

The Effect of Organizational Memory on Organizational Identity Strength

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This study examines the most enduring nature of organizational identity by exploring its relationship with the past in the three metatheories that pervade the literature – social actor, social constructivist and social identity and self-categorization theories. For further exploration, we conceptualize this past as organizational memory. Organizational memory has largely been studied from the perspective of decision making and performance in organizations, but not in connection with organizational identity. The structure of organizational memory is re-examined here with the aid of an empirical qualitative study. This reveals three factors - cultural memory, system memory and HR memory. We follow this with a hierarchical regression to examine the relationship between organizational memory and organizational identity.

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Introduction

Organizational identity (OI) has been intrinsically linked to the past, whether as the central and distinct characteristic of the organization that endures over time (Albert & Whetten 1985), or as being central and distinct but in a state of dynamic instability because it is constantly moving away from the past in order to adapt itself to changing contexts (Gioia et al., 2000). In the first definition, the past is the bedrock on which OI stabilizes and gets deeply entrenched and continues into the future. The present adds on to the past, often seamlessly. It is this unobtrusiveness of the past attached to identity that makes it enduring. This gets problematized during some major changes (Brown & Humpherys, 2002). In the second, the past is somehow different from the future and the present is where the two get reconciled. The past is seen to hold the organization back, and because of this tension the OI gets destabilized. These positions illustrate two dominant discourses in OI studies - social actor theory (Whetten, 2006; Whetten & Mackey, 2002) and social constructionist theory (Gioia et al., 2000; Brickson, 2000; Corley

& Gioia, 2004). In the third metatheory that Haslam et al. (2017) identified as permeating identity discourse - social identity and self-categorization - the past remains a subtext (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). The focus is on the present, the identity that exists and there is an assumption that it is enduring (Albert & Whetten, 1985).

For employees who draw their social identity from the various groups to which they belong, with the organization being one of them (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Mael & Ashforth, 1992), the past of the organization would be an important factor on which they repose their faith. In order to understand the role of the past in OI we have conceptualized the past as organizational memory (OM). OM has been defined as the “stored information from an organization’s history that can be brought to bear on present decisions” (Walsh & Ungson, 1991: 61). Walsh and Ungson conceptualized OM as being stored in five retrieval bins – individual, culture, transformation (i.e. the processes through which various things were transformed in the organization), structure and ecology. It is not surprising that OM literature has remained steeped in studies of organizational performance (Moorman & Miner, 1997) and learning (Huber, 1991). It is only in 2012 that Anteby and Molnar (2012) explored how the narratives about the past are constructed to shape OI.

In this paper we argue that it is not just the narrative structures by which identity is framed and sustained, but culture, transformation, structure and ecol-

ogy also influence OI and are critical to the debate on the endurance of OI. We however debate about whether OM is a composite construct, whether the five retrieval bins represent the factors of OM or whether the factorial structure underpinning OM is different, especially when we talk of their effect on OI. As Anderson and Sun (2010) have pointed out, though most scholars of OM evoke Walsh and Ungson (1991) very few engage with them. This is also the first study of OM in India and for that reason we critically examined the structure of OM at a conceptual level and followed it with an empirical study to validate our understanding.

The significance of the past to OI studies in the current context becomes even more relevant because of new forms of organizations emerging, spurred by the internet. Our study shows that OM has a positive effect on OI and contributes to existing literature by adding a new perspective to OI literature.

The Past in Social Actor Theory

The theory tends to take an anthropomorphic view of the organization which is supported by the legal status conferred on it. The organization comes into existence on a particular date (Olins, 1978) and is legitimized by institutional norms (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). Therefore, the past stands as a proof of the authenticity of its claims of distinctiveness and continuity – it existed in the past as it exists in the present. The past not only sanctifies the present but also validates the future. “Identity is thus conceived of as those

things that enable social actors to satisfy their inherent needs to be the same yesterday, today, and tomorrow and to be unique actors or entities” (Whetten & Mackey, 2002: 396). There is a strong teleological undercurrent that links the past to OI.

The past exists in the present either in its acknowledged form or as a repressed force that can disrupt the smooth functioning of the organization.

All events that have occurred in the past become part of the organization’s history. As Haslam et al. (2017) have noted many psychodynamic theorists have attributed ego defenses and the unconscious to organizations (de Vries & Miller, 1984). So, the past exists in the present either in its acknowledged form or as a repressed force that can disrupt the smooth functioning of the organization. Therefore, OI exists not only because of the remembered past but through deliberate acts of forgetting that detract from its glory.

The Past in Social Identity Theory

The social identity theory and its companion social categorization theory, were conceptualized in the 1970s and were developed through a series of experiments by Tajfel and associates (Tajfel et al., 1971; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The focus of these studies was the way people connected with the identity of the collective and through the process of identification formed their own sense of their

social self. Ashforth and Mael (1989) adapted this to organizations. OI is treated as an emergent property of the organization that is more than the aggregate of the identities of the individuals in the organization (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). As Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) observed, most of this literature deals with the static aspect of identity work and correlations. The endurance of the past was uncritically accepted.

The Past in Social Constructivist Theory

The social constructivist view of identity sees it as primarily a construct that reflects the way “organization’s members’ collective understanding of the features presumed to be central and relatively permanent, and that distinguish the organization from other organizations’ perception of the employees” (Gioia et al., 2000: 64). It is relatively permanent because even if the descriptive words remain the same, the meaning changes over time. Identity has continuity, morphing to adapt itself to changing times. The focus is really on the processes of identity formation, recalibration, and adaptation. If the two theories above focused on the state of being, the social constructivist theory focuses on becoming.

OI as Perceived by Employees

The past, therefore, poses a dilemma in OI studies. Whether people will align and appropriate the identity of the organization, as they say they are IITians (studied in the Indian Institute of Technology) depends a lot on how they perceive the

past. People want to be a part of successful organizations so their being a part of that organization confers success and pedigree on them. OI has been seen as a constructed narrative (Chreim, 2005) through which the organization projects desired identity to even its own employees (Christensen & Askegaard, 2001).

OM & OI

The influence of collective memory on identity of the collective is well established in memory studies (Halbwachs, 1992; Schwartz et al. 1986; Schwartz 1996; Assmann & Czaplicka, 1995; Olick, 1999). The organization is, like the nation, an imagined (Anteby & Molnar, 2012). Anteby and Molnar found that the memories residing in the narratives that were documented as well as in individuals were seen to affect OI. There is a deliberate attempt to preserve only certain aspects of the past to construct and conform to a desirable OI. What stays as OM is also what is kept alive through the socialization processes, as each new employee is inducted into the organization. Bulletins or other documents remain as information. It is inert and archival in nature and is not OM. It becomes OM when it is activated and is in circulation (Rowlinson et al., 2010). So, OM consists of those narratives that are part of shared knowledge, rituals and commemorations in which most employees partici-

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pate, those aspects of organizational behavior which define what “is done” or “not done” in the organization. It is this which helps people define what the organization stands for. OM also is the knowledge from the past that the organization carries forward (Walsh & Ungson, 1991) which gives it stability and endurance. This knowledge from past actions distinguishes the organization from other organizations. On this basis we frame our first hypothesis:

HI: OM will have a positive effect on OIS.

Walsh & Ungson’s (1991) conceptualization of the structure of OM emerged from their understanding of the sources of OM, what they called the storage/retrieval bins. Yet, when we look at OM from an employees’ perspective, the narrative structures (both in the documents as well as the individual narratives) that Anteby and Molnar (2012) referred to represent the more symbolic aspect of the organization. This symbolic world is represented through rituals, commemorations, greetings, the typical jargon that circulates in the organization, the vision statements. We think that it exists even in the power structures that define many protocols in the organization, some that are stated and formalized, and many that are not stated. Power dynamics affect the construction of the past as well as the way we remember it. We would like to call this the cultural memory of the organization. “Culture is how we live nature (including our own biology); it is the shared meanings we make and encounter in our everyday lives” (Storey, 2003: 2). Cultural memory

(CM) of the organization is, therefore, the way the people create a shared understanding of the past. It consists of the beliefs; the norms that govern the way people behave and interact with each other; the language that an organization develops; the rituals that govern organizational life. It is also the story of the organization, where the past is narrativized (White, 1980), where certain facts are suppressed, and others highlighted for consumption and a teleological spin is given to discrete episodes. So, our next hypothesis is:

H2: CM will have a positive effect on OIS.

The interest in OM grew exponentially in the 1990s with the growth of IT in organizations.

The other aspect of OM emerges from the knowledge that exists in organizations. This knowledge is largely what Yates (1990) referred to as defining what is OM. This knowledge gets embedded into systems and processes that define how work is done and should be done in the organizations. The interest in OM grew exponentially in the 1990s with the growth of IT in organizations. Many of these processes became encoded in the IT software itself. Therefore, our third hypothesis is:

H3: SM will have a positive effect on OIS.

Huber (1991) spoke of the importance of OM in socializing people into the organization. Yet, this aspect does not find

a place in Walsh and Ungson's (1991) influential essay on OM. Through OM new employees are socialized into the history of the organizations, the accolades and what the organization stands for. As we mentioned above a lot of OIS building is aimed at employees themselves (Christensen & Askegaard, 2001). They are also familiarized about the nature and specificities of their role and job, the way the organization functions, the processes it follows at the time of entry and even later as they move both vertically (promotions) and horizontally (change of function or location) across the organization. Since this relates a lot to the group of functions that the human resources (HR) department performs and manages, we have called this HR memory (HRM). Our last hypothesis is:

H4: HRM will have a positive effect on OIS.

Methodology

We decided to do an empirical qualitative study to validate our understanding of OM since this was the first study of OM in India. This was even more important because we were looking at OM from the perspective of employees. We relied on the sequential mixed methods process (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2006). We followed this with a pilot study to validate the existing scales of the other variables and then did a factor analysis of the OM items to derive our OM scale.

Independent Variables

We found the OM scale developed by Fiedler and Welpe (2010) to be the most

comprehensive. It consisted of 14 items making five factors representing the five retrieval bins. Since our conceptualization of the structure of OM was different, we conducted a preliminary study in a manufacturing organization across multiple locations. We used a structured sampling (N:21) approach to represent function, level, experience, location and age in the organization. For coding we used directed content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005) and adopted the coding of the five internal retrieval bins – individual, cultural, transformational, structure and ecology. The meaning unit (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004) in this study was words and phrases. After that we searched for any additional categories that we could extract (Hsieh & Shannon, 2005). For finalization of all items for the scale the item pool created “(a) should be broader and more comprehensive than one’s own theoretical view of the target construct and (b) should include content that ultimately will be shown to be tangential or even unrelated to the core construct” (Clark & Watson, 1995: 311) and at this stage, overinclusiveness was a better strategy than parsimony. Seven new items were added making it a total of 22 items, including one item that was split into two. The new items pertained to induction, HR processes and training, what we had conceptualized as HRM.

Dependent Variable.

Organizational Identity Strength (OIS): We had one dependent variable – OI. OI has many dimensions. We felt that strength would cover the centrality, distinctiveness as well as endurance that were critical to our study. We therefore

decided to use an established scale developed by Mael and Ashforth (1992).

Control Variables

We controlled for gender, tenure (in the current organization), the total experience (including other organizations), the number of organizations the person has worked in and the type of industry (manufacturing or service). We left out age as we thought that it had a great correlation with the total experience of a person, which was more relevant for our study. For our final study, we took our samples from organizations which were at least 10 years old because that has been accepted as the threshold for OM to stabilize in organizations (Fiedler & Welpel, 2010).

Pilot Study

We distributed the questionnaire to various batches of working executives who had come to attend an Executive MBA program and collected the data simultaneously to do an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) of OM and to test the reliability and validity of the scales. The data was checked for missing values, outliers and duplication. Two incomplete samples were discarded yielding 129 samples from a total of 131. According to Floyd and Widaman (1995) this is adequate for conducting an (EFA). The sample was checked for average tenure in the organization (3.1 years), average experience (11.5 years), average organizations worked in (3.1 years), gender (77% males, 33% females) and type of organization (52% manufacturing, others 48%). The cronbach alpha of the OIS scale was 0.81.

Exploratory Factor Analysis. Factor analysis is one way of understanding the underlying structure of a construct, a “method for determining the number and nature of the underlying variables” (Kerlinger, 2014: 659). According to Lewis-Beck (1994: 4) it “is also often used as a heuristic device.”

It always rests on “a theoretical argument, or the knowledge of causal ordering among the variables based on previous research” (Ibid: 37). We first tested the reliability of the OM scale developed by Fiedler and Welpe (2010) with only the original items and then with the additional items (Table 1).

Table 1 Pilot Study: Cronbach’s Alpha for Organizational Memory

Factors	No. of Items		Cronbach’s Alpha		
	Fiedler & Welpe (2010)	Modified Scale Fiedler & Welpe (2010)	original study	Fiedler & Welpe (2010)	Modified Scale Pilot Study
Individual	3	5	0.83	0.64	0.61
Culture	5	7	0.81	0.62	0.76
Transformation	2	4	0.77	0.63	0.69
Structure	2	2	0.81	0.47	-
Ecology	3	4	0.81	0.53	0.60
Composite Scale	15	22	-	0.85	0.90

We then did an EFA to explore the factorial structure and also to reduce the data and remove the cross-loading items (Floyd & Widaman, 1995). We used principal axis factoring with direct oblimin rotation to extract the pattern matrix with factor loadings of only 0.3 and above. After removing those items with less than 0.3 factor loadings and cross loading items sequentially, we used principal component factoring with varimax rotation to extract the structure. According to Lewis-Beck (1994:73) principal axis factoring is used for initially factoring and principal component factoring is used with varimax rotation to “maximize the variance of a column of a pattern matrix”. The three factors adequately represent the three dimensions of OM that we had discussed – CM, SM and HRM. One item, “Workplace or shop floor design and seating arrangements” loaded on to the cultural memory factor, indicating how an

organization designs the workplace is also cultural and often indicates very clearly the power structures, both formal and informal, in the organizations. The third factor, HRM, emerged from the new items in our qualitative study.

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA)

CFA is used primarily for construct validity and is a special case of structural equation modeling (Floyd & Widaman, 1995). The sample (N: 319) drawn from three organizations more than ten years old with 250 people and above, representing the manufacturing, services and consultancy. Since the nature of the study required self-reported data, to reduce possible common method bias (Podsakoff et al., 2003) we took many of the prescribed ex ante as well as some of the ex post remedies recom-

mended in literature (Chang et al., 2010). Our model was sufficiently complex and the Herman one-factor method test showed that the total variance was 24%. Table 2 shows the descriptive statistics. The data was also screened for skewness, kurtosis and homoscedasticity

(Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013). Since there was significant correlation among the variables, the data was checked for multicollinearity. VIF for all the variables was less than 2 and so they were within limits (O'brien, 2007). Table 3 presents the correlation matrix.

Table 2 Descriptive Statistics of Final Survey

	N	Mean	S.D.
Gender*	319	.8	.4
Age	319	32.9	8.0
Organization worked in	319	3.1	1.6
Tenure	319	4.1	4.0
Total Experience	319	9.3	7.3
Present Designation **	320	1.77	.68
Education***	320	2.43	.63
Organizational Identity	319	3.8	.5
Organization Memory	319	4.0	.4
Cultural Memory	319	3.9	.5
System Memory	319	4.0	.5
HR Memory	319	4.0	.5

* F=0, M=1; ** Junior=1, Middle=2, Senior=3, Top=4; ***Diploma=1, Graduate=2, Post Graduate=3; Doctorate=4;

Table 3 Correlation Matrix of Final Survey

Spearman's rho (N:319)	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 Organizational Memory	(0.85)									
2 System Memory	.928***	(-0.81)								
3 Cultural Memory	.734***	.512***	(-0.64)							
4 HR Memory	.699***	.564***	.439***	(-0.69)						
5 Organizational Identity Strength	.534***	.470***	.430***	.441***	(-0.81)					
6 Gender	.075	.089	.118*	-.113*	.139*	-				
7 Type of Industry	.246***	.270***	.200***	.009	.288***	.484***	-			
8 No. of Organizations worked in centred	.060	.032	.084	.106	.007	.042	-.116*	-		
9 Tenure Centred	.251***	.253***	.189***	.136*	.219***	.323***	.503***	.033	-	
10 Total Experience Centred	.174**	.177**	.154***	.104	.220***	.338***	.383***	.567***	.672***	-

Note: Correlation is significant (2-tailed) at the 0.001 level (***); 0.001 level (**); 0.05 level (*).Cronbach's Alpha is in the diagonal in brackets

Byrne (2010), in her discussion of model fit indices, puts values closer to 0.95 for CFI and TLI as a good fit. We used AMOS 20. CFI was 0.95 and though

TLI was 0.94, with one modification between the error terms, TLI value also became 0.95. Root mean square error of approximation (RMSEA) was at 0.05 which is also within the specified range indicating that the model was well fitted. KMO was 0.878 and 53.55% of the variance was explained. The Cronbach's alpha of OM scale (13 items) was 0.85, CM (4 items) was 0.64, SM (7 items) was 0.81 and HRM (2 items) was 0.69. Nunnally had originally put 0.5 to 0.6 as the limit for preliminary research but in 1978 had revised it to 0.7 and had not given any explanation for the revision (Peterson, 1994). According to Cortina (1993: 101), "The level of reliability that is adequate depends on the decision that is made with the scale. The finer the distinction that needs to be made, the better the reliability must be." Fine distinctions would apply more to medical research. For our study Cronbach's alpha for the full scale and its factors was therefore acceptable.

Results

We used hierarchical regression to test the various hypotheses in our study, using the non-refined factor score - the mean scores (DiStefano et al., 2009) for all the variables on a Likert scale. For the exploratory stages where estimates and generalizations are required it is better than a score "too close to "true" score" (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2013: 656) and is "more stable across samples than refined methods" (DiStefano et al., 2009: 3). For the categorical variables we used a dummy variable for gender and type of organization and standardized scores (DiStefano

et al., 2009) for tenure, number of organizations worked in and total experience.

Table 4 shows that when a hierarchical regression was computed to establish the individual effect of OM, SM, CM and HRM on OIS, all the relationships were significant. The adjusted R² in all regressions indicate that OM has a greater effect on OIS than any of the individual factors individually. When OIS was regressed on SM, CM and HRM simultaneously then also all contributed significantly - CM: $p < .001$; SM: $p < .004$; HRM: $p < .001$.

Discussion

Anteby and Molnar (2012) had looked at only certain aspect of the construct as conceptualized in organizational studies to explore its relationship to OI. We have looked beyond the storage bin metaphor with which OM has been stuck with since Walsh and Ungson (1991) had conceptualized it. The context of our study made us focus on the way OM was kept alive in organizations through various acts of recalling and socialization. Our final study validated that OM had a significant effect on OIS ($\beta = 0.54$) and so did all the three factors (Table 4). When all the three factors were simultaneously regressed on OIS, CM and HRM had a greater effect than SM, indicating that the symbolic and

The symbolic and socialization processes that define who we are, affected OIS more than the actions that govern what we do in an organization.

socialization processes that define who we are, affected OIS more than the actions that govern what we do in an organization. The study also showed that OM is more significant in-service organizations indicating a greater reliance on processes and systems to service a more dynamic and fluid market.

Table 4 Results of Regression of Organizational Identity Strength on Organizational Memory, Cultural Memory, System Memory and HR Memory

	Organizational Identity Strength	Organizational Identity Strength	Organizational Identity Strength	Organizational Identity Strength	Organizational Identity Strength
Gender	0.03 (-0.03)	-0.02 (-0.03)	0.02 (-0.03)	0.06 (-0.03)	0.04 (-0.03)
Type of Industry	0.04 (.17*)	0.09 (.17*)	0.04 (.17*)	0.14 (.17*)	0.06 (.17*)
Organizations worked in	-.13* (-0.05)	-0.11 (-0.05)	-0.1 (-0.05)	-0.12 (-0.05)	-0.14 (-0.05)
Tenure	-.03* (0.08)	0.02 (0.08)	0.01 (0.08)	-0.02 (0.08)	-0.04 (0.08)
Experience	0.2 (0.15)	0.19 (0.15)	0.18 (0.15)	0.19 (0.15)	0.21* (0.15)
Organizational Memory	.54***				
Culture Memory		.43***			0.23***
System Memory			.46***		0.18**
HR Memory				.44***	0.24***
R ²	0.36	0.27	0.27	0.28	0.36
Adjusted R ²	0.35	0.26	0.26	0.26	0.34
“R ²	0.27	0.18	0.18	0.18	0.27
“F	129.20***	74.88***	76.35***	79.64***	42.78***
Hypothesis	H1	H3	H2	H4	
Accepted/ Rejected	A	A	A	A	

Note: ***= p at <.001, **= p at <.01, *= p at <.05; A=Accepted.
Direct effect shown in brackets

The emergence of HRM as significant to OIS draws attention to the processes of socialization, learning, induction, training and HR policies in organizations. Organizations can be toxic (de Vries & Miller, 1984) or they can vie for the award for the best organization to work in. There are many organizations that are aspirational and therefore attract employees (Mael & Ashforth, 1995). Learning and training are complex processes though. On the one hand they

keep alive the past in the organization by training new people as well as retraining existing people to the ways of the organization. On the other hand, they also create new OM e.g. through brainstorming sessions or organizational development interventions and introduce new systems into the organization. Huber (1991) talked of the inertial effect of OM to change and new learning and Argyris (1977) had talked of learning as taking place in multiple stages before something

new is accepted and institutionalized in the organization.

It is quite possible that under different conditions the relationship between OM and OIS, while remaining significant, could be negative. Or, as has also been noticed in memory studies “memory is valorized when identity is problematized” (Kansteiner, 2002: 184), and a different kind of past can be evoked to question the existing identity and justify a change process. The politics of memory making is beyond the scope of this study.

Limitations

The major limitation of this study is that it examines the relationship of OM and OIS under certain conditions. Under more turbulent conditions there could be dramatic changes in the relationship. In certain organizations that are constantly innovating, instability might itself become a part of the identity. In such organizations, would they glorify the past and the successes or forget them? This could be a possible area of further studies.

Similarly, new forms of organizations, especially those that dominate the internet, could operate very differently, could bring a very different understanding of both OM and OIS. As the lines between the real and the imaginary, even fake, get blurred, we think that there could be a similar erasure of the difference between the imagined and the constructed past. This could be a real challenge to those working with organizations at the identity level.

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