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In management studies, research on organizational identity (OI) has gained momentum over the last fifteen years. Members' claims, beliefs, and narratives about "central, distinctive and enduring" attributes of their organization (Albert and Whetten, 1985) seem to be an appealing topic both to organizational theorists and behaviourists. OI and related concepts have been used to investigate various issues, including strategic decisions (e.g. Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Ashforth and Mael, 1996; Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Ravasi and Phillips, 2011; Rindova, Dalpiaz and Ravasi, 2011), organizational change (e.g. Humphreys and Brown, 2002; Nag, Corley and Gioia, 2007; Ybema, 2010; Kjærgaard, Morsing and Ravasi, 2011), reactions to environmental changes (e.g. Elsbach and Kramer, 1996; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006; He and Baruch, 2010), organizational commitment and cooperative behaviour (e.g. Bartel, 2001; Dukerich, Golden and Shortell, 2002; Foreman and Whetten, 2002), and technology and innovation (Tripsas, 2009; Ravasi and Canato, 2010).

Recently, prominent scholars in the field have tried to systematize the theoretical foundations of OI research, acknowledging the existence of different perspectives on what organizational identity is and how it affects organizational life (Whetten, 2006; Corley et al. 2006; Brown, Dacin, Pratt, and Whetten, 2006; Cornelissen, Haslam and Balmer, 2007; Brown, 2009). The multiplicity and the relative convergence of these efforts to polish the OI-related vocabulary and to integrate complementary perspectives indicate the increasing legitimation and consolidation of OI as central construct in organization studies. However, despite the vitality of the debate about OI-related constructs and their relevance for organizational studies, and although the conceptual foundations of the topic were laid down almost 30 years ago (Albert and Whetten, 1985), this field of research still lacks clearly established methodological guidelines

defining how researchers should address central issues such as, for instance, “what counts as legitimate evidence of OI?”. While scholars have amply discussed the theoretical underpinnings of the construct (Whetten and Godfrey, 1998; Albert, Ashforth and Dutton, 2000; Hatch and Schultz, 2000; Brown, 2006), scholarly debate about the requisites of “good research” on OI has been less intense.

The absence of clear guidelines increases the uncertainty surrounding how OI studies are not only to be carried out, but also reviewed and evaluated. Where can one find reasonable evidence of “organizational identity”? How can one distinguish evidence of organizational identity from related constructs (e.g. image, culture, brand, etc.)? Can we still talk of organizational identity even in the absence of explicit claims made by members about their organization? How does one classify an identity belief as “shared”, as one moves from the individual to the organizational level of analysis? Whose interpretations really count (organizational leaders, all members, key informants, the researcher, etc.)? How can we consider a statement an “identity statement”, or a narrative an “identity narrative”? Or, in other words, are all collective self-representations or self-conceptualizations evidence of organizational identity?

Although some of these issues have been partially discussed in the past (Brown, 2006; Corley et al., 2006; Whetten, 2006), a broadly shared and explicit consensus about how they should be addressed still seems to be missing. Answers to these questions, then, are largely left to scholars’ experience and craftsmanship. This lack of consensus around methodological prescriptions possibly reflects the co-existence of different paradigmatic stances amongst students of OI. After all, asking about what counts as evidence of organizational identity is an epistemological question that requires the disclosure of deeper ontological assumptions. In this paper, we approach this

problem inductively, by reviewing empirical studies on OI published in top journals in organization studies, and comparing how different scholars have successfully addressed the issues outlined above. Our review highlights different approaches to the study of OI – both quantitative (survey-based, possibly using an extended-metaphor approach) and qualitative (narrative analysis, grounded-theory building, and ethnography). These approaches reflect different ontological and epistemological assumptions, and each of them faces different issues and provides different answers to the questions raised before.

We believe that our contribution to OI research is three-fold. First, our review highlights three different waves of empirical research on OI, characterized by the different stance of researchers towards the construct: an unexpected explanation for an observed phenomenon (e.g. Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Gioia and Thomas, 1996), an individual-level variable to be correlated with organizational behaviour (e.g. Dukerich et al. 2002; Foreman and Whetten, 2002); an organizational construct to be studied in its own right (e.g. Humphreys and Brown, 2002; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006; Gioia, Price, Hamilton and Thomas, 2010; Ybema, 2010). Across these waves, we identify five main methods guiding the collection and the analysis of data. For each method, we discuss ontological and epistemological underpinnings, and we outline critical issues, potential solutions, and the most appropriate areas of application.

Secondly, we identify methodological issues that are central to OI research, such as how to select, among the various self-referential statements that are made by organizational members, those that can be legitimately considered evidence of organizational identity, and whose perspective counts in gathering evidence of OI, and we compare how published studies have successfully addressed identity-specific research questions outlined above.

Finally, our review of published research on OI reveals some degree of ambiguity in professed ontological assumptions and methodological choices in past research. By bringing out more clearly the paradigmatic differences that underpin these studies, and by highlighting their implications for methodological choices, we attempt to reduce uncertainty about the appropriateness of different research design for the questions being investigated. By doing so, we also encourage the assessment of each piece of research in terms of its own paradigmatic conventions, and draw attention to opportunities to build bridges between scholars working from different paradigms.

Methodology

In order to uncover “best practices” in OI research, our review deliberately focused on empirical articles on organizational identity published in top-tier management journals, such as the *Academy of Management Journal*, *Administrative Science Quarterly*, the *British Journal of Management*, *Human Relations*, the *Journal of Management*, the *Journal of Management Studies*, *Journal of Organizational Behavior*, *Organization Science*, *Organization Studies*, *Strategic Management Journal*, and *Strategic Organization*, between 1985 and 2011.

The selection of research output combined a protocol driven methodology with a “snowballing” technique (Greenhalgh and Peacock, 2005). We first retrieved from the Social Sciences Citation Index all papers published in the abovementioned journals that used the term “organizational identity” or “organizational identities” in the title or in the abstract. We removed articles that were purely theoretical (e.g. Gioia, Schultz & Corley, 2000), focused on macro-level sociological phenomena (see Hsu and Hannan, 2005), or individual workplace identities (e.g. Brown and Lewis, 2011). We then searched the

bibliographies of the remaining articles for additional work that, while relevant to our study, could have escaped our initial selection criteria (e.g. Dukerich et al. 2002). The final list included 33 articles.

A brief overview of research on organizational identity

The notion of identity has been discussed by sociologists (e.g. Cooley, 1902/1964; Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1959), psychologists (e.g. Erikson, 1959, 1968), philosophers and other social scientists for a long time (see Brown, 2009). Scholars, however, generally trace the origin of the debate on “organizational” identity, as it is conventionally understood, to a seminal article published by Stuart Albert and David Whetten in 1985. Almost three decades earlier, Philip Selznick (1957) had drawn attention to what he referred to as the “character” of the organization as a core set of values revealed in “irreversible” commitments. OI scholars, however, acknowledged the relevance of these ideas for the conceptualization of organizational identity only later (Whetten, 2006).

Albert and Whetten’s interest was activated by the observation of how discussions around a small cut in the budget of a programme in their school had escalated into a highly emotional debate on the very essence of the organization (Albert and Whetten, 1985). This experience brought these scholars to propose that the notion of identity used in psychology to account for individuals’ sense of continuity (Erikson, 1959) could be applied to organizations, in order to explain the relevance of perceived central, enduring and distinctive features of organizations in times of change.

As other scholars have observed (Whetten and Godfrey, 1998; Whetten, 2006) it took some time for OI to attract interest from organizational scholars. In fact, with the

exception of Dutton and Dukerich's work on the New York Port Authority (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991), it took more than ten years for empirical studies investigating the influence of OI on organizational dynamics to appear on major journals (Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997). In the following years, the topic attracted the interest of an increasing number of scholars, who engaged in a lively conceptual debate (Whetten and Godfrey, 1998), exploring different applications of the concept (e.g. Reger, Gustafsson, Demarie and Mullane, 1994; Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, 1994), as well as its interrelation with other related notions such as organizational image and culture (Hatch and Schultz, 1997; Gioia, Schultz and Corley, 2000). This growing interest culminated in special issues of the *Academy of Management Review* (Albert et al., 2000) and the *Corporate Reputation Review* (van Rekom, Corley and Ravasi, 2008) hosting several theoretical contributions advancing our understanding of different facets of the construct. In the meantime, until very recently, the number of empirical papers remained relatively small, if compared to the parallel theoretical development.

In fact, a review of the content of published empirical work on OI (see Appendix 1) suggests that past studies could roughly be classified into three major waves reflecting different forms of researcher's engagement with the concept. An initial number of studies used the concept of OI to understand social dynamics observed in unrelated research projects (first wave). It was followed by research using of this concept to investigate antecedents of organization behaviour (second wave). More recently, an increasing number of studies investigate OI-related processes (third wave), based on projects purposefully designed to increase our understanding of the phenomenon.

1991-2000: OI as an unexpected explanation

During the 1990's, most published research involving organizational identity was not initially aimed at investigating OI, but started with broader research questions in mind, such as exploring issue management (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991), strategic change (Gioia and Thomas, 1996), or responses to deteriorating images (Elsbach and Kramer, 1996). In these cases, like Albert and Whetten did years before, researchers employing inductive qualitative methodologies found themselves facing explanations for what they observed that touched informants' perceptions of what their own organizations were or should be.

Dutton and Dukerich's (1991) study is now widely cited as central in understanding the interrelations between organizational identity and image. Yet, it really started as an investigation of how organizations choose and frame the issues they attend to: construed organizational image and identity emerged as critical explanatory variables in the process. Elsbach and Kramer (1996) observed similar dynamics when studying how members react to external threats to the image of their organization.

As Gioia and Thomas (1996) investigated strategic changes in a large university, they observed how the development of future courses of action was shaped by a desired conceptualization of the organization ("desired future identity"). Similarly, Fox-Wolfgramm, Boal and Hunt (1997) observed how members' understanding of their organization explained how these organizations responded to environmental pressures.

Discrepancies between members' conceptualizations of their organization also explained intra-organizational conflicts in studies of role-conflict amongst board members in a not-for-profit organization (Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997) and a dispute over resource allocation during a strike at the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra (Glynn, 2000).

2000-2002: OI as an antecedent of organizational behaviour

From 2000 to 2002, a second wave of research on OI used this concept – or rather, the “perceived” organizational identity – as an antecedent of organizational behaviour. Unlike past studies, analysis was carried out at the individual level, as researchers investigated various antecedents of members’ identification with their organization. These studies collectively show how an identity perceived as coherent with personal values tends to favour strong individual attachment to the organization (Dukerich et al., 2002). Conversely, poor organizational reputation (Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001) or dualities in organizational identities (Foreman and Whetten, 2002) lead to dis-identification with the organization. In addition, Bartel (2001) suggests that individuals’ perceptions of organizational identity and dynamics of identification can be related to the boundary spanning role of individuals.

2002-2011: OI as an explicit research object

The third wave is the result of research explicitly designed with a focus on OI, as reflected also in a special issue of the *British Journal of Management*, gathering studies on OI and related constructs and processes (see Cornelissen et al., 2007).

Research in this period begins to examine how organizational identities are constructed or re-constructed (e.g. Corley and Gioia, 2004; Oliver and Roos, 2007; Rodrigues and Child, 2008; Sillince and Brown, 2009; Gioia et al., 2010), how organizational members make sense of changes in the organizational identity (Humphreys and Brown, 2002; Corley 2004; Brown and Humphreys, 2006; Ybema, 2010), or how identity evolves along with broader organizational and strategic changes (Chreim, 2005, Ravasi and Schultz, 2006, Nag et al. 2007; Tripsas, 2009; Clark, Gioia,

Ketchen and Thomas, et al., 2010; He and Baruch, 2010; Kjærgaard et al. 2011; Ravasi and Phillips, 2011).

Research in these lines of inquiry tends to adopt a theory-building approach, based on single case studies covering an extended period of time (Chreim, 2005; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006) or focusing on specific organizational events such as foundations (Gioia et al., 2010), mergers (Clark et al., 2010), or restructuring (Kjærgaard et al., 2011) (see Voss, Cable and Voss, 2006, for a different research design).

As the focus and purpose of OI research changed over the years, then, so did the methods that researchers employed, reflecting an apparent shift from the positivist paradigmatic underpinnings of early research towards an interpretive perspective on organizational identities as social constructions. As our review suggests, however, a plurality of ontological and epistemological stances still co-exist, although they are not always made explicit by researchers, as discussed in the following section.

A review of research methods in OI studies

A review of past research on OI indicates that most studies have adopted one of five fundamental methods, with rare exceptions adopting non-conventional procedures for data collection and analysis (e.g. Oliver and Roos, 2007), or combining different qualitative and/or quantitative methods (e.g. Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Tripsas, 2009; Gioia et al., 2010). Two of the most widely used methods are based on a quantitative assessment of the construct (see Table 1), and three are based on qualitative research (see Table 2). In this section, we review each method, highlighting its main applications, paradigmatic assumptions, and key issues.

Insert Tables 1 and 2 about here

Survey-based research

In OI research, papers adopting a survey-based design typically aimed at capturing a quantitative assessment of the construct in order to test hypotheses relating organizational identity to identification, commitment, citizenship and other aspects of organizational behaviour (Bartel, 2001; Elsbach and Battacharya, 2001; Dukerich et al., 2002). This approach is typically followed by students of organizational behaviour investigating micro-level phenomena¹. Researchers, for instance, use surveys in order to investigate whether individual beliefs about central and enduring characteristics of the organizations are a significant antecedent of identification (Dukerich et al., 2002), and if these beliefs change after increased exposure to external stakeholders (Bartel, 2001). What these studies measure, therefore, is not OI as such – conceived as a global property of the organization – but the extent to which individual members perceive certain features to be part of the identity of the organization, or, in other words, the “perceived organizational identity.”

These studies are firmly rooted in a positivistic (Gephardt, 2004) – or modernist (Guba and Lincoln, 1994) – paradigm assuming the world as an objective, knowable reality, which can be accurately captured through careful measurement. They assume that a combination of preliminary qualitative interviewing and broad quantitative measurement allow researchers to neutrally measure and report members’ perceptions. They further assume that, by doing so, they can uncover deeper, fundamental laws relating individual identity perceptions to organizational behaviour.

¹ A recent exception is Voss et al. (2006), who correlate the degree of sharedness of top managers’ identity perceptions to measures of organizational performance.

Researchers relying on survey studies need to strike a balance between gathering a large amount of data and ensuring the relevance of the questionnaire for the focal organizations. In order to collect easily tractable data about individual perceptions, they have to submit to respondents a closed list of features that reflect widespread internal beliefs about central, enduring and distinctive features. So far, researchers have faced this problem either by focusing on one organization and relying on preliminary interviews to build measures that are in part specific to the setting (e.g. Bartel, 2001; Dukerich et al., 2003), or by selecting a population of organizations that, as we discuss in the next section, share some archetypal identity features (e.g. Foreman and Whetten, 2002; Voss et al. 2006). Based on these insights, they developed a set of organization-specific or field-specific features, and asked respondents to evaluate the extent to which these features reflected the characteristics of their organization.

As researchers attempt to build organization-specific measurement tools based on a preliminary round of interview, a critical issue concerns their capacity to capture beliefs that are often below the threshold of awareness. In this respect, the so-called “laddering technique”, widely used in consumer research, has been proposed as a useful tool for capturing identity beliefs, using an increasingly profound probing into the relative importance of one’s actions to the organization (van Rekom, 1997). Despite the potential inherent in this tool, none of the studies considered by our review made use of this technique, possibly reflecting lack of familiarity or mistrust for data collection tools developed in other fields of business studies.

Finally, while surveys have proved to be valid data collection tools as far as individual beliefs are concerned, more problematic is the shift from the individual to the organizational level of analysis. In other words, how can a researcher move from a

number of individual beliefs to what is understood as a global property of the organization? How many respondents need to agree on a given feature, before it can be considered “relatively shared”? While in extreme cases (90% or 10%) the classification of a given feature as part of the identity of the organization or not may be hardly questionable, no heuristics or commonly accepted “rules of thumb” assist the researcher at this regard. This consideration points to the limit inherent in this method when it comes to explain organization-level dynamics, and it possibly explains the narrow diffusion of this method in OI research.

Extended metaphor analysis

Extended metaphor analysis (EMA) may be classified as a specific subset of survey-based OI research. Albert and Whetten (1985) initially suggested EMA as a particularly fruitful way to research organizational identities, with the specific purpose of investigating what they referred to as *dual identities*. According to Albert and Whetten (1985), some types of organization are characterized by an intrinsic duality in that their identity exhibits characteristics that might at time collide with one another, as they reflect partly opposing “value systems” (Foreman and Whetten, 2002), such as in the case of family businesses (familistic vs. utilitarian), or not-for-profit organizations (voluntaristic vs. utilitarian). In the original formulation, EMA was proposed as an analytical technique based on the explicit comparison of two metaphorical interpretations of the same type of organization. In their seminal paper, for instance, they apply this technique to explore the ways in which universities can be described as churches (where norms rule and sense of calling predominates) versus businesses (dominated by concerns for efficiency and commerce). The application of EMA to the

analysis of dual-identity organizations would help researchers capture the complexity and contradictions of such “hybrids”.

Later studies built on Albert and Whetten’s original insights and developed practical, large scale, survey-based applications of EMA, aimed at investigating OI-related issues in dual identity organizations such as business schools (Gioia and Thomas, 1996) and agricultural cooperatives (Foreman and Whetten, 2002). In these quantitative applications of EMA, researchers try to infer from members’ responses the relative salience of traits and features that are typical of organizational ideal types associated to the competing identities. The use of a large scale survey allows them to assess whether members conceive their organization, for instance, more “like a church” or more “like a business”. In order to do so, the researchers need to gain a clear understanding of the dualities that might be present in a given organization.

Initially proposed as a technique to aid the “discovery of identity dimensions”, EMA seems to be rooted in the same positivist paradigm that informs the survey-based studies mentioned earlier. The main difference between EMA and a more general survey-based study is that the latter does not impose an interpretation of OI in terms of internally coherent categorical metaphors (e.g. “family”, “church”, “business”), but captures individual perceptions on a looser set of features that are interpreted as central, enduring and distinctive.

Up until now, EMA has seen only limited application in organization studies. However, the rising interest in institutional theory for how organized actions is influenced by institutional logics (Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury, 2012) – understood as coherent patterns of norms and beliefs that prescribe legitimate organizational practices – shows opportunities to recover this method to investigate

whether and how multiple logics shape organizational identities, and how organizations handle the structural co-existence of partly conflicting logics.

Grounded-theory building

Grounded-theory building is frequently employed by OI scholars interested in investigating the relationships between OI and other organizational constructs (e.g. image, culture) or processes (e.g. change, decision making). These studies apply directly the methodology introduced by Glaser and Strauss (1967), or refer indirectly to this research tradition by relying on an iterative process of codification and theorization from interviews and observational data (e.g. Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997; Glynn, 2000).

Grounded-theory building was initially proposed as a method to inductively derive more robust and generalizable theories from the systematic collection and careful analysis of qualitative data reflecting informants' experience of an organizational phenomenon (Glaser and Strauss, 1967). In this respect, it has been considered by many as embedded in a positivist paradigm reflecting an empirical realist ontology (Denzin and Lincoln, 1994). The proponents' concern for the incorporation of informants' perspectives in researchers' own interpretations (see Strauss and Corbin, 1994) has brought other scholars to suggest the location of this method within the interpretive tradition (Locke, 2001; Suddaby, 2006), or to propose developments of this method that may be compatible with an interpretive paradigm (Charmaz, 2006).

Our review of OI studies highlights this paradigmatic ambiguity, also reflected in earlier descriptions of this body of work as adopting a "mixed realist/constructivist position" (Hatch and Yanow, 2008) or offering "a compromise between extreme

empiricism and complete relativism by articulating a middle ground in which systematic data collection could be used to develop theories that address the interpretive realities of actors in social settings (Suddaby, 2006, p. 634).” Some authors (e.g. Corley, 2004; Corley and Gioia, 2004; Nag, Corley and Gioia, 2007) embed the use of analytical techniques borrowed from grounded-theory building within the more general umbrella of “naturalistic inquiry” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Others (Clegg, Rhodes and Kornberger, 2007) draw explicitly on Charmaz (2006) to justify the adoption of coding techniques borrowed from grounded-theory building to uncover regularities in the discursive constructions of identities. Most authors, however, do not disclose explicitly their paradigmatic stance, or formally subscribe to an interpretive perspective while applying methodological tools and language that reflect positivistic concerns for validity, replicability, and generalizability.

This ambiguity might reflect what Burrell and Morgan describe as “ontological oscillation”, as while some of these authors claim their studies to be driven by a social constructive stance, they seem to “admit a more realist form of ontology through the back door (Burrell and Morgan, 1979, p. 266).” Or, more pragmatically, it could reflect a rhetorical strategy to present qualitative work in ways that would pass the scrutiny of quantitatively-oriented reviewers (Pratt, 2008; Hatch and Yanow, 2008).

It could be argued, however, that the attempt to draw on the structured methodological toolkit of grounded-theory to produce more convincing interpretive accounts of identity processes may really reflect a critical realist ontology (Ackroyd and Fleetwood, 2000; Reed, 2005). Critical realism maintains that reality exists “independently from our knowledge of it (Fleetwood, 2005, p. 197),” but engagement with reality is always “conceptually mediated” by the cognitive resources we use as we

try to make sense of it². In this perspective, organizational identities are “real” in that they produce effects on behaviour (decision making, social interaction, etc.), and can be studied through “knowledgeable informants” (Gioia et al., forthcoming), who assist the researcher in uncovering the way they do so. The researcher’s task, then, is to facilitate informants’ articulation of their – often tacit (Fleetwood, 2005) – knowledge to produce new concepts and refine existing ones (Gioia et al., forthcoming), in an ongoing attempt to improve our theorization of the mechanisms that underlie social reality (Tsoukas, 1989).

A manifestation of the critical realist assumptions that seem to inform these studies, albeit tacitly and implicitly, can be seen in the use of textual data to capture informants’ interpretations and interpretive work, to extend a theorization of how organizational identity influences interactions in organizations. Consistent with methodological guidelines from grounded-theory building (see Locke, 2001; Strauss and Corbin, 1990), these studies usually rely on multiple sources of text, such as interviews, archival sources (annual reports, corporate biographies, internal communication, transcripts of public speeches, etc.), and, at times, a certain degree of non-participant observation. Although the number of interviews varies from a minimum of 13 to a maximum of 232, most studies tend to range between 25 and 35 interviews for each case. A lower number of informants is usually associated to more substantial archival sources (Rindova et al., 2011) and/or theoretical claims restricted to the identity narratives, beliefs or aspirations of specific categories of members (e.g. Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Clegg, Rhodes and Kornberger, 2007; Ravasi and Phillips, 2011).

² In this respect, while not mentioning critical realism, Rodrigues and Child admit how they take a “middle ground” between an empirical realist and a social constructionist ontology, as they conceive of organizational identity as a “socially constructed reality... [that] has an existence, and more importantly,

A common – possibly growing – concern of research in this tradition is the use of triangulation between various data types (and various sources within each type – e.g. various informants or texts) in order to ensure a robust grounding for the interpretation of one’s observations. The notion of triangulation – understood as the use of different methods to investigate an empirical phenomenon (Denzin, 1978) – is rooted in a positivistic tradition and was initially introduced to overcome problems of measurement bias and construct validity (Campbell and Fiske, 1959). Later, advocates of “mixed methods” argued that triangulation between qualitative and quantitative data may improve our comprehension of a phenomenon, not only the robustness of our measurement of it (Jick, 1979; Brewer and Hunter, 1989). This notion, however, has been contested on the ground that methods reflecting different paradigmatic stances – positivistic and interpretive – cannot be employed together because of their incompatible ontological assumptions (Blaikie, 1991, 2000).

In fact, only few studies of OI employed mixed methods, and they did so either in order to produce measurement tools that could capture context-specific variation in respondent’s perceptions (e.g. Dukerich et al., 2003), or to combine (qualitative) theory-building and (quantitative) theory-testing within the same study (e.g. Gioia and Thomas, 1996). More often, triangulation manifested as “within method” (Denzin, 1978) reliance on multiple sources of textual data, in order to compensate for the partial capacity of each source to capture identity-related constructs (e.g. Corley and Gioia, 2004; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006), or to produce a richer account of identity-related processes in and around organization (e.g. Rodrigues and Child, 2007; Clark et al., 2010; Kjærgaard et al., 2011). Consistent with an interpretive tradition, these studies did not use this form

some consequences that become to some degree independent from the process by which it was generated (Rodrigues and Child, 2007, p. 894).

of triangulation as a way to improve the accuracy of measurement or to cross-validate emerging theories. They did so to increase the depth and scope of inquiry (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000), and to produce more convincing theory building (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003) by disclosing broad support to emerging interpretations (Pratt, 2009). This use of triangulation could also be explained as a rhetorical device required by the editorial conventions of North American journals (Pratt, 2008), but appears consistent with a critical realist stance (Modell, 2009).

The extensive use of semi-structured interviews and transcripts of naturally occurring speeches as the main source of data raises particular concerns with the quality of these data, to the extent that they are used to infer informants' beliefs about the identity of their organization. If we take seriously Goffman's idea of identity as an ongoing "performance", where actors are constantly striving to leave favourable impressions on their different audiences (Goffman, 1959), then any self-referential claim, categorization, or narrative – even those collected during interviews – should be taken with a pinch of salt and analyzed within their social interaction context (we return on this issue later, as we discuss its general implications for qualitative research on OI).

Further, the rise of identity and identity management in the practice-oriented literature (e.g. van Riel, 2005; Balmer and Greyser, 2003) should alert researchers about the possible "performativity" of these theories (Callon, 1998; MacKenzie and Millo, 2003). In other words, the increasing popularity of these concepts may induce managers to engage in more identity-sensitive thinking and acting than they would otherwise, possibly overstating the influence of identity and identity-related constructs on organizational processes.

Ethnography

Another qualitative method often used by OI scholars is ethnography (e.g. Humphreys and Brown, 2002; Brown and Humphreys, 2006; Ybema, 2010), at times combined with other qualitative methods for data analysis (Gioia et al., 2010). Ethnographic research requires deep immersion in the community or the organization under study to allow a researcher to gain a fine-grained understanding and to provide a trustworthy rendition of this context (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1995). Data analysis rests on a “thick description” of observed findings, and a narrative report that links findings with theoretical dimensions of analysis (Van Maanen, 2011).

Multiple versions of ethnographic research have developed over the years, each subscribing to different ontological and epistemological assumptions (Atkinson and Hammersley, 1994). Early ethnographic work in the field of anthropology, for instance, was inspired by a functionalist paradigm and aimed at producing accurate descriptions of social and cultural characteristics of human societies (e.g. Malinowski, 1922; Radcliffe-Brown, 1948). Later developments drew from symbolic interactionism and hermeneutics to investigate the webs of social meanings and symbolic actions that shape interaction within a community (e.g. Geertz, 1973).

Ethnographic research on OI generally subscribes to an interpretive perspective. Consistent with an interpretive view of OI as a social construction (see Whetten and Godfrey, 1998), these studies have produced rich portrayals of how different identity claims and narratives arise and interact in times of change (e.g. Ybema, 2010; Humphreys and Brown, 2002), and how they shape members’ understandings of their organizations and affect their interactions (e.g. Gioia et al., 2010). Some of these studies adopted what Van Maanen (1988) and Creswell (2007) refer to as a “realist” approach

to data reporting, striving to present observations as a faithful and “objective” account of the cultural phenomena they investigate. “Realist tales” (Van Maanen, 1988) are usually rich and detailed to reassure about the researcher’s capacity to develop an intimate understanding of the setting (see Golden-Biddle and Locke, 1993). Narratives are presented from a “native’s” point of view, with ample use of quotes to report informants’ interpretations of events in their own terms. In OI research, ethnographers have sometimes taken advantage of the possibility to adopt an insider/outsider perspective (Gioia et al., 2010) to take advantage of the insight of one member of the research team, who is at the same time a member of the organization under study, while other members of the team retain sufficient detachment to produce a trustworthy theoretical interpretation of the observed social processes.

Following the emergence of critical and postmodern theories in the social sciences, the possibility to achieve the transparency, neutrality, and deep understanding claimed by traditional ethnographies and reflected in realist tales has been heavily criticized, leading to what has been referred to as a “crisis of representation” in ethnographic studies (Davies, 1999; Aunger, 2003). “Critical” ethnographers addressed this crisis of representation by striving to be more consciously reflexive about how their pre-existing beliefs and values might influence their interpretations, and by using their work to uncover situations of social domination and inequalities (see Thomas, 1992; Carspecken, 1996). In organization studies, a rich tradition of critical studies has investigated issues of power, identity-regulation and control on the workplace (e.g. Kärreman and Alvesson, 2001; Alvesson and Willmott, 2002; Sveningsson and Alvesson, 2007; Thornborrow and Brown, 2009; Brown and Lewis, 2011; Clarke, Brown, and Hope Hailey, 2009). OI research in a critical tradition has uncovered how

managers employ organizational identities as a rhetoric device to control and direct organizational life (Humphreys and Brown, 2002; Brown and Humphreys, 2002; Brown and Humphreys 2006). These studies acknowledge openly the critical purpose of their inquiry and the reflexive nature of their interpretations. Whereas “realist” tales tend to separate observations from theoretical reflections, critical studies of OI tend to merge empirical narratives and theoretical arguments by framing observations within pre-existing theoretical work. Compared to the thriving research on workplace identities mentioned above, however, the investigation on how organizational identities are involved in power struggles in and around organizations appears underdeveloped. We know little, for instance, about how the self-categorization of organizations and/or the identity narratives crafted in, by and around them influence their relative power and social position, and their capacity to access scarce resources.

Researchers engaged in ethnographic research face similar issues to those who follow a grounded approach; yet, their partly different way of collecting and analysing data, allows – or requires – them to handle them differently. On the one hand, the long term engagement and the deep immersion of researchers in the observed social reality should increase their capacity to place identity-relevant statements in their context, to appreciate their purposeful use in the negotiation of social reality, and to give voice to the multiple identity narratives co-existing within organizations (Humphreys and Brown, 2002). On the other hand, some researchers have combined an ethnographic approach to data collection with the analytical apparatus of grounded-theory building, based on systematic coding of textual data, to organize the analysis and presentation of data in a more structured way (see Gioia et al., 2010; Clark et al., 2010). This combination may be perceived by some as conflicting with a social constructionist take

on social reality. Its diffusion even in research adopting a narrative conception of organizational identity (Brown and Humphreys, 2002; Clegg, Rhodes and Kornberger, 2007), however, suggests its potential viability to account for the researchers' interpretive work as emerging interpretations are presented to the readers.

Narrative analysis

Finally, some studies approach organizational identities from a narrative perspective (e.g. Coupland and Brown, 2004; Chreim, 2005; Sillince and Brown, 2009). Studies based on narrative analysis fully embrace a social constructionist ontology maintaining that social reality is constituted through language and discourse, and they investigate how different understandings of an organization are constructed, challenged, negotiated, constituted through discursive practices and artefacts (e.g. Czarniawska, 1997; Brown, 2006)³. Data sources include settings that allow researchers to capture understandings and constructions of organizational identities through the narratives that actors weave around and about an organization. These settings include annual messages to shareholders (Chreim, 2005) and online forums and websites (Coupland and Brown, 2004; Sillince and Brown, 2009).

Barry, Carron and Hansen (2006) distinguish between endotextual and exotextual approaches to narrative analysis. The former borrow methods from literary analysis and criticism, and focus on the text itself (e.g. Boje, 2001). The latter are inspired instead by ethnographic research and, more recently, discourse analysis (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2000; Phillips and Hardy, 2002), and they work outward from a text to its context(s). In fact, some of the studies presented previously as ethnographies (Humphreys and Brown,

³ See Brown and Humphreys, 2002, and Chreim, 2005, for excellent discussions and illustrations of the methodology involved in the collection and analysis of narrative data.

2002; Brown and Humphreys, 2002; Ybema, 2010) explicitly rely on informants' narratives to uncover how organizational identities are used in the re-negotiation of the organizational reality in times of change. Other studies, however, adopt an endotextual approach and use various analytical techniques (rhetoric analysis, theme analysis) to uncover discursive strategies of identity construction available to actors in organizations (e.g. Chreim, 2005; Sillince and Brown, 2009).

The application of techniques of linguistic and discourse analysis seems to be a promising avenue to increase our understanding of how organizational identities are discursively enacted through language and conversation. This approach is consistent with a narrative approach to organizational identity that refuses the notion of a monolithic understanding, but points to the multiplicity of representations of an organization advanced by different parties at any point in time (Brown, 2006). Rather than focusing on the convergence of different discourses, then, researchers are encouraged to purposefully seek and uncover how multiple and conflicting identity narratives within organizations influence struggles of power, resources, and control (Brown, 2006).

Using narrative analysis to investigate identity-related constructs and processes might raise the issue of whether we can plausibly consider any self-referential portrayal of the organization as an "identity narrative" or an "identity statement". In this respect, David Whetten (2006) has proposed a detailed set of guidelines to distinguish "bona fide" identity claims from more general statements about the organization. Building on Selznick (1959), for instance, he encourages researchers to search for evidence of "irreversible commitments" – such as strategic investments or organizational policies – that may bind members to the enactment of certain identity narratives. These guidelines,

however, seem to assume the existence of some objective “identity referents” that are indeed central, enduring and distinctive, and they may therefore be less appropriate for a constructivist approach understanding organizational identities are “discursive (linguistic) and/or imagistic constructions (Brown, 2009, p. 180),” that are continuously claimed, disputed, and re-constructed in conversations amongst multiple actors in and around organizations (Coupland and Brown, 2004).

Discussion

In the past, OI research has witnessed a proliferation of definitions. This phenomenon has induced some scholars to attempt reconciliation between different conceptualizations by producing an integrated theory and terminology to describe identity-related phenomena in organizations (e.g. Gioia et al., 2000; Brown et al., 2006).

As some researchers have recently acknowledged, however:

This proliferation of definitions ... masks several more profound issues, including the contradictions between the ontological and epistemological assumptions underlying each conceptualization (Corley et al., 2006, p. 86)

Indeed, our review suggests that different paradigmatic premises brought researchers to use the same label to refer to different facets of a broader phenomenon associated with members’ construction, expression, and enactment of representations of their organization. Some conceived *organizational identity* as a global property of an organization, embodied in collective claims and beliefs about central, distinctive and enduring attributes of the organization (Albert and Whetten, 1985; Whetten, 2006). Others focused on *perceived organizational identity*, as the single individual’s understanding of central and distinctive traits of the organization (e.g. Dukerich et al., 2003). Some scholars focused on *identity claims*, understood as fundamental statements about what an organization is and stands for (e.g. Glynn, 2000; Kjærgaard et al., 2011).

Others investigated the broader *identity narratives* that are crafted and woven in and around organizations (e.g. Brown and Coupland, 2004). Others still tried to capture members' *identity beliefs and understandings* about fundamental attributes of their organization (e.g. Corley, 2004; He and Baruch, 2010), or organizational leaders' *envisioned and desired future identity* (e.g. Gioia and Thomas, 1996).

To some degree, these multiple foci have enriched our understanding of the overall phenomenon, and we agree with Corley and colleagues that multiple perspectives represent “opportunities for scholars to keep conversations about organizational identity richly contextualized in their ontological assumptions (Corley et al., 2006, p. 96).” Multiple perspectives, however, may also create confusion about how to conduct and to assess an OI study, and, as Brown recently lamented, “there is little evidence that authors are becoming sufficiently broadminded to see beyond their own narrow paradigmatic assumptions (Brown, 2009, p. 187).” We concur with Brown that:

Rather than seek to restrict the scope of debate, scholars interested in organizational identity may be better advised to recognize appreciate, and accept that there are many ways in which the concept may be defined and deployed and that none of these is inherently more worthwhile than any other (Brown, 2009, p. 187).

In this paper, a comparison of different methods adopted by published studies over the last twenty years helped us outline and discuss paradigmatic assumptions that underlie different bodies of research. Based on our review, we now discuss how these assumptions shape how published studies address issues that appear central to the preoccupations of students of OI: What constitutes valid evidence of organizational identity (or identities)? Can any general description of an organization be classified as OI? Whose perspective should be adopted when studying identity?

How can you tell it's an identity matter?

One of us was once involved in a study where informants explicitly and spontaneously referred to what they called the “identity” of their organization. When we submitted our paper to a journal, however, one of the reviewers expressed concerns that what members called identity might not have been *really* the identity of the organization. This comment reflects an empirical realist, or “essentialist” perspective (see Whetten and Godfrey, 1998) – based on the assumption that an organizational identity exists independently from members’ claims and understandings of it. Few OI researchers, however, openly subscribe to this perspective anymore. Even Whetten’s proposal to strengthen the “operationalization” of organizational identity, appears less concerned with capturing what an organization “really is” than with outlining conditions under which attributes are likely to be included in “identity-referencing discourse” and to influence decision making (Whetten, 2006; see also Ravasi and Canato, 2010).

From a social constructionist perspective, this problem may seem irrelevant: in this perspective, identities *are* narratives and social reality is a linguistic construction. Any self-referential statement, therefore, could be considered part of an identity narrative. If we take the notion of social construction seriously, however, identity narratives are revealed in their purposeful use by organizational actors to negotiate their social reality by proposing, imposing, resisting or disputing representations of their organization (e.g. Humphreys and Brown, 2002), and, indirectly, of themselves as organizational members (Watson, 2009). From this perspective, then, a careful analysis of the context within which textual data is produced and used is important to distinguish identity-relevant narratives, aimed at influencing the allocation of resources, power, and status, or at enhancing members’ own identities and self-concepts. from simple descriptive statements about an organization. If these narratives are not part of naturally occurring

text, then, but are produced in the context of semi-structured interviews, it may be more difficult to ascertain their actual use in the negotiation of social reality (although they may still reveal much about how individuals construct their own understanding of self – see Watson, 2009).

The problem is to be addressed differently for researchers combining a critical realist ontology with methods from grounded-theory building. Research in this tradition assumes that identity-related constructs and processes can be theorized about, and that these theories can be “transferred” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) beyond the boundaries of the research setting. In this case, it is important for researchers to reassure themselves and their audiences about their capacity to capture the unobservable constructs and mechanisms that shape social reality.

A look at published studies suggests that some researchers address this issue by focusing on members’ attempts to construct their organization as similar to/or different from other comparable organizations. Some search their textual data for explicit categorization and labelling of an organization, such as a “market-oriented organization” (Nag et al., 2007), an “artistic mediator” (Rindova et al., 2011) or a “spaghetti organization” (Kjærgaard et al., 2011). These labels use available social categories to make and give sense of the organization in terms of familiar cognitive structures (Ashforth & Humphrey, 1997), or to forge new categories by combining or qualifying existing ones.

Others scholars search informants’ texts for explicit claims about certain attributes being part of the “identity” of the organization, or, less explicitly, of its “essence”, “core values”, or other similar expressions pointing to central and distinctive traits (e.g. Corley, 2004; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006; Gioia et al. 2010). This method appears

particularly useful to begin to distinguish cultural elements that become also identity referents (that is they are included in conscious, self-referential discourse about what an organization is and what makes it different from other comparable ones, see Pratt, 2003) from the more general set of norms, beliefs and artefacts that constitute the culture of an organization.

These analytical methods are consistent with an understanding of organizational identity as resting in members' beliefs and constructed in a process of claim-making (see Glynn, 2000), in which actors combine social categories imported from the broader discursive environment with newly crafted categories (or images) alluding to organization-specific features (Rindova et al., 2011). Even in this case, however, researchers may provide stronger support to their theoretical claims by combining evidence based on discursive categorization, with more substantial evidence of the embodiment and use of these claims in organizational strategies, structures, and practices (see Whetten, 2006; Ravasi and Phillips, 2011).

Research in this tradition should pay additional care to substantiate assertions about the of different sources of data as evidence of identity constructs. While social constructionist studies focus on identity narratives, this second body of research postulates the existence of differences between identity claims (what people say their organization is), beliefs (what people believe their organization is), and aspirations (what people would like their organization to be, or to be perceived), and theorizes about how the interaction among these constructs explains important organizational processes (e.g. Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Corley and Gioia, 2004; Gioia et al., 2010).

Introducing a distinction between cognitive and discursive embodiments of organizational identity, however, places an additional burden on these scholars, as they

try to use what members claim about their organization to infer the underlying beliefs (for a more general discussion of this issue, see Van Maanen, 1979). If we believe Goffman (1959), organizations and individuals are constantly engaged, more or less consciously, in the manipulation of their image to impress their various audiences. As they do so, members use available narratives as well as produce new ones to shape a relatively coherent and attractive portrayal of themselves and/or their organization (Watson, 2009). Identity claims and narratives directed to external audiences (outward-facing claims), however, may not correspond to claims and narratives invoked in a “backstage” situations (inward-facing claims). Also, research shows that individuals tend to make claims about their organization that reflect their personal ambitions and that enhance their role and skills (Glynn, 2000). Different types of textual data, then, may reflect claims made by different actors, for different purposes, and addressing different audiences.

Published studies address this issue by using text addressing different audiences as evidence for different types of identity-related constructs (e.g. Corley, 2004; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006), and by being more transparent about all their sources of textual data and the audiences they were intended to (e.g. Gioia et al., 2010). By systematically tracking evidence produced in different contexts and targeting different audiences, these scholars attempt to uncover discrepancies between narratives, and to distinguish claims that reflect actors’ partial perspective from more widely accepted organizational narratives.

Published works also use insights collected during interviews to highlight the cognitive dissonance experienced by some members confronting different narratives, or a discrepancy between narratives and organizational practices (e.g. Corley and Gioia, 2004; Kjærgaard et al., 2011; Ravasi and Phillips, 2011). Combining these insights with

a systematic analysis of the content and the context of identity narratives, these scholars claim plausible inferences about the extent to which these narratives reflect identity-relevant beliefs and/or aspirations.

In matters of identity, whose perspective matters?

Set aside an extreme essentialist perspective assuming that organizations *have* identities, most researchers tend to agree, more or less explicitly, that organizational identities are “images” of organizations. For some researchers these images reside in members’ minds (e.g. Corley and Gioia, 2004), while for others are reflected in and constructed by members’ narratives (e.g. Brown, 2006). Building on this idea, most researchers also agree that multiple, possibly diverging, identities co-exist within organizations, reflected in the beliefs and/or narratives of different members and groups (Pratt and Foreman, 2000; Brown, 2006). Another important issue to be addressed by OI researcher, therefore, has to do with whose perspective is adopted when investigating organizational identity.

Published work varies in this respect, and this variety seems to cut across perspectives and methods. Some researchers focused on top management teams, under the assumptions that top managers’ beliefs and aspirations shape strategic decisions (e.g. Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Fox-Wolfgramm et al., 1998; Clegg et al., 2007; Ravasi and Phillips, 2011), and that identity-relevant narratives feature prominently in their discursive practices (e.g. Chreim, 2005). Others extended the scope of their investigation to the lower levels and the periphery of the organization, with the intent of capturing multiple beliefs (e.g. Corley, 2004) and narratives (e.g. Humphreys and Brown, 2002) across levels, units, and groups. Others still focused on potentially

identity-relevant events, such as the foundation and early years of organizations (Clegg et al., 2007; Gioia et al., 2010), the outbreak and resolution of organizational conflicts (Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997; Glynn, 2000), or the manifestation of external threats to the image of the organization (Elsbach and Kramer, 1996; Coupland and Brown, 2004). These scholars circumscribed their analysis to the specific actors involved in the event to investigate how the identity-relevant beliefs they expressed and/or the narratives they crafted influenced how they handled the focal event.

While scholars in a social constructionist tradition alert us about the potential bias inherent in privileging some narratives at the expense of others, it is not uncommon, even for these scholars, to focus on the narrative of one or few groups of organizational actors, if this focus is justified by the specific question driving the investigation. Researchers, however, should be careful not to assume unproblematically that the narrative they captured represent the only available construction of organizational identity. They may want to adopt research designs that allow them to remain sensitive to alternative views and narratives, by deliberately tapping sources that can possibly challenge the narratives produced by their focal informants (see Rodrigues and Child, 2008).

Finally, we wonder whether, in writing up the study, replacing the term “organizational identity” with qualified reference to identity beliefs, aspirations, claims, or narratives (and the actors they refer to) may help address the reservations of some reviewers – perhaps less familiar with the state of the academic debate – about the capacity of the study to capture *the* identity of the organization. As our review indicates, while the notion of organizational identity has served as a symbolic rallying point for academic research, different scholars have used the term differently. This lack of

consistency has probably facilitated the diffusion of research on identity-related phenomena in organizations. More focused treatment of this concept, however, may help further the academic debate, facilitate the exchange between different strands of research on OI, and eventually produce more nuanced and sophisticated theories.

Conclusions

The development of a field of study depends on the convergence of scholars around a set of clear and widely accepted principles for doing “good research”. In this paper, we have tried to contribute to further this debate amongst OI scholars by reviewing and discussing different methods used in published studies. Our review outlined five methods, used to varying degree of frequency in past research. A comparative analysis of how researchers used these methods helped us contextualize them within their ontological and epistemological premises, and uncover the constructs, processes, and questions that can be more appropriately investigated by each method. By doing so, we hope to help prospective researchers make a better selection of tools for data collection and analysis, consistently with their specific research interests and paradigmatic assumptions.

Our review revealed potential ambiguities and contradictions, but also opportunities for enriching methodologies with tools borrowed from other traditions. OI researchers adopting different ontological and epistemological assumptions have already begun to acknowledge the relevance of each other’s work by citing and drawing on works from other bodies of research. We hope that our review and discussion may contribute to reinforce the mutual recognition of the appropriateness of each others’ methodological choices, as long as they are coherent with the professed paradigmatic assumptions. In

this respect, we recommend future studies to clarify upfront these assumptions, so that the consistency of methodological choices can be properly assessed. Clarifying the paradigmatic assumptions and the conceptualization of identity driving one's study should also help editors select reviewers that are familiar with (or at least not opposed to) these theoretical premises, and that are willing to assess a study in its own terms.

A comparison of "best practices" from published studies also allowed us to outline possible ways to address fundamental issues in the design of OI research, and to establish the validity of researchers' claims about organizational identity-related constructs and processes. Our review draws attention to the centrality of naturally occurring textual data (e.g. public speeches, organizational communication, observed and recorded interactions) and semi-structured interviews to capture the construction, expression, dispute and negotiation of organizational identities. Even for survey-based studies, the use of this type of data is crucial, in a preliminary phase, to produce a questionnaire that captures what members see as relevant to the identity of their organization. Different studies place relatively more emphasis on different discursive processes and artefacts. Some organize data around identity-relevant narratives (e.g. Humphreys and Brown, 2002; Ybema, 2010), while others search organizational texts for categorizations and/or attributions (e.g. Rindova et al., 2011). We do not see these methods as incompatible. In fact, we recommend future research to remain open to the use of multiple methods of analysis of textual data to produce a more nuanced portrayal of the interplay of narratives and claims of distinctiveness and similarity in the construction of organizational identities.

Our review also draws attention to the importance of combining textual evidence with observations of the symbolic use of claims and narratives in the negotiation and

enactment of social reality, and/or their substantial “anchoring” in organizational strategies, structures, and practices (see Ravasi and Phillips, 2011). Even constructionist research using narrative methods, we argue, may benefit from examining the use of identity narratives to negotiate social reality within an organization, consistently with the more general assumption about the constitutive role of language that informs these studies. In the future, therefore, we hope to see more research combining observations of discursive artefacts, structural properties, and material practices in organizations, to support researchers’ claims about identity-related processes.

Finally, our review draws attention to the multiplicity of sources and targets of identity-relevant narratives and claims. Some researchers emphasize the sensegiving function of these artefacts and analyze how members draw upon them as they negotiate social reality (e.g. Coupland and Brown, 2004). Others consider these narratives manifestations of how members make sense of what their organization is and stands for, and they use these discursive artefacts to infer members’ beliefs and understandings (e.g. Corley and Gioia, 2004). Both approaches are equally valid within their respective epistemological assumptions. Absolute transparency about the source, the context, and the audience of the textual data that their interpretations rely on (see Gioia et al., 2010), however, is essential to let readers properly assess the plausibility of researchers’ use of these data as manifestations of sensegiving and/or sensemaking processes.

Finally, we encourage future studies to deliberately search for discrepancies between different narratives, because these discrepancies may reveal underlying tensions across the interests, interpretations, and strategies of different individuals and groups (e.g. Glynn, 2000; Humphreys and Brown, 2002). Researchers should also pay more attention to the reported dissonance between informants’ beliefs, experiences, and

narratives, as these episodes offer important insights into the sensemaking and sensegiving processes that surround the construction, enactment, and/or challenge of organizational identities (e.g. Kjærgaard et al., 2011). We expect the use of both analytical strategies to help researchers draw a more nuanced portrayal of identity-related processes occurring in their research site.

Our effort was motivated by the impression that the lack of commonly accepted guidelines regarding appropriate ways of doing research on OI might hamper the implementation of research efforts and the publication of research findings. In this respect, we hope that our observations may not only provide some guidance on how to carry out OI research – helping new researchers to orient themselves in the possibly confusing arrays of perspectives and methods – but also assist authors and reviewers in the evaluation of papers reporting from this research. By doing so, we hope that our attempt to bring more clarity about methodological requirements will contribute to facilitate the access of new scholars to this field of study, to favour the intensification of research efforts, and to ultimately improve our understanding of identity-related phenomena in and about organizations.

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TABLE 1
Quantitative methods in OI research

	Survey	Extended metaphor
<i>Examples</i>	Bartel, 2001 Dukerich, Golden and Shortell, 2002	Gioia and Thomas, 1996 Foreman and Whetten, 2002
<i>Focal theme</i>	Measurement of attributes of OI and/or correlation with organizational behaviour	Identification and measurement of dual identities
<i>Data source</i>	Preliminary interview or focus group with representative sample Survey	Interview with key informants Focus group Survey
<i>Focal identity-related constructs</i>	Perceived organizational identity	Ideal-typical, metaphorical interpretations of dual identities (e.g. family/business, business/church)
<i>Critical issues</i>	Capturing beliefs that are often below the threshold of awareness	Development of a valid measurement tool, reflecting core traits of dual identities

TABLE 2
Qualitative methods in OI research

	Grounded Theory	Ethnography	Narrative analysis
<i>Examples</i>	Ravasi and Schultz, 2006 Nag et al., 2007 Clark et al., 2010	Humphreys and Brown, 2002 Ybema, 2010	Chreim, 2005 Sillince and Brown, 2009
<i>Focal theme</i>	Relationships between OI and other organizational constructs and processes	Social construction and negotiation of members' understanding of their organizational reality	Use of discursive strategies to construct organizational identities
<i>Data source</i>	Interviews Archival data	Interviews Archival data Observation	Oral and written texts Archival data Organizational statements
<i>Focal identity-related constructs</i>	Identity beliefs and claims	Identity beliefs, claims and narratives	Identity narratives
<i>Critical issues</i>	Distinguishing evidence of different identity-related constructs	Building a convincing case for the researcher's interpretation	Organizing and reporting the analysis of a large body of narrative data

APPENDIX 1

A comparative analysis of organizational identity research

Paper	Main theme	Research setting	Data collection	Data analysis
Dutton and Dukerich, 1991	Influence of OI and construed image on issue management	Municipal transportation company	• 25 interviews (employees) • Archival data	• Grounded theory building
Gioia and Thomas, 1996	Relevance of envisioned identity and image during strategic change	American academic institutions	• 25 interviews (university management and faculty) • Questionnaire	• Grounded theory building • Ext. metaphor analysis
Elsbach and Kramer, 1996	Reaction to reputational threats	8 American business schools	• 43 interviews (faculty) • Local press • Archival records of reputation	• Grounded theory building • Triangulation
Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997	Role conflict in a multiple identity organization	American not-for-profit medical organization	• Interviews • Observation	• Thick description
Fox Wolfgramm, Boal and Hunt, 1998	Organizational responses to institutional pressures	Two American Banks	• 13 interviews (senior managers) • Archival data	• Grounded theory building
Glynn, 2000	Relation between professional background and identity claims	Atlanta Symphony Orchestra	• 13 interviews (managers and artists) • Archival sources about the organization and the industry	• Interpretive analysis
Bartel, 2001	Boundary spanning role, perceived OI and identification	Large American food company	• Survey (including open ended questions) • 50 interviews (employees)	• Statistical analysis

Paper	Main theme	Research setting	Data collection	Data analysis
Elsbach and Bhattacharya, 2001	Determinants of organizational dis-identification	National Rifle Association	• Focus groups with NRA members • Archival data	• Grounded theory building
Brown and Humphreys, 2002	Nostalgia in collective identity narratives	Turkish vocational educational institution	• Interviews and observation	• Narrative analysis (stories)
Dukerich, Golden and Shortell, 2002	Perceived OI, construed external image, identification and cooperative behaviour	Physicians affiliated with 3 health care systems	• Survey with (some) longitudinal dimension	• Statistical analysis
Foreman and Whetten, 2002	Perceived identity and identification in multiple-identity organizations	Members of various US rural cooperatives.	• Survey	• Statistical analysis • Extended metaphor analysis
Humphreys and Brown, 2002	Relation between identity-related processes and resistance to change	British institute of higher educational	• Participant observation (ethnography)	• Interpretive analysis
Corley, 2004	Identity understandings and hierarchical positions	Spin off from a global technology service provider	• 38 interviews (managers) • Archival documents • Observation	• Grounded theory building
Corley and Gioia, 2004	Processes of OI change	Spin off from a global technology service provider	• 38 interviews (managers) • Archival documents • Observation	• Grounded theory building
Coupland and Brown, 2004	Identity construction through language	Anglo-Dutch oil company	• E-mail exchanges on public corporate website	• Narrative analysis (themes)

Paper	Main theme	Research setting	Data collection	Data analysis
Chreim, 2005	Persistence and change in organizational identity	Canadian bank	• Annual reports and business press	• Narrative analysis (themes)
Martins, 2005	OI as moderator of organizational responses to reputational threats	98 US Business Schools	• Survey	• Statistical analysis
Ravasi and Schultz, 2006	Organizational reaction to identity threats	Manufacturer of audio-video systems	• Semi-structured interviews • Identity seminars • Archival data	• Grounded theory building
Brown and Humphreys, 2006	Organizational identity in cohorts of workers	UK college of further education	• 75 interviews • Observation	• Thick description
Voss, Cable and Voss, 2006	Divergence in OI perception and firm performance	Not-for-profit professional theatres	• 133 surveys • Interviews	• Statistical analysis
Nag, Corley and Gioia, 2007	Organizational identity during strategic change	High tech R&D organization	• 34 interviews (senior and middle managers)	• Grounded theory building
Clegg, Rhodes and Kornberger, 2007	Identity formation in emerging industries	Coaching industry in Australia	• 11 interviews with company principals	• Grounded theory building
Jack and Lorbiecki, 2007	National identity and the construction of OI	Three British corporations	• 36 interviews (employees in various positions)	• Coding and search for themes
Rodrigues and Child, 2008	Power relations and resource mobilization in identity construction	Brazilian telecom company	• 13 interviews (executive directors) • 145 interviews (middle managers) • Archival sources	• Not specified

Paper	Main theme	Research setting	Data collection	Data analysis
Sillince and Brown, 2009	Identity and rhetoric in organizational self-presentations	43 English and Welsh constabularies	• Websites	• Narrative analysis (rhetoric)
Tripsas, 2009	Identity and organizational response to technology change	A spin-off in the digital imaging industry	• 30 interviews (senior and middle managers) • Participant observation • Archival sources	• Grounded theory building • Content analysis
He and Baruch, 2010	Interplay between OI and legitimacy during change	Two British building society	• 45 interviews • Archival sources	• Grounded theory building
Gioia, Price, Hamilton and Thomas, 2010	The formation of a new organizational identity	American college	• 33 interviews (faculty members) • Non-participant observation • Participant observation (insider) • Archival data	• Grounded theory building • Insider-outsider ethnographic work
Ybema, 2010	Temporal discontinuities and the construction of organizational identity	Dutch news company	• Participant observation (insider/outsider)	• Narrative analysis (stories)
Clark, Gioia, Ketchen and Thomas 2010	Organizational identity change during a merger	Two American health care organizations	• 33 interviews (senior managers) • Participant observation (insider/outsider) • Archival data •	• Grounded theory building
Kjergaard, Morsing and Ravasi, 2011	Identity and celebrity during strategic change	Danish producer of hearing aids	• 232 interviews (employees at all levels) • Archival sources • Direct observation	• Grounded theory building

Paper	Main theme	Research setting	Data collection	Data analysis
Ravasi and Phillips, 2011	Identity management and strategic change	Danish producer of audio-video systems	• 16 interviews (senior and middle managers) • Archival sources	• Grounded theory building
Rindova, Dalpiaz and Ravasi, 2011	Cultural repertoire enrichment and strategic change	Italian producer of household appliances	• 27 interviews (managers and employees) • Archival sources	• Text analysis • Grounded theory building