assertion of parochial interests between organizational sub-groupings (e.g., Glynn, 2000; Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997) and the consequent changes in relative positioning (e.g., divergence) or even centrality of location among OI communities in the organization as a whole (Rodrigues & Child, 2008). Ultimately, it is a mixture of goal-directed and serendipitous processes that is likely help organizations find effective constellations of OI communities that balance integration focused on explicitly formulated, goal directed OI meanings on the one hand with the ongoing spontaneous social construction that produces symbolic innovation through serendipity on the other.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have sought to develop a number of ideas about how whole networks structures can be employed to model the distribution of shared yet diverse OI meanings in large organizations. My discussion has been focused primarily at the organizational level of analysis, although extensions of the work presented to the individual and inter-organizational analysis are natural extensions of a social network perspective (Borgatti & Foster, 2003; Provan et al., 2007). The implications of the structural perspective for the analysis of OI processes and dynamics suggest a number of new avenues for research, as outlined in the discussion. More generally, though, the model developed may also serve as a catalyst for other scholars to think about the ways in which the co-evolution of social networks and OI communities help understand network development and emergence (Provan et al., 2007) as well as the dynamics of changing identities (Ibarra et al., 2005).
References


Simmel, G. (1908).


