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The construction of organizational identity: Comparative case studies of consulting firms

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Abstract
This paper explores how organizational identity is constructed in four very different management consulting firms. The study suggests four broad dimensions that organizational members refer to in constructing their organizational identity: Knowledge Work, Management and Membership, Personal Orientation, and External Interface. We identify multiple themes within these broad dimensions of identity construction and highlight several broader identity-related issues, specifically: the extent to which shared ideas of a distinct organizational identity are present or absent in organizations, the relationship between organizational identity and the individual, and the balance of reality and fantasy in identity construction.

1. Introduction

Organizational identity is at present a popular theme in management and organization studies. It is assumed to be significant for understanding a wide set of issues from mergers and acquisitions (Empson, 2004), corporate image (Hatch & Schultz, 2003) and strategic change (Gioia & Thomas, 1996) to motivation and commitment (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Elsbach, 1999) and knowledge sharing (Empson, 2001). It is commonly argued that organizational identity represents the form by which organizational members define themselves as a social group in relation to their external environment, and how they understand themselves to be different from their competitors (Dutton et al., 1994; Fiol, Hatch, & Golden-Biddle, 1998; Haslam, 2004). It is assumed that an organization's members shape and are shaped by this organizational identity. Organizational members develop and express their self-concepts within the organization and the organization in turn is developed and expressed through its members' self-concepts. Organizational identity is, therefore, more than simply an answer to the question, 'Who are we?' as an organization (Gioia & Thomas, 1996). It presents, potentially, a partial answer to the question 'Who am I?' as an individual.[1]

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[1]Organizational identity has obvious overlaps with organizational culture. Researchers often have problems distinguishing between the two, partly related to the ambiguity of the terms, partly to the variety of definitions and uses of both terms. We here follow Hatch and Schultz (2002, p. 384), who see culture as being relatively more easily placed in the conceptual domains of the contextual, tacit and emergent than is identity which, when compared with culture,

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Identity is often defined in terms of its key characteristics: distinctiveness, endurance and centrality (Albert & Whetten, 1985), although critics remark that contemporary organizations and individuals may be more fragmented and malleable than this would suggest, particularly in a dynamic world (Alvesson, 2003; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000). For organizational identity to make sense, organizational members must broadly agree that the organization has certain distinctive features, that it differs from others in certain respects over time, and that its distinctive features characterize the organization in different situations and across various themes, such as decisions, actions, and policies.

In this article we use the expression organizational identity to convey the idea that organizational members construct a common perception of their organization as having certain key characteristics, as being distinctive from other organizations in some respects, and as showing a degree of continuity over a period of time and in varying circumstances. We do *not* see organizational identity as a fixed and robust object that can be measured and we try to avoid the reification trap (Johansson, 1990). For the sake of economy of writing, we occasionally express ourselves as if we see identity as a thing-like phenomenon, but it should not be interpreted in such a way.

Most literature tends to take it for granted that organizational identities 'exist', even to the extent that individuals may define themselves in opposition to them (i.e. 'non-identification' in Elsbach's terms, 1999). We question that assumption and argue for a more nuanced and problematized conceptualization of organizational identity (Alvesson, 2003; Brown, 2006). Without going into detail about the ontological question of the nature of organizations and the problems of reification and of imprinting unifying concepts on an ambiguous reality, we are more interested in empirical variation between organizations in how employees relate to their organizations as a means of developing a subtle understanding of a complex phenomenon. We address empirical questions such as:

- *Presence or absence of organizational identity*—Will individuals always be able to define and agree upon that which is central, distinctive, and enduring in their organization? Or will there be various views about such characteristics or perhaps even the absence of such identity claims? Where there is lack of clarity about organizational identity, or an apparent absence of it, can either form an integral part of an organization's identity?
- *Relationship between organizational identity and the individual*—To what extent do individuals shape themselves through constructions of their organizational identity, i.e. how far is their personal identity defined through identification with the organization? Is organizational identity sustained by attracting and retaining individuals whose self-concepts are coherent and supportive of the prevailing organizational identity? Or is there a loose relationship between individual self-concepts and their views of the organization?
- *Balance between reality and fantasy*—To what extent is organizational identity grounded in credible assessments about the organization (where credibility is judged by ability to withstand external scrutiny)? To what extent does it reflect an idealized fantasy about what the organization should be (or, more specifically, the idealized self-concepts of the organizational members)?[2] What are the implications of identity fantasies for individuals and the organization as a whole?

We seek to investigate organizational identity rather than take its significance for granted. We recognize that not all organizations are constructed as highly distinct, positive and significant by all employees. Not all organizations are particularly original or easy to portray in terms of a few key characteristics and some are not likely to attract much positive sentiment from their employees. Clearly, there is strong variation between groups of people in these respects and this variation is important to consider (Alvesson, 2003; Humphries & Brown, 2002; Pratt, 2000). Arguably, not many people define themselves primarily through identification with their organization. On the other hand, few people are totally de-coupled from workplace group membership and there is frequently some positive affiliation with the organization; the perceived characteristics of at least some (valued) organizations inform the efforts of their employees in determining who they are (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, 1996; Dutton et al., 1994).

Despite the wealth of literature on organizational identity, there is not much work on the substantive themes or key dimensions around which identity is constructed. A considerable part of the literature is made up of theoretical work providing frameworks for understanding organizational identity and identification. These often operate with broad and abstract categories and suggest hypotheses on law-like patterns. Despite references to the constructed nature of identity, the line of reasoning is often based on a quantitative logic. Words such as 'increase/decrease', 'overlap', 'stronger' and 'greater' are common within the identity literature. Ideas about something being (clearly) positive or negative will also affect identification. For example: 'The greater the distinctiveness of an organizational image (e.g. perceived organizational identity)

(*footnote continued*)
appears to be more textual, explicit and instrumental'. In addition, while identity refers to ideas on how people in an organization define what is distinct and unique about the organization, culture covers broader terrain, including meanings and beliefs about a wider set of issues of more indirect relevance for self-definition. Culture may for example be used to understand meanings around sex, age, technology, customers, products, authority, knowledge without these meanings being directly mobilized in identity-defining situations.

[2] The term fantasy is used in various ways in the literature, from indicating escapism reinforcing conformism to a form of opposition to resistance (Gabriel, 1995) and as a mental process that is little affected by the experiences of reality (Sveningsson & Larsson, 2006). We see it as a narrative adding flavour and emotion to experience through portraying organizations in fairly drastic and imaginative ways, borrowing from models and situations being in sharp contrast to experienced everyday life. Of course, accounts aiming to portray 'reality' in fairly down-to-earth terms have a 'weak' narrative quality, whereas what we refer to fantasy has a more obvious, distinct and colourful character.

relative to other organizations, the stronger a member's organizational identification' (Dutton et al., 1994). Also, 'the strength of organizational identification will be positively related to stakeholders' perceptions of the urgency of their claims' (Scott & Lane, 2000, p. 55). There is thus a large 'the greater-the stronger' literature aiming at generalization. But within this literature on organizational identity there is little examination of the 'substance' of organizational identity, for example, the qualities that are targeted in constructions of distinctiveness, coherence and endurance.

Single case studies have been carried out (e.g. Dutton et al., 1994; Hatch & Schultz, 2003; Humphries & Brown, 2002), mostly in rather turbulent situations. These studies have yielded important insights into the process by which organizational identity is constructed and articulated in specific situations, and the interaction that occurs between organizational identity and organizational members' self-concepts. These studies do not, however, provide many clues about themes and dimensions of identity constructions that go beyond the specifics of the single case. Consequently, their ability to generate more generalizable theoretical insights covering a broader domain of organizations is somewhat limited.

This paper offers a somewhat broader and varied empirical base for discussion as it is based on four case studies. It is based on research on consulting firms conducted during the early stages of the post-merger integration process. Arguably, organizational identity can play a vital role within consulting firms (Alvesson, 2004; Alvesson & Robertson, 2006). Organizational identity can provide a focus for member identification in an insecure employment context; it can foster group cohesion within a diffuse authority structure; it can provide the basis for a tangible 'external' identity to counteract the intangibility and ambiguity of the service offering; and it can represent a formal means of managerial control within an ambiguous work context (Empson, 2004). All these qualities are potentially characteristic of consulting firms. Consultants may have no physical product or clearly defined service and are often exposed to questioning and doubt and used as scapegoats (O'Shea & Madigan, 1998) or more generally face the 'burden of otherness' (Kipping & Armbrüster, 2002). It therefore becomes important for them to have a clear sense of who they are and what they stand for as a source of support in work. These ideas are also central to the marketing of professional services which depends on the self-confidence and persuasive style of the professionals (Alvesson, 2004).

Consulting firms are also of interest because organizational identity must coexist alongside professional/occupational identities. The four cases are not traditional professions (i.e. such as law or medicine, which maintain barriers to entry through form qualification procedures) but they belong to a category of occupations sharing some of the key defining characteristics of professions and are often labeled as such (e.g. Løwendahl, 1997; Sharma, 1997). If people primarily define themselves as 'professionals', and emphasize their individuality within the ethos of their profession, this may limit the scope for the creation of organizational identities and reduce their value in shaping the self-concepts of the organizational members. The organizations may be reduced to serving simply as arenas or administrative contexts for carrying out professional work, or as meeting places for an assembly of people with strong individual senses of themselves—the organization as mainly defined by its personnel. For all these reasons, consulting firms are an appropriate arena in which to study the construction of organizational identity.

The purpose of this paper is thus to develop knowledge on constructions of organizational identity, in particular in consulting firms, and to develop theoretical ideas on key themes around identity.

2. Research design and methods

This analysis of organizational identity construction began as a broad ranging inductive study by Empson into the process of post-merger integration within a variety of accounting and consulting firms. Although organizational identity was not addressed explicitly during the data collection process, the evolution of a new organizational identity within the merged firms became an important focus of attention in the concluding analysis of the post-merger integration study (see Empson, 2004 for a detailed analysis of the process of emergence of new organizational identity in a merged accounting firms). This experience, of the emergence of organizational identity as an important theme, reflects the experience of Dutton and Dukerich in their study of organizational change (1991): 'Although we did not originally intend to make the organization's identity so central to the explanation of how the organization adapted ... individuals' sense of the organization's identity and image were metathemes that emerged from our data analysis'' (p. 525).

Periods of dramatic organizational change in general, and of post-merger integration in particular, are likely to provoke sustained ''identity work'' on the part of organizational employees. Organizational members, who typically do not articulate organizational identity very clearly under ''normal'' conditions (Ashforth & Mael, 1996), will begin to do so when faced with major discontinuities and external threats such as a merger or acquisition, bad publicity or crises (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Dutton et al., 1994; Kleppestø, 1993). In reflecting upon how things are now, organizational members begin to reflect more deeply on how things used to be. It is these reflections which form the basis of the current study.

The firms in the current study provide an excellent opportunity for a multi-case comparative analysis of identity construction. The four consulting firms worked in closely related but distinct fields (operations management, change management, strategic management, and human resource management), suggesting that the organizational identities themselves might be varied while the basis on which that identity was constructed might be similar.

Research focused on the London offices of the firms, which ranged in size from 27 to 92 employees (see Table 1). The study consisted or 79 semi-structured interviews, supplemented by archival and observational data. In order to gather a broad cross-section of opinions across the firm, the following selection criteria for interviewees were adopted: hierarchical level, equity holding, area of

Table 1 Details of cases and interviews

London offices	Land consulting Operations improvement	Valley consulting Change management	Sea consulting Strategy	Hill consulting Human resource management
Staff	92	27	83	75
Consultants	79	18	55	50
Interviews conducted	9	28	9	33
Interviewees	8	13	7	15
Consultants interviewed (%)	10	72	13	30

business, functional responsibility, and length of tenure. Archival material included: internal memos related to merger negotiations and integration planning, legal documents relating to merger agreements, results of psychometric tests and staff attitude surveys, presentations to key staff, press releases, press articles, and marketing brochures. Key meetings observed included: staff communications sessions, integration planning meetings, and annual general meetings.

As the study did not set out to focus on identity, no questions were asked which directly addressed the issue (i.e. the word "identity" did not appear in the interview guides and was rarely mentioned explicitly by interviewer or interviewees). However numerous questions were asked which, on reflection, proved to have elicited responses relevant to the study of identity. For example, a substantial portion of the initial scene-setting interview conducted with each participant in the study was devoted to exploring the following themes:

1. How would you describe your firm? (prompt for the following characteristics) People? Reputation? Service? Management systems and style? Values and culture?
2. At the time when the merger was announced how would you have contrasted [merger partner] with your firm?

These initial prompts provided a general guide to the discussions and interviewees were given ample opportunity to explore particular themes that were of most interest to them. A key advantage of not asking interviewees direct questions about identity is that the interviewer is unable to steer the interviewee directly towards identity themes, minimizing the potential for social reporting or imposing an awareness of identity which might otherwise be absent.

Interviews lasted 90 min on average. They were not taped but detailed notes were made and pertinent quotations were recorded verbatim. The iterative process of data analysis began during the interview, when deciding which follow-up questions to ask and which responses to record in detail. Interview notes (ranging from three to seven pages of single spaced text) were typed within 24 hours of the interview and observations and initial insights were recorded separately.

On completion of the interviews, the researcher developed coding frames to reflect the emerging themes of the study. QSR NUD.IST software was used to code the text of the interviews according to these coding frames (at this stage in the analysis the coding frames did not address identity directly as this was not an explicit focus of the analysis of the post-merger integration process). Interview data were analysed in conjunction with the data gathered from the archives and observation. The researcher developed detailed case studies for each of the firms.

The current study's analysis of the construction of organizational identity in consulting firms was developed subsequently by the authors of this paper, based on the original case studies which outlined the process of post-merger integration. On reviewing these case studies we recognized that they contained a considerable amount of data that was pertinent to identity, and in particular the basis on which the firms constructed their distinctive organizational identities. We engaged in many hours of discussions with each other, identifying potential themes for organizational identity construction. These themes were derived in part from our knowledge of the existing literature on organizational identity and in part from the data in the four cases (i.e. we adopted an interpretive and highly iterative approach to concept formation and data analysis).

Having identified multiple themes from each of the cases in turn, we reviewed the other case studies to look for points of similarity and difference. For some themes it was immediately clear that they were significant in all cases (e.g. the nature of work was clearly central to the firms' organizational identities). Sometimes it was possible to merge multiple themes (e.g. what we had coded as "motivation" in one case seemed to relate closely to what we had coded as "ideals" in another). Other themes appeared more or less relevant in each case (e.g. only some firms seemed to define themselves in relation to an external "other"). This prompted a return to the original interview notes to see whether such dimensions had in fact been represented in the interview notes but not in the subsequent case write ups. Following this analysis, some themes which appeared in only a single case or seemed to be only weakly developed in multiple cases were dropped entirely.

When we had agreed upon the final ten themes we organized these into four categories which we termed "dimensions". Some of these dimensions had initially been adopted as themes but were set aside when it became clear that the case data contained subsidiary and more complex nuances on the main dimension. For example the dimension "Knowledge Work" was initially classified as a theme but was divided into the two related themes of "content of knowledge" and "work processes" when it became clear that these were separate but significant foundations for identity construction. The four dimensions that eventually emerged related to the work that consultants did ("Knowledge Work"), how they related to the market ("External Interface"), how they saw themselves as individuals ("Personal Orientation"), and how they worked together as firm ("Management and Membership").

A general problem in identity studies is that it is sometimes unclear which organizational features are unambiguously identity-related. Organizational identity studies need to point to something that non-identity focused descriptions of organizational cultures, for example, would not explore. The literature is not always explicit on this issue and it is very easy when analysing transcripts to jump from interviewees' descriptions or expressions of opinions about their organization to conclusions about identification or disidentification, without getting to the core of how people see themselves in the light of the organization. In effect, researchers must struggle with the problem of moving from talk about the organization more generally to identifying specific identity themes at an individual level. We do not claim to have a solution to this problem but believe that identity research needs to recognize and struggle with this issue.

In interpreting the empirical material from the study, we have tried to avoid two additional problems: first the endless emphasis on varieties and distinctions; second the tendency for 'gross categorizations' (Potter & Wetherell, 1987), i.e. to neglect the nuances in accounts, repress variation and emphasize unity through using broad categories. Understanding identity constructions calls for nuanced and locally sensitive interpretations, but our ambition is to say something of broader relevance.

We think that this empirical material is multifaceted, rich, and sufficient for the development of empirically supported ideas about organizational identity in general, but do not claim that we can prove precisely how things are or offer strict comparisons. We also recognize that 'general' does not mean 'universal'. There will be considerable variation in the dimensions and themes used in such construction processes. The purpose of the empirical study, therefore, is exploratory rather than confirmatory. Rather than establishing any final "truth", it seeks to uncover new conceptualisations of organizational identity which may inspire future research.

3. Dimensions of organizational identity

Based on our analysis of the data we argue that organizational identity in consulting firms can be understood as circling around four core dimensions:

1. *Knowledge work*—What do we know and how do we work?
2. *Management and membership*—How is this organization managed and how do members relate to it?
3. *Personal orientation*—What kinds of people are we in the context of the organization?
4. *External interface*—How are we seen and how do we see others?

These four dimensions often form important criteria against which consultants compare their organization with other firms and, at times, define themselves as distinct from members of other organizations. These dimensions are described in detail below, together with the ten identity themes that were emphasized in varying and selective ways by people in the different firms in the current study (see Table 2).

3.1. Knowledge work

The question 'What do we know?' encompasses the form as well as the content of an organization's knowledge. It goes beyond basic descriptions of the content of the technical knowledge of the firm. It refers to how knowledge is conceptualized within the organization, what kinds of skills and expertise are deemed to be legitimate and valuable. It includes the extent to which knowledge is codified and formally managed and how far it remains tacit and highly personalized. It distinguishes between knowledge learnt through informal apprenticeship and through formal training. The question 'How do we work?' addresses the way in which service is delivered to clients. Do consultants work alongside clients or independently from them? Do they emphasize skills transfer or rigorous analysis? Are they seeking to solve practical problems or to change mindsets? How closely do senior consultants get involved in directing the work of juniors?

Table 2 Identity dimensions and associated themes of identity construction

1. *Knowledge work*: What do we know and how do we work?
   - Content of knowledge
   - Work processes

2. *Management and membership*: How is the organization managed and how do members relate to management?
   - Formal structure and systems
   - Informal structure and systems
   - Ideals and motivation

3. *Personal orientation*: What kind of people are we in the context of the organization?
   - Morality
   - Mythology

4. *External interface*: How are we seen and how do we see others?
   - Image
   - Clients and competitors
   - The 'other'

There is an important distinction between emphasizing 'Knowledge' and emphasizing 'Work'. The former draws attention to embrained and encultured forms of knowledge associated with theory, brains, education and mastery of symbols (Blackler, 1995). The latter refers to practices, procedures and processes. In terms of identity consultants, in effect, define themselves in terms of 'We are what we *know*' as well as 'We are what we *do*'.

3.2. Management and membership

The dimension 'Knowledge Work' focuses on the core operating resources of the firm (i.e. the nature of expertise and the way it is deployed to deliver a customized service to clients). The dimension 'Management and Membership' focuses on the informal and formal systems and structures that support the delivery of that service to clients, as well as the links between the organization and its members. The core questions, therefore, are how is the organization managed and how do organizational members relate to management and the employing organization? Specifically, why do organizational members work and to what extent are their ideals influenced by, or independent of, the objectives of management?

In terms of identification we are concerned with how the informal and formal management structures and systems are utilized to mould and motivate, classify and control organizational members. Is the firm built upon output controls, where a strong performance orientation is produced by explicit measurement and rewards? Is there, alternatively, a greater emphasis on normative controls, giving the organization a strong presence in the mindsets of its members through the promulgation of values, beliefs, norms and forms of symbolism which offer ways in which people can account for their organizational experiences and 'core' features of the organization? What are the linkages between organization and individuals? Freedom, creativity, performance, status, interpersonal relations, pay, career prospects, doing good things for others are elements in the motives that people can raise as central identity concerns, as well as the material through which they are linked to the organization. To what extent is it legitimate or even positive to emphasize monetary motivation? Are other kinds of ideals expected to take precedence (e.g. intellectual challenge, making a difference, etc.)? These themes also give some indications of the sources of identification.

3.3. Personal orientation

In the context of organizational identity construction, the dimension 'Management and membership' focuses on the interface between the individual and the organization. The dimension 'Personal orientation' is concerned with the way in which organizational identity has, or fails to have, an impact on the more subtle personal elements of an individual. How, for example, does organizational identity relate to values and morality, the personal mythologies and fantasies that may support and shape an organizational member's self-concept. In an organizational setting it is not our most extreme idiosyncratic elements that are at stake. Instead it is the more or less shared workplace ideas of people's way of being.

Issues around work ideals touch upon this, but there are other elements also which are less strongly related to explicit organizational/individual links and more a matter of subtle personal orientations. These may be more or less credible and more or less conventional. Sometimes they go quite far in the direction of mythology—fantasies and non-credible stories of highly unusual and strongly exaggerated ways of being. These are typically not communicated or validated externally, but expressed only within a particular group, functioning in isolation in this specific respect. Another element is the definition of people in the organization as carriers of values/morality (e.g. believing themselves to be ethically superior or having integrity). This partly overlaps with issues of work processes and ideals, but refers also to the objectives and hopes individuals bring to the work context.

3.4. External interface

Although identities are constructed within organizations, organizational members are strongly influenced by their interactions with outsiders. Some authors even emphasize that 'at any moment identity is the immediate result of conversation between organizational (cultural) self-expressions and mirrored stakeholder images' (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). The question 'How are we seen?' reflects how organizational members believe themselves to be perceived by others (i.e. clients, competitors, and potential recruits). It is not, therefore, an 'objectively based' assessment of brand but a highly personalized view of image, grounded in listening to feedback and the interpretation of clues, and an inclination to wishful thinking. Organizational image has direct implications for individual's personal image. A key component of image concerns clients and competitors; who you work for and who you compete against can be used as an indicator of your quality, particularly in consulting firms. Through selectively emphasizing prestigious clients, organizational members can claim to belong to a leading firm in the competitive arena. To enhance one's external prestige and self-concept, one can draw upon clients in other ways, e.g. by emphasizing that one is working with individual clients at a senior level or working on particular high profile or high status projects. In effect, we are selectively drawing upon the theme of how others see us as a key element in answering the question 'Who are we?' (and 'Who am I?')

An additional theme associated with the dimension ''External interface'' is how organizational members define their organization in comparison to others (mainly their competitors). The key question here is, ''How do we see others?'' In all identity constructions there is an implicit element of comparison and distancing—identity is about claims to distinctiveness, but these may be weak and implicit. However, sometimes explicit and salient non-me or non-us (i.e. the 'other') takes centre stage in identity projects, through offering an object which is framed negatively. Comparing oneself with the 'other' can make oneself appear in a particularly favourable light. In this sense 'Who we are' is intimately bound up with 'Who we are not'.

4. Organizational identity in consulting firms

We discuss each of the four consulting firms in turn, focusing on those issues that relate to the four identity dimensions and their related themes. We conclude each section with a brief description of the identity narrative that emerges from an analysis of these dimensions and related themes. We explore how interviewees addressed key identity questions and refer to the dimensions and those themes that seem to be most significant in their constructions of who they are. The key features of the organizational identity of each of the firms are shown in Table 3. In so doing our intention is not to "summarize" the identities of the four firms in definitive terms but simply to highlight the key dimensions and related themes that organizational members draw upon in each of the firms.

4.1. Land operations improvement consulting

Land was established in the USA in the 1960s by Bob Porter, its managing director and principle shareholder (75%). Land sought to achieve improvement in operational processes by working closely with clients. The emphasis was on pragmatism, efficiency, and inter-personal skills. At the time of the study, Land's London office had been open for 5 years and employed 92 people.

4.1.1. Knowledge work

At Land the content of knowledge and working processes were inextricably connected. The knowledge of the firm *was* its work processes. Identity circled around what organizational members did rather than their abstract, intellectual knowledge. The Land response to the question 'Who are we?' was 'We are what we do'. Identity became contingent upon distinct work processes.

Consultants facilitated clients through a set of previously codified processes designed to achieve a precisely

Table 3 Identity framework applied to cases[a]

	Land	Valley	Sea	Hill
Knowledge work				
Content of knowledge	Interpersonal skills and defined processes	Facilitation and interpersonal skills, minimal frameworks	Academic models	Based on survey data collected organizationally
Work processes	Organizationally codified	Highly personalized, emphasis on intuition	Highly personalized, emphasis on intellectual creativity	Highly personalized, emphasis on autonomy
Management and membership				
Formal structure and systems	Intensely prescribed	Minimal. Attempts to empower	Minimal	Minimal
Informal structure and systems	Expected to 'live the values'	Strong organizational community	Emphasis on socialization	'Anarchy'
Ideals and motivation	To deliver promised benefits to clients	To make a difference to the lives of clients	To develop intellectually creative solutions	'To beat the shit out of the competition'
Personal orientation				
Morality	Mutual support and enthusiasm	Good-doers, ethical, values-driven	Pursuit of academic 'truth'	
Mythology			Quirky individualism, diverse, eccentric	Clint Eastwood types
External interface				
Image	Pragmatic, reliable, cultish	'Classy, sexy'	Elitist, intelligent, academic	Individual, not organizational
Clients and competitors		Important and prestigious clients		'Clients our mother-in-laws have heard of'
The 'other'	'The McDonalds of consulting'		As good as McKinsey but more interesting	Not 'architects' but 'first-rate plumbers'

[a]Where organizational members do not draw significantly upon a particular identity theme, this dimension has been left blank.

prescribed outcome. For example, the organizational climate survey, which was always administered in Week 3 of the Pilot Project, invariably generated 'the worst results we have ever seen', or so consultants would inform their potential clients. The objective of the Pilot Project was to diagnose the key operational problems and to assign values to the potential cost-savings that would ensue if Land were to be employed for the full project (the 'Benefits Case'). The Benefits Case became the touchstone of the project, with consultants working intensely with clients to deliver the promised cost savings and revenue improvements. Consultants were expected to display strong inter-personal skills in order to manage the emotional consequences of working closely with clients in challenging situations. Academic attainment was not considered to be a key recruitment criterion. As one interviewee explained:

> In Land there were 20 brilliant guys at the top, with this huge pyramid under them of guys who didn't ask too many questions but knew how to implement. Land codified its skills because it knew the skills gap between the top and the bottom of the organization was so great. (Manager).

4.1.2. Management and membership and personal orientation

The twin dimensions management and membership and personal orientation were inextricably connected. This was largely due to explicit efforts by Bob Porter to shape the identities of organizational members, and to select recruits who were likely to be susceptible to the process of identity 'regulation', in Alvesson and Willmott's (2002) terms. Bob Porter had considerable power and chose to exercise it in a very explicit manner, as the following anecdote illustrates:

> We were at a senior management conference. Porter handed out badges to us which said—'No whining'—and told us to put them on. Then he said—'I've sold the company. (Vice President.)

As well as developing highly codified processes which determined how work should be done, he also set out to determine how consultants should speak, write and even think and feel, going beyond mere behavioural control to affect employees' self-concepts.

> What bound Land together were the values which were explicitly articulated and genuinely believed—'We are one family. We trust each other.' We really supported each other at the project level. (Vice President.)

The objective was for organizational members to achieve total identification with the objectives of the organization and for this to translate into performance. As one Land interviewee commented:

> Porter was extraordinary, a bit mad in the way that you have to be to pursue a vision in such a single-minded way. He was determined that his company would be the best in the world. Land was more of a cult than a culture. (Vice president.)

For example, all consultants were required to carry and use the Land diary, which included a statement of the organization's values and guiding principles. These emphasized the sense of being 'one family', working enthusiastically together to support one another and to help the clients. Each page of the diary contained an 'inspirational' message which consultants were expected to study and to share with clients when appropriate. In meetings with clients or with colleagues, consultants were prohibited from using the word 'problems'. Problems were called 'Issues'. Consultants were trained to avoid direct criticism and to say 'What I like about your idea is ... but I wish I knew how to ...' (to be abbreviated to 'IWIKH2' when writing on flip charts). At the end of each meeting consultants would summarize the 'Benefits and Concerns' arising from the meeting (to be abbreviated as 'Bs and Cs'). Benefits would always be described in detail before concerns could be recorded.

Human resource management processes of selection, training, and evaluation were designed to identify and support consultants who demonstrated positive and enthusiastic attitudes and personal values that were congruent with the values of the organization. Induction and training were extensive and highly formalized in order to communicate the prescribed processes that consultants needed to learn to do their jobs. The evaluation process was designed to identify and reward compliance and eliminate those who did not 'live the values'.

> People were recruited very much to a standardized mould. They went through a highly prescribed training process that was designed to produce conformity. (Vice president.)

Consultants were motivated by the desire to make a significant difference to organizational effectiveness and by the satisfaction of working in a close-knit and supportive team environment at the clients' offices. People seemed to attach a strong, value-laden meaning to technical standards and behavioural rules for operating. They felt attached to and identified with the firm:

> I fell in love with Land and what it was claiming to do. It appeared to really live the values of the team, of mutual support, of enthusiasm for what we were doing. It worked because there were enough strong personalities who believed in the values to put the spot light on people who were not playing the game. (Vice President.)

4.1.3. External interface

Land consultants did not appear to be concerned about the somewhat 'cultish' image they possessed in some quarters. Those clients who did not appreciate their practices did not appoint them after the Pilot Project: those who did often became enthusiastic converts to Land's codified methods. Land consultants were proud of their image of total reliability and delivery of significant quantifiable benefits. When accused by competitors of being 'The McDonalds of consulting', Land consultants pointed out that McDonalds had an impressive reputation for efficiency, profitability, customer satisfaction, and global domination.

4.1.4. Overall identity narrative

Land consultants saw themselves as pragmatic, enthusiastic, and results-driven people with a strong sense of the collective identity associated with a distinctive organization.

They enjoyed making a difference in their client organizations and delivering benefits to their firm. They believed that the processes prescribed by Bob Porter were the most effective way of delivering promised benefits and accepted an intensely prescribed set of behaviours and values because of the satisfaction they derived from being part of the organization, even if that meant they were called 'McDonalds'. Being known as 'The McDonalds of consulting' indicates the difficulty of using the views of others as a key thematic for positive identity constructions. Nevertheless the defensiveness it engendered gave energy to the process of identity construction as, in seeking to defy their critics, Land consultants derived even greater strength from their collective endeavor.

4.2. Valley change management consulting

Valley was founded by four human resource management consultants. They claimed to have set out to change the 'hearts and minds' of people within organizations and, in so doing, unleash the potential within specific individuals and organizations as a whole. They sought to create an equally inspiring and empowering environment within their own organization. At the time of the study, the firm had been in existence for 9 years, employing a total of 27 people in a single London office.

4.2.1. Knowledge work

Knowledge was not emphasized in itself but was seen as tied to and expressed within work processes. Valley consultants did not perform data analysis but facilitated clients through process-based change interventions. Very little was codified within Valley. Consultants were expected to 'tune in' to the needs of clients and to use their intuition and imagination to understand how to coach clients in specifically challenging situations. Valley consultants viewed themselves as highly gifted in terms of their interpersonal intuition.

> It was quite frightening when I joined because I did not know all the answers. So I would say to clients, 'I don't know the answer to that, but I know a process that will help us to work out the answer.' Even today, every new job I have I can't do on Day One. We rely on the intrinsic skills of the individual consultants, backed up with a bit of common thinking. (Consultant.)

Beyond this, consultants talked very little about knowledge and work processes. Who they were in a given situation was deemed to be more important than what they knew in any 'academic' sense, and the need for defined processes was seen as a limitation of less experienced consultants. Reflecting this, the majority of consultants were highly experienced, typically operating alone on change management assignments, or at least without the leveraged team more typical in consulting assignments.

4.2.2. Management and membership

The founders of Valley de-emphasized the significance of formal organizational systems and structures, whilst stressing the significance of organizational community and the ideals associated with that. The varying responses of organizational members to the official rhetoric are reflected in the following comments.

> The firm has values which some of the founders endeavor to encourage. But not all consultants practice them. Some of the consultants have very elitist views ... They view themselves as superior beings. This is reflected in their behaviour within the firm. (Consultant.)
> When we had discussions about our values and everyone would say that we have to be frightfully nice to each other, I would say—'I agree with that but if we just go around being nice to each other we won't get anywhere as a business.' The organization has to tolerate a set of quite pig-headed individuals. I would not be able to sell in a tough environment without being a bit of an egotist. (Consultant.)

Although people had varying experiences and orientations they, on the whole, seemed to identify with the organization.

> People here have quite strong political views, not necessarily the same ones. But if you ask people why the hell they are here they will say, 'because this company believes in the same kinds of things that I believe in.' (Founder.)

The founders of Valley paid careful attention to the creation and regulation of identity (though they tended to avoid explicit reference to this term) and saw this as essentially a collective process, to be undertaken with the full involvement of all organizational members, including support and secretarial staff. Strongly expressed rites were thus central in the construction and manifestation of organizational identity. For example, their explicit statement of values had been created by all members of the firm working together. Another visible manifestation of their commitment to empowerment were the monthly meetings attended by all staff (fee earners and support) where management issues were discussed. Discussion on these occasions was open and sometimes confrontational, reflecting the approach to change management interventions that Valley consultants used with their clients. Recalling one particularly difficult meeting after a failed attempt by the founders to sell the firm, one interviewee commented:

> It was an astonishing and emotional event. Feelings ran very high. People cried. People stormed out. A lot of stuff was processed that needed to be got through. (Consultant.)

A second manifestation of this attempt by the managers to sustain an identity of egalitarianism was the fact that there were no job titles. All fee-earning staff were simply called 'consultants'.

4.2.3. Personal orientation

A key marketing document of Valley's was entitled 'A Chance to Dream'. This title encapsulates the philosophy of Valley, both as a marketing device and as a belief of organizational members.

> Central to the achievement of a high performance culture is the release of the latent potential of each individual within the organization. Time and time again

> we have seen how, given the right circumstances, people at all levels can deliver extraordinary performance. It is this link between individual performance and overall business performance which makes us such passionate exponents of transformational change. (Valley marketing document.)

Valley consultants were open in their attempt to define the kind of people they were in the context of the organization and were quite willing to use this to their advantage in seeking to win over clients. So, by encouraging clients to 'dream' about achieving their full potential, Valley consultants brought a strong sense of themselves and their personal orientation into the client encounter (or, more specifically, the version of themselves that they considered appropriate to present in that context).

> When we go to see a new client we explain to them the values that drive the kind of business we are in. We don't say we are card carrying members of the Labour party but we do say that we believe in certain things about how consultancies should operate. For instance, consultants should always operate in partnership with clients, not seek to build client dependence. Another very strong value is that most companies don't remotely utilize the human assets that they have. We have to find ways of liberating that potential. (Founder.)

Value commitments were claimed to be crucial for people at Valley. They had a strong belief in the potential of people. They defined themselves as deriving satisfaction from making a positive difference in people's lives, based on strong ethical principles. Morality and ideals, therefore, were a key component of identity construction.

4.2.4. External interface

Valley consultants drew upon the positive organizational image to sustain and validate their positive self-concepts. One consultant expressed Valley's image as follows:

> We are one of the leading consultants in this area with an extremely classy, sexy reputation. (Consultant.)

By the term 'sexy' this consultant was referring to the image Valley members believed they projected of being highly imaginative, fun, and inspirational. Consultants also tended to be attractive and well presented. The most successful consultants were deemed by their colleagues to be 'charismatic'. The 'classy, sexy' identity was further enhanced by the fact that Valley counted the British Secret Service amongst its clients, whose most famous (fictional) organizational member, James Bond, is seen as the epitome of classy British male sexiness. As Valley consultants were prohibited from revealing that they had this client, it could not form part of their explicit external image but the relationship could still be used internally for identity construction and to enhance the self-concept. Valley consultants thus communicated to themselves that 'We are our reputation. We are who we serve'. Valley also counted a global tobacco company amongst its major clients but consultants did not emphasize this fact, suggesting that they only used clients as identity reference points when those clients themselves had a positive external image.

4.2.5. Overall identity narrative

Valley consultants saw themselves as a group of intelligent and intuitive people, doing important life-changing work for important clients. The respect for the individual which they showed in their work with clients was manifested within the organization, where members at all levels were encouraged to believe that they had a voice in the management of the firm. What matters in the context of identity construction is not whether any of these assertions are objectively 'true', but that organizational members experienced them as personally meaningful.

4.3. Sea strategic management consulting

Sea was founded as a partnership by a group of Harvard Business School faculty members in the 1960s and counted numerous professors from Top 20 business schools amongst its network of faculty associates. Its academic origins were reflected in all aspects of its organizational identity. At the time of the study it employed 83 people in the London office.

4.3.1. Knowledge work

Knowledge was conceptualized in terms of leading-edge academically informed frameworks. Faculty associates worked with consultants to test out their theoretical models in organizational settings. Beyond employing academic frameworks, there was very little effort to codify and disseminate their knowledge formally.

> The skills were located within individual consultants rather than within professional processes. Sea made very little investment in codifying skills. There was no incentive for an individual to do so. Your value to the organization was derived from your skills. If you codified them, you diminished your personal value. (Manager.)

Consultants were recruited from leading business schools and great emphasis was placed on hiring people who were exceptionally intelligent, intellectually creative, and who enjoyed working independently on conceptually challenging problems. Emotional Intelligence was not deemed an essential prerequisite. As the results of psychometric tests carried out on Sea consultants revealed:

> They are creative and very flexible ...While Sea consultants have outstanding analytical skills, people skills are somewhat lacking. The typical consultant is driven by the desire to achieve the task and is sorely unaware of the subtleties of person to person interaction. (Report on results of psychometric tests.)

Consultants worked independently from clients to conduct rigorous empirical customized analysis. However, the rhetoric of customization may also be seen as concealing a lack of efficiency. As one interviewee explained:

> There was so much emphasis placed on intellectual creativity that we tended to reinvent the wheel for each assignment. (Partner.)

The emphasis on academic intelligence and intellectual creativity were paramount in the construction of organizational identity. It was not work processes but knowledge—and symbols indicating it, such as educational background—that was drawn upon in identity construction. The rhetoric of client service was present but consultants appeared to attach greater satisfaction to the elegance of the solution than to the application of the analysis, as befits the academic origins of the firm.

4.3.2. Management and membership

Consultants worked at Sea because they enjoyed the chance to exercise intellectual creativity within a relatively unstructured environment.

> Consultants show an extremely strong preference to avoid structure, order, and planning. (Report on psychometric tests.)

There was minimal attention to formal structures and systems.

> There were zero controls. The office ran on a wing and a prayer. The bills came in. We paid them. Hopefully our clients paid us. (Partner.)
> The office manager made sure consultants had a desk. Accounts made sure they got paid. The partners and the rest of the professional staff did everything else when they found the time. (Head of Human Resources.)

In this context, socialization was the primary mechanism for ensuring that consultants identified with, and were motivated to work in accordance with, management objectives.

Great emphasis was placed on recruiting. Consultants returned to their alma mater business schools to conduct interviews. A successful candidate would be interviewed by eight people. Offers were made only to candidates who were deemed to be 'partner material'. Therefore the link between management and membership was explicit from the start. The hope was that all new consultants would one day prove to be worthy of ascending to partnership.

There was no formal training or induction process but, as part of the socialization process, a partner would show each recruit around the partner room. All partners sat together in one room at large antique leather-topped desks. The pictures on the walls consisted of cartoons and paintings, which were commissioned each year to be the firm's Christmas card. These pictures contained many in-jokes and subtle allusions to Sea folklore, which could be understood only by insiders and favoured clients. The partner would explain the pictures to new recruits and, in so doing, recount the history of the firm. Thereafter the process of learning and socialization took on an informal apprenticeship model. As interviewees explained:

> You succeeded if you were able to attach yourself to a powerful partner. If you failed, there was no real discussion of how you could improve. You were just told—'You're not really making it here'—and asked to leave. (Manager.)
> It was difficult to get promoted. If you were blackballed by one partner, you were finished. (Consultant.)

The system was therefore designed to produce consistently over time through the replication of the partner group. Consultants returned to where they came from, to look for people like themselves. Partners taught consultants the history and culture of the firm and punished them if they did not fit in.

4.3.3. Personal orientation and external interface

In Sea the two dimensions personal orientation and external interface were closely inter-related. A key element of how they defined themselves as a firm and as individuals was with reference to the 'other'. The 'other' functioned as a source of identity: the explicit or implicit comparison with a reference object provided an answer to the question 'Who are we?'. In Sea's case the 'other' was represented by academia and McKinsey. Sea consultants saw themselves as pseudo-academics. They worked closely with academics and possessed a somewhat idealistic belief in their ability to discover the 'right' answer for the client through rigorous analysis. They claimed to be unwilling to compromise intellectual quality for the sake of commercial expediency. Sea consultants also viewed themselves in relation to McKinsey consultants. As a consulting firm they perceived themselves to be as good as their prime competitor but viewed themselves as more interesting as individuals. When interviewing candidates, Sea consultants said they looked for the kind of people who were good enough to get a job at McKinsey but would find the environment too conformist.

As evidence of their unconformist tendencies Sea consultants claimed to value 'quirky individualism', 'eccentricity', and 'diversity'. As one interviewee explained:

> What was great about Sea was that it was a place where eccentric bright people could succeed. We had a huge amount of personal freedom. It was a culture that prized diversity ... (Partner.)

However these qualities were only accepted within a fairly conventional context. The great majority of consultants came from East Coast /Ivy League or Home Counties/ Oxbridge backgrounds. They might express their eccentricity and individualism by having left-wing political views, or cycling into work. They might have come from unusual careers (e.g. psychiatry, the priesthood) or might depart for unusual reasons (e.g. to walk across Africa, to do a Ph.D.). However, whilst they worked at Sea, their behaviour was contained within the boundaries of a fairly conventional concept of professionalism and diversity was narrowly defined. For example, whilst Sea employed several gay male consultants (including one gay partner) they remained resolutely 'in the closest', taking female dates to office parties, etc. In this sense, there is a mythological quality associated with these beliefs in 'quirky individualism', 'eccentricity' and 'diversity', which does not stand up well to robust questioning. As one consultant explained:

> If you weren't accepted it could be pretty tough. It was an exclusive, clubby atmosphere. (Partner.)

4.3.4. Overall identity narrative

The overall identity construction circled around notions such as 'elite', 'brightness', 'quirky individualism', 'eccentricity' and 'diversity'. Individuals were expected to display an academic orientation (i.e. intellectual creativity and abstract intelligence, not necessarily accompanied by a practical orientation or interpersonal skills). A key message to themselves and to certain external groups, in particular on the labour market, was 'as good as, but less conformist than McKinsey'. In a basically conformist professional context, certain extra-work idiosyncrasies were prized in order to emphasize individuality and eccentricity, but within fairly limited boundaries.

4.4. Hill human resource management consulting

Hill was founded in the USA in the 1930s as an actuarial firm and grew to become a leading global specialist in 'people related services'. Hill's Human Resource practice in London, consisted of 75 people and its core business was remunerations consulting.

4.4.1. Knowledge work

Hill's conceptualization of knowledge reflected its actuarial origins. Knowledge was derived from data. Consultants typically produced standardized reports, such as executive compensation surveys, which were bought by the great majority of FTSE 100 companies in the UK. These data were used as the basis for designing complex executive compensation packages. A few consultants were involved in organization and management development (O&MD) work, which was not primarily content-based, but this area was marginalized within the firm.

> When our Managing Director, Jim Casey, saw the kind of process consulting work I do with my clients he said—'My God. You mean our clients actually pay you to do that?' (O&MD Consultant.)

Although much of the work had the potential to be highly routinized, very little effort was put into codifying the underlying processes.

> There is no concept of leverage here. Some of our most senior people perform routine tasks and are very unwilling to let go of their consulting work to more junior colleagues. (Consultant.)

This lack of codification does not appear to relate to the distinctive nature of the knowledge and work processes, but is more likely associated with the highly individualistic orientation of the Managing Director, Jim Casey, described below.

4.4.2. Management and membership

Jim Casey valued individualistic and self-managing consultants who could generate large fees with minimal intervention from him. As he explained:

> We have good people. They don't need a lot of structure and hand holding. We are too busy with our clients ... One of my colleagues outside this office refers to us as anarchic. I have always taken that as a compliment. (Jim Casey, Managing Director.)

Consultants were granted considerable autonomy within the context of fairly demanding performance targets.

> It is so laissez faire here that people are free to do whatever they want, to pursue their own interests and ideas. As long as you are earning the target billable hours they leave you alone. No one is accountable to anyone else. (Consultant.)

Consultants who remained at Hill thrived within this individualistic environment. They responded to questions about their organizational values dismissively.

> I haven't seen any sign of a values statement. At Hill we are treated as adults. (Consultant.)
> What are our organizational values? It is not something I would ever think about normally. The only things that matter are satisfying the client and winning work. (Consultant.)

The motivation and ideals of organizational members were consistent with the objectives of the firm to the extent that individuals were driven to achieve their target billable hours. More broadly, they were motivated by strongly personal orientations and appreciated the fact that the management of Hill did not seek to interfere with them. Within this broad ranging orientation, however, Jim Casey saw a consistent pattern of motivation among his consultants.

> We all want to work for the kind of clients our mothers-in-law have heard of and to be proud of the firm we work for. We want to be the best and enjoy beating the shit out of the competition. (Jim Casey, Managing Director.)

4.4.3. Personal orientation

A strong orientation to consumption and the exhibition of goods characterized many consultants in the firm. Some followed the lead of Jim Casey and drove expensive and flamboyant sports cars. The need for conspicuous displays of wealth, and to impress their mothers-in-law, suggests that insecurity lay behind the rhetoric of tough individualism, though this was never articulated by interviewees.

The lack of interest in the concept of organizational identity was palpable within Hill. As various interviewees explained:

> Our MD sees the consulting organization as a collection of individuals who have very little in common except for the fact that they share an office space. (Senior manager.)
> The firm operates as a group of individuals and not as a corporate whole. (Consultant.)
> Hill is a very individualistic culture ... the consultant as Clint Eastwood in *High Plains Drifter* ... You go into the outside world and clean up. Then you bring the carcass back to the office for your colleagues to gnaw on whatever you have left them. (Consultant.)

Clint Eastwood was known simply as 'The Stranger' in *High Plains Drifter* and as 'The Man with No Name' in *A Fistful of Dollars*. This image of a tough macho loner, operating outside conventional society, reflects Jim Casey's organizational vision. Yet, it can be argued that the vivid anti-identity rhetoric in itself constituted an integral component of Hill's identity.

4.4.4. External interface

In view of the earlier comments about having the kinds of clients that would impress your mother-in-law, there clearly was some emphasis on the client portfolio as a source of identity construction. However, very little emphasis was placed on clients' perceptions of organizational image in Hill. As one interviewee explained:

> Clients are usually buying the individual, not the firm. (Consultant.)

Whilst client perceptions were not key, awareness of competition was deployed within the overall identity work. In the following statement the Managing Director is positioning the firm in relation to consultants at a competitor firm who refer to themselves as organizational architects.

> It is sometimes said around here, perhaps unkindly, that our remunerations consultants are plumbers. They might be plumbers but they are first rate plumbers.

Whereas architects are unambiguously professionals, plumbers are not. However, plumbers in the UK, it is worth noting, are notoriously well paid relative to their level of education. Status associated with symbolic capital and/or a prestigious organizational image did not appear to be an easily available option for the Hill people. Instrumentality, results, and the use of the profits for identity-supporting consumption were chosen as the alternative route.

4,4.5. Overall (anti-) identity narrative

Within Hill, consultants shunned any explicit recognition of organizational identity (The Man with No Name—The Consulting Firm with No Identity). In this tough individualistic, macho, environment, 'identity was for wimps'—or at least this was what the rhetoric of the Managing Director suggested. The consultants who thrived in this environment defined themselves as people who did not need to belong to an organization in the conventional sense, but who derived their personal satisfaction and material for (individual) identity construction through tangible measures of success (i.e. fast cars, prestigious clients, and 'beating the shit out of the competition'). It was this hostility towards identity and identification, which in fact formed the basis of their organizational identity, in other words, an anti-identity.

5. Summary and conclusions

In order to understand more about how identity is constructed, we have examined organizational members' articulations of organizational identity within four consulting firms. We suggest that, in their attempt to articulate an answer to the basic question: 'Who are we as an organization?', consultants explored various subsidiary questions:

1. What do we know and how do we work?
2. How is this organization managed and how do members relate to it?
3. What kinds of people are we in the context of the organization?
4. How are we seen and how do we see others?

Organizational identity in consulting firms can therefore be understood as circling around four basic dimensions: (1) Knowledge work, (2) Management and membership, (3) Personal orientation, and (4) External interface. We argue that these four dimensions form the reference criteria against which consultants compare their organization with other firms and define themselves as being distinctive from members of other organizations. We find that within these broad criteria, a variety of themes were present to varying degrees within each of the firms. We have developed a framework (i.e. Table 2) as a guide to 'where to look' for identity within organizations.

Our four case studies indicate some variation in the key themes, which people use in these kinds of organizations to construct an idea of what characterizes them. Some emphasize what we know (e.g. intellect, education), others what we do (e.g. processes, methods), or how the organization is managed or controlled (e.g. through a unique corporate culture). For some it is the link between organization and employees which is key, whereas others emphasize how they share certain distinct orientations, or how they believe others broadly see themselves, or how they differ from competitors.

While this framework was developed in the context of consulting firms, we believe it has an applicability to organizations more generally. Understanding and expressing the relationship between management/organization and members is fundamental in any organizational context. In terms of personal orientations, there is no reason to assume that ideals and mythologies are present to a different degree in consulting firms than in any other kind of organization. For example, previous studies have indicated that Pepsi Cola managers thought of themselves as the 'Marine Corps of the business world' (Sculley, 1987) and direct insurance salesmen in a US firm viewed the work as suitable only for men—while the same work was conducted almost solely by women in Japan (Leidner, 1991). In both these cases, as with Hill human resource management consulting, men construct a strongly masculine identity of a kind of work—selling soft drinks and insurance and compensation plans—that most people probably would not associate with stereotypical 'masculine' virtues.

Having said this, our study may also say something more distinct about consultancy firms. These firms are internally relatively homogenous, with the majority of employees belonging to a single occupation and with coordination and control typically being done through mutual adjustment. Consequently shared reference points, such as a common set of ideas of the character of the organization, tend to be developed. The strong sales and client orientations of consultants working with intangible services and dependent on a distinct image also call for a back-up of identity and identification, making identity constructions somewhat more focused in most consultancy firms. (One of our four cases was to some extent an exception, here the narratives around a distinct kind of employees compensated for a clear interest in the characteristics of the firm in identity terms.) The significance of knowledge and image for identity construction may be more salient in this type of organization. More generally the notion of membership may have particular resonance in professional service firms as, relative to other organizations, people may identify more positively with work and enjoy particular privileges, whilst sharing a common educational background and occupying a similar social position.

We conclude by returning to the three issues we raised at the start of this paper: the presence or absence of organizational identity, the relationship between organizational identity and the individual, and the balance between reality and fantasy in identity construction. In so doing, we emphasize the situatedness of identity constructions.

5.1. Presence or absence of organizational identity

Most of the organizational identity literature tends to emphasize the existence and 'tightness' of organizational identity, although there is some skepticism about certain key characteristics—Gioia et al. (2000) downplay endurance in a turbulent world—and there is certainly an emphasis on how the degree of organizational identification varies (e.g. Elsbach, 1999; Pratt, 2000). Nevertheless most theory and research suggest that individual identity and organizational identity are closely linked (Scott & Lane, 2000, p. 43). Some see this is necessary for cooperation to be possible: 'social identity—the shared sense of belonging to a common social category—is the precondition for people willingly and effectively to act together as part of an organization' (Haslam & Reicher, 2006, p. 136). But the possibility of variation in terms of the assumed meaningfulness of organizational identity talk—constructions of what is central, coherent and distinctive for an organization—is not widely addressed.

In the four cases we studied there seemed to be considerable variation in the focus and level of interest in organizational identity issues; the frequency and intensity with which identity claims are made differ greatly. Two cases seemed to be highly focused on organizational identity (Land and Valley) while two others were less so (Sea and Hill). This seems to reflect, or at least be consistent with, the values and styles of the firm's leaders. Given the relatively small size, the homogenous membership and the centrality of the leaders having a strong power base as also being the founders and owners of the firm, we find a stronger impact of these compared to many other organizations. In Land and Valley there was an emphasis on shared orientations and the belief that people gathered around a common set of values and ways of working, often viewed as central in this type of firm (Alvesson, 2004; Newell et al., 2002; Ouchi, 1980). In Sea and Hill these issues were not seen as significant. Indeed in Hill, the Managing Director was explicitly negative about such concerns and, thereby, helped to shape the 'identity'—or anti-identity—of the organization as one in which members did not engage in identity talk. But one cannot really say that there is an identity in the sense of a shared sense of belonging to a common social category or an agreement of a 'positive' set of characteristics functioning as a source of identification.

On the whole, the study suggests that one can find some indication of organizational identity in all firms, but that such constructions will be expressed in very different ways and valued to varying degrees. Rather than assuming its universal significance, we should perhaps talk about high organizational identity and low organizational identity contexts in firms, characterized by a high (or respectively, a low) density and richness of communication and negotiation of meanings around the nature and core characteristics of the organization. Under normal circumstances identity may not represent a key reference point for some organizations, though it can still be an implicit theme and, under certain circumstances (e.g. perceived threats), can be salient and significant in all organizations. We emphasize, therefore, that the presence or significance of organizational identity, i.e. shared meanings around organizational distinctiveness, should not be assumed to be universal. Of course, organizations may, as Brown (2006) argues, be seen as 'multiple intertextually networked narratives' (p. 743), but these may concern details of organizational life and not necessarily address some kind of organizational whole.

5.2. Relationship between organizational identity and the individual

The study highlights a second important issue: the extent to which organizational identity emerges from the characteristics of the organization as opposed to the characteristics of organizational members. This connects to the issue of belonging to a strong 'we' versus putting the 'I' in the centre of how one defines oneself in work contexts (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006). We can, in effect, distinguish between organization-driven individuals and individual-driven organizations. In the former, individuals construct their identity through organizational affiliation and identification; in the latter, organizational identity is contingent upon the individuals that work there. The organization then is not defined as a strong resource offering a collective basis for identity. Of course, organizations do not normally lend themselves to such easy classification. In practice, elements of both organization-driven individuals and individual-driven organizations will be at play in identity construction. Even highly selective recruitment can be influenced by organizational conditions as well as individual preferences. Nevertheless, we find the distinction worthwhile to illuminate variation in our four cases. Land seems to be strongly organization-driven, reflecting the aspirations of the founder and his codified processes of recruitment and training, at the time of the study institutionalized in the organization. Hill people see themselves as strongly individually driven and dismissive of organizational identity; the distinctiveness of the organization stems from the vigour with which individuals dismiss organizational level preoccupations. In Sea and Valley the relationship between organizational identity and the individual is more interactive. The individual is shaped by the organization but the organizational identity in turn is shaped by the personal identity work of the agglomeration of individuals.

5.3. Balance between reality and fantasy in identity construction

A third important issue concerns the relationship between more 'sober' and fairly uncontroversial identity claims, and identity constructions based on fantasy and bolder claims. To what extent is organizational identity grounded in what could be viewed as realistic or credible statements about the organization (i.e. reality-driven organizations) and to what extent does it reflect an idealized fantasy about what the organization should be or, more specifically, the idealized self-concepts of the organizational members (i.e. fantasy-driven organizations)? We found many examples which suggest that organization members construct a positive organizational identity that enhances their self-concept and selectively draw upon appropriate mythologies to enable them to do so. As discussed below, at the same time they show a tendency to reconstruct negative ascriptions to lessen the destructive impact on their self-concepts.

The empirical material illustrates an interesting span of organizational identity constructions in terms of the originality and imagination used. We identify one pole of rather neutral and standardized claims (i.e. reality-driven), and another characterized by the use of mythology and rather fantastical claims (i.e. fantasy-driven). This can also be formulated in terms of mundane/conventional stories (as found in Land and to some extent Valley) versus colourful/fantastical versions of identity (Hill and to some extent Sea). Hill consultants, in particular emphasized the mythological version of organizational identity, when drawing upon the Clint Eastwood image. Sea consultants constructed a university fantasy—it was just like being an academic but better paid. Valley consultants constructed a complex self-concept of ideologically oriented, empowered and empowering doers of good, liberating people whilst remaining classy and sexy. Land consultants seemed to draw less upon idealized or fantastical identity stories, consistent with their highly pragmatic work orientation. As with virtually all dimensions of identity, this reality/fantasy theme is not something that runs through all aspects of identity constructions in a coherent way, but imprints organizational identity in partial, selected ways.

The study suggests that organizational members can draw upon their powers of fantasy to reconstruct externally imposed pejorative metaphors. Rather than rejecting criticisms, organizational members can reframe and turn these metaphors into defensive, but more positively loaded organizational identity constructions. The Land people used 'the McDonald's of consulting' metaphor to draw attention to efficiency, reliability, value for money and world-wide success of the McDonalds. Sea consultants, who could simply have accepted their position as a second-tier competitor of McKinsey, chose instead to present themselves as 'as clever as McKinsey but more interesting.' Hill consultants recognized that they were 'plumbers' rather than 'architects' but at least they were 'first-rate plumbers'. A similar tactic was used by Hill's Managing Director, when turning the absence of an organizational identity focus to the firm's advantage: being perceived as anarchistic was interpreted as praise. The technique used here is not to reject fully the skeptical ascriptions of identity, but to reconstruct them and give them a more positive meaning.

We suggest that different organizations will draw upon 'fantasy themes' to varying degrees and that the extent to which these are deployed will vary according to the situation which organizational members are confronting. Ultimately it is important to recognize the situatedness of identity claims. In certain situations, people may try to describe their organizational identity fairly neutrally. Sometimes there is a strong motivation to consider 'Who we are?' without too much wishful thinking (e.g. in strategic decision-making). However, in many other situations organizational identity is constructed in ways involving or leading to a positive self-concept. Affect and emotionality rather than cognition and instrumentality are salient here. Organizational pride and confidence may be strongly invoked when faced by 'negative' comments. In these circumstances the incentive and motivation is more about boosting self-esteem and mobilizing enthusiasm, attachment and community feeling, rather than developing any profound insight into 'Who we really are'. Our study emphasizes that the extent to which organizational members may be inclined to critical self-scrutiny will vary according to the situation, as will the extent to which they are inclined to communicate the results of these musings to each other and the outside world.

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