



To imitate or differentiate: Cross-level identity work in an innovation network



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ABSTRACT

Survival in global high-tech industries requires many organizations to participate in specialized innovation networks. However, sustained participation in these networks often proves more challenging than expected for organizations and their representatives, due to complex cross-level identity tensions that are indiscernible when only one level of analysis is considered. The purpose of this study is to analyze cross-level identity tensions at the interface of personal and organizational identities in an innovation network. We identify three key cross-level identity tensions related to intellectual property, communication and market definition, which together contribute to an overall organizational–personal identity tension opposing differentiation and imitation. These tensions are indicative of a complex process of “partial isomorphism” in identity work, which can facilitate collaboration while simultaneously fostering innovation among personal and organizational network members.

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1. Introduction

Organizations operating in highly competitive industries frequently invest time and money in innovation networks in order to stay abreast of new developments, build connections, and at times, embark on new collaborative ventures. But meeting network requirements and remaining attractive to potential partners can pose significant challenges to these organizations and their employees. Participants in such collaborations can fall victim to free riding, opportunism, escalating commitment, redundant information (Oliver, 2004), resource misappropriation, project stagnation, cynicism, over-collaboration and even excessive innovation surpassing individual and organizational absorptive capacities (Katila, Rosenberger, & Eisenhardt, 2008). Furthermore, while research networks can indeed generate innovations, they sometimes also result in attitude similarity, imitation, and varying levels of performance, leading to calls for additional study of dynamic tradeoffs occurring at multiple levels (Brass, Galaskiewicz, Greve, & Tsai, 2004).

The high-tech aerospace industry is characterized by rapid change and intense, globalized competition, requiring continuous research and development (R&D) investments. Complex products

(e.g., planes, drones, helicopters and satellites) have given rise to complicated supply chains and shared R&D through innovation networks, as organizations attempt to increase market share. Such innovation networks not only promote resource concentration, risk distribution and intellectual property sharing among industrial, academic and governmental organizations, but also increase the occurrence and intensity of interaction among representatives, which can reverberate all the way up to interorganizational relations (Chreim, Williams, & Hinings, 2007; Marchington & Vincent, 2004).

Interorganizational research networks also present cross-level identity challenges (Huemer, Becerra, & Lunnan, 2004). Originating as an individual-level construct in the field of psychology, the notion of identity has been extended to the collective and organizational levels, where it continues to offer a personal frame of reference that legitimizes decision-making and enables the formation of stable relationships with others (Oliver, 2015). Identity has been connected to many organizational phenomena, including the formulation of strategy, the enactment of leadership, intergroup conflict, employee pride (Ashforth, Rogers, & Corley, 2011), and organizational development (Jacobs, Oliver, & Heraclous, 2013). Far from being a static attribute, identity is constantly interpreted, reflected upon, and gradually formed within social interactions (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002).

Identity work refers to processes engaged in by individuals related to “forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness” (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003:

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1165). Studies of identity work have tended to focus on active processes of identity construction, including ways in which people make connections “outwards” to social others as well as “inwards” to the self (Watson, 2008: 140). However, processes of identity work also are characterized by *tensions* between individual notions of who and what one is (self-identity), and cultural, discursive or institutional notions of who or what any individual might be (social-identity) (Watson, 2008). Tracy and Trethney (2005) urged scholars to “explore the shifting, fluid, and potentially liberatory identity tensions in a world in which people are accustomed to striving for a stable self” (2005: 185).

Although individuals may be attempting to construct a coherent sense of self, they can also be “read” in terms of more than one social identity (Watson, 2008). This tension between the inside and the outside occurs at each level of interaction (e.g., intrapersonal vs. interpersonal, intraorganizational vs. interorganizational). Similarly, identity tensions may occur *between* levels of interaction, such as between the interpersonal level and the interorganizational level. Such cross-level tensions are particularly prevalent in the context of multi-organizational research networks or consortia where the intellectual property is owned by the organizations. However, cross-level research on identity and identity work has generated more theoretical than empirical interest in the literature to date, despite the broader potential to help bridge levels of analysis in organization studies research (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006).

The goal of this study is to analyze the cross-level tensions that influence identity work in the interface between interpersonal and interorganizational relationships in a research consortium. The Canadian aerospace industry is home to the world’s third largest aerospace cluster in Montreal (Emerson, 2012), which includes a number of organized innovation networks involved in interorganizational R&D projects. We explain and further conceptualize the everyday interactions among individuals representing different organizational members of a Montreal-based aerospace research consortium. In particular, we focus on the cross-level tensions impacting identity work occurring at the personal and organizational levels among consortium participants. Our analysis reveals three tensions related to intellectual property (protecting vs. concealing), communication (translating vs. decoding), and market definition (competing vs. collaborating). These tensions give rise to an overall tension between differentiation and imitation at the personal and organizational levels.

We begin this article by briefly situating our argument in the literatures on identity work and cross-level tensions, before integrating notions of identity in networks. We subsequently describe our methodology and our case study. Our findings section presents the grounded analysis leading to our four specific cross-level tensions. Finally, we discuss our results in the context of the literature on cross-level identity work, and present some conclusions and directions for future research.

1.1. Identity work and cross-level tensions

Identity work potentially encompasses a vast array of activities; Brown (2015) enumerated an impressive number of descriptive verbs used in the literature, including claim, accept, comply, resist, and define.¹ Generally speaking, identity work relates to how

¹ Other verbs used in the identity work literature include: separate, join, limit, bound, stabilize, reconcile, (re)structure, differentiate, manufacture, regulate, distance, contest, improvise, craft, deny, (re)act, (re)shape, (re)think, acquiesce, rebel, conform, enact, construct, acquire, lose, switch, modify, adjust, evolve, (re) negotiate, flex, adapt, enable, facilitate, direct, usurp, control, impede, hinder, establish, discard, (re)formulate, and (re)narrate (Brown, 2015).

individuals locate themselves as social and organizational beings, and endeavor to construct a coherent sense of self (Alvesson, Ashcraft, & Thomas, 2008). It includes internal reactions to suggested external identities, such as ways in which individuals align their personal identities with collective identities in organizations (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Alvesson et al., 2008). This ongoing and largely internal struggle may not be openly expressed, as individuals “perceive themselves to be under varying degrees of obligation to speak from a particular identity position by the social obligations implicit to the prevailing interactional context” (Brown, 2015: 29). Identity work may become especially salient and intense in episodes characterized by crises, tensions or constraints (Breit, 2014; Brown, 2015), or when triggered by some clash or discrepancy between identity and disconfirmation (Alvesson & Robertson, 2015). In their study of an opera company, Beech, Gilmore, Cochrane, and Greig (2012) identified key identity tensions associated with enacting an aspirational identity, distancing from parts of self from which one wishes to dis-identify, and managing the contradictions inherent in hybrid identities. Cross-level tensions are also evident during “remedial organizational identity work” (Breit, 2014) whereby organizational members attempt to remedy, threaten or damage organizational identities.

Individuals work on identities for themselves, others and on behalf of collectives, alone or in aggregate. Thus, identity work involves linking everyday micropractices (communications, emails, conversations, informal routines, etc.) with macroprocesses (formal discourses, materiality, hierarchies, and contracts), whereby multiple levels of interaction affect the organic, complex process of identity construction. In their article about internal (intra-identity) and external (extra-identity) interfaces between personal and organizational identities, Kreiner et al. (2006) described internal boundaries between identity dimensions at each identity level as “permeable” or “impermeable.” Personal and organizational identities may thus be conceived as permeable or impermeable to one another, potentially leading to a negotiation of shared or independent identity dimensions at each level. Identity work thus also relates to the negotiation of identities *between* levels of interaction, since suggested external “superordinate identities” impose constraints on suggested external “nested identities” (Kane, 2010), while facilitating knowledge transfer (Argote & Kane, 2009). Identities at each level of analysis can thus simultaneously enable and constrain identities at other levels, maintaining a degree of cross-level isomorphism (Ashforth et al., 2011).

Identity permeability/impermeability is also observable in the language used by organizational members. Drawing on work by Kreiner et al. (2006) and Ellis and Ybema (2010), Ashforth et al. (2011) described three mutually-influencing processes in the cross-level co-construction of identity: intrasubjective (“I think”), intersubjective (“we think”) and subjective generic (“it is”). Identity work occurs within the structural arrangements of organizations and the multiplicity of discourses that affect interactions and alter the relationships between individuals (McInnes & Corlett, 2012). Whether internalized or not, discourses are external resources that enable individuals to establish themselves as distinctive and valued, while delimiting what can be said and done in ongoing conversations. Identity work can thus “be experienced as tensions between different social duties and rights associated with being a particular-type-of-individual” (McInnes & Corlett, 2012: 29). Actors can choose ways to combine or hold competing discourses in tension as part of their continued growth of a “crystallized self” (Tracy & Trethewey, 2005: 188). The metaphor of identity as a seemingly stable crystal suggests that there are always new “facets” of one’s identity that are relevant to a

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