

The meaning and implications of a fragmented organizational identity

A Case Study of a Finnish University of Applied Sciences

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ABSTRACT – *The meaning and implications of a fragmented organizational identity*

This study contributes to research on organizational identity and points to some propositions that can be examined in future research. In majority of organizational identity research so far, organizations have been generally described in terms of a single specific meta-identity. Although some researchers argue that organizational identity could be composed of contradictory elements, there has been little study on the effects of hybrid identity on organizational phenomena (Golden-Biddle & Rao 2004, 341). In addition, the basic assumption has been that the members of an organization act consistently in relation to that identity, in many researches, defined by the management. What if the interpretations of the identity vary? The aim of this qualitative case study is to understand the perceptions of both the management and personnel. In a broader view, this study can help to understand what it means if the management and personnel have different perceptions of the core task, goals and practices of the organization.

The analysis reveals that in the case organization, organizational identity is fragmented. There is a gap between management and personnel in terms of interpretations concerning the defining characteristics of the organizational identity.

Differing conceptions and interpretations can be, at least in part, argued to appear as a result of differing interpretations concerning the organization change process.

The study produced increased understanding about the interconnectedness of organizational identity and organizational change. The most significant theoretical contributions of this study are the increase in understanding, as well as, the creation of new knowledge in regard to the implications (operational and attitudinal) of identity fragmentation that manifest themselves at both organizational and individual level and interconnection between the collective interpretation of the identity and commitment. The interpretation and expression of the organizational identity play an important role in the commitment of the members. Contrary to prior belief, the collective interpretation of identity does not automatically seem, however, to lead to organizational commitment of the members. The level and the target of commitment are affected by the expression of the identity in the organization and by the interpretation of the core elements of identity.

Keywords: organizational identity, identity expression, organizational change, commitment, interpretation, understanding.

INTRODUCTION

The theoretical target phenomenon of this article is organizational identity. As a phenomenon it is yet relatively unknown and unexplored in the field of management- and organization studies. It is a multilevel notion; the concept of organizational identity has its roots in the exploration of identity in an individual level. Therefore identity research has traditionally been conducted from the cognition or psychological point of view¹. Individual-level identity research led the researchers' interest towards exploring it within groups and finally in an organization context. In this article I focus attention primarily on the concept of organizational identity that was first introduced as late as in 1985. However, as a topic it has already proven to be fruitful beholding many intriguing possibilities. At the organization level, exploration of identity can increase understanding concerning both organization behaviour as well as the behaviour of individuals in the organization both theoretically and from the practical point of view². Organizational identity research helps understanding better how organizations work, what organization members think and why they act the way they do. Gioia et al. (2000) state that "the concept of identity is key to understanding modern organizations". (Gioia et al. 2000, 78) It helps understanding the profound organizational circumstances. (Puusa 2007) Several researches also suggest that organizational identity influences how organizational members interpret issues and roles, responses to problems, and feelings about the outcomes. (Albert & Whetten 1985; Dutton et al. 1994; Puusa 2007). Whetten (2006) states that "under girding a strong portrayal of organizational identity is the notion that it is used, by organizational members and scholars alike, when other explanations simply won't do." (Whetten 2006, 229)

Some researchers argue that organizations, like individuals, possess multiple identities, with a core assumption in identity theory that actors strongly prefer a coherent, internally consistent self-view (Baumeister, 1998: 682; Ryan & Deci, 2003). So far in the majority of organizational identity research the basic assumption has been that the members of the organization act consistently in relation to the identity. What if the interpretations of the identity vary?

In this study, I try to understand the conceptions

of both the management and personnel. In a broader view, this study can help to understand what it means, if the management and personnel have different perceptions of the core task, goals and practices of the organization. The objective of this article is to understand organization members' interpretations concerning the question of "who we are as an organization" and, through that, interpret what kind of an identity, in terms of its unity, is constructed in the target organization and analyze, what it means from both organization and individual point of view. Although some researchers argue that organizational identity could be composed of contradictory elements, there has been little study of the effects of hybrid identity on organizational phenomena (Golden-Biddle & Rao 2004, 341).

There has been evolving interest in the social construction of identity in organizations in recent years (e.g. Kärreman & Alvesson, 2001; Ainsworth & Hardy, 2004). In such studies identity is regarded as negotiated and an 'interactional accomplishment' (Cerulo, 1997: 387), and investigate why particular identities are invoked (called upon) in particular contexts. In a somewhat similar vein, in this study, organizational identity is understood as a social and symbolic construction. Its purpose is to give a meaning to an experience. Identity is not a "hard" phenomenon that is separate from people and their social interactions. Instead, it is constructed in the interaction and by the conceptions of actors. In other words, identity can be understood as a volatile social construction that bases its existence and significance largely on the interpretative capabilities and preferences of organization members (and stakeholders). Organizational members both shape and are shaped by their organizational membership through this dynamic dialectic process. In the next sections, I consider previous research that has addressed organizational identity related specific issues.

A COMPLEX, MULTILEVEL CONCEPT OF ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY

In recent years organizational identity has become a subject of rather intensive organizational study. The applicability of the concept at multiple levels of analysis and its capacity for integrating analytical insights at the micro-, mid- and macro-levels underscores its cohering potential. However, the use of

the concept is not established and researchers have not reached a consensus regarding its contents and meaning. Definitions proposed differ by their very basic assumptions concerning the ontology and epistemology of the phenomenon. As a result of this incoherence, the phenomenon of identity is interpreted in many ways and, consequently, different schools of thought have emerged.

The concept of organizational identity has its roots in the exploration of identity at an individual level³. In addition, identification⁴ and identity are constructs closely related to one another. Albert (1998) and Huemer et al. (2004) have considered the interrelation and state that an organizational identity can be understood as if a part of an answer relating to identification: *To what is someone identifying themselves with?* Or as Hatch & Schultz (2000) describe it: "Organizational identity, as the object of commitment and a sense of belonging, is seen as providing a cognitive and emotional foundation on which organizational members build meaningful relationships with the organization concerned. Identification can be regarded as forming a mental bridge between an individual and an organization.

The concept of organizational identity was first introduced by Albert and Whetten in 1985. They suggested that organizational identity embodies the characteristics of an organization, that its members perceive to be central, distinctive, and enduring (or continuing) in an organization when past, present and the future is taken into account. Organizational identity is commonly seen as the property of a collective. Organizational identity constitutes part of the shared meanings held by members. It can be understood, at least to some extent, as a collectively-held frame "invoked by members to both interpret and to take action; that is, to make sense of their world". (Golden-Biddle & Rao 2004, 314) Since the establishment of the organizational identity construct, most organizational researchers have applied ideas directly from Albert and Whetten whereas only a few have challenged their approach.

Organizational identity helps answer the question "who are we as an organization". In other words, organizational identity has found to lend insight into the character and behaviour of organizations and their members. According to Elsbach and Kramer (1996), for organizational members, organizational identity may be conceptualized as their cognitive schema or perception of their

organization's central and distinctive attributes, including its positional status and relevant comparison groups. According to Whetten (2006) attributes signify organization's self-defining unique social space and in practical level, organizational identity claims "function as organizational identity referents for members when they are acting or speaking on behalf of their organization.." (Whetten 2006, 220) According to Brickson (2007), identity guides organizational action. Without a conception of who they are, it is impossible for entities to coherently act toward others and for others to know how to interact with them. (Brickson 2007, 866)

EXPRESSION OF ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY – SINGLE OR MULTIPLE IDENTITIES?

Organizational identity is typically taken by scholars to be an organizations members' collective understanding of the features presumed to be central and relatively permanent, and that distinguish the organization from other organizations (Albert & Whetten 1985). Despite of the collective nature of organizational identity, researcher can, based on their adopted background assumptions, assume organizations to have one controlling, collectively held meta-identity or possibly several, simultaneously maintained organizational identities. Formerly organizations were generally described in terms of a single specific identity. This can be the result of the fact that especially in most of the early organizational identity research, organizational elites, namely management, was given the status of being the "spokesperson" of organizational identity. In other words, research focused on management's definitions of organization's identity without regarding other organization members' interpretations. However, for example Golden-Biddle and Rao (2004) point out that members of an organization do not solely construct monolithic organizational identities. Instead, multiple identities can be developed in which members incorporate two or more different and potentially conflicting interpretations (Golden-Biddle & Rao 2004, 315).

In the field of organization studies the topic of multiple organizational identities has yet received relatively little attention. However, while organizational identity seeks answering the question of "who we are as an organization", the answer to this single question, however, is often not a single

answer. Rather, within any single entity there may exist multiple answers and thereby, multiple identities. Alike individuals, organizations can also be conceptualized as having many "selves". However, Pratt and Foreman point out, multiple organizational identities need not be consciously held, or even shared by all members (Albert & Whetten 1985, 2004; Ashforth & Mael 1996; Golden-Biddle & Rao 1997, 2004; Pratt & Rafaeli 1997; Gioia 1998, Stimpert et al. 1998; Prat & Foreman 2000; Brickson 2000; Hogg & Terry 2000; Brown & Starkey 2000; Scott & Lane 2000; Foreman & Whetten 2002; Whetten 2006; Puusa 2007). Whetten (2006, 230) argues that organizations, like individuals, possess multiple identities, with a core assumption in identity theory that actors strongly prefer a coherent, internally consistent self-view. In turn, Brown et al. (2005) argue that organizations could be characterized by multiple identities because identities themselves are narrative accomplishments that by nature, variously evolve, overlap, compete, intertwine, distance and often contest each others' hegemonic reach (Brown et al. 2005, 312, 314).

Researchers have tried to understand the meaning of multiple organizational identities. According to Albert and Whetten, it increases the flexibility of an organization. According to Pratt and Foreman (2000) organizations, can develop dual or multiple identities when operating in complex environments and facing multiple stakeholders with conflicting interests. This in turn, is one of the advantages of multiple organizational identities; it means increased organization adaptability and better ability to consider different stakeholders and their conflicting demands. The downside is increased potential for internal conflicts and extra costs resulting in growing need to negotiate between various organization member groups (Pratt & Foreman 2000). Scott et al. (1998) however state that multiple identities need not be in competition with one another. (Scott, Corman, & Cheney 1998).

Manageability of organizational identity, let alone multiple identities, is a controversial issue among identity researchers. According to Whetten (2006), the discussions of how organizations manage conflicting identities apply to hybrid identity organizations, rather than to organizations generally (Whetten 2006, 230). Pratt and Foreman (2000) however, argue that multiple identities can and should be managed, and that the effectiveness of

this management process can have a wide-ranging impact on the organization. Although, management of multiple identities can be very challenging; organizations can face similar problems as do individuals with multiple personalities. The identity literature provides insights into how individuals may cope with multiple and conflicting identities within themselves. In much of the extant work, particularly in psychology and sociology, scholars have depicted multiple identities as being the norm within individuals. Yet there are only a few attempts to link these individual-level dynamics with the broader dynamics facing members in their organizational settings.

ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGE

As changes are commonplace in organizations and as they are tried to be understood better, the construct of organizational identity has proven to be interesting. By examining organizational identity it is possible to understand and explain better the organizational behaviour in the situation of change. The studies to this point have shown that organizational identity has an important role in the survival of an enterprise in change. (Gioia & Thomas 1996; Whetten & Godfrey 1998; Stimpert et al. 1998; Markkanen 1999; Oswick et al. 2005; Puusa 2007) During significant changes the members really have to think, perhaps even re-evaluate, who they are and what is important for them. In other words, if the aim is to create notable changes in the organization, the focal factors should be altered. That is to say, the basic assumptions that concern the organization and describe the organizational identity have to be changed. In addition, the questions of identification and commitment are also relevant and current nowadays when organizations are going through constant changes⁵.

For a fairly long time, representatives from different schools of thought viewed that organizational identity is a collectively shared understanding of the personnel about the organization. This understanding was regarded as relatively stable and fixed. The dimension of centrality that is characteristic to organizational identity has been considered to explain the aspect of permanency. In other words, it is thought that the focal characteristics of an organization reject the attempts of change, because they are tied to the history of the

organization. (Gioia & Thomas 1996). In addition, the results imply that the way in which the management handles, understands and interprets the identity may either enhance or prevent change. The choice and approach of management style to follow through with the change is even more demanding when the change concerns an expert organization, where the members are highly educated and used to independent brainwork (Puusa 2007). Research results have shown that enterprises are able to grow and change in a way that is consistently related to the organizational identity. They also indicate that change is extremely difficult if it does not support the present identity. (Stimpert et al. 1998) In other words, regarding most of the organizations consistency has shown to be essential. The complex and social character of identity partly explains the difficulties that are related to organizational change and adaptation.

INTRODUCTION TO RESEARCH CONTEXT AND METHODOLOGICAL CHOICES

The data was collected in one Finnish University of Applied Sciences (formerly referred as a polytechnic). The case polytechnic is an expert organization⁶ regarded as an example of an organization that is undergoing a fundamental change process. In this study, change is understood to be a natural part of an organization, because the members constantly contemplate, shape and evaluate the meanings related to the organization. Change is "naturally" present in the chosen context, so it acts as a context of the examination of the expression of identity of the target organization. However, it is also believed that changes can be classified theoretically according to their type. Typologies help understand the nature and extent of the change. For example Nadler and Tushman point out that while organizations constantly change, the extent, nature and the intensity of change processes vary. The view is also shared for example by Reger et al. (1998) and Van de Ven & Poole (1995). According to Nadler and Tushman, the type of change that affects the organization as a whole, can be referred as strategic organization change. For these types of changes it is typical that they force companies to re-evaluate their core existence and basic values. In addition, strategic change can refer to change in organizations core mission. (Nadler & Tushman 1990, 79-80). As many polytechnics, the case

organization has developed through a testing phase into a permanent polytechnic. The process of change has been long-lasting and strategic and it has affected the whole organization. An organization has had to evaluate the basis of its existence, its core task and the values that direct its operations.

Polytechnics as institutions are relatively new among Finnish educational institutes. It is important to do research in this context, because the national competitiveness is directly dependent on the educational level and know-how of the country compared to others. According to Rask (2002), the development of polytechnics has been directed by the goal of high-standard education that is close to working life as well as of a desire to positively influence society. The choice of research subject was affected by the discussion that has been going on since the establishment of polytechnics about their task, purpose, operation and even about the legitimacy of their existence. When the position of polytechnics and especially the problems relating to the establishment of this position is examined, it is important to know whether the common goal is believed in, understood collectively or acted systematically in favor of inside the organization. Thus, it is important to understand the identity of the organization. What kind of identity is, in terms of its unity, then, constructed to the case polytechnic during the little over ten years? Moreover, the choice of the research subject was influenced by the fact that organizational research in the context of academic institutions is relatively rarely done.

The methodological approach of this study is qualitative case study, the choices of which are guided by the background assumptions of philosophy of science that are in accordance with the interpretative research paradigm. From the point of view of the research process, the central concepts are experiences, conceptions, interpretation, understanding and the hermeneutical circle.

A critical question in the empirical research of identity has been what can be regarded as legitimate, appropriate source of information. In other words, who or which party can define and specify an organizational identity or whose story or description of identity is relevant? According to Whetten (2006), one of the most difficult aspects of framing organizational identity from the perspective of an organizational actor is properly accounting for the subjective ("I") frame of reference, at the

core of identity theory and suggested by persistent questions such as "Who speaks for an organization?" and "Who gets to specify an organization's identity?" (Whetten 2006, 229) To this point, the study of identity has been dominated by the perspective of the management. Ravasi and Van Rekom (2003) state that because of their special position in the organization the researchers have regarded managers as kind of experts in describing and defining identity. If the only perspective is the one of the management, the results can be very different from the case where the point of view of the other personnel is also taken into account. (Ravasi & Van Rekom 2003)

The data was collected by using individual and group theme interviews. Altogether 21 interviews were conducted. Both management and personnel, in the department of business economics, were interviewed. In the sample, dimensional sampling method was used (Arnold 1970). The interviewees were classified into different groups according to either their background or position. Managers were divided into groups according to their position; top-management, middle-management and department supervisors. Teachers were categorized into three different groups according to their work-experience. The interviewees were selected to give a diversity of views including long-term employees with a firm experience in education, those with experience from other trades as well and those without a long-term experience from the field of education or any other, but who have a permanent position at the case organization. In this way, I hoped to get versatile views concerning organizational identity. The interviews were not heavily structured but generally covered issues of what is central and distinctive for the organization and what kinds of conceptions interviewees have about the change.

The interviews, which lasted between 50 and 90 minutes, were recorded and transcribed. I subjected the transcripts to a form of a qualitative content analysis. The interviews yielded a large amount of qualitative data. Analysis process included going back and forth between the corpus and the theoretical framework. First I scanned the data in search of dominant themes. Themes were named based on theoretical concepts. I soon noticed that despite the heterogeneous sample, there were "two mainstreams" identifiable in the data. The managers and personnel interpreted issues related to identity differently. However,

among the managers and among the personnel, the interpretations were very much alike, in other words, the analysis revealed somewhat unitary notion of identity.

RESEARCH RESULTS

Dimension of centrality

The aim of this theme was to understand how the members perceive their organization and what kinds of meanings are attached to it. The basis of the existence of the organization was described in a similar way by both the teachers and the managers. The basic task was seen as defined from outside. The justification for existence was not questioned. Still, the managers and the teachers had different perceptions of the execution of the core task. The management tried to execute the core task they had collectively interpreted. This interpretation was analyzed very comprehensively compared to the one of the teachers. Managers thought that the integration of three tasks (educational, regional development and R&D) and the focus areas defined in organizations strategy were focal in the organization. Moreover, they seemed to be very strongly committed to both their organization and to the ideology of polytechnics in general.

The management had invested in the creation of vision and strategy. The vision and strategy of an organization interpreted by the management have a great impact on the construction of identity. It was interpreted in the perceptions of the management that strategy and vision are building blocks with the help of which an individual and standout identity is constructed to the organization. In addition, the managers had a belief that other members of the organization shared their interpretation of the organizational identity. According to their interpretation, the construction of the identity is done in cooperation and consensus of the personnel. The management saw that the organization is very coherent and this was perceived to be a characteristic, important and defining feature of the organization.

From the point of view of the personnel, the present perception of identity was constructed partly by criticality that can be interpreted to express the perceptions of change and the management of change. The personnel regarded the concepts of vision and strategy, which define the goals and

practices of the organization, as distant and abstract. In their interpretation, vision and strategy did not describe the identity in the target organization. This was reflected also in the perceptions about their own task and the focal points in their own work. The question of "what is focal in the perspective of the organization" was typically answered with another question: "Is or should be?" Based on this, it is possible to interpret that personnel's conceptualization of identity is marked by the perception of a gap between the management's and personnel's interpretation of the present situation. In addition, it is marked by the perception of a gap between present and ideal identity. At the organizational and individual levels, the personnel regarded the execution of the pedagogical task, the organizing of teaching, as focal.

The personnel were committed to their work, developing themselves and maintaining professional skills. They stated to take pride in what they do. They for example put a lot of effort in preparing their lectures and all stated that they maintain and develop their skills in various ways, such as by reading or studying. They did not, however, seem to be as committed to the organization as the management. The commitment seemed to be weakened by the dissimilar interpretation of the execution of the basic, focal task. The personnel interpreted that the management regarded the planning of the vision and strategy as their central task, whereas they saw that in addition to planning the vision and strategy should also be enabled and implemented.

Unlike the management, the personnel regarded the organization fairly incoherent. More coherence was hoped for in the future. The management and personnel shared the perception of the organization as constantly developing and wanting to develop.

Dimension of distinctiveness

The aim was to understand how the organization distinguishes itself from other organizations in the opinion of the members. In other words, what makes the organization original? According to both the management and the personnel, change was considered as a natural part of the organization and suitable, constant development was also hoped for in the future. The management thought

that the operation of the polytechnic is mainly established and they regarded their organization as strongly original. Based on the data it could be argued that a collectively interpreted and differentiated identity has been constructed among the management. They also believe in it and it is reflected in their behaviour.

The teachers did not, however, consider the identity of polytechnics to be very strong or clear yet. It seems that the construction of identity is not finished among the teachers. Identity was described through different, fairly concrete and structural features such as the size of the organization and its location. But when examined explicitly the personnel did not interpret the organization to have a distinctive, strong identity that would, make their organization clearly unique and different from other polytechnics. On the other hand, the personnel seemed to have a strong need to experience and feel the identity as original, so that other factors than externally perceived or structural ones could be related in its interpretation. They considered it to be important that the organization could be regarded as original and different from others.

Also the time aspect that is related to identity seemed to play an important role: the personnel in the target organization highlighted the present together with the past. They reflected the past particularly when analyzing the changes that have taken place in the organization. They talked a lot about their daily work and its requirements. They also reflected it in regards to the changes that have taken place as well as the resources they are provided with. The management, on the other hand, constructed their perception of identity mainly through the future.

Interconnectedness between organizational identity and organizational change

During the interviews the topic of change was brought up on several occasions. Discussions helped understand the connection between organizational identity and organizational change. Based on analysis the description of the first phases of the change process was consistent among the management and the personnel. Those who had been working in the organization from the beginning can be interpreted as to have been very committed to pursue the goals of the organization in the first phases. After this the descriptions started to become

differentiated. According to the management, the change has progressed in a way that was systematic, hoped for and target-oriented. It can be interpreted that the change and the construction of identity are connected to one another, because in addition to structural factors, also the values of the organization were established. From the beginning, the management aimed to establish practices and to construct a distinct identity in cooperation with other members of the organization and its stakeholders. Because the managers interpreted that this construction has succeeded collectively, and in a way that the identity has become strong, this interpretation reflects their behaviour, e.g. their decision making. Moreover, they interpreted the change process to have been a large one. During interviews, many elements highlighting their commitment were brought up.

In the interviews with the personnel, the examination of individual level as a portrayer of the change was brought up. Based on this, it is possible to interpret that the teachers are more committed to teaching, in other words their professional identity, than to the organization. Several thought that their work was not appreciated enough by the managers or they did not feel that they were sufficiently permitted to participate in the planning and implementation of the operations. Thus, for example, giving feedback and the communication as a whole become central when the perceptions and behaviour of the members of the organization are interpreted and understood.

The more changes there have been in the organization, the more the perceptions of the members about their organization have become differentiated. The personnel feel that the management's perception of the core task has become more and more abstract. This is also reflected in the operations. When examined at the organizational level, it could be said that many concrete and structural factors have been improved and stabilized through the change. At the same time, the organization has become more incoherent. There is a gap between the management and the personnel. Thus, there are (at least) two differently interpreted identities in the organization. This in turn has weakened the commitment of the personnel to the organization. According to the data, organizational change, manifestation of identity and commitment are connected to one another.

CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions about the organizational identity

Based on this study, the construction of identity is marked by a process nature. This supports the fact that organizational identity can be regarded as an internal process of development. It is constructed, not built. Thus, identity cannot be outsourced or deeply understood from outside. In addition, this study enforces the view that the construction of identity is affected by time, social interaction as well as interpretations and reinterpretations of different parties. So, by nature it is complex, social and changing in time.

Organizational identity and organizational change

Organizational change can be regarded as a complex and multidimensional phenomenon. In the target organization, the organizational change can be interpreted to have maintained operational. The organization had succeeded to change and establish processes and practices. These types of changes are incremental that aim to minor modifications. The goal in the target organization was, however, a strategic, fundamental change that would have concerned the whole organization and affected it deeper than in the structures and processes enhancing the operations. In other words, a change of attitude that would have reflected in operations as well was pursued. The aspiration for this type of change was reflected in the answers of the managers when they talked about the creation processes of vision and strategy. The management sets conscious goals that are consciously pursued after. This approach is shown in the interpretations of identity, for example, in the fact that the interviewed managers thought that the other personnel share their perception of the focal features of the identity. Teachers' interpretations were, however, in many cases even contrary.

The planning of change seemed to have been mainly future-oriented. It could be argued that to some extent according to employees, this seems to have happened at the cost of present operations. According to Reger et al. (1994) an organization can be diverged from its planned strategy without its knowledge. This seems to be the case in the

target organization because the perceptions of the management and the personnel about the core task and goals differ from one another. It is evident that this is reflected also in the operations and organization behaviour.

The change present in the target context and the interpretations concerning it, lead to the examination of time dimension of organizational identity. In the framework, it was brought up how, according to the first definition of organizational identity presented in 1985, the characteristics of identity should be examined from the point of views of the past, present and future. (Albert & Whetten 1985; Whetten & Godfrey 1998; Stimpert et al. 1998; Gioia et al. 2000; Ravasi & Phillips; Oliver & Roos 2003; Ravasi & Van Rekom 2003; Hatum & Pettigrew 2004) This examination is relevant when attempting to better understand the link between organizational identity and behaviour of change. In the target organization, the management and the personnel structured identity differently also regarding the time dimension. In the point of view of the personnel, the past and present were highlighted. The management constructed its perception of identity more through the future. Thus, especially in a time of significant changes it is important to find a connection between the past and future of the organization. This relates to the discussion of change management, managers should understand that at the operational level the work is done "here and now" rather than "tomorrow". Based on the results, the teachers see identity as a phenomenon that is greatly affected by the past and present and not so much by the perceptions of the future. Therefore it can be stated that based on this study, the concepts of time and change are closely connected to the recognition and construction of identity.

Expression of organizational identity

In the theoretical part of this article it was mentioned that based on the background assumptions, researchers assume organizations to be characterized either with single or multiple identities. In the case organization of this study, at least two, collectively interpreted, but when comparing, different identities have been constructed. This in turn, emphasizes the basic assumption in interpretative research paradigm according to which, despite the subjectivity and individual perceptions, human beings,

especially in social groups, have a need for some stability of meaning⁷. Contrary to majority of prior research, in this study also other members' conceptions of the organization besides the managers were taken into account. In other words, the interviewees purposefully consisted of individuals with heterogeneous positions and backgrounds and thereby the choice of sample offered a possibility to examine the perceptions of identity diversely and thus, it was possible that opposite perceptions and different interpretations would come up. Regardless of the diversity of interviewees and chosen research method, that leaves a lot of room for free expression, similarities and collective interpretations were distinctive in the corpus. Research results also reinforce the conception of the collective nature of the organizational identity (Dutton et al. 1994; Weick 1995; Schein 1985; Markkanen 1999; Albert et al. 2000; Davies et al. 2003).

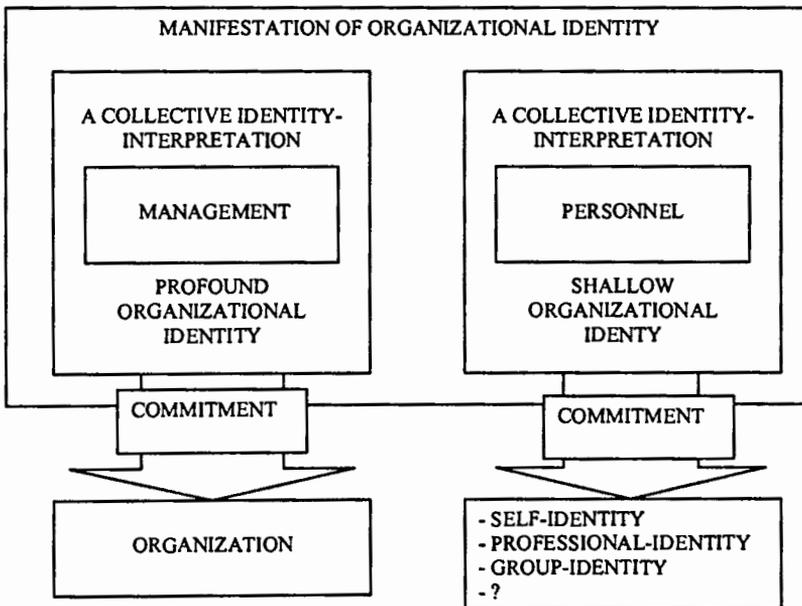
Like discussed in the theoretical part of the article, researchers have contemplated over the meaning and significance, in other words, implications of multiple identity construction in an organization. From the perspective of the case organization, identity fragmentation seems to be a result of different perceptions about the organizational change and its execution. Research highlights the importance to include personnel in to the strategic planning process⁸. Need for involvement is especially relevant in an expert organization. Personnel feel that the management has been incapable to facilitate their work properly. Facilitation has been inadequate in terms of time, money, participation and communication. These practical issues alongside with conflicting interpretations concerning core elements of organizational identity, what is central and distinctive in the organization, lead to the conclusion that the construction of two, conflicting organizational identities in the case organization can be regarded to be harmful in terms of organization behaviour. Construction of multiple identities has then created a gap between management and personnel in regard as to what is considered central and defining the core existence of the organization. This in turn, has also lead to differing perceptions about the future of the organization, namely, about the ideal organization identity. Based on this, it can be stated that at least to some degree, the target organization is suffering from identity crisis. According to literature, in this type of situation management should pay extra attention to enabling the change process⁹. The

research results also help to highlight that if the management wants to carry out a change within an organization, it cannot be managed per se.

Construction of two, conflicting organizational identities can be interpreted to have two kinds of implications in the case organization: *operational* and *attitudinal* that manifest themselves at both organizational and individual level. Firstly, due to differing perceptions concerning the organizations focal task and its execution, performance can become estranged from its strategy. This in turn, also effect on achieving the set vision. In practice, how organizational members interpret the central task of the organization, affects their daily work-behaviour and thereby the organization behaviour. Secondly, contradictory interpretations concerning identity and a created gap between the management and personnel has lead to a decrease in motivation and commitment to the organization among personnel¹⁰. In other words, based on the research, it can be stated that organizational identity expression, i.e. the question of whether there are one or several identities constructed in the organization, has an effect on *to what* and *with what intensity* people in the organization commit themselves to. In the target organization, it can be concluded that the personnel is committed to their work, self-development and developing their professional skills. The management, in turn, is also

committed to the organization. They have a collective interpretation of their organization's identity, they believe in it, and act accordingly. At an attitudinal level, they are motivated and committed to both their work and the organization. Among the personnel, there is also a collective understanding about the organizational identity. However, it conflicts with the management's interpretation. In addition, personnel do not feel the organizational identity to be strong and the kind that makes their organization unique. This is relevant from the point of view of commitment; instead of committing themselves to the organization, self- and professional identities have grown stronger among the personnel.

Furthermore, the study produced increased understanding in regard to the interconnectedness between collective interpretation of the identity and commitment¹¹. The interpretation and expression of the organizational identity play an important role in the commitment of the members. However, contrary to prior belief, the collective interpretation of identity does not seem to lead to the organizational commitment of the members. The intensity and the target of commitment are affected by the expression of the identity in the organization and by the interpretation of the level of the identity; in other words, if it is believed in¹² and regarded as strong and distinctive (picture 1.).



Picture 1. A collective organization identity interpretation and the target of commitment

It is important to recognize the study's obvious limitations. This was a qualitative case study and due to the nature of the study, the findings cannot be applied as such to other organizational contexts and populations. In addition, from the point of view of the case organization, I do not seek to present here a generalized or representative view, but rather an interpretation that demonstrates different characterizations of the dimensions constructing organizational identity. The analysis is based on interview material and understanding of the organizational context at the time. The extracts and analysis presented here are, therefore, my interpretation, my argument for understanding the case in a particular way, just as I am suggesting that the organizational members were arguing for particular perspectives. In sum, despite its limitations, I believe that this study offers new insight for emerging theory and research on the meaning and relevance of organizational identity and the interrelation between organizational identity, change and commitment.

FINALLY

As a conclusion, it is stated that exploring identity and its expression within an organization is a very interesting and revealing research agenda. This kind of research concentrates on analyzing if there occurs one or multiple identities within the organization context simultaneously and seeks to understand the effects of such manifestation. Despite of research conducted so far, for example by Ashforth & Mael (1996), Golden-Biddle & Rao (1997), Stimpert et. al. (1998), Albert et. al. (2000), Brickson (2000) and Foreman & Whetten (2002), Ravasi and Phillips suggest that further investigation of the factors that make a monolithic or a pluralistic identity beneficial to the organization could be a promising path for future research (Ravasi & Phillips, 34).

The most important contribution of this study is the broadening of understanding and new information about the expression of organizational identity and its meaning at both organization and individual level. Operational as well as attitudinal implications were identified in the chosen context. Furthermore, the study produced new knowledge in regard to the interconnectedness between collective organizational identity interpretation and commitment.

In addition, the research increases the understanding of the link between the organizational identity and change. The interpretations of organizational change construct the perception of identity. The different interpretations concerning organizational change can lead to the dispersion of identity. Controversial interpretations of change and identity may result in difficulties in the implementation of change. The research also help to highlight that if the management wants to carry out a fundamental organization change, it is essential to consider the fundamental characteristics of the organization, its identity and varying interpretations of it. The study shows the importance of examining the expression of organizational identity also in practice, because it helped to understand organizational behaviour during change in the target organization. Thereby, it can be stated that organizational identity is not only an academic construct, it is a phenomenon that really exists.

FOOTNOTES

¹ See for example Hatch & Schultz (2002); Ravasi & Van Rekom (2003).

² Many organizational identity researchers, for example Whetten & Godfrey (1998), Oliver & Roos (2003), Hatch & Schultz (2004), and Puusa (2007), state that identity as a theoretical construction has proven to have a strong relation also to practice.

³ See for example Ashfort & Mael 1989; Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail 1994; Elsbach & Kramer 1996; Scott & Lane 2000; Lindgren & Wählin 2001; Alveson 2001; Empson 2004, Brickson 2007.

⁴ Identification can be defined as an individual's sense of oneness or belongingness within an organization. Organization identity, when realized by organization members, has an effect on how strongly individuals within the organization, identify themselves with the organization. Strong identification can then result in stronger commitment to the organization and its goals (Puusa & Tolvanen 2006).

⁵ Author acknowledges that there is a conceptual overlap between organizational identification and commitment. Despite concepts similarities, some researchers have attempted to make the concepts more conceptually distinct. In this research similar to organizational identification, the focus of organizational commitment is the relationship between an individual member and the employing organization and thereby identification is assumed to be a large part of organizational commitment.

⁶ See for example Eklund 1992, 15, 59–60, 62, 64, 115.

⁷ See for example Whetten & Godfrey 1998, 35–42.

⁸ See for example McEwen et al. 1988; Kanter 1983 in Burnes 2004, 96.

⁹ See for example Huff et al. 1992, 55–76; Van de Ven & Poole 1995; Barney et al. 1998, 139–144, 146.

¹⁰ For example Collins and Porras (1994) have found the interconnectedness between the concepts of organizational identity, vision, motivation and commitment. According to them, in organizations where there is a strong, collectively interpreted identity, organizational members have a strong feeling about the meaning and purpose, which in turn, increases their motivation and willingness to act in favour of organization's goals.

¹¹ See also Fiol 1991.

¹² See Puusa 2007.

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