

FOCUSING ON LONE TREES IN THE FOREST: MEMBERS' EXPERIENCES OF A MULTIPLE IDENTITY ORGANIZATION

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INTRODUCTION

Organizational identities, or the shared beliefs of members about the central, enduring, and distinct characteristics of their organization (Albert and Whetten, 1985), have long interested organizational scholars, particularly when these identities are multiple or hybrid in form (Pratt and Foreman, 2000; Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997). The coexistence of multiple identities within an organization constitutes a unique challenge for managers, and a rich research opportunity for scholars; research efforts have until recently, however, mostly concerned the view from above.

In this paper we examine the impact of multiple organizational identities on lower-level organization members. Building on existing research about the management of multiple identity organizations, we report results from a longitudinal field study of lower-level members of a multiple identity organization and develop a perspective on the identification patterns that shape the experience of lower-level employees of a multiple identity organization. Using interview data, archival data, and longitudinal survey data, we detail the interplay between identities and identification in a non-profit organization, showing that lower-level members tend to limit their focus and connection to a single identity of the organization, potentially derailing the outcomes that the organization aims to achieve. The distinct experience of lower-level members – focused identification – suggests new boundary conditions for the validity of the multiple identity construct. More broadly, our research implies that multiple identity organizations may not be perceived as such by lower-level organizational members, who instead are likely to recognize a single identity to the exclusion of others.

The View From Above

For leaders and managers of multiple identity organizations, a major challenge to be met involves whether and how to integrate or divide the organizational identities. Succeeding at this challenge is important since member's identification with these identities can spark cooperative behavior both among organization members (Dukerich, Golden and Shortell, 2002) and within groups (Kramer, 1991), decrease turnover (Mael and Ashforth, 1995; Tyler, 1999), and may influence individual well-being (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Research on the management of multiple identity organizations has focused mostly on the pressures that these identities create for organizational leadership. As an example, over three-quarters of the interview sample used by Corley and Gioia (2004) to study organizational identity change consisted of members at the rank of manager or above. Overall, the focus of the literature has largely been on the viewpoints

and tactics of managers (Pratt and Foreman, 2000) or board members (Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997) when managing hybrid identities.

The View From Below

Considerably less research has considered the experience of membership in a multiple identity organization from the perspective of lower-level employees (see Foreman and Whetten, 2002; Zilber, 2002 for exceptions). Past work on the relationship between organizational image and identity (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991) has drawn, in part, on the views of lower-level employees in understanding the development of an organizational identity issue over time. But the articulation and management of multiple identities have been assumed to be managerial acts (Pratt and Foreman, 2000) occurring at high levels of the organization (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991). While members' identification levels with multiple identity organizations have been examined (Dukerich et al., 2002; Foreman and Whetten, 2002), the nature of the relationship that members form with their organizations as it unfolds over time has received less attention.

RESEARCH SITE, DATA, AND METHODOLOGY

In order to study the identification dynamics that unfold in multiple identity organizations, we examined the experience and effects of membership in a multiple identity organization in a longitudinal study of a French youth civic volunteering organization, labeled Helping Hands. Such organizations typically exist as both community service organizations and youth development organizations, and thus are prime examples of multiple identity organizations. The goal of Helping Hands was to promote a "time for solidarity" and to enable young adults between the ages of 18 and 25, living in France, regardless of their nationality or immigration status, to engage in a full-time volunteering experience for a nine-month period. Helping Hands strived to maintain two different identities: one in keeping with its objective of community service (what we label "helping others"), and the other focused on the objective of the professional development of its own members (what we label "helping oneself").

We collected and analyzed several different kinds of data. First, we conducted interviews (N = 22) with founders, site directors, staff members, and volunteers. Second, we conducted a two-and-a-half-year, three-wave longitudinal survey with incoming members from the Fall and Winter 2001-2002 cohort (N = 42 at T1, N = 34 at T2, and N = 25 at T3). Third, we collected printed archival data, including board meeting minutes, press articles, and secondary data provided by the constituent organizations served by the members. To fully understand Helping Hands' identity, we used a combination of methodological approaches, allowing us to study the impact of both individual and institutional dynamics on the organizational identification of lower-level members, and thus helping to build stronger assertions about interpretation by triangulating findings (Yin, 1984; Eisenhardt, 1989).

FINDINGS

A Multiple Identity Organization

We organize our findings in four parts. First, we provide evidence of a multiple identity organization, showing how two organizational identities, one defined as "helping others" and the

other defined as “helping oneself” coexist at Helping Hands. Interviews with founders and staff members, board meeting minutes, survey data from partner non-profit organizations, and press coverage of the organization indicate that Helping Hands is viewed as an organization that strives to serve the community while it aims to develop the professional paths of its young adult members. The combination of service and personal development is presented as a harmonious aspect of Helping Hands’ holographic identity but founders and staff members of Helping Hands were quite aware of the struggles presented by its multiple identity. When this multiple identity was contested at the board level, meeting minutes revealed that board members voiced concerns that one identity not be favored over another. The non-profit partner organizations that interacted on a daily basis with groups of Helping Hands members were also aware of its multiple identity.

A Dual Entry Path into the Organization

Second, the multiple organizational identity of Helping Hands was also reflected in the experience of its members. Newcomers seemed to be aware of *one* of the identities of Helping Hands, but not both. In the first wave of survey data, members were asked to rate a list of reasons describing why they joined Helping Hands. The two most strongly endorsed reasons for joining were to “learn and develop skills that I can use in the future” and to “help others and make a difference in the life of someone.” However, the correlation between these two reasons was negative and marginally significant, suggesting that new members joined primarily for one, but not both, of the dominant identities of Helping Hands.

Both the interviews with staff members and volunteers and our survey results revealed two distinct entry paths of respondents into the organization. The data indicated a clear difference between two groups that we have labeled as the “future professionals” (N=15) and the “drifters” (N=27). The future professionals explicitly wanted to engage in social or humanitarian work and saw Helping Hands as an instrumental way to achieve that goal. This group was highly focused on a future career; 87 percent of future professionals were planning to become social workers, youth educators, nurses, or clinical psychologists, among other careers. In contrast, 76 percent of the drifters did not specify or know what they wanted to do in the future. Most drifters were not sure of what the next year would have held for them had they not joined Helping Hands (e.g., one wrote, “I would have worked in a post office, in the subway, a sandwich shop or a photography lab.”).

Members entered Helping Hands with two different understandings of the organization, each of which was associated with their reason for joining. For example, drifters joined to “challenge themselves and develop” while future professionals did not focus on this reason for joining. Future professionals were significantly more inclined to join in order to “increase their professional or educational opportunities” than drifters.

The Emphasis on Member Interactions

Third, after joining Helping Hands, members’ open-ended responses tended to focus on the experience of mixing with members who were different from themselves, and who were there for different reasons. The shift in members’ focus toward their interactions with group members and away from helping others *or* helping themselves was reflected in a shift in their reported reasons for joining Helping Hands. At T1 and T2, we asked members to rate a list of reasons for joining the organization according to which reasons best fit their motivation for joining. The reasons

respondents gave at T2 changed when compared with what they claimed were their reasons for joining at T1. Compared to what they stated upon entry, the fact that they “spent time with people from a different background” became significantly more salient over time as an explanation for why respondents joined Helping Hands at T2. A count of themes that emerged from our coding of the interviews indicated that lessons in teamwork were the focal point of attention and received the most mentions (36 narratives in the 22 interviews), followed by discussions of the impact of Helping Hands in the world (18), and the change in empathy that members noticed they had toward others (13). Overall, members reported a focus on interacting with fellow members of Helping Hands, rather than on the community or their own personal development.

Mixed Organizational Outcomes

The final set of analyses concerns the outcomes that Helping Hands was able to achieve with respect to its members. Members’ identification levels with the organization decreased significantly over time across the entire sample. Upon entry, future professionals reported higher levels of identification with the organization than did drifters; but this difference in organizational identification disappeared at T2 and T3. While this overall drop across the entire sample could be attributed to a general burnout phenomenon, we suggest it reflects the mixed feelings toward the organization that members developed over time as they experienced the impact of tensions associated with working closely with others who joined the organization for different reasons.

In addition, we found that membership in Helping Hands did not promote changes in the civic values that respondents reported at each time wave. As well, neither identification with Helping Hands nor respondents’ status as a future professional or drifter predicted their civic values upon exit from Helping Hands. Thus, even those who felt most connected to the organization reported no increase in civic values over time.

DISCUSSION

We suggest that upon joining the organization and beginning to work interdependently, members confronted the multiple identity of the organization through their interactions with others who had joined the organization for different reasons. Ultimately, rather than finding that members identified more strongly with their organization after working to serve those less fortunate (Bartel, 2001), members of Helping Hands identified less strongly with the organization over time and remained unchanged in their civic values. Though identification with Helping Hands predicted the number of civic activities that respondents were engaged in after leaving the organization, it did not predict entry into a civically-oriented occupation or course of study. These results, we argue, stem in part from members’ inability to fully recognize, and, as a result, to reconcile the multiple identities of the organization.

A focus on community service and helping others while one is being groomed for the future through lectures, internships, and resume workshops may be a confusing dual foci for members, particularly since the vast majority of them entered the organization on the basis of only one of the organizational identities. Tensions between members (Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997; Glynn, 2000; Zilber, 2002) and within members (Foreman and Whetten, 2002) in multiple identity organizations have previously been noted, and have been shown to affect organizational

identification levels (Foreman and Whetten, 2002). This study suggests that these tensions might also impact organizational outcomes.

Helping Hands presents an interesting context for studying a process not yet widely understood in the identity literature. When members decide to join an organization, our results suggest that they may have a different understanding of the identity of the organization than the organization expects. The organizational socialization literature has established that newcomers often find that their ideas about the organizations they join are revised upon entry (Louis, 1980). Our results indicate that members may instead hew to a single, more focused identity in their understanding and experience of the organization.

Implications for Research on Multiple Identity Organizations

Our study contributes to the literature on multiple identity organizations in three ways. First, much of the prior research implicitly assumes that the identity dynamics of multiple identity organizations are shaped from above—by managers and leaders (e.g., Golden-Biddle and Rao, 1997; Pratt and Foreman, 2000; Corley and Gioia, 2004). In this view, lower-level members are the recipients of carefully crafted cues about the identities of their organization, which they filter, interpret, comprehend, and then act upon on behalf of the organization. While acknowledging that multiple identities of such organizations can be managed, our results suggest that the *impact* of their management on the experience of members may be limited. Indeed, members may, despite the best efforts of management, merely focus on the identity of the organization that they find most compelling or attractive at the point of entry.

Second, the role of interactions of lower-level members who have chosen to focus on different identities to create their representation of the organization may have been overlooked in existing literature. Through their interactions, members may encounter conflicts and difficulties as they struggle with challenges to their representations of the organization's identity. To the extent that research on multiple identity organizations has focused on the tensions and strategies for managing multiple identity organizations, this presents a new front on which to manage such additional tensions. In the rare instance when tensions have been documented within the same hierarchical level (e.g., Zilber, 2002), the extent of the disconnect between the members aligned around each identity has been assumed to fade away over time.

A third contribution of this study to the identity literature grows from our finding mixed long-term effects of multiple-identity organizations not only on members' identification levels, but also on their attitudes and behaviors. Our study suggests that the tensions engendered by multiple identity organizations in their members might also affect the very attitudes and behaviors that these organizations are trying to promote. Thus, this study raises questions about the ability of multiple identity organizations to engage their members over time.

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