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Organizational Identity: What Is the Conversation Currently Dealing with? Paradigms, Perspectives, and Discussions

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Abstract

This paper presents the results of a data research on the issue of organizational identity, the aim of which was to explore the current state of the discussion on organizational identity based on the analysis of papers published in 10 of the world's leading organizational and management journals between 2000 and 2011, in order to identify paradigms, subjects, and trends. After a first selection of 5509 papers, 92 articles dealing with the specific issue of organizational identity were classified for analysis. Identity is not only an important perspective of study within the organizational field, but it has also become a relevant reference to bear in mind in order to understand phenomena related to organizations.

Keywords: Identity, organizational identity, organizational studies, organizational identity paradigms, analysis perspectives

JEL Classification code: M10

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The concept of identity is not new in the human and social sciences. Philosophy has approached it from different perspectives and in different historical contexts. Identity seems to be the result of a certain line of reasoning that reduces what is real to what is identical, that is, to sacrifice the multiplicity of identity in order to explain it and to use it as a base for any theorization on the human condition. Additionally, during the last century, psychology and psychoanalysis gave identity a crucial role in the study of individual processes, and it became a key element in understanding the development of personality. Anthropology has had to produce a body of theory regarding the issue of social identity. Of course, it is also important to consider the contributions of other disciplines such as sociology, political science, and linguistics.

Identity has played an important role in the theorizing of the social and human sciences, which contribute to and have an effect on organizational studies (Corley et al., 2006), the field of knowledge of this paper. Notwithstanding the academic interest the term arouses, its study in the organizational field is relatively recent (Hatch & Schultz, 2004). The conceptualization proposed by Albert and Whetten (1985), who claimed that organizational identity (OI) implied organizational aspects meeting the criteria of centrality, distinctive character, and continuity in time, has given way to new approaches. This influential work has inspired a wave of research and theorizing continuing to the present.

Nevertheless, a little more than a quarter of century after its conceptualization, the definition of the term OI is not complete, and the discussion on its scope and proposed models is far from finished. Within the organizational field, definitions have abounded, ranging from the individual level to perceptions of what an organization actually is, based on institutionalist or essentialist perspectives aimed at identifying the features

of an organization (Ashforth, Rogers, & Corley, 2011). This has generated cacophonous and polysemous definitions and contributions to the organizational field and given rise to a contradictory situation where it seems that *everything is identity and, at the same time, nothing is identity.*

This paper aims at discussing the current state of conversations regarding OI within organization studies (OS). Clegg and Hardy (1996) defined OS as "a series of conversations, particularly of those organizational researchers contributing to the constitution of the very institutions by means of terms derived from paradigms, methods and assumptions, which derive in turn from previous conversations" (p. 3). The aim is to propose a general overview of research dealing with this issue within OS, in order to encourage conversations, discussions, and the development of theory. The idea is also to show the opportunities offered by this model in order to understand and analyze social phenomena within organizations.

The goal is to take the reader to the context of paradigms, perspectives, and discussions typical of the study of OI. Therefore, the paper does not advocate a specific definition or aspect but presents the current state of the conversation based on journal articles from the last 12 years (2000–2011) drawn from 10 of the most important journals within the organizational field worldwide. The aim of this study has been to identify and classify some of the main paradigms, perspectives, and conceptualizations in an effort to highlight the importance of OI for organizational analysis and to encourage theorizing and empirical research within this field, so that this text may become a point of reference for future papers on OI.

This paper is divided into four sections. The first section outlines the importance that the issue of OI has gained in the academic field in recent years. The second briefly explains the methodology used. The third presents the findings of this research and is divided into paradigms from which OI is currently studied, theoretical perspectives related to OI, and the relation between OI and other concepts linked to it. Finally, this study ends with a brief discussion on future possibilities of this model for the study of organizations.

Context, Importance, and Difficulties of Organizational Identity

In recent years, the concept of identity has extended into macro levels of analysis and has become a key issue to understand the meaning of an organization within society (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Ashforth et al., 2011; Czarniawska, 1997; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Hatch & Schultz, 2002). This is why the study of OI has become relevant among theoreticians and researchers of organizations.

Based on Albert and Whetten's (1985)[i] definition of OI, researchers have approached the concept of OI by exploring its implications for organizational life in a variety of environments. This growing interest has led to taking OI as an important perspective to analyze different topics such as strategic decision making (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Gioia & Thomas, 1996; Glynn, 2000; Maitlis & Lawrence, 2003), organizational change (Chreim, 2005; Martins, 2005; Nag, Corley, & Gioia, 2007), and how organizations and their managers interpret issues (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991), identify threats (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996), perceive and solve conflicts (Golden-Biddle & Rao, 1997), establish a competitive advantage (Fiol, 1991), and build strategies (Fiol & Huff, 1992), just to mention a few.

The issue of OI is, therefore, theoretically important, and it offers valuable elements for empirical analyses. This topic presents creative ways to understand a broad variety of organizational contexts and phenomena (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008). Likewise, this theme has also been approached as both an analysis perspective and a subject of enquiry. That is, there is an interest in understanding "*what one is*" as a cultural and historical form and a trend to take OI as a perspective to understand social problems and phenomena that occur within organizations.

One of the possibilities offered by the term OI is that it allows the location of an entity. Whether it is an organization, group, or person, each organization needs at least a preliminary answer to the question *Who are we?* in order to be able to interact effectively with other entities in the long term. Likewise, other entities need at least a preliminary answer to the question *Who are they?* in order to carry out such interaction. This way, OI locates the organization, group, or person socially (Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000).

People develop a great variety of intertextual identification processes between the *self* and the *other* in their interaction with their social environments (Fuller et al., 2006). This allows the simultaneous construction of a personal identity as a human being, and of a public identity as a social actor. Given that such practices articulate what is personal and what is social, analytically speaking, the idea of identity may be described as a

concept between the individual and the society (Ybema et al., 2009). Its potential for mediation lies precisely in this double character, which is why identity may be considered a permanent dialectic between the personal and the social structure.

Therefore, studying OI allows understanding the permanent and underlying will to generate consistency and fit of certain personal attitudes and behaviors with what has been established by the organization. This could also imply reevaluating the individual's fundamental beliefs or pushing the organization into changing its practices, which could lead to reconsidering the very relation between the individual and the organization (Foreman & Whetten, 2002).

Notwithstanding its importance and the possibilities it offers to aid in the understanding of organizational phenomena, Pratt and Rosa (2003) have claimed that identity, as an explanatory concept, is often used in excess, and has not been thoroughly specified yet. "The concept of organizational identity is suffering an identity crisis" (Whetten, 2006, p. 220).

Pratt (2003), in reference to the term OI, claimed that "a concept that means everything, means nothing" (p. 162). This differs from the definition of Albert and Whetten (1985) who introduced the concept as a well-defined construct. Whetten (2006) himself referred to this issue when he claimed that, although some authors understand OI as a set of fragments, often incompatible, other authors question this position, because they think that if OI is conceived as stable, it allows consistent coherence with organizational action:

> *Different points of view in different moments of history may simply serve different purposes; the lack of universal agreement is, somehow, an obstacle for the future. In fact, it may well be that some of the deepest questions posed in relation to identity, might not be solved, given that their depth and density will always remain an enigma.* (p. 15)

It is within this frame that OI is important for organizational analysis. The underlying difficulties raise some questions: What has been actually said in relation to OI? Which are the main theoretical perspectives researchers have used for their study? In other words, what is the conversation about OI currently dealing with? In the following section, the methodological aspects of this review of the literature on OI will be introduced.

Methodological Aspects

Methodological Strategy

In its first stage, the research consisted of a review of 5509 papers published in 10 of the leading journals worldwide in the organizational field, between 2000 and 2011. The following data were considered: title, name of the author(s), the institution they work for, the abstract and the key words. Perspectives and theoretical frameworks with which organizational problems were studied were identified, OI among these. Only papers were considered among the publications, leaving aside editorial comments, forums, book reviews, and other material. From this first review, the articles developing the issue of OI as such were classified; this resulted in 125 articles being selected in the first instance.

In the second stage, each of these articles was read and then processed and systematized by means of the 6.2 version of Atlas Ti specialized software for qualitative research. From this second review, texts referring to personal, labor, professional, cultural, and family identities, among others, were discarded, and 92 papers remained. The literature analysis presented in this document corresponds to these articles, though not exclusively.

Information Collection

The Institute for Scientific Information (ISI) and Scopus databases were used to select the journals used, besides other relevant criteria outside the rankings, mainly based on the impact factor (IF): the importance of the journal within the organizational field, the recognition and experience of the authors, journals in which the foremost authors on the theme were publishing.

For the selection of the principal 10 journals in the study of organizations worldwide, the two aforementioned databases were crosschecked, assessing the papers in terms of the number of references quoted within a specific thematic field. For this, three criteria were used: (a) thematic categories related to the research (business, management, and sociology, among others); (b) the existing correlation between the IF (February 2012) and SCImago Journal and Country Rank (SJR) indicators; and (c) the interquartile ranges in the frequency

distribution of the corresponding indicators. The 10 journals selected are between the first and second quartiles (Q1 and Q2), and they are *Organization Studies, Organization, Administrative Science Quarterly, Human Relations, Academy of Management Journal, The Academy of Management Review, Journal of Management Studies, Journal of Management Inquiry, Work, Employment and Society,* and *Organization Science.* After data coding, categorization was carried out. In this process, the three main categories that emerged were (a) study paradigms, (b) theoretical perspectives, and (c) discussions linked to other terms.

Table 1 contains the list of papers selected for this review. The numbers (1 to 92) provide the codes that will be used to categorize them according to the paradigms and perspectives found in the analysis.

Table 1
Papers Selected for Review

1. "Gaming is my work": Identity work in internet-hobbyist game workers
2. Identities, discipline and routines
3. The role of social identity, appraisal, and emotion in determining responses to diversity management
4. Professional identity construction: Using narrative to understand the negotiation of professional and stigmatized cultural identities
5. Is the merger necessary? The interactive effect of perceived necessity and sense of continuity on post-merger identification
6. Liminality and the practices of identity reconstruction
7. Experiencing the shadow: Organizational exclusion and denial within experience economy
8. Network-domains in combat and fashion organizations
9. Talk of change: Temporal contrasts and collective identities
10. Construing organizational identity: The role of embodied cognition
11. Marketing identities: Shifting circles of identification in inter-organizational relationships
12. Managing creatives: Paradoxical approaches to identity regulation
13. The right tools for the job: Constructing gender meanings and identities in the male-dominated building trades
14. Self-doubters, strugglers, storytellers, surfers and others: Images of self-identities in organization studies
15. Encountering the Arugula Leaf: The failure of the imaginary and its implications for research on identity in organizations
16. "Being regimented": Aspiration, discipline and identity work in the British parachute regiment
17. Struggling with lack: A Lacanian perspective on organizational identity
18. Articulating identities
19. Narrative, life story and manager identity: A case study in autobiographical identity work
20. Multiple organizational identities and legitimacy: The rhetoric of police websites
21. Gay men at work: (Re)constructing the self as professional
22. Beyond dis-identification: A discursive approach to self-alienation in contemporary organizations
23. Working identities? Antagonistic discursive resources and managerial identity
24. Mind over body: Physical and psychotherapeutic discourses and the regulation of the older worker
25. Re-viewing "role" in processes of identity construction
26. Defaulting to management: Leadership defined by what it is not
27. On the nature of dialogic identity work
28. Identity matters: Reflections on the construction of identity scholarship in organization studies
29. Applying common identity and bond theory to design of online communities
30. Resisting resistance: Counter-resistance, consent and compliance in a consultancy firm
31. "Being yourself" in the electronic sweatshop: New forms of normative control

33. Desperately seeking legitimacy: Organizational identity and emerging industries
34. From prophets to profits: The occupational rhetoric of management consultants
35. Enterprising identities: Female entrepreneurs of Moroccan or Turkish origin in the Netherlands
36. Relational identity and identification: Defining ourselves through work relationships
37. Organizational identity orientation: Forging a link between organizational identity and organizations' relations with stakeholders
38. The intersection of organizational identity, knowledge, and practice: Attempting strategic change via knowledge grafting
39. Organizational identity and firm performance: What happens when leaders disagree about "Who we are?"
40. The best and the brightest: The construction, significance and effects of elite identities in consulting firms
41. A "demented work ethic" and a "lifestyle firm": Discourse, identity, and workplace time commitments
42. Albert and Whetten revisited: Strengthening the concept of organizational identity
43. Guiding organizational identity through aged adolescence
44. On the edge of identity: Boundary dynamics at the interface of individual and organizational identities
45. The ambivalence of professional identity: On cynicism and jouissance in audit firms
46. Perceived external prestige and internal respect: New insights into the organizational identifications process
47. Changing identities in a changing workplace: Identification, identity enactment, self-verification, and telecommuting
48. Constructing professional identity: The role of work and identity learning cycles in the customization of identity among medical residents
49. Where Is the "Me" among the "We"? Identity work and the search for optimal balance
50. Constructing an artistic identity
51. Identities, genres, and organizational forms
52. Affiliative objects
53. One foot in each camp: The dual identification of contract workers
54. Organizational identity orientation: The genesis of the role of the firm and distinct forms of social value
55. Discourse and collaboration: The role of conversations and collective identity
56. Identity orientations and forms of social exchange in organizations
57. Out of sight but not out of mind: Managing invisible social identities in the workplace
58. Identity of confirmation networks and cooperation in work groups
59. Generational encounters and the social formations of entrepreneurial identity: Young guns and old farts
60. Defined by our strategy or our culture? Hierarchical differences in perceptions of organizational identity and change
61. Identity ambiguity and change in the wake of a corporate spin-off
62. Identities and insecurities: Selves at work
63. Managing managerial identities: Organizational fragmentation, discourse and identity struggle
64. Relating physical environment to self-categorizations: Identity threat and affirmation in a non-territorial office space
65. Employee creativity in Taiwan: An application of role identity theory
66. Members' identification with multiple-identity organizations
67. When hot and cold collide in radical change processes: Lessons from community development
68. Capitalizing on paradox: The role of language in transforming organizational identities
69. Losing the plot? Middle managers and identity
70. The dynamics of organizational identity
71. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder: The impact of organizational identification, identity, and image on the cooperative behaviors of physicians
72. Emulation in academia: Balancing structure and identity

73. Defining who you are by what you're not: Organizational disidentification and the national rifle association
74. Making newsmakers :Conversational identity at work
75. Organizations studies and identity: Towards a research agenda
76. Social comparisons in boundary-spanning work: Effects of community outreach on members' organizational identity and identification
77. Resource partitioning and the evolution of specialist organizations: The role of location and identity in the U.S. wine industry
78. When cymbals become symbols: Conflict over organizational identity within a symphony orchestra
79. Embeddedness, social identity and mobility: Why firms leave the NASDAQ and join the New York stock exchange
80. The good, the bad, and the ambivalent: Managing identification among Amway distributors
81. A stakeholder approach to organizational identity
82. Classifying managerial responses to multiple organizational identities
83. Organizational identity, image, and adaptive instability
84. The impact of identity orientation on individual and organizational outcomes in demographically diverse settings
85. Organizational identity and identification: Charting new waters and building new bridges
86. When will stakeholder groups act? An interest- and identity-based model of stakeholder group mobilization
87. Managing identity: Identity work, personal predicaments and structural circumstances
88. The importance of being "Indian": Identity centrality and work outcomes in an off-shored call center in India
89. Interlevel influences on the reconstruction of professional role identity
90. Dirty work designations : How police officers account for their use coercive force
91. When the working day is through: The end of work as identity?
92. Entrepreneurial identities: Reflections from two case studies

Source: Authors' development.

Although this literature review on OI is based on this selection of articles from these 10 journals in the last 12 years, for the analysis and discussion of some themes, as for instance the very concept of OI, some texts published outside the aforementioned parameters were reviewed in order to explain the concepts and analysis perspectives more broadly. The aim was to offer the reader a more wide-ranging context and greater clarity on the issue under discussion. The findings of this review are presented below.

Findings, Paradigms, Perspectives, and Discussions

Paradigms Underlying the Study of Organizational Identity

Following Cornelissen's (2006) categorization in which OI is conceived as a concept (Harquail & King, 2010), there are three paradigms or conceptions of OI: (a) the essentialist paradigm of social actors, (b) the social construction paradigm, and (c) the linguistic-discursive paradigm. Each of these three paradigms has its own understanding of OI: a set of features identifying such conceptions, a device for cognitive elaboration, and a continuously narrated argument.

The essentialist paradigm of social actors considers OI to be a goal of the organizational entity and covers reified attributes of what is central, distinctive, and enduring. The organization is taken as a unified social actor. The attributes defining the organization are described as its features, reflecting its reality and describing fixed features of the organization (Chreim, 2005). From this essentialist point of view, OI understands the organization as an entity in itself, as self-reflexive: "OI is a concept organizations use to characterize certain aspects of themselves" (Albert & Whetten, 1985, p. 264). This perspective highlights how the members of a given organization could experiment with, assess, appreciate, and possibly manage those specific features (Harquail & King, 2010).

Within the social construction paradigm, OI is conceptualized as a generalized collective and a sustained interpretation of *who we are within the organization*. This interpretation is used as a framework to organize and lead the collective experience, which is why it is subject to negotiation (Scott & Lane, 2000a) and to political influence (Rodrigues & Child, 2008). Arguments revolve around the collective behavior of an organization and around which features are more defining than others, thus reflecting each group's perspective within the organization (Coupland & Brown, 2004). Therefore, this perspective is more negotiated than the essentialist one, and more anchored in reality. OI is a way to collectively frame and interpret information (Fiol, 2002). Members of an organization use OI to understand their actions, establish expectations in terms of their behavior, and set a point of reference to guide their actions in the name of the organization.

The linguistic-discursive paradigm focuses on language and the role it plays in the construction of reality. Linguistic research of this paradigm outlines the role of metaphor (Cornelissen, 2006; Heracleous & Jacobs, 2008), categorization, and name in OI construction. Identity construction is a continuous process of narrating in which both the narrator and the public formulate, edit, applaud, and deny elements in narrative production. Discursive research focuses on practices of development, while it underlines the role of power and politics, defying the hegemony of a particular discourse (Brown & Humphreys, 2006; Chreim, 2005; Coupland & Brown, 2004; Humphreys & Brown, 2002b).

Alvesson, Ashcraft, and Thomas (2008) claimed OI studies have focused on several philosophical fields, and they proposed a different classification: (a) the functionalist, (b) the interpretative, and (c) the critical, this latter inspired by poststructuralists. Departing from Habermas (1972), the authors said there were three cognitive approaches to knowledge underlying human research: the technical, the practical-hermeneutic, and the emancipatory approach.

The technical interest is related to functionalist research, because it aims at to develop knowledge of cause-effect relationships by means of the control of natural and social resources. This approach seems to dominate identity and identification studies deriving from a business management-centered trend of research. The studies with a technical cognitive concern are interested in how identity and identification can potentially improve the organization's effectiveness.

The practical-hermeneutic approach aims at a broader understanding of cultural and human experiences, or at how to communicate in order to generate or transform meaning. In contrast with technical concerns, linked to functionality, there is little concern for the instrumental usefulness of this knowledge in organizational performance. The practical-hermeneutic approach focuses on how people develop their identity by means of interaction, or how the narratives of *self* weave meanings together with others and outside the different contextual resources within their reach. From this interpretative perspective, identity remains a crucial key to understand the complexity of development and the dynamic relation between *self, work,* and *the organization*.

Finally, the emancipatory perspective has a clearly critical orientation. Attention is paid to power relations and the different ways individuals may free themselves from the means of repression implemented by organizations. Researchers have used the theme of identity to understand contemporary relations of control and resistance, especially those actions aimed at looking into those worldviews that are useful to subordinate human bodies to managerial regimes.

These are the paradigms underlying the study of OI. Both classifications have elements in common and allow the understanding of the kind of relation existing between the one who knows and what is to be known, which in this case is OI. Next, several theoretical perspectives which have developed in relation to OI are introduced.

Analysis Perspectives in Relation to Organizational Identity

Narrative and discourse. OI is understood as a discourse (Whetten, 2006) or a construction of what is central, enduring, and distinctive in an organization by means of narratives (Albert & Whetten, 1985). It is a socially developed conversation, which can include internal and external individuals (Brown, 2006; Hatch & Schultz 2002; Scott & Lane, 2000a). In this regard, Sillince and Brown (2009) claimed that OI is a social rhetorical development in which organizations represent what the managers want or what they say they are.

McAdams (1996) claimed that the narrative identities built by people represent their efforts to reach an agreement with "the past rebuilt, the present perceived and the future foreseen" (p. 307), that is, they offer a sense of unity and improve the contradictions and multiplicities of modernity. Nonetheless, for Brown and Humphreys (2006), such units are essentially contingent and fragile, temporary spaces for classification.

For Beech (2008), the identity construction process is the result of a mix of writing oneself, being written by others, and trying to write oneself into the story of the others. For Clarke, Brown, and Hope-Hailey (2009), in turn, identities are available for individuals in a subjective way, through self-narratives operating by means of internal monologues and interaction with *others*. It is also a process of absorption and personalization of a general narrative (Coupland & Brown, 2004; Slay & Smith, 2011) limited by the structure and duration of such a narrative (Gabriel, 2003).

Ybema (2010) approached identity from discourse by aiming at moving theorizing towards the relation between time categories, collective identity, and organizational change. For this author, the central analysis and exploration axis lies in the way people construct their collective identity in the everyday organizational discourse. Thus, for Ybema et al. (2009) and for Ellis and Ybema (2010), identity discourse analysis covers a broad variety of methods and approaches, but at least, a discursive framework or perspective of identity situated in and consisting of *speaking and writing practices*. The emphasis in any identity discourse invariably lies (Hardy, Lawrence, & Grant, 2005; Thomas & Linstead, 2002) in speaking about identity (Snow & Anderson, 1987) or in identity narratives (Brown, 2006; Czarniawska, 1997; Thomas & Davies, 2005).

The discourse of identity is crucial in the attempts to establish, legitimize, or defy the dominant relations of power and status (Ball & Wilson, 2000). In this way, for Ybema et al. (2009), discursive positioning underlines the idea that OI construction could be a measure of a neutral or benign process in which emotions, judgment, and approval take part, that is, such a process implies social maneuvers and power games.

Identity construction. Constructing OI is a permanent, iterative cognitive process, incarnated by employees, who rely on multiple modalities to assimilate organizational reality, with the capability to approach it in different ways, evoking, in turn, different perspectives from such experience (Harquail & King, 2010). The construction of OI by a member of the organization is based on the processing, assessment, interpretation, and expression of incorporated information, which is formal and nonformal, official and nonofficial, symbolic and material, just as shared information is collective, interpersonal, and specific to the individual. Together with this, OI conceptualization by an individual is configured not only from physical stimuli and experiences, but also from socially developed habits and intentional managerial actions to elaborate certain beliefs about what an organization is (Humphreys & Brown, 2002a).

Notwithstanding the existence of a series of studies on OI construction (for instance, Brown & Lewis, 2011; Coupland & Brown, 2004; Denissen, 2010; Fiol, 2002; Humphreys & Brown, 2002b;) and the fact that some researchers care about some of the aspects of identity construction within organizations (Clegg, Rhodes, & Kornberger, 2007; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Czarniawska & Wolff, 1998), there has been no thorough research on how organizational identities develop at first (Gioia, Price, Hamilton, & Thomas, 2010). For these authors, only three studies have researched OI construction *per se*: Clegg et al. (2007), Corley and Gioia (2004), and Czarniawska and Wolff (1998). Each one of them approaches only some aspects of OI construction, but together they are a good point of departure for a more holistic consideration of OI formation.

The constructivist approach to OI implies the negotiation on the part of its members of the shared meanings of *what we are for the organization*, paying special attention to the interpretative schemes collectively built by the members in order to give meaning to their organizational experience (Gioia et al., 2000; Whetten, 2006). Ravasi and Schultz (2006) observed that this approach implies emphasizing sense construction processes linked to the social construction of identity as meaning and meanings of structures intersubjectively negotiated by the very members of the organization (Fiol, 1991). This way, OI is progressive, complex, resourceful, reflexive, and in permanent construction (Ybema et al., 2009), negotiated by the members of the organization by means of their interactions among themselves and with the participation of interested external parties (Coupland & Brown, 2004; Hatch & Schultz, 2002), leaving aside rigid linearity and causality pretensions in order to open space for understanding the complexity of their construction (Simpson & Carroll, 2008).

In this regard, the stability of identity is, to a great extent, temporary, because its construction will be discursive, emerging from and immersed in a continuous process of reconstruction, which is why stability will only be a temporary achievement or a resistant fiction (Simpson & Carroll, 2008). Likewise, both individually and collectively, from the founders' approach (Rodrigues & Child, 2008) and from repeated negotiations at different levels (Ybema et al., 2009), from complaints about the decisions of the organization as an entity (Whetten, 2006), and from the legitimation of a value, they are all part of the game in the necessary process of identity construction.

According to the social actor approach, OI is, however, the property of the organization as an entity or social actor (King, Felin, & Whetten, 2010), and it is mainly perceptible in the forms of commitment and in the actions taken (Corley et al., 2006). Whetten (2006) called these commitments identity notifications, or references, which mean self-determination and self-definition of the organization in the social space. Within it, OI is also contextualized and becomes a comparative phenomenon, identifying the organization and making it different from others (Glynn & Abzug, 2002). King et al. (2010) claimed that from the point of view of an organization as a social actor, the way forward depends on its own story. In its absence, members outline other organizations in their own personal stories, so that they can have a reference to decide which actions and commitments to appropriate, while they find important elements in the OI construction process, which correspond to the search for an optimum essential distinction in order to decide the process of being identical and different at the same time. In this way, identity construction is not free from contradictions and elements deriving from this process, and it may even undermine the very process of construction (Alvesson & Robertson, 2006).

For Beech (2011), the construction of OI has been conceived as a coconstruction with interaction between individuals and social structures (Ybema et al., 2009). The coconstruction is developed in interaction of the very individual identity (one's own notion of *who one is*) and social identity (the notion of the person in external discourses, institutions, and culture; Watson, 2009). But it is also worth noting that, although it is a construction, it has to seem believable for its members, without submitting it to a strict reality check (Albert & Whetten, 1985). In relation to the aforementioned, Sluss and Ashforth (2007) proposed a conceptual model aimed at integrating the construction process, in which the personal level, the interpersonal relations, and the role-based collective levels converge.

The social constructivism approach has been used for the study of organizational identities (Cornelissen, 2006; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Identities are rebuilt by means of symbolic action and social interaction in social contexts (Cunliffe, 2002). This is important because they become the frame of possibilities for people to create and recognize the sense of their actions. In this vein, the identity construction process is gradual; in it, the subject manages to realize things are different due to a point of inflection leading to the expectation of a new meaning. Identity transformations are produced when a person experiences misalignment, surprise, shock, disgust, anxiety, tension, confusion, and self-questioning and when the person is forced to accept that he or she is not the same as before. This is similar to writing oneself again.

Regulation and resistance. OI's regulation strategies represent managerial efforts aimed at influencing the way employees solve conflicts arising from the juxtaposition of values and the expectations generated in organizations (Hackley & Kover, 2007). Contemporary directors are more attentive every day to how control can be exercised through subjectivity construction (Watson, 1994). Critical literature has made contributions on these kinds of control and the possible forms of abuse they generate (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). However, researchers have complained about the scarcity of studies examining how companies may help their employees to face the multiple demands of identity (Down & Revely, 2009; Gotsi, Andriopoulos, Lewis, & Ingram, 2010).

Other studies have suggested that managerial strategies have moved from a technocratic control approach (by means of standardization and direct supervision) to attempts to influence workers' beliefs, showing normative, ideological, and identity control (Ainsworth & Hardy, 2008; Karreman & Alvesson, 2004). In this regard, some studies suggest that control over employees, including the managers, aims at colonizing the inside to create engineering selves (Kunda, 1992), design selves (Casey, 1995), and entrepreneurial selves (Brown & Humphreys, 2006). Therefore, the regulatory aspect is considered a normative way of control aiming at managing the workers' inside so that they become flexible and committed to the organization because they identify themselves with it. Managing people's inside is considered potentially less disturbing and more effective than the traditional *external* forms of managerial control (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

For Alvesson and Willmott (2002), the efforts made to regulate identity focus on four aspects. The first is *the employee*: to help define directly the individual and/or others related to him or her. The second is *orientations for action*: to offer a specific vocabulary of motives and values (through stories, archetypes, personnel selection, social activities) by means of which employees may build meaning for their work and the development of their skills. The third aspect is *social relations*: to clarify group categorizations and affiliations, specifying the hierarchical location. The fourth is *the scene*: to clearly establish the rules of the game, limiting the context (for instance, those of the market or industry).

From a critical perspective, research has presented these control efforts as a means to achieve a certain hegemony (Alvesson & Willmott, 1996). For example, resistance usually prevails when the managers try to exercise broad control over the employees' mentalities. Control strategies are seen as a problem, because people need to be controlled in order to subordinate their will to the organization as a collective (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

While some scholars have suggested OI's management is an important function of leadership (Voss, Cable, & Voss, 2006), it has been argued that these discursive developments may sometimes be highly resistant to managerial intervention aimed at integration, aggregation, participation, or elimination (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Given that the identity of organizations may be adaptively unstable (Gioia et al., 2000; Vaara, Kleymann, & Seristo, 2004; Vaara, Tienari, Piekkari, & Santti, 2005) and, therefore, changeable within the restrictions, it is not clear then that an individual might be controlled by the managerial elites in a programmed and predictable way. That is why it can be claimed that hegemony, as a form of control, is never complete (Brown & Humphreys, 2006).

In relation to the OI construction process, managerial efforts to manufacture subjectivity have also been explored (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), as well as people's resistance (Collinson, 2005), which aims at changing a "current *self*" to an aspirational identity (Thornborrow & Brown, 2009) or at visualizing and identifying an imposed work identity so that *one's self* can be considered authentic (Costas & Fleming, 2009). The worker's subjectivity is seen as a product of disciplinary mechanisms and of surveillance techniques and power strategies.

The dialogic approach explains how it is possible to generate a kind of resistance thanks to the transformation of meaning through inner dialogue and to the potential use of the meanings in the linguistic context in order to shape counter-narratives and counter-discourses (Beech, 2008). The challenge is to analyze how these processes are promulgated in the construction of a new meaning. In this regard, dialogue could lead to reinforcing or rejecting identity construction or to generating meeting points between the extremes.

That is how employees, facing these regulation strategies, could develop resistance when they intend to persevere in elements they appreciate in a particular OI (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Therefore, when employees feel threatened or are defensive and insecure, identity regulation strategies could amplify cynicism and resistance (Kosmala & Herrbach, 2006), while they could also be counterproductive and alienating, preventing innovation due to the promoted homogeneity. This reaction on the side of employees has been called disidentification (Beech, 2011; Costas & Fleming, 2009).

Other analysis perspectives. The three perspectives presented so far were the most relevant results of the review. However, there are many others which are also relevant within the field of OS, specifically in regard to the issue of OI. Among them are stability and change (Gioia et al., 2000; Hatch & Schultz, 2002), OI and psychoanalysis (Driver, 2009; Harding, 2007; Roberts, 2005), and contractions and conflicts (Fiol, Pratt, & O'Connor, 2009; Foreman & Whetten, 2002; Kreiner, Hollensensbe, & Sheep 2006b;), among others.

Conversations in Relation to the Concept of Organizational Identity

Enduring. For Driver (2009), it has taken time to understand OI's seminal definition as a unitary construction making a considerable effort to keep a permanent and coherent OI throughout time. Other researchers consider this construction to be a unitary and stable essence (Corley et al., 2006; Scott & Lane, 2000b). Indeed, the process of adapting to environmental demands — which is crucial for the organization's success (Brown & Starkey, 2000; Corley & Gioia 2004; Corley et al., 2006; Gioia et al., 2000) — is considered to be just as important, and sometimes even more so, in maintaining this unitary identity provided by recognition (Whetten, 2006), legitimacy, and competitive advantage.

This is how the concept of OI has been developed as a phenomenological metaphor, or as a social construction, objectively existing in essence, and therefore enduring, and as a property of organizations when considered as social actors, or a set of shared understandings (Humphreys & Brown, 2002a; Humphreys & Brown, 2002b).

Self-referential and intersubjective. OI essentially consists of "a self-reference meaning […] the attempts of the entity to define itself" (Corley et al., 2006, p. 87). These self-referential meanings, which are always contextualized and inherently comparative, could be either tacit or explicit and may be taken for granted or consciously developed (Clarke et al., 2009; Thornborrow & Brown, 2009). This self-referencing process is nothing but the way an organization is usually represented (Sillince & Brown, 2009).

For some authors, OI is an intersubjective phenomenon (Clegg et al., 2007) consisting of the perception and interpretation of its members or groups of interest (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). Ravasi and Schultz (2006) defined OI from interpretative schemes collectively built by the members of the organization in order to make some sense of their experience.

Multiple identities. Authors such as Carter and Mueller (2002) and Foreman and Whetten (2002) have accepted that organizations may have multiple identities. OI is considered to be multiple when the organization's members make two or more claims as to what the organization is. For Sillince and Brown (2009), this understanding of identities derives from an approach from rhetoric (Carter & Mueller, 2002; Collinson, 2005), in which there is an analysis of how recognition and claims about identity may contribute to the efforts of explaining organizations' behavior in more detail. Although the notion of multiple identity is frequent in the literature, the lack of consensus in regard to its meaning compromises its usefulness as a theoretical construct (Foreman & Whetten, 2002).

For Sillince and Brown (2009), the rhetorical approach to multiple OI carries at least three important implications for theorizing and research in this field. First, acknowledging multiple identities suggests the need for reconsidering the common assumption that organizations tend to communicate coherently. In this regard, it may be possible to find different *selves* in a given organization. Second, acknowledging several identities responds to a clear vision of what the members *are, are synonyms of,* and *should be* in order to promote identification, that is, in order to promote active integration processes and a sense of belonging. Third, OI's conception as multiple offers new ideas for developing theory in this field, as long as identities are stable and enduring (Albert & Whetten, 1985), dynamic (Gioia et al., 2000), or adaptative (Brown & Starkey, 2000).

Therefore, OI is in a permanent state of destabilization due to the production of new *texts*, in which identity is submitted to a permanent reconstruction, which is why such reconstruction might be very different, while in other cases, the change could be almost imperceptible (Chreim, 2005; Nayak, 2008). It is widely known that psychologists have accepted that people have multiple identities, and more recently, it has also been claimed that individuals have a repertoire of identities which become prominent in different roles and contexts. Likewise, individuals have "multiple conceptualizations of who we are" (Pratt & Foreman, 2000, p. 19), based on factors such as personal history or one's position in the organization's hierarchy (Corley, 2004).

Change. The literature has contributed to making the understanding of OI more complicated with the emergence of the concepts of change and plurality as possible sources of tension, instead of approaching OI as something static and unchanging. Identity has been conceptualized as flowing and malleable (Kreiner, Hollensensbe, & Sheep, 2006a), impermanent and fragmentary (Bendle, 2002), and multiple and contextual (Alvesson, 2000). Identities are built permanently and are constantly rebuilt because they are continuously negotiated through identification and differentiation processes.

Identities emerge from interaction and negotiation and share sense-making processes. These interpretations take place in their environment and are contextualized and influenced by it, in such a way that the interactions between external and internal members of the organization contribute to identity construction (Gioia et al., 2000). Gioia et al. (2000) avoid considering OI to be static or essential by approaching it through *performances*. This idea extends theory of identity as a dialectic process in which *one is-being* or *one gets to be* (Clegg, Kornberger, & Rhodes, 2005; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002), which means that OI, rather than being ontologically certain, emerges from the very process of organizing the organization. In other words, it is in permanent state of change. Identities are not static nor do they exist objectively, but they are built discursively in a permanent and flowing way (Brown & Humphreys, 2006).

Dialogic and relational. Identity has an essentially relational character (Ybema et al., (2009). Identities can emerge from the articulation of similarities and differences, which implies discursively separating the *self* from *the other* and leading to something intrinsic to the process in which one gets to understand what one is, departing from notions of what one is not and, by extension, of *who we are* and *who the others are*. As argued by Jenkins (2004), "the social construction of identity is a matter of establishing and making sense of the relations of similarity and difference" (p. 5), rather than of imposing apparently arbitrary limits to create and define alterity.

The concept of dialogism is considered to be a bridge between individuals and society. Its media potential lies in its double character, which refracts what can be seen as a permanent dialectic between personal and social structure. That is why identity studies pay simultaneous attention to both self-definitions and definitions of the others (Ybema et al., 2009), so that identity may become a *subject*, and that it can also be seen as

an active discursive process in relation to other speakers. In this discursive interrelation, "not only does the organization construct the employee, but the employee also constructs the organization" (Gabriel, 1999, p. 190).

Identity is understood as a process where identity itself is built and rebuilt by means of a dynamic interaction in which the person is thrown into the *identity of others* (Karreman & Alvesson, 2004), aiming at projecting an identity out into the external world (Brown, 2001) or at acquiring behaviors, symbols, and stories of an identity (Sims, 2003). These interactions imply a dialogue between inner self-identity and the outer social identity (Watson, 2009). Social identity consists of the projections of others onto oneself, the projections of *oneself* onto the others, and the reactions to the projections received (Beech, 2008). Therefore, social identity is a space or place people resort to or impose upon themselves by means of external discourses. Self-identity is the interiorized view of *self*, in which people try to keep a particular narrative (Watson, 2009).

Discussion: Considerations for Future Conversations

What has been said in this paper has contributed to showing different conversations, currently in progress, regarding the issue of OI. It aims at encouraging the conversation and showing the main paradigms, perspectives, and discussions within the current dialogues about this concern. This review has revealed some conversations on OI and has provided a framework for discussion in order to keep encouraging debates and controversies, as they outline and help to present a general overview of the issue for those researchers who would like to consider it in more depth.

OI has been acknowledged and established as an important concept within OS (Brown, 2001), and it has been seen recently as an increasingly important construct (Ashforth et al., 2011). Although Albert and Whetten's (1985) seminal definition of OI as *what is central, distinctive, and enduring* is still valid and revisited by researchers in their work, it has experienced a series of changes and developments in the last years. Different researchers have departed from different paradigms and theoretical perspectives to interpret these attributes, forming a controversial dialogue on what OI *is* or *should be*. Table 2 synthesizes what has been discussed.

Table 2
Paradigms in Relation to Organizational Identity

Items Paradigms	Essentialist	Constructivist	Discursive
Conception of OI	It is an attribute or feature likely to be managed.	It is a generalized collective and sustained interpretation from which actions are understood.	It is a narrative constructed as a metaphor in which there is not one prevailing discourse.
Conception of the organization	It is a self-reflexive entity in itself.	It is a social construction.	It is a discursive construct.
Cognitive approaches	Hand in hand with functionalism, it focuses technically on cause-effect relations in order to improve the organization's efficacy.	From an interpretative view, it aims at understanding the identity construction process by means of hermeneutical practices.	It has a critical approach with the aim of emancipating people, by denouncing the subordination and control they are subjected to under managerial regimes.
Theoretical perspectives	Regulation and resistance.	Identity construction.	Narrative and discourse.

Source: Authors' development.

What is central, distinctive, and enduring about OI has given way to what is dynamic and unstable (Gioia et al., 2000), to the multiple facets in which there is not a singular unit (Brickson, 2000; Essers & Benschop, 2007; Pratt & Foreman 2000). This has allowed the conversations around OI to be heterogeneous and sometimes even contradictory. However, theoretical and empirical research on the identity construction processes could be considered relatively recent (Kornberger & Brown, 2007; Sillince & Brown, 2009), notwithstanding the fact that "the concept of identity is crucial to understand modern organizations" (Gioia et al., 2000, p. 78). Nevertheless, there is little agreement on what OI denotes or whether there is a methodology to study it. Indeed, and revisiting Harquail (2004), it could be claimed that anarchy still rules over the concept of OI.

Regarding the diversity of voices related to the very concept of OI, the paradigm underlying such conceptualization, and it relationship to other terms, approaching OI, both as a subject of inquiry and as a theoretical perspective for organizational analysis, requires conceptual and epistemological clarity in order not to be methodologically or theoretically inconsistent. This is a challenge for every researcher interested in looking into this field of knowledge.

Although it is true that some important distinctions have been made, the analytic tools, both at a conceptual level and at a methodological level, are relatively scarce and do not allow for providing a clear account of the identity construction process itself. There is an example of this in the fact that the ways the concepts of identity and culture relate to each other have not yet been thoroughly examined, nor the similarities and differences between the two concepts, or the potential they have for offering a different analytical contribution for OS. Another aspect still to be looked into is the possibilities OI has of understanding, both at a theoretical and at an empirical level, the relations between the organization and the environment, and the consequences in relation to legitimacy, reputation, and investment attraction, to mention just a few ramifications for future research.

Table 3 contains a classification of the papers based on the paradigms and perspectives found after the analysis of the data. The paradigms were classified according to the typification proposal of Cornelissen (2006) and Alvesson et al. (2008), while the perspectives were selected according to the data analysis already discussed in the results section.

Table 3
Classification of the Papers Based on the Paradigms and Perspectives of the Analysis

Paradigms	Frequency of the papers	# of papers (%)
Essentialist-functionalist	1, 11, 12, 23, 26, 29, 34, 35, 42, 52, 58, 65, 72, 79, 80, 81, 82, 84, 86, 90	20 (22%)
Social constructive-interpretative	2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 10, 14, 17, 18, 20, 24, 25, 27, 28, 32, 33, 38, 39, 40, 44, 47, 48, 50, 55, 62, 63, 66, 68, 69, 70, 73, 76, 78, 85, 87, 89, 91	37 (40%)
Linguistic-discursive-critical	4, 5, 9, 13, 15, 16, 19, 21, 22, 30, 31, 36, 37, 41, 45, 46, 49, 51, 53, 54, 56, 57, 60, 61, 64, 67, 71, 74, 77, 88, 92	31 (34%)
Does not apply	43, 59, 75, 83	4 (4%)
Perspectives		
Narrative and discourse	2, 4, 5, 9, 11, 14, 18, 19, 20, 23, 27, 29, 34, 35, 41, 49, 52, 56, 57, 60, 61, 62, 64, 65, 67, 71, 73, 74, 77, 81, 84, 85, 87, 89, 91	35 (38%)
Identity construction	3, 6, 8, 10, 13, 15, 25, 28, 33, 36, 37, 38, 39, 40, 43, 44, 46, 47, 48, 50, 54, 55, 63, 66, 68, 69, 70, 76, 88, 92	30 (33%)
Regulation and resistance	1, 7, 12, 16, 22, 24, 26, 30, 31, 45, 53, 58, 72, 78, 79, 80, 82, 86, 90	19 (21%)
Other analysis perspectives	17, 21, 32, 42, 51, 59, 75, 83	8 (9%)

Source: Authors' development.

As shown in Table 3, the constructive-interpretative paradigm presents a frequency of 40% and is the one that prevails among the studies reviewed. It is followed by the linguistic-discursive-critical paradigm with 34%. This means that, in terms of the papers reviewed and the methodology followed, the articles that referred to the OI in the last 12 years have focused on a more comprehensive view of the study of organizational identity, as opposed to a functional view. Four (4%) of papers could not be classified in any of the three paradigms proposed because of their character and methodology.

The perspectives of analysis show the same trends as the paradigms, because the narrative and discourse perspective and the identity construction perspective account for 71% of the perspectives or theoretical frameworks with which organizational phenomena are studied from the OI viewpoint.

The applicability of the concept of identity to multiple levels of analysis, and its capability to integrate analytical knowledge at micro, medium, and macro levels, outlines even more prominently its potential to become an integrating construct. In the vein of the claims of Albert et al. (2000), "the power of identity and of identification derives from the capability to integrate and generate that such constructs may have" (p. 13). The challenge will then be to find ways to develop and display attractive concepts of identity for the social

sciences, in order to offer the possibility of multiple types of insightful analyses, which may also be well enough defined to promote a deeper understanding of the complexities of organizational reality.

By Way of Conclusion

The conceptualizations on the nature of OI and its possibilities within organizational analysis are far from being a closed subject. In a recent text on identity and organizations, Kenny, Whittle, and Willmott (2011) argued the importance of this issue as an essential and relevant aspect to understand organizational phenomena. That is why this paper has aimed at presenting what the conversation on OI is currently dealing with, in the context of organizational studies. It has attempted to echo the different voices and interests developed around the topic, thus opening room for new discussions and offering wider knowledge of the organization and its scope.

The review has produced three paradigms and some theoretical perspectives for organizational analysis. Although the constructivist paradigm and the narrative-discursive approach are gaining considerable importance (Coupland & Brown, 2004; Driver, 2009; Humphreys & Brown, 2002b; Ybema, 2010), the review shows that OI's construction or configuration is not only restricted to these discursive processes. Cognitive knowledge (Harquail & King, 2010), as well as the construction aspects in evolving organizations, with great influence of proper institutional processes, provide subjects with the possibility of forming a particular OI (McKendrick, Jaffee, Carroll, & Khessina, 2003). It is worth noting that these constructions have also been found in the very organizational processes, which implies that the structure underlies many human organizational phenomena (Hsu & Hannan, 2005; Labianca, Fairbank, Thomas, Gioia, & Umphress, 2001).

Additionally, it is necessary to highlight that OI construction is a task undertaken in located practices, when participating in activities in a particular way, and simultaneously in thought as an inner speech, and in the generation of a *self* that is capable of uttering different voices. Identity construction is a self-formation process when it takes part in and makes contact with cultural practices and meanings. As far as more fields of experience have been acknowledged, new capabilities of being and thinking are also being generated, which meet and allow the appropriation of cultural worlds. In this way, people and the activities they engage in in specific places provide identity resources to subjects aiming at forming an OI.

Together with the afroementioned, and as part of the final reflections on this research, it is somehow surprising that the topic of OI, from the perspective of the reviewed documents, remains practically detached from cultural issues. There are no references or developments in which OI is related to organizational culture, except from researchers quoting texts or studies on this issue. Additionally, there is a great variety of topics and theoretical frameworks in which OI is taken as a subject of study, as well as a theoretical perspective for the analysis of organizational phenomena. Therefore, it may be claimed that OI seems to be important and relevant enough to be considered a focus of study in itself.

Endnote

[1] These authors define OI from three features: (a) The features that are specific to the organization, that is, features considered to be its essence. Identity distinguishes an organization based on something important and essential. It refers to the features identified as *central*. (b) The features that distinguish the organization from others. Identity covers features allowing differentiation from other organizations. It refers to the features identified as *distinctive*. (c) The features showing a certain degree of sameness or continuity over time. Identity refers to the features identified as providing *continuity*.

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