

EDITORIALE

STUDYING ORGANIZATIONS: IDENTITY, PLURALISM, AND CHANGE

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1. Introduction

This special issue is the outcome of a Call for paper that has involved the community of organizational scholars, in the aftermath of the XX WOA (Workshop on Organization) Palermo 2019. The workshop has brought together the community of organization scholars around the concept of identity and it has represented a twofold chance: on the one hand, they dealt with organizational identity, to be inquired by the category of design and behaviour, on the other they dealt with the identity of organization studies, that are characterised by a strong disciplinary pluralism, and therefore, unavoidably, with the theme of how to address change as "sparring partner" of our theoretical-disciplinary statute. Thus, an opportunity for comparing it with an oxymoron: "stable change". This (apparent, or real?) oxymoron has numerous declinations in our community of researchers and teachers of organizational studies.

2. Organizational identity debate

In a way, organizational identities represent an establishing field of inquiry (Brown, 2015; Ybema et al., 2009). The concept of identity in organization is inquired both from a conceptual and pragmatic point of view. Concerning the former, the structuration of the identity concepts addresses the definition of identity, the evolution of the identity over time, the process of identity construction, and in which ways identity could be studied (Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2003; Gabriel, 1999; Kreiner et al., 2006). Concerning the latter, the identity as a phenomenon addresses the role played by this concept within organizational processes and performances, thus looking at relationships, motivations, control, institutional change and diversity management (Johansson et al., 2017; Endrissat et al., 2017). Therefore, empirical research on the theme is focusing on specific domains of inquiry, characterised by the relevance of the social face within organizational processes. If seen as a construction process, identity means also dialogue, conducted by more than one identity that take action on the same playground. Here it emerges the matter of pluralism. Are the collective identities pluralistic by definition? Otherwise, is the collective identity the sum of pluralities? Pluralism, if compared with identity becomes in turn a point of weakness or a point of strength of the organization (Shipilov et al., 2014). In this sense, the contribution by Beech (2011) promotes the conception of identity as an increasing construct, in which liminality supports the progressive identity construction aspects. However, if on the one hand, the capacity to relate with different actors could increase the strategic alternatives at the

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management disposal, on the other this capacity could create difficulties in univocally acknowledge the organizational action. Pluralism is thus tightly linked to the change (Eisenhardt, 2000). The call has drawn the attention by the community, fostering the submission of heterogenous contributions. Given the challenging proposal of proposing a dialogue between the three concepts of identity, pluralism, and change, the papers submitted do actually introduce a novel perspective. Indeed, most of the researches are focused on the concept of identity, construing from time to time its own relationship with pluralism and change (Gioia and Hamilton, 2016).

The concept of organizational identity is widely debated in organizational literature and, more generally, in management studies, up to the point where organizational identity is linked almost to everything (Alvesson et al., 2008; Van Tonder and Lessing, 2003). As Anteby and Anderson (2014) underline, the concept of identity was absent in the organizational context up until 1980. The 1980s represent in the literature the introduction of organizational identity, as “theories and research suggest that members’ identities and organizational identity are closely linked” (Scott and Lane, 2000, p. 43).

2.1 Individualistic and constructivist view of identity in organization

From the extensive literature available on this topic, it is nonetheless of interest those contributions that allow us to foster an interaction between identity, at the organizational level, and the construction of identity, at the individual level. Following this criterion, the concept of identity evolves, in organizational studies, from an individualistic view (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Fiol and Huff, 1992; Gioia et al., 2000; Brown and Starkey, 2000) to a social one (Ashfort and Mael, 1989; Scott and Lane, 2000; Alvesson and Wilmott, 2002; Alvesson et al, 2008). Therefore, the evolution of the concept of identity can be subsumed under two broad categories: the permanence of those elements strictly linked to the organizational identity and the construction of its own social identity, where elements of the individual identity interact with the organization, and vice versa. We refer to the two categorisations as the classical and constructivist approach. And on this ridge that stands out (and clarifies) the nature of the oxymoron evoked at the beginning of this editorial.

Albert and Whetten (1985) can be considered as the pioneers of the classical approach. They were the first scholars to use the term ‘organizational identity’ in order to identify those elements that remain “stable, substantial and distinctive” over the time. The concept of identity argued by Albert and Whetten (1985) is quite close to the etymology of the word ‘identity’: id in Latin means ‘the same’, enduring over the time. The authors analysed a period of economic crisis in their university, interviewing some of their colleagues and asking them what they would do and what their future plans would be in case they were fired. Their answers shed light on how the concept of identity crisis moves from individuals to organization. From this point of view, the organizational identity becomes more visible and acknowledgeable during periods of crisis, in that precise moment when people are forced to question which elements are stable and which are not.

Gioia et al. (2000) expand on Albert and Whetten's (1985) elements of stability and distinctiveness over the time in organizational identity by adding that, while an organization might not be considered stable over time, it nevertheless preserves some of its features, thus conveying a certain halo of stability. Thus, according to Gioia et al. (2000), what changes are the meanings associated with those labels that represent the stable elements of the organizational identity. In other words, while individuals perceive organizations as stable, they are always at the mercy of change as the meanings associated with those labels change. Gioia et al. (2000) call this process "adaptive instability" (Gioia et al., 2000, p. 63), which allows organization's members to interpret certain organizational labels, in order to increase their self-esteem (Brown and Starkey, 2000). The next step is to understand how much stable the identity has to be. Is it necessary that organizational stability is saved over time or not? Are there any particular moments or circumstances in which these characteristics may change?

Corley and Harrison (2009) state that organizations need to change in order to preserve their own identity. Therefore, identity is not only an individual issue but a collective one. Therefore, it is strictly correlated with the interaction among individuals and the interaction between individuals and the organization in the wider social context. Likewise, the organization's identity is of significance for all the individuals belonging to that organization and, correspondingly, individuals' identity is of paramount significance for the organization. Thus, people who are undergoing a process of identity (gender) transition or those who are planning to do so should be valued by managers and by all the organization's members. Individuals construct their identity in the workplace because there is a dialectical relationship between social identity (shaped also by the organization) and the occupation (Beagan et al., 2012).

The constructivist approach assumes that the social context is a lever for the shaping of identity. Indeed, the Social Identity Theory (Ashfort and Mael, 1989) argues that the individual tries to obtain a better social identity thanks to the feeling of belongingness to groups that are highly considered. Organization's members face a social identification process through the organizational identity. Drawing on the social constructivist view of organizational identity means to admit that organization does not remain stable over the time but, rather, it constructs itself every day, shedding light on the more evident phenomenon of if the recognition of the individuals' identities matters for the whole organization as much as it matters for the individuals themselves. According to Knights (2015), it is possible to go beyond the subjectivity, looking at knowledge that derives from the individuals' representation. This representation is not limited to the categories imposed by society, but he argues for a dynamic ontology of the subject, aiming to dissolve, and not only challenge, the stable view of identity (Dobusch and Schoeneborn, 2015).

3. A contribution to the debate

The papers presented into this issue take in account this twofold perspective of identity, considering both the manifoldness of the concept, and the co-existence of elements that on the other hand are stable, substantial, and distinctive, with elements that are continuously built in the social context. The six papers presented into this issue are symbolically splitted into two parts, the first dedicated to public bodies and to how change is tied to distinctive identity, more assumed in a perspective of change, the second one more focused on the construction of identity in private contexts.

In the first two contributions of this special issue the concept of identity is useful to underpinning the inner pluralism of such research objects, which are in themselves not identifiable in a traditional and comforting category. For instance, in the paper authored by Francesco Virili, Maddalena Sorrentino, Giancarlo Manzi, "Public/private collaboration and multiplicity in the identity-mission nexus: the BikeMi case" the framework built around the organizational identity becomes foundational of the inquiring around the implicit hybridity of a public/private body. In the second paper of this special issue, titled "Ambidextrous identity in Public Management. The case of Apulia Region" by Pamela Palmi, Angelo Coralli, Antonio Caforio, Angelo Scialpi, identity and change are tightly interrelated. Through a case study concerning the adoption of a public service model with an ambidextrous approach, identity is framed as the gap between rationality and creativity. The latter becomes fundamental for change, especially if seen through the lens of a public administration. Closing the first part of the issue around public bodies, we find the paper authored by Sabrina Bonomi, Daria Sarti, Sandra Fedrigo, "Identity and pluralism: studying the experience of a public network aimed at redesigning social services", that addresses the issue of social services provision. On the one hand, the paper is engaged in considering the different identities involved in the difficult aim of providing social services in a low budget institutional context, on the other it opens a reflection around the identity of some public administrations, who depends by the efficacy and the trustworthiness of such service, both from a political point of view and public managers performances.

The second part of the special issue starts with the paper authored by Marzia Ventura and Rocco Reina "Conflict management styles in Medical Health Managers", where different conflict management styles are addressed. In particular, conflict usually derives from the access to resources, but they are also coming from changes occurring in organizations and institutional contexts. The paper "Engaging active stakeholders in the social enterprise: Evidence of social values as a challenge to organizational identity" by Rita Bissola, Barbara Imperatori, Domenico Bodega, titled "Engaging active stakeholders in the social enterprise: Evidence of social values as a challenge to organizational identity", addresses how the construction of identity is based even on external pressures. They adopt the Stakeholder theory inevitably to inquire Social Enterprises and to understand which aspects are mainly taken in account when dealing with the realm of responsibility. The last paper of this issue, titled "Identity and behaviors in the era of social recruiting: The Millennials' perspective", by Francesca Mochi, Rita Bissola, Barbara Imperatori, concerns the Millennials' willingness in considering as potential employer, those corporations who

construe their identity also through the use of social media, especially for the aspects concerning the employer branding. Therefore, looking at the challenging proposal of intertwining identity, pluralism, and change, these six articles are an expression of how much difficult could be framing change in stable categories without problematising it in a more general debate around the identity and pluralism of organization studies. Therefore, these six researches proposed in this Special issue of "ImpresaProgetto" contribute to make clear how kaleidoscopic and problematic is the theme of identity, both from the perspective of public bodies and private companies, providing only some (among many other possible) points of view, secondarily contributing to the identity in the broader context of Italian researchers and professors of business organization who participated at the XX WOA in Palermo on February 2019.

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