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“Being a construction worker”: Identity effects as a self-reinforcing mechanism in construction

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Abstract

The interplay between identity and behaviour has been well documented in the literature, but how identity and organizational life relate warrants future research. This paper draws on data from an ongoing longitudinal case study in a large construction company in order to examine how the “self” interacts with the organizational cultural capital. Our results indicate that there exists a strong collective identity that permeates the members of the organization regardless of role, position, and function. We claim that the effect of this strong collective identity is at the heart of an organizational self-reinforcing mechanism that can explain specific traits of organizational life in construction. We conclude by arguing that the identify effect could result in a problematic contradiction between operational “best practices” and strategic “best practices” in construction.

Keywords: identity effects, organizational life, self-reinforcing mechanism, construction

Manager J: *“It is very hard to find a good construction worker and then teach him [sic] how to deal with numbers?”*

Researcher: *“Why don’t you find someone that already knows numbers and instead teach them about construction?”*

Manager J: *“That possibility never occurred to me!”*

This short exchange took place during a field observation of strategy away-days (e.g. Hodgkinson et al, 2006) for a group of middle-level managers in a construction firm. They were discussing the difficulty of finding good recruits for strategic positions in the organization. The excerpt illustrates the implicit relationship between the self and culture as composite parts (Hermans, 2001). Here the manager is referring to the wider construct of an industrial culture, construction, and to the self, the identity of those who work within construction; in other words he is referring to his own self identity. To him a “good manager” is a “good construction worker”. As many culture scholars, he assumes that cultures are homogeneous, defined by criteria such as place and practice, time and semiotic tools (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, 1989). Yet, he voices a concern which reflects the challenges of survival in an increasingly globalised world, where boundaries between cultures: national, industrial, or organizational are becoming permeable. This permeability leads to a necessary recombination of existing practices, a form of hybridization (Hermans, 2001; Pieterse, 1995), which in turn creates multiple identities, e.g. a good construction worker who is also competent with numbers, or maybe an economist who has appropriated construction work. Based on findings from an ongoing longitudinal (from 2005) and interpretative empirically-based study of strategy processes and practices in a large construction organization, we explore the relationship between the self and the “construction culture”. We argue that the social categories to which people belong have profound impacts on their perceptions of self. Contrary to traditional theories of culture as being something *out there*, we assume that culture exists *in the self* and that there is a continuous interplay and enactment between self and culture. It is this enactment and its implication for construction organizations that we explore in this paper. We have seen that the self and the culture are pulling toward maintaining cultural boundaries rather than allowing for hybridization and change. Using the voices of a large number of managers at different levels of the organization, this paper provides a picture of how the on-site self (i.e. the good

construction worker) makes its way into the boardroom (strategic managers) through a self-reinforcing mechanism that we refer to as *identity effects*.

Theoretical frame

Humans are flock animals who belong to various social groups or social categories, i.e. cultures. As mentioned earlier, one of the central criteria of a culture is its semiotic system of which language is central. A dialogic approach to self and culture views social languages (discourses of different social groups) as shaping cultural and individual voices. According to Bakhtin there is no such thing as a unique utterance; rather when a speaker voices an utterance he/she ventriloquates, i.e. in his/her utterance are traces of multiple utterances that have been voiced before it; hence Bakhtin's (1973) notion of multi voices (see also Hermans, 2001). Rather than multiple voices or multiple identities, Harré and Van Langenhoven (1991) talk of positions that individuals take on when interacting with others. Discursive action takes place within a specific local moral order of speaking and acting, i.e. within situations bound by specific, where a speaker takes on a certain social position. Taking on a position in a conversation automatically entails that the speaker also ascribes a certain position to his/her interlocutor. For example, a site manager may position a construction worker as willing and able to work overtime whenever requested. Harré and Van Langenhoven contrast social position with an individual's personal position, how the individual defines him or herself and organises his/her life. Thus, the construction worker in the example may contest the social position ascribed him by invoking family responsibilities. The relevance of this discussion to the purpose of this paper is that individual and collective meanings "belong to a cultural capital inherited and invested by new actors through history" (Hermans, 2001). This implies that relationships do not only unfold between people in conversations and enactments with each other, they also unfold within an individual and between individuals and the cultures in which they are embedded.

Self-reinforcement is a conception that is used in many different domains. Within economics, it depicts a process with an accelerating feature: e.g., increasing returns, "earn, earn more" (e.g. Arthur, 1996), production concentration, "produce, produce more" (e.g. Krugman, 1999), or economies of scale "grow, grow more" (e.g. Rostow, 1956). In this sense it portrays a positive feedback. Within the domains of organizational life and sociology, it seems however, to have a slightly different meaning – not necessarily representing any positive feedback (or negative for that matter), but rather as a way to understand organizational behavioral patterns. Edmondson and Moingeon (1998) define

organizational self-reinforcement as the process of creating and sustaining organizational routines by the decisions and actions of individuals. Rosenheck (2001) share this notion, but instead of routines they view self-reinforcement in relation to organizational culture, i.e. when experiences and challenges are shared, a community of practice is developed on the basis of the patterned social interactions between members that sustain organizational knowledge and facilitate its reproduction. Self-reinforcement, in this sense, is about how organizational life happens, and the existing self-reinforcing mechanisms reflect the identities and behavioral patterns already in existence and forecast what will happen next. Levitt and March (1988) stated that organizational routines not only record history, but shape the future course: each time an organization uses a certain routine, it becomes more proficient at that routine and more likely to repeat it in the future. This has little to do with positive (or negative) feedback, in fact it seems to be the contrary, in this sense self-reinforcement would not represent how a process is accelerating, but how organizational patterns reinforce themselves to remain the same. Nelson and Winter (1982) have the same notion, saying that “within an organization, existing routines serve as templates for producing copies, making their replication possible from day to day, but also over generations of the company’s employee’s. DiMaggio and Powell (1983), however, describe organizational self-reinforcement as a positive feedback process: “organizational inherence patterns are sensitive to the effects of self-reinforcing positive feedback on small, fortuitous events; that is large and successful enough to provide attractive model for imitation”. Studying self-reinforcing mechanisms and organizational routines can provide important insights into organizational life. They are at the heart of every organizational path (Sydow et al., 2009) and understanding their internal structures and dynamics can therefore help us explore core organizational phenomena (Pentland and Feldman, 2005).

Methods and Results

The rich empirical data are part of an ongoing longitudinal case study of strategizing in a large construction company. A case study design was chosen since our initial aim was to increase understanding of the unfolding of complex phenomena as perceived and narrated on the micro level in the organization (Eisenhardt 1989, Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000). The data therefore consist of managers’ retrospective accounts of change from 1990 to-date complemented by observations of strategy away-days, informal “water-cooler” conversations, and analysis of governing organizational documents. These methods have provided us with a large number of stories, including our own, of organizational life as it is lived.

In accordance with Lynn (1990), who advocates the use of an interpretative approach, our assumption is that organizational members create, embody and enact the realities that they inhabit and, subsequently base their predictions and actions on these. Thus, retrospective interpretations are not only alive in the present moment; they live on into the future through various re-conceptions. Furthermore, individual frames of reference, especially those of managers, are shared and used to create governing realities since managers possess interpretative priority over employees. They can therefore be seen as “practical authors” of the outcomes of the organizational conversations and enactments they have (Shotter and Cunliffe, 2003).

Our findings are aggregated from complementing insights and triangulated data. Iterative analyses between the different data sources led to the proposition underpinning this paper:

In construction, a strong common professional or trade identity is a self-reinforcing mechanism through which on-site mindsets and behavior make their way into the boardroom.

An interview study concerned with how the managers in the organization perceive organizational change over time resulted in a number of interesting findings. For example, the managers’ versions of the change trajectory from 1990 to-date depicted a reactive, discontinuous and short-term chain of events that significantly contrasted with the rational, coherent and long-term version found in official documents (Löwstedt et al 2011). Another interesting phenomenon was a strong tendency to personify strategies and changes, i.e. ascribing these to specific CEOs (Löwstedt et al. 2011). The data suggested that managers’ interpretations bespoke a version of organizational life that evolved through a number of seemingly unconnected, reactive episodes, driven by a few “strong persons”. Insights into praxis in the organization as well as an understanding of its culture complemented the findings from the interview study. First of all, the formalized career path in the organization (and in the industry as a whole) where recruits start by working the mud on construction sites to then successively progress up the hierarchical ladder. Managers at all levels are very seldom recruited outside of construction spheres, but instead fostered in the building projects during several years before they can acquire legitimacy for promotion. This climbing of the promotion ladder was corroborated during the interview study; the majority of the participating managers had actually “lived” the organizational change they described and they had started their careers on the lower steps of the ladder. They had become strategic managers, because they earned legitimacy in accordance with the established norms of the industry (being construction workers for a significant number of years). These norms can be seen as embedded in the construction industry’s wisdom (Melander, 2008)

Furthermore, field observations revealed that there exists a strong collective sense of pride related to construction craftsmanship. The conversation in the beginning of this paper is a typical illustration of this. Another illustrative example is a comment made by one of the few non-construction recruits working in a central strategic support team.

“I have so many times been told that to get anywhere [in the organization], I need to go out and work on the building sites”

This quote epitomizes an important underpinning of the *identity effect* referred to in the title of the paper.

Even though the majority of the managers participating in this study had been promoted to the rank of strategists, they kept identifying themselves with the original craftsmanship “construction worker”. They furthermore ascribed specific traits to “being a construction worker”, e.g., construction workers [we] are “problem solvers”. And a sense of pride, “we are construction workers”. They also legitimized their current strategy position through the original craftsmanship (the importance of knowing the craftsmanship; knowing how to “construct”).

Discussion

We argue that there is a sense of collective identity that permeates members of the organization regardless of role, position, and function. Based on our finding we suggest that “being a construction worker” is an identity, inherent in the cultural capital, that is embedded as a composite part linking the self and the organizational culture (Hermans, 2001). The proposition underpinning this paper suggests that this enactment, this *identity effect*, is at the heart of an organizational self-reinforcing mechanism in which the “construction worker” identity is reinforced across organizational levels. Sydow et al. (2009) develop a framework of different types of self-reinforcing mechanisms at the level of single organizations and organizational sub-units. One of them is *Adaptive Expectation Effects*, which is based around the notion that individual preferences are expected to vary in response to the expectation of other. The dynamic of this self-reinforcing mechanism is driven by a self-fulfilling prophecy, in which organizational members are willing to adopt practices because they expect others to do the same. This tendency is continuously reinforced by the seeking and signaling of “becoming” and “belonging” (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002); individuals who do not subscribe to the mainstream practice may risk losing legitimacy and be stigmatized as outsiders (Sydow et al. 2009: 700). The interactions and interdependency between the self and the organizational culture argued for here could in part be

seen as an adaptive expectation effect. The becoming “self” responds to the implicit and explicit expectations of the “culture” and thereby is both reinforced and reinforces the cultural capital, that in turn keeps signaling expectations to the becoming self.

Findings from the case study, indicate, that a collective identity may be reinforced in other ways as well, which warrants future research.

Building projects have often been ascribed specific traits, such as that each building project is unique and that initial plans in building projects seldom corresponds with actual outcomes. These specific traits would call for specific traits of the construction worker challenged by them. A construction worker must be able to adapt to the circumstances surrounding each unique building project and they must be able to adapt to sudden changes in plan. In short, a construction worker needs to be a (and the managers in this study have stated this already) “problem solver”. Construction sites are furthermore still dominated by male workers and much indicates that a “macho culture” prevails. Without digging further into that conception, we have been presented many examples of how you need to know construction yourself in order to get construction workers attention; in order for the “guys [sic] to listen to you”, i.e., you are being legitimized by the construction worker identity.

To conclude, we argue that a “construction worker” identity spans across organizational levels. A simplified yet suggestive analogy could be that they seem to do strategy, as they construct their buildings. Findings from the interview study show that strategic managers perceive organizational change to happen reactively and discontinuously over time, i.e., they solve problems as they arise (Löwstedt et al. 2010b). They furthermore make sense of organizational life via a number of strong leaders, in which personal authority in its own right seems to legitimize organizational change (Löwstedt et al. 2010a).

These traits suggest that the collective identity of “being a construction worker” is not only reinforced by the adaptive expectation effects between the cultural capital and the self, but also by a community of practice (Rosenheck, 2001, Whittington, 2006), embedded in the specific traits of the building projects, where the strategic managers were once nurtured. Feldman and Pentland (2003) have argued for a revised ontology of organizational routines. They criticize that much of current research portrays the mechanism at the heart of a routine as an object: a static, unchanging, yet regulating object. Feldman and Pentland (2003) advocate instead an ontology in which the mechanism is understood as the collective of constant human activities. These fundamental differences can be

related to whether an organization is considered to consist of things or processes, of being or becoming (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002).

We therefore argue for the collective identity of construction workers as a constant “becoming” (Tsoukas and Chia, 2002). The construction worker identity is being reinforced at the interface of self and organizational culture, but also by a community of practice that relates to industry-specific circumstances and the industrial wisdom (Melander, 2008). However, this might hinder important forms of hybridization (Hermans, 2001; Pieterse, 1995), as it is the “becoming to remain the same”.

The *identity effects* proposed in this paper is a self-reinforcing mechanism that spans across operational and strategic levels, albeit the associative behaviors may not always be desirable in accordance. The identity fostered and the practices encouraged in the building projects (e.g. to be able to solve problems when they occur) may inhibit long-term development on a strategic level (e.g. where problems need to be solved before they even occur). The ideal operational identity is somewhat contradictory to the ideal strategic identity, but the *identity effect* merges the two in a way that may result in a problematic organizational path.

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