Alterity/Identity Interplay in Image Construction

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1. alterity n.
The state of being other or different. (*The Concise Oxford English Dictionary*)

2. alterity
Term used in postmodern writings for the 'otherness' of others, or sometimes the otherness of the self. (*The Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy*)

Being different is hardly a postmodern invention, so why is that 'identity' is a part of our everyday vocabulary, while 'alterity' is reserved for esoteric writings, and even there only 'sometimes' related to the Self?

I begin by sketching a historical process that might be an explanation of this development, and then argue that re-introducing alterity to the common vocabulary of organization studies might help us understand many of the interesting phenomena that we observe but obscure by dealing with them under the label of identity.

THE TYRANNY OF IDENTITY

The identity paradigm

To exist is to differ; difference, in a sense, is the substantial side of things, is what they have only to themselves and what they have most in common. One has to start the explanation from here, including the explanation of identity, taken often, mistakenly, for a starting point. Identity is but a minimal difference, and hence a type of difference, and a very rare type at that, in the same way as rest is a type of movement and circle a peculiar type of ellipse. (Tarde, [1893]1999)

Why was identity taken as a starting point at the turn of the previous century, when Tarde wrote these words? Why does it continue to be taken as a starting point now? Peter Brooks (2005) explained this with the emergence of what he called an identity paradigm. Two phenomena were at the centre of attention in the 19th century, especially the attention of
the young nation states. One was urbanization: the enormous movement from the countryside to the city. The previously content bourgeois became frightened; criminality was on the rise, and it was taking new, sophisticated forms. As Brooks pointed out, the picturesque figure of a ‘master criminal’ in a variety of disguises was not only a figment of the vivid imaginations of novelists, but existed in reality, to the exasperation of police forces. Another 19th century phenomenon had to do with the exigencies of running the colonies. How to tell the natives from one another if they all look alike to the eye of the colonialists? Also, how to tell working-class people from one another, if they not only wear the same clothes, but also imitate the bourgeoisie (or the other way around)? The problem, therefore, was too many differences and too few differences. A search for various technologies of identification was activated during this period: physiognomy, phrenology and then photography and finger-printing were put at the service of the police and the colonial authorities. Of course, says Brooks, the question of mistaken identities has always been a focus of interest of playwrights and novelists from Homer to Shakespeare, but the search for certain marks of identity became a non-fictional matter, and an especially acute one in the 1800s.

Whereas the issues of alterity and identity were born in relation to persons, they were transferred, by analogy, to the realm of abstract entities, such as legal persons (corporations; Lamoreaux, 2003) and nation states. Thus, the emergence of the identity paradigm in the 19th century was also most likely connected to the rise of nationalism (Anderson, 1983/1991). People grouped within the new borders desperately needed to know what they had in common, as the tendency was for them to see too many differences. This attempt was so successful that, in the opinion of Ian Buruma, ‘identity’ is behind most of the present world troubles:

Identity is a bloody business. Religion, nationality or race may not be the primary causes of war and mass murder. These are more likely to be tyranny, or the greed for territory, wealth and power. But ‘identity’ is what gets the blood boiling, what makes people do unspeakable things to their neighbors. (Buruma, 2002)

The situation in organizations might not be as drastic. Nevertheless, organization theory does not deviate from the current public discourse, with its focus on the phenomenon of identity construction (see e.g. Whetten and Godfrey, 1998; Schultz et al., 2000; Hatch and Schultz, 2003).

**A corporate persona and its image**

Although we have been saddled with the notion of ‘organizations’, thanks to the organization theorists’ interest in system theory in the 1960s (Waldo, 1961), most of our reasoning circles, implicitly or explicitly, around the notion of a corporation – a legal person. This reasoning became even more valid in present times, when public administration units are encouraged or forced to assume shapes of ‘real organizations’: that is to say, corporations.

The history of corporations in the USA is a history of a competition, never concluded, between the school of thought that conceptualizes corporations as natural persons, and the one that sees them as artificial persons (Lamoreaux, 2003). According to the latter theory, a corporation is a person only to the degree bestowed on it by its legislator. Thus, an organization is a Super Person (Czarniawska, 1994), in the sense of being bigger in certain ways than all the individuals who contribute to its existence; yet also a Limited Person. Were Gabriel Tarde an organization theorist, he would say that each person employed in a company is much bigger and much more complex than the company itself, the latter being a collection of a repetition of one or few properties of its employees and machines (Czarniawska, 2004).

If one adopts a ‘natural person’ perspective, an organization can have a self. Within an ‘artificial person’ perspective, to which I subscribe, an organization cannot have a ‘self’, but can have, to borrow an expression from narratology, a Character
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(deducible and observable from its deeds and self-presentations). In corporate law, Naomi Lamoreaux tells us, the two theories tend to hybridize rather than clash. We can follow their example and agree on a common point: what is compared in order to establish an identity or an alterity relation is an organizational image. Whether this image reflects the essence of an organization or is an ongoing social construction may remain a point of discontent and personal belief. The fact remains that organizational images are constantly produced and reproduced by actors and observers within and outside organizations; they are used to control employees and the investors and to legitimate and to attract attention. Thus, two research questions arise. How are organizational images constructed (both in the sense of process and product)? and, How are they used?

Organization theorists had no problem in accepting and translating to their own use the constructivist view on the character of the self that would see it not as an essence to be located or expressed, but as an image of ‘I’ produced and reproduced in interactions (Mead, 1913). Such a self – individual or organizational – would be stable insofar there persists a memory of past interactions. The self is historical, and is both constituted by and constitutive of a community (Bruner, 1990; Rorty, 1991). If members of the community conceive of themselves as forming an abstract system, as it is the case of formal organizations, the image of this system will also be constructed in abstract terms.

It has also been accepted that ‘[i]dentities are performed in conversations. … what we achieve in conversations is positioning vis-à-vis other people’ (Davies and Harré, 1990: 44), and against the background of a plot that is negotiated by those taking part in the conversation. Whether this background is the history of the community or one’s life project may vary from one conversation to another. Thus, the self – individual and organizational – is produced, reproduced and maintained in discourses, past and present. It is community-constituted, as Rorty says, in the sense of being created by those who take part in a conversation; it is historical because past conversations are evoked in the course of present ones.

While the idea that self is an image that is being constructed in and through discourses was taking root, the attention – including that of Davies and Harré – focused on identity construction as synonymous with the self. This fashionable focus of attention overshadows the simultaneous and unavoidable process of alterity construction, of constructing oneself as different. Indeed, whereas ‘identity’ entered everyday parlance, ‘alterity’ remains a precious concept limited to the circles of cultural studies. Yet there is no reason to suppose that the question ‘Who am I like?’ is more important than the question ‘Who am I unlike?’ and, even more poignant, ‘How am I different?’ Identity and alterity form the self, and their interplay results in an image – projected or received.

Altered in social sciences

Both identity and alterity do appear in social studies – but usually in two versions, which can be situated on two extremes of the exclusion–inclusion dimension.

One version is typical for cultural studies, and is strongly influenced by Michel Foucault, who claimed that ‘the forceful exclusion and exorcism of what is Other is an act of identity formation’ (Corbey and Leerssen, 1991: xii). The other end of the dimension is represented by post-Hegelians who see the interplay between identity and alterity as a dialectical move, resulting in ‘increasing expansion and incorporation, assimilating or at least harmonizing all otherness in terms of expanding identity’ (ibid. xi). Michael Taussig (1993) followed Benjamin in the belief that mimesis means yielding into the Other. Thus, in the discourse of and on identity, alterity is either attributed (‘they are different and therefore not us’) or incorporated (‘they are actually very much like us’). The third possibility, the affirmation of difference (‘we are different’), is omitted, with the exception of the work of Gilles Deleuze, who alone
continued the Tardean tradition (Czarniawska, 2004).

The process of calling attention to distinctions has sometimes been called a negativity (‘what we are not’), or a game of internal difference, as contrasted to ‘true alterity’, that of the Other (Zahavi, 1999: 196). For the Foucauldians, negativity is uninteresting in the face of the ‘true’, irremediable alterity, which, however, cannot concern oneself. For the post-Hegelians, it is but further proof of incorporation, of a harmonizing removal of differences in the process of identity formation. Deleuze’s anti-Hegelian project suggests that negativity is the last point on the identity continuum constituted by The Same, The Similar, The Analogous and The Opposed, and needs to be distinguished from affirmation of difference (1968/1997: 265).

Although the simultaneous presence of exclusion-inclusion movements has been acknowledged before (Höpfl, 1992), the simultaneous construction of identity and alterity of such collective images as ‘an organization’ or ‘management practice’ requires attention. The need to distinguish between the two is justified by the different places they occupy in different attempts at construction of an image. Thus, following Deleuze’s argument, identity and alterity can be seen as two dimensions (the alterity dimension being non-continuous).

Although The Same can be seen as an ideal on the identity continuum, it is not so. It is only The Primitive who returns to The Same, and therefore does not progress (de Certeau, 1975/1988). The Primitive Other imitates; The Moderns emulate (and do it better than the model). One can thus portray identity-alterity dimensions as a circle, the larger part of which the moderns have reserved for themselves. The Primitive Others are supposed to remain at the extremes; they repeat themselves, and they are unlike anybody else. The Moderns are free to engage in the identity-alterity interplay in many diverse fashions. (See Figure 1.4.1.)

The observation of actual practices tells a different story, however. The whole field is open to everybody, even if fashion might prefer some modes and some types of interplay. The Primitive Other is but an invention, a prop to be used in the interplay.

The analogy with corporations and ‘corporate citizenship’ is obvious. Actors and observers constantly produce and reproduce organizational images, which are used to control the employees and the investors, to legitimate, and to attract attention. Corporate leadership tries to convince employees that they have much in common, and convince the customers that the other corporations are different. The ‘unsophisticated’ organizations are either impossible to tell apart, or are unique and therefore irrelevant. But while practitioners construct the images playing on both identity (who are we like? and how?) and alterity (how are we different? and from whom?), scholars tend to concentrate only on the former part of this process.

The dominant conceptualization of ‘identity free of alterity’ has caused a significant semantic gliding in studies of corporate image construction. At one time merely denoting a relation (identity, like an alterity, is a judgement resulting from a comparison), identity has become an attribute – something that an organization can have or lack. A relational view of the identity/alterity interplay in organizational image construction promises a more nuanced understanding of these complex phenomena. I illustrate it here with the examples of three studies: city management (Czarniawska, 2000, 2002), business school management (Wedlin, 2006) and an IT company management (Strannegård and Friberg, 2001). In accordance with the logic of grounded theory, I present the first case in greater detail, whereas the other two serve as a test and extension of the theory of the interplay of identity and alterity in the construction of organizational images.

**THE CONSTRUCTION OF CITY IMAGE AS AN INTERPLAY OF IDENTITY AND ALTERITY**

City managers and politicians in Warsaw, Stockholm and Rome described to the researchers their cities and their own work in
The Same

The Similar

The Analogous

The Opposite

IDENTITY

The (Primitive)
Other

Uniqueness
(affirmation of
difference)

Partial
difference

Minimal
difference

ALTERITY

The Moderns

Figure 1.4.1 Identity-alterity interplay (Czarniawska, 2002: 35)

relation to an image of ‘a modern European capital’. Although this notion had many topics in common, it also contained dramatically different visions of such a capital, given that the frame of reference differed from one city to another. These different frames included different constellations of European cities, but also local stories of specific developments in the three capitals. These accounts were intended to set the city apart – apart from all other cities and or apart from specific cities. The ways of identification (same, similar, analogous), of negation (opposite), and of differentiation (unique or different) shifted in form and in content.

Images of ‘a European capital’ in Warsaw

There were three dominant elements of an image of a European capital that were common in Warsaw: such a national capital needed a metro, water treatment plants, and a centrally steered infrastructure.

The construction of the subway was the topic of the greatest controversy and the highest hopes at the time of my study in the late 1990s. I was continually asked whether I was aware that there were only two capitals in Europe without a subway – Warsaw and Tirana? Tirana, the capital of Albania, was Warsaw’s Opposite, and not only in matters of transportation. My pointing out that Copenhagen had no subway had no effect; quite rightly, as it turned out (Copenhagen built a subway at the end of the 1990s). Everyone agreed that a subway would solve many problems connected with urban transportation.

The World Bank, however, comparing Warsaw to Johannesburg, had argued for a construction of an effective surface transport
system, and was ready to help with that project. This position gained few supporters in Warsaw, and the alterity aspect of the image of the European capital became clear in this context. Such a capital cannot be in any place other than Europe, but one continent in which it most emphatically must not be located is Africa. Johannesburg was, at that time, an important prop in the alterity construction, and this construction revealed, among many other things, the untamed strength of racial prejudice. Western consultants were accused of trying to ‘Africanize’ Poland. This accusation had its root in the fact that many of the aid programmes had turned away from Africa and toward eastern Europe (Wedel, 2001). But while Western liberals were despairing of the consequences for African countries, at least some eastern Europeans were annoyed that their situation could be seen as paralleling that of Africa. Johannesburg might be a more modern city than Warsaw; but, alas, it is in the wrong continent. Tirana may be a symbol of poverty and belatedness, but it is, at least, a European capital, The Opposite, not the Other.

The water quality problems were obvious as well. They were partly a result of shallow intakes, dirty water, and obsolete technology; but primarily due to the fact that Warsaw had only one water treatment plant, which collected wastewater from one side of the river. Warsaw had been classified by the Helsinki Convention documents and by the Baltic Water Protection Program as their most difficult case. A single-proprietorship city company, financed mainly with credit from the European Investment Bank, was created to build another wastewater treatment plant. It was considered appropriate that a European bank assisted in the Europeanization of Warsaw. What provoked my interest, was that the model for water management had been derived from the past – the 1930s in Warsaw – on the claim that although water quality and technology had both changed, the idea of effective management had not, and could be directly imported from the past. Warsaw was too different from other cities to rely on their experience.

There was also a strong conviction that the only effective management of infrastructure would be a centralized one. Some of my interlocutors pointed out that the idea of municipal corporations – an alternative to central control – had been borrowed from Germany, where it was being applied to small towns rather than major cities. The popular assumption of the incompatibility of democracy and efficiency revealed its sources in the memory of past emergency situations. Such a tendency to expect threat and emergency is typical of ‘Mitteleuropa’, and atypical of Sweden, where this historically induced sense of threat is unknown. This, among other factors, makes a tendency to imitate contemporary cities less pronounced in Warsaw than in Stockholm, as will be seen below.

The image of an ‘ideal city’ has a multifaceted role in managerial practice in Warsaw: it motivated and legitimated, focused discourse, guided action, and served as argument. Such an image was a composite of pictures, some of which could probably be traced back to some professional producers of images, but many of which seem to be produced by the actors evoking them. This composite used sameness (‘Warsaw is a European city’), opposition (‘Tirana is a European city but Warsaw must not be like it’), difference (‘Warsaw is not an African city’), and uniqueness (‘Warsaw is different from all European cities’). This composite would be recognizable but not usable in Stockholm.

**Images of a ‘European big city’ in Stockholm**

By Warsaw standards, Stockholm fulfills all the requirements of ‘the European capital’: it has a subway and water treatment plants, and its infrastructure is centrally managed (in a company form). But these images were not those present in the minds of Stockholm politicians and managers. The ‘big European city of the 21st century’, as they called their image, had to fulfill quite another set of requirements. Because the big-but-not-capital cities like Milan, Stuttgart, Naples and
Gothenburg rebelled against the hegemony of capitals, the scope of identification could be extended. Stockholm was aware of being a not-so-big big city, and watched the agile moves of other not-so-big cities with interest. They also listened to what the ‘field servicing’ organizations (Hedmo et al., 2005) suggested. Opening one of many OECD conferences on ‘The City and New Technologies’ in 1992, Michel Delebarre said that information technology was the only way to increase the efficiency of municipal services, while attracting the computer industry to a big city that had disposed of its heavy and light industry. As a consequence, city managers began to market their cities within the frame of information technology: Osaka represented itself as City of Intelligence, Barcelona as City of Telematics, Amsterdam as City of Information, Manchester as Wired City, and Stockholm as Internet Bay (Dobers and Strannegård, 2001).

Although the image of an IT-city did not originate in Stockholm, it was in Stockholm that it found a natural home. At the time of my study (1996–7), Stockholm City had put big money into CityNet, a new optic-fibre net connecting all municipal offices, a ‘new city infrastructure’. Stockholm had created a home page early in the history of the Internet, and its politicians believed that computer education was the best way to deal with unemployment caused by a new immigration wave from the countryside to the city. The IT industries could not but agree.

Another image of a global character adopted in Stockholm was that of the city as a spectacle (Wilson, 1991). This is also an old idea: modern city as a spectacle and modern citizen as a spectator (flâneur) are images from the previous fin-de-siècle, which now seem to have reached their full expression. Allan Pred (1995) recounted the story of three spectacular spaces on which hang the history of modern Stockholm: the Stockholm Exhibition of 1897; the Stockholm Exhibition of 1930; and the multipurpose arena, the Globe, which opened in 1989. Thus Stockholm, intent as it is on following present development in other cities, also followed its own tradition.

The latest spectacle Stockholm offered the world was in 1998, in its role as Cultural Capital of Europe (Pipan and Porsander, 2000).

One image that is used forcefully for marketing purposes is that of Stockholm as Clean City, with fresh air and pure water (Adolfsson, 2005). The difficulty with this enterprise lies in providing the evidence. A modern city cannot rely on impressions of its tourists or its inhabitants, especially if these impressions are positive only in the negative statement, ‘no pollution’. Thus an impressive apparatus for the measurement of air and water pollution, involving many people and machines, was constructed. An obelisk showing the level of pollution of air and water has been opened by the King.

Unfortunately, no dramatic results can be shown – the neon light indicators rarely darken. While ‘dirty cities’ (such as Rome and Warsaw) can show diminishing pollution levels, Stockholm’s measurements lie almost constantly below the permissible EU norm. Although the city is truly clean, it is difficult to use it for either identity or alterity construction. As clean as … what other city? Cleaner than … any city?

There was a great supply of images of other cities in Stockholm as well as in Warsaw, but they were different (although in the debate about the traffic it has been said that, apart from Stockholm, only Tirana does not have an inner ring road). Gothenburg is usually seen as Stockholm’s at-home opposite, while Copenhagen, Oslo, and Helsinki as similar or analogous, which meant that any elements of managerial practice in these cities might be imitated – although Stockholm really wished to be imitated by others. Rome, on the other hand, wished to be placed on a different map entirely.

Images of the ‘leading European capital’ in Rome

There was a well-deserved grandiosity in city images present in Rome. Whereas Warsaw was painfully aware of its belatedness and Stockholm of its small size and Nordic
location, Rome dreamed of joining the fashion leaders – Paris, Berlin and London. It shared with Warsaw the belief that rapid modernization was needed, with Stockholm an interest in the newest managerial fashion, and with Athens the pride of a unique past incorporated and preserved in the city. All these elements found expression in the images of the leading European capital that seemed to be guiding both political visions and managerial practices.

There were some palpable similarities between the traffic issues in Warsaw and Rome. One was the citizens’ love of the automobile that results in a congestion of city traffic of which the citizens of Stockholm, with all their complaints about traffic problems, know little. Another similarity is the late arrival of the subway. By the time of the study, however, Rome already had two subway lines, and the subway construction problems were mostly primarily local and related to Rome’s historical past. The uniquely Roman problem was that the city did not have a traffic system. There never was an urban transport plan, and neither the tariffs nor the networks were integrated. Rome is truly a palimpsest city, as Bauman (1998: 40) defined it.

Big European cities like Paris and Rome, with effective public transportation systems were seen as analogous. Berlin was especially attractive because its double networks of local trains and subway were close to the Roman programme ‘to activate the iron’ – the many unused railway lines that crisscross the city – and because of Berlin’s recent experiences at joining its two parts again. There were, however, a great many difficulties involved in even partially imitating Berlin (Czarniawska, 2003). The sediments of the old regimes were residing not only under the ground as archeological monuments. It was, in many ways, a heroic enterprise to try to create a traffic system in a big city rather than merely extending or modernizing an existing system.

On the other hand, the idea of city as spectacle was obvious to Roman politicians, officials, and citizens. If anything, they were tired of it, as the relief at having lost the Olympics and the general wariness about the Jubilee of the Third Millennium of Christianity clearly indicated. But with the approach of this last spectacle, forced onto Rome by the Vatican, the city was determined to make the best of it. The best had to be more durable than the event itself, and the past had to be turned into the main asset of the present. The Jubilee was to become a marketing opportunity: an excellent opportunity for spreading the image of Rome around the world. Rome was to become a city that offers its tourists all the modern comforts so they can better enjoy the beauty of the past (Pipan and Porsander, 2000).

Another managerial novelty in Rome – a more pervasive and far-reaching one – was the privatization of public services, which in Rome was perceived as a must for a modern European capital, inspired by the example of London. The first case in point was to be the privatization of Centrale di Latte, the city-owned dairy monopoly, which was probably seen as the easiest privatization target because it was such an obvious anachronism. The process turned out to be far from easy. The citizens were against privatization, and union protests and street demonstrations followed. The subsequent privatization of ACEA, the conglomerate of water, sewer and city illumination proceeded slowly and cautiously. Mazza (2001) claims that Rome used Centrale di Latte as a learning case for further privatization. The outcome of this learning is still controversial in practice, but it has undoubtedly contributed to the legitimization of the privatization discourse in Rome. Such a legitimization permitted the city managers to follow a global fashion with the acceptance of its local audience. Privatization of public utilities in Rome can thus be seen as following a fashion in the world of public management, imitating those cities that are perceived as similar or analogous.

City management: Constructing identity and alterity

The interplay of identity and alterity work was visible in all the city image constructions: one could claim that such interplay was explicitly
demanded by the audience. As Orvar Löfgren (1993) pointed out, contemporary norms prescribing how identities should be built – national, regional, local identities – include the paradoxical requirement that such an identity should be built around the image of uniqueness.

Thus Rome is comparable to Athens because of its cultural capital, but Athens is a city with many problems and no solutions, which Rome is not. London is the model of privatized municipal services, but its citizens do not enjoy the ancient cultural heritage of Rome. Berlin has a model traffic system with the railway at its centre, but German cities are over-organized, and the charm of Rome lies partly in its anarchy. Images of other cities become fragmented, and those fragments are used to construct both the similarity and the difference.

It was not always cities that supplied the images: in the case of preparations for the Jubilee and for the Cultural Capital year, the reference points were great events. Again, the Olympic Games in Atlanta were seen as opposite of what Rome wanted to achieve, and Stockholm saw itself as analogous to Glasgow and Copenhagen, but not to Antwerp. Thus, in many cases alterity construction was in fact subordinated to identity construction; in Deleuze’s terms, the Opposite is the extreme end of the identity continuum, but remains within it. The cities (or actions within the management net) differ, but on the same dimension.

An interesting example of a combination of identity and alterity work was a frequent comparison between Rome and Barcelona. Barcelona was a model to imitate – not as a city, but as a case of transformation from a pre-modern to a late-modern city. The managers in Rome did not want Rome to become another Barcelona, but they wanted the same managerial success that their counterparts in Barcelona enjoyed. Guje Sevón (1996) called this phenomenon, after René Girard, the imitation of desire. Rome was different, but desired the same success.

But alterity was not only an aid in identity construction. In the case of Stockholm, there was also an affirmation of difference. Stockholm is the only truly Nordic and truly big city; Stockholm combines, in unique ways, Continental and Scandinavian traditions; Stockholm is the only capital situated both at the sea and on a lake; Stockholm is different. But in romantic terms, Stockholm is also the Venice of the North. In terms of management, Amsterdam, another city on water, was Stockholm’s simile. The identity construction used The Similar (Amsterdam), The Analogous (Venice) and The Opposite (in the case of London’s wrongly built ‘city net’) positions on the identity dimension.

The ‘uniqueness of Warsaw’ was a topic to which the interviewees often returned. Warsaw is different from all other cities in Poland, because it is a capital; because after the war it was dealt with by a special Decree; because in 1990 it was exempted from the Local Government Law. Warsaw is different from any western European capital because it has a different history; it is different from any eastern European capital because it has a different geopolitical position. Warsaw, in short, is different, and the affirmation of its difference dominated the city image. The identity moves were usually located on the Opposite point and consisted of such politically incorrect negations as ‘unlike Tirana’. Warsaw’s management had identity problems because a city unlike any other cannot legitimatize its actions by following the examples of others. An image built only on alterity is unclear. The ‘decisive difference’ – the one that supposedly determines the result of any market competition – must be positioned on a common dimension. Similar. Analogous. Opposite. But on the same scale.

This was exactly the idea behind the ranking of business schools, and example to which I now turn.

ALTERITY AND IDENTITY INTERPLAY IN BUSINESS SCHOOLS

Linda Wedlin (2006) studied the emergence of ranking lists and league tables as aids to the comparison and evaluation of higher
education in the media. She focused on business schools, as the attempt to internationalize management education is one of the most prominent cases of the present globalization of university education. Her purpose was not to judge this activity, but to try to describe how and why the rankings were established, how they were met by business schools, and what were the observable consequences of their use. Limiting her interest to European business schools, she collected published material on rankings and media coverage of management education in Europe since the mid-1990s, conducted a survey of opinions of European business school deans, and interviewed selected top administrators and media representatives. It is especially the interviews with the top administrators that are of interest to me, as they were summarized in two ‘identity narratives’ composed by Wedlin.

While I concur with her analysis, I wish to show how the issues of affirmed alterity (‘this is how we differ …’) are subsumed under the identity heading. In producing the image of their schools, however, the deans are clearly (and skilfully) engaging in an identity/alterity interplay.

**A University Business School**

This ‘academic’ business school, as Wedlin chose to call it, is a relatively new (in existence since 1990) but a fast-growing one (60 research and teaching staff in 2002). Its specificity is the fact that it is part of a large and old university. One of the interviewees stated that the aim of the school was to be one of the leading international business schools, owing to a successful combination of teaching and research.

The identification was quite clear: the school wanted to be a ‘true’ business school. This meant, in the first place, an MBA programme (‘… if you want to be a serious management/business school, you have to have an MBA course’; Wedlin, 2006: 49). The MBA credentials attract the interest of alumni, students, other business schools, and corporations all over the world. And the MBA’s fees provide an important source of income. Another trait common for business schools is the close link to practice: via inclusion of corporate representatives into the advisory board, via executive education, and via consulting undertaken by the faculty.

But the differences should not be overlooked. Unlike many other business schools, this was a school within ‘an ancient, multi-faculty, inter-disciplinary university’ (ibid.: 47). The excellence of this university lies in the scholarly research that is closely connected to undergraduate and graduate teaching, and the business school had to be on the same level. This was a challenge, translated mainly into the high recruitment standards, but also a resource, consisting of easily formed links with other university departments.

Here, however, another differentiation occurred: in forging links with other university departments, the business school had to be careful to avoid becoming like (some of) them, that is ‘ossified, backward-facing’ (ibid.: 47); it had to be vibrant and fast, like other international schools. Thus, the possibilities within the identity/alterity circle were fully exploited: the University Business School was to be like all international business schools through MBA and corporate contacts; unlike other business schools through scholarly research and tight links to the university tradition; but unlike other university departments and like business schools in terms of speed and vivacity.

**A Business Business School**

The other identity narrative that Wedlin presented was that of a business school without ties to a university, established partly outside of the national university system. It was established in the same year as the University Business School, and has the same faculty size. Being a ‘true’ business school did not mean that its alterity claims were non-existent; if anything, they were even stronger. The school represented ‘a dramatically different model’; different from what? – ‘the classical model you (Wedlin) will study’ (p. 51). Further probing
revealed that there were, in fact, two classical models from which a business school can differ. One was ‘a typical university that knows best’ (p. 53); the Business Business School was international (not parochial, like many universities), practical (no ivory towers here), and customer-oriented (rather than faculty-oriented). These differences meant in practice that there were no departmental divisions based on disciplines, no academic titles, and no tenure (the two latter measures intended to free time and energy from the usual academic power struggles, and divert it toward customer needs). The school also had a bonus system to attract and maintain high-level faculty.

Nevertheless, they claimed to be different from a typical business school: ‘outstanding research, outstanding teaching, outstanding ratings, but doing everything differently …’ (p. 53). The main difference from other business schools was the focus on research, and the interviewees claimed that the school managed to achieve what everybody dreams of: research that leads both to applicable results and to high-prestige academic publications. And, although they had an MBA programme, it was small and elitist, and it served primarily as a marketing device.

**Different ways of braiding identity and alterity**

The two narratives have in common the active interplay of alterity and identity features, but in differing proportions and with different results. The University Business School put relatively more weight on identity claims: they were like business schools in some aspects and like university in others. Their alterity was partly established by the attribution of difference to the others, the ‘ossified departments’. In contrast, and similar to the city of Warsaw, the Business Business School built its narrative around a total alterity claim: it was dramatically different from everybody. A reader employed in academia might be sceptical about the degree of drama in such differences; yet at least one trait was unique – bonuses as rewards for research.

Both schools claimed to have good results, and their rankings support their claims. One can speculate, however, about a quicker faculty turnover at Business Business School, as it does not award tenure and its faculty members teach more than other business school teachers do (the University Business School faculty teach more than other university departments, but less than other business schools).

Wedlin interpreted the results similarly, although only in the vocabulary of identity (she spoke of similarities and differences, however). She pointed out that the props for constructing differences and similarities were truly effigies: ‘the traditional university’ (which probably does not exist anywhere anymore) and ‘the real business school’ (as to the character of which, opinions differ, depending on the contrast required).

**AN ALTERITY ONLY?**

Lars Strannegård conducted a prolonged direct observation of an IT company in Stockholm just before the ‘IT-bubble’ burst and during the crisis (October 1999–April 2001). His results are reported in the form of extensive quotes from field notes, discussed in theoretical terms, and illustrated by the work of an artist, Maria Friberg, who herself made a prolonged observation of young businessmen in Stockholm (Strannegård and Friberg, 2001).

The IT whiz kids (or rather young men and women) that Strannegård observed engaged often and spontaneously in self-image construction, both in words and in deeds. What struck me in this image was that it seemed to be constructed only upon alterity. They were different; and in order to be different, they needed to construct a monolithic identity of ‘the Other’, who were all alike and existed in order to differ from:

> They’re not competitors. They’re not innovative and they’re still doing the same thing.
> They’re just a bunch of old dummies.
> We’re doing something totally new. We solve entire business problems and find new business possibilities. (p. 43)
Only one utterance was more conservative, but still in the same spirit: ‘Internet companies don’t do things all that differently. But it goes faster and is more dynamic’ (p. 58).

Strannegård, inspired, among others, by my writings (‘According to Czarniawska, the similarity dimension is the most important aspect of identity construction …’, p. 68), looked for the similarity dimension, and found none. Instead he found this web document describing the company’s ‘vision and values’ (at least in that they were similar!):

We were founded in Sweden, but we’re not Swedish. We are a global company that provides global solutions for the global network economy.

We are building a new model. There is no model for our business. Or for our kind of company. We have set our own standards. Created our own rules. And created our own success.

Until the 2000 stock market crash, ‘they’ were rather unspecified traditional industrial companies, and in the manifesto above, ‘they’ did not exist. The company was unique. After the crash, ‘they’ changed identity, and the company image moved towards negativity (The Opposite):

But we’re nothing like the traditional dot-com company. In most cases they have no business plan. They’re not cohesive and in many cases not very serious about what they’re doing, they’re just out to make some quick money. They’ve been completely exaggerated (sic), spend huge amounts of money and haven’t followed the way the Internet has actually developed. (p. 73)

The IT company is clearly an interesting case, difficult to analyse because of its claim to uniqueness. There are some elements resembling the colonial rhetoric in its contempt for ‘the primitive’ other – in this case, traditional industrial companies. There is the claim of being completely different, that resembles Warsaw’s claims to uniqueness (‘we are like no other city in Europe’). There are tones, especially in the last, more guarded description, similar to the Business Business School claim to be a real business school but dramatically different from all others. Observe, however, that the differences from ‘the traditional dot-com company’ (how quickly do traditions form!) seem to make the IT company similar to the ‘traditional industrial’ one with its boring business plan, boring seriousness, and boring long-term planning. It is difficult to be different without at least somebody being similar.

THE IMAGE OF AN ORGANIZATION

The uses of an organizational image are as many as its users, but let me limit this reasoning to the ways that management can use an image of the organization they are managing. The cases described above allow us to discern the following ways that managers use the image of the city/the school/the company:

- to attract tourists/students/clients;
- to attract investors/sponsors;
- to manage the inhabitants/the employees/themselves;
- to manage the legislators and the media;
- to compete with other organizations.

Therefore a specific identity/alterity interplay must be, intentionally or unintentionally, closely linked to strategy; it may become a part of it. As there are different ways of shaping this interplay, they must lead to different results. New institutionalists (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991) taught us that organizations in the same field of activity tend to acquire the same forms; this phenomenon was named ‘isomorphism’. Isomorphism assumes strong identification mechanisms: managers imitate organization forms because they see their own organizations as similar to their models. Yet there is as clear a tendency to differentiation, at its peak becoming a quest for uniqueness. Therefore one could expect existence of allo-morphism (divergence of forms), but also of automorphism (Schwartz, 1997), an imitation of its own past (as in the case of Warsaw water management), or at least the past of the organization of which one is a part (University Business School). Figure 1.4.2 illustrates the
ALTERITY/IDENTITY INTERPLAY IN IMAGE CONSTRUCTION

| Identification with Others (identity dimension: similar or analogous) | Isomorphism (organizational forms in the same field become alike: Stockholm, Rome, business schools) |
| Differentiation (alterity dimension: unique, identity dimension: opposite to) | Allomorphism (diversity of forms: Warsaw, Business School, IT company) |
| Identification with Own Past (identity dimension: the same) | Automorphism (organizations handle the demands from their environment by using the strategies applied previously with some success: Stockholm, Rome, Warsaw, University Business School) |

Figure 1.4.2 Consequences of different forms of alterity/identity interplay for an organization field

A variety of mechanisms and their consequences for an organization field.

A dominance of a certain form might have far-ranging consequences for an organization field. As we live in an identity paradigm, it is usually assumed that the first form and the resulting isomorphism are most common. I would claim that the other two are equally frequent, but have not been studied enough. It would be interesting to make comparisons between different organization fields, between different regions of the world, between different periods. Many noteworthy things could be said about contemporary organizations by allowing alterity to take its place together with identity.

NOTES

1 The anthology edited by these two scholars, Alterity, Identity, Image. Selves and Others in Society and Scholarship, is an excellent example of this school of thought.

2 At the close of the 19th century and well into the Depression of the 1930s, many cities owned the production or distribution of such organizations as bakeries and dairies that were considered to be satisfying the basic needs of its citizens.

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Organizational Identity as an Emerging Perennial Domain

Dennis A. Gioia

Ours is a field full of fads. Little ideas pop up periodically, run through their 15 minutes of academic fame and fade from the scene. While they burn, they burn brightly, but then they burn out quickly, leaving barely a dying ember, even in the form of a footnote 15 years on. Even our good ideas or domains of work seem to have relatively short half-lives. They make an entrance, dominate the conversation for some period of time and then just sort of recede into the background – acknowledged as important, but exhausted (e.g. organizational culture). Others are deemed to be academically dead (motivation theory). Still others, however, seem to be perennials, that appear to regenerate interest because they are seen as pragmatically important and/or theoretically rejuvenated (leadership).

I confess that I have paid scant attention to ‘what’s hot’ in trying to decide what to study. I’d rather lose myself in an engaging issue or problem, so intrinsic interest in a topic has always been my game (although, as a Renaissance idealist, I have an intrinsic interest in a lot of games – see Gioia, 2004). Nonetheless, I do try to read the glowing embers occasionally, so I can at least avoid working on a soon-to-be-dead area in which no one will care what I might have to say.

With that little proviso in mind, I serendipitously found myself interested in organizational identity in the early 1990s because it ‘emerged’ from one of my grounded studies. Tracking backwards, I found that Albert and Whetten (1985) had made a conceptual statement about identity, but then the notion languished until Dutton and Dukerich (1991) picked it up. That same year I published an identity study without overtly recognizing it as an identity study (Gioia and Chittipeddi, 1991). I pursued that line of work for some years (e.g. Gioia and Thomas, 1996), but by the latter 1990s my idea half-life sensors were screaming at me to ‘Get Out Now!’ because this domain was likely to flame out in interest right at about the turn of the millennium. I figured the field was ready for a culminating statement by that time (the special issue of *Academy of Management Review*, 2000), so I made what I thought was my swansong statement (Gioia et al., 2000), and figured to get out while the getting was good – before the identity flame extinguished.

Boy, was I ever wrong!

Organizational identity theory and research has just continued to burgeon. More scholars are working in this area than ever before. Papers on identity have come to dominate the programmes of many of our conferences, and there is a steady stream of articles coming out in our best journals. The topic has seemed to fuel its own fire. Hmmm! Missing the end of a supposed trend cycle as badly as I missed this one has not only led me to have my half-life sensors re-calibrated, but also to muse on why interest in organizational identity is like the underground coal inferno in Pennsylvania that just keeps growing and spreading.

Why is identity becoming an emerging perennial domain of interest?

Here’s what I think: The idea of organizational identity simply resonates. It resonates with people in organizations, and it resonates with those of us who study organizations. It resonates because it constitutes the most meaningful, most intriguing, most relevant concept we deal with in both our personal and our organizational lives. Identity is

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about us – as individuals and as organization members – and it inquires into the deepest level of our sensemaking and understanding. When you study identity you are delving into the inner reaches – of yourself and your subject of study. There is just something profound about the idea itself, as well as the scholarly effort to study it. Identity also has the requisite mystery that characterizes all the great domains of study. Furthermore, it harbours the multifaceted, multilevel character that is the hallmark of perennial domains. It is a ‘built to last’ concept, and I prophesy that it will continue to emerge and re-emerge in different guises over the coming years.

So, for a volume on emerging topics in organization study, why would I choose to focus on a concept already with us, rather than some demonstrably new concept? Well, it depends on how you construe what is ‘new’. First of all, the study of organizational identity is a relatively young field. Empirical work is barely 15 years old. More importantly, though, the emergence of identity as a domain of interest is a fine exemplar of Durkheim’s (1915) venerable and critical notion that ‘new knowledge’ is most often created by revising what we already know or think we know. In other words, transforming existing knowledge via new modes of understanding constitutes new knowledge. That’s what I think is happening in the short history of identity study. What is perhaps most intriguing about the study of organizational identity, when viewed as a ‘new’ or ‘emerging’ area, despite its strong current presence in the field, is that it looks to be capable of regenerating and continuously re-emerging in new forms. It holds this potential because it represents one of the great themes in the human – and now organizational – experience and, therefore, is not only endlessly fascinating, but also endlessly reinterpretable. Picasso once noted that good artists borrow; great artists steal. What he meant is that the best artists reinterpret the great themes according to different tenets. Identity work will continue to be fresh mainly because it will attract the attention of some of our best scholars, who will work and rework the essence of the identity theme to generate new takes on it and make new sense of it.

Where, then, might organizational identity work be headed? I don’t have a clue. But, I do have some preferences. I’d like to see some work on identity creation. To date, we’ve assumed away the genesis of organizational identity without doing a definitive study on how it actually forms in the first place. I’d also like to see more work on identity change (e.g. Corley and Gioia, 2004). Yes, identity is deep and close-to-the-bone and difficult to change – so much so that it often appears unchanging. Yet, there can be no bona fide deep change without identity change. How can an essential concept be both enduring by definition and yet also changeable? Oh, my! A real conundrum! As the bard in Shakespeare in Love put it, ‘It’s a mystery …!’ Resolving this mysterious paradox is perhaps the future of work on organizational identity. Lastly, identity can be viewed as the centre of gravity of a nomological net. It’s connected to every other important organizational concept. So, let’s figure out what those connections look like – whether they be connections to learning, to knowledge, to practice, to culture, to whatever. Looks like a fantastically interesting set of curiosities that ought to keep this fire glowing incandescently for some time to come, as it continues to (re)emerge as a key organizational concept.

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Is Identity in and of Organizations Just a Passing Fad?

Michael G. Pratt

A colleague asked me a few years ago whether I thought the ‘identity craze’ in organizational studies was reaching its end. I was not sure then. However, even I – an admitted ‘big fan’ – am amazed at the growth in this concept: from new research on the inner workings of identity construction to the emergence of organizational identity in population ecology. But will this growth continue? Or will identity go the way of many other organizational constructs and become a passing fad?

Of course, in some ways, asking whether identity will become a fad is a trick question. Not only is identity ubiquitous across all of the social sciences – it can even be represented mathematically! It is also tied to fundamental questions of human existence – such as ‘Gnothi seauton’ (know thyself). While newer to organizational studies and strongly articulated in Albert and Whetten’s (1985) foundational piece on organizational identity, the history of identity in organizational research extends farther back. For example, Gouldner’s (1957) classic work on cosmopolitans and locals is framed in terms of latent identities. But however deep its roots, it is hard to deny that identity is increasingly in vogue these days. This has led some to question whether identity is being over-used in organizational research, thus predisposing identity – or at least the label – towards becoming passé.

I think there are two conditions under which this might happen. The first is when a preoccupation with capturing the term evolves into conceptual ‘turf wars’. There has been a lot of energy (including my own) that has gone into defining what identity ‘is’ and ‘is not’ – which is either ironic, or highly fitting, for such a concept. However, if the conversation stays here – or worse, evolves into trying to prove that there is only one way to define identity – then the life and vitality of the concept is in peril. To begin, battles over definition tend to exclude rather than invite constructive diversity into the conversation. Similarly, turf wars obscure the point that no one field or set of researchers owns the term. Identity is too big for any one theory or discipline to encapsulate. In organizational studies, we are, at best, humble caretakers in an ongoing conversation about ‘who we are’ and ‘who I am’. Thus, while people should be clear about how they use the term, conceptual wars over the ‘identity of identity’ would appear to have severely diminishing returns.

Second, identity is in peril of becoming a fad when it can mean anything. Having a theoretical ‘open dialogue’ for conceptualizing identity does not mean that anything can and should be identity (or identity-related). In some ways, this is the flip side of turf wars. A net analogy may suffice. When one only allows one definition, it is hard to capture identity (or much else) because the net allows too little in – the holes are too small. By contrast, when anything can be identity, the net’s holes are too big and can capture – and lose – almost anything. This leads one to wonder what the purpose of the net was in the first place.

Going too far down either extreme appears dangerous. But perhaps their common focus – capturing what identity is – is dangerous, too. For identity to continue to flourish and enliven our field, perhaps we should change our question from ‘what is identity?’ to

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‘what does identity do?’ For example, I recently read March’s (1994) work on how we make decisions and was surprised to find a fair amount there on identity. But his focus is not on identity, per se; rather he uses identity to open our eyes to logics of appropriateness. Similarly, Sen’s (2006) book focuses on the role of identity – specifically the danger of ascribing singular identities to others – in fostering societal violence. This compelling analysis of identity-in-use raises several issues for organizational scholars. For example, if single identities (either ascribed or claimed) limit choice, then multiple identities may engender choice and freedom.

Even if the term, ‘identity’, went away, the question(s) that underlies it will continue to manifest itself in other guises. But to ensure its continued contribution to the organizational field, I would encourage all of us to spend more time looking at identity-in-use. This involves more than re-framing a paper as an identity story. Rather, it examines how individuals’, groups’, organizations’, etc. self-construals influence how they think, feel, make choices, coordinate, organize, and otherwise act.

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