ETHNOGRAPHY FOR ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY

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Ethnography for organizational identity

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ABSTRACT

**Purpose:** This article explores how work on organizational identity can influence the choice of research methodology. Specifically, the research focuses on the benefits of ethnography as an effective method to deal with the complexity of apprehending organizational identity.

**Methodology:** This methodological document is based on an ethnographic study conducted in the field of organizational identity.

**Findings:** Research indicates that an in-depth work of organizational identity may present new opportunities for applications of the ethnographic research method to better understand the underlying processes that are at work and their implication on management and transformation of organizations.

**Originality/Value:** The research contributes to the literature on organizational research methods, providing theoretical evidence on how the ethnographic method could add to the theoretical construction in the field of organizational identity.

**KEYWORDS**

Ethnography, organizational identity
Ethnography for organizational identity

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Introduction

The notion of identity is at the crossroads of several disciplines: psychology, anthropology, sociology, political science (Lévi-Strauss, 1977). In the field that interests us, management sciences, the identity of the organization is approached from the definition of the organizational identity proposed by Albert and Whetten (1985), to which we will refer in the context of this article which raises the question of the organization’s identity in a fundamental way.

Other definitions of the organization’s identity are discussed in the literature: a strategic approach by Larçon and Reitter (1979) or a psychoanalytic approach by Diamond (1993). Any individual has multiple identities (Mead, 1934) who emerge according to assigned roles and contexts (Ashforth and Johnson, 2001). According to Dut ton and al. (1994), it is in situations of change that organizational members become more aware of organizational identity. When an organization encounters deep and lasting inconveniences, and technical solutions have failed, identity questions are raised in the sense of what is "central, lasting and distinctive" (Albert and Whetten, 1985). Organizational identity includes a dynamic part constructed over time and events, and a stable part (Gagliardi, 1986, Gioia, Schultz, Corley, 2000) consisting of invariants transmitted by the founder (Schein, 1984; Judge and al., 2015).

These fundamental characteristics are presumed to be resistant to attempts at change: the main strategy of an organization is to maintain its stable identity.

As a result of cultural anthropology and grounded theory, the ethnography has developed in management studies over the past three decades. In particular, organizational studies, strategy, and marketing have increasingly used and discussed the advantages and limitations of ethnography in the academic research of the managerial axis. We will study how the ethnographic method is recommended to approach the phenomenon of organizational identity.
1. Organizational identity

The central, distinctive and stable characteristics allow answering the question at the level of the organization: "Who are we?" (Albert and Whetten, 1985). Organizational identity makes sense (Weick, 1995) and covers several dimensions (Whetten and Godfrey, 1998) neither necessarily homogeneous, nor common to the members of the organization. Organizational identity is plural and complex and also integrates elements of the organizational context, such as image, reputation. Organizational identity is also a scheme of interpretation and action of the organization (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Gioia and Thomas, 1996; Elsbach and Kramer, 1996). It creates referents usable by management, constraints with a view to congruence, legitimacy (Stimpert, Gustafson and Sarason, 1998; Dutton and Jackson, 1988; Dutton and Penner, 1993; Ashforth and Mael, 1989, 1996).

For Fauchard and Gruber (2011), an identity constitutes a frame of reference for interpreting social situations, behaviors, and actions. This allows us to analyze the relationship between the identity of the founder and his decisions in terms of 1) market segment served, 2) customer needs, 3) resources, capabilities deployed, because these decisions are taken into account for strategically define a new business (Abell, 1980).

Organizational identity is related to individual and group identity. According to Erikson (1968), the formation of identity is an interaction between the psychological and the social level. In the field of social identity Mead (1934), Sarbin (1954), Tajfel and Turner (1985) demonstrate that identity is constructed in interaction with others. As a result, group membership, intergroup relationships, and the resulting identifications are involved in building an organizational identity. Ashforth and Mael (1989), Whetten and Godfrey (1998) highlight the importance of the identification mechanism in the development of organizational identity. According to Pratt (1998), the process of organizational identification consists in integrating perceptions of one's identity and perceptions of the identity of the organization. It also highlights the links between individual identity and group identity. For Weick (1995) a man can not produce meaning without knowing the meaning of what he is.

According to Czarniawska-Jeorges and Sevon (1996), when the characteristics considered as stable change, there is a risk of crisis due to the weak tolerance of the actors to the change of the organizational identity. This produces an imbalance (Piaget, 1975), resulting in cognitive dissonance between the perceived identity in the past, as in the present and the ideal identity.

The identity of an organization is largely related to its mission and what it does to accomplish it (McMillan, 1987). It focuses on the characteristics
that define for the actors the heart, the essence of the organization, the same way the identity of an individual in a given social context is largely related to his role in this context. Leadership is, therefore, paramount in the question of the identity of the organization (Zaleznik, 1989).

2. Ethnography in management sciences: methodology

Ethnographic research has been used in the managerial field since the late 1970s and considered as an alternative to quantitative research methods. Gephart (1978, p.554) suggests that the positivist approach may not allow exploring the "sociological micro-processes that occur in face-to-face situations". The following are methodological elements for the ethnographic study.

2.1. Two main data collection techniques

Interviews and observation. Ethnography involves the convergence of verbal data (conversations) and what people do. Additional data collection techniques can complement ethnography. However, it does not mean that they are essential.

2.2. The ethnographic interview

We assume that each informant is approached in its natural context. It is an interview that takes place in the natural environment of the informant and in the midst of his daily life. The goal is to collect presentable and operational contextual data. The ethnographic interview allows the production of literal transcripts of interviews that can be supplemented by additional ethnographic material. Its specificity is natural context, living with the informant and low maintenance structure (Van Maanen, 1979).

2.3. The narrative interview

We start from the assumption that stories are an incredible repository of meanings and produce intimate knowledge. It is a simple discussion to collect stories told to the first or third person. Stories are the only possible way to relate a person's life experience. This allows the production of : 1) narratives, 2) life history or (auto) biography, 3) history. Its specificity is length and nature of the collected data (Atkinson 1998).
2.4. Phenomenological maintenance

Our assumption: the informant is the most competent person on his/her lived experience. The objective is to gather the lived experience of the informant in a given field of experience. This provides a deep and factual description of the informant's experience. Its specificity implies: 1) open-ended questions, 2) led by the informant, 3) existential description (Thompson, Locander and Pollio, 1989).

2.5. The epistemic interview

We start from the premise that negotiations are at the heart of this conversation. It is conducted by construction around the stories of the interviewee. The goal is to produce the interpretations at the time of the interview. It allows obtaining the literal transcription of the interview, which will thus include negotiated interpretations. Its specificity is simultaneity of the interpretation and the participation of the interviewee in the generation of meaning.

2.6. The observation

It is not voyeurism or folklore or an ethnographic 'Blitzkrieg'. What to watch? The actors (who they are, age, skills, interests, goals, behaviors, non-verbal), atmosphere (particularities, location, layout), artifacts (category, function, features, configuration, styles), activities (types, sequence, purpose, results, difficulties).

2.7. Video ethnography

Video ethnography is a video recording approach that captures and performs a detailed analysis of records of natural activities and interactions (Streeck & Mehus, 2005).

The use of video was influenced by Goffman’s work on interactions (Goffman, 1971, 1982); By the symbolic interactionism of Mead (Mead, 1934); And the analysis of conversations, which examines the micro-processes by which the participants perform certain actions, analyzing the natural discourses (Garfinkel, 1967, Sacks, 1984, Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1974). The justification for its use in management studies is that "social interactions" underlie our understanding of what is happening in organizational parameters, forming the micro-foundations of organizational processes (Llewellyn & Hindmarsh, 2010). Examples of these studies include explorations of emotions displayed by team members (Bartel & Saavedra, 2000).

Interest in this method is the identification of "infinitely rich details of transient events" (Cohen, 2010, p.34), such as the affective and nuanced expression of the face / voice / verbal or bodily (Liu & Maitlis, 2014).
2.8. The role of the researcher

Sherry (1991) has long supported the idea that qualitative research pursues different paths: 1) Improvement of research methods and techniques 2) Improvement of the reflexivity of the researcher. The decades of positivism research have led us to believe that the researcher must be removed from the phenomenon to grant him objectivity. However, in an ethnographic approach research becomes the part of the phenomenon. Furthermore, ethnography change the researcher and his perspective: it's like a journey. As such, the researcher must deal and utilize his subjectivity to: 1) meditate on his assumptions considered as self-evident and therefore evaluate their impact on his research, 2) negotiate with informants, some interpretations which appear, 3) propose alternative interpretations, when it’s relevant.

2.9. The naturalization of the researcher

"People only see what they are prepared to see"[2]. Thus, any ethnographer must go through a process of naturalization to get to know the phenomenon he is looking for. Naturalization consists of a process of progressive decentralization (from what is familiar to what is unfamiliar and becomes familiar). Naturalization can be seen as a process of acculturation of the researcher. The process of acculturation occurs on both sides of the relationship (Berry, 1980). It can be "measured" through indicators (Barley and al., 1988, 29). LaFromboise, Coleman and Gerton (1993) suggest that acculturation implies: 1) learning the language of informants, 2) understanding their norms and values, 3) identifying their rites and rituals, 4) reading of their behavioral patterns, 5) the exposure of behaviors that can be socially sanctioned.

2.10. Towards a derived etic approach

By relying on linguistics, Berry (1989) suggests that an ethnographer can develop three different positions: 1) An 'etic' account is a description of a behavior or belief by a social analyst or scientific observer (a student or scholar of anthropology or sociology, for example), in terms that can be applied across cultures; that is, an etic account attempts to be 'culturally neutral', limiting any ethnocentric, political, and/or cultural bias or alienation by the observer, 2) An 'emic' account is a description of behavior or a belief in terms meaningful (consciously or unconsciously) to the actor; that is, an emic account comes from a person within the culture. Almost anything from within a culture can provide an emic account, 3) Etic derivative: the negotiation of meaning - what kind of point of view must be maintained - on the other, on the researcher, or something between them. There are specific interview approaches that involve several times when the interviewer asks for meaning negotiation moments. For example "ok, but do you mean that...." is a negotiation of meaning.
Emic and etic are derived from the linguistic terms phonemic and phonetic (Pike, 1967).

The role of the context is very important: it is necessary to provide a careful and in-depth interpretation of the domain by describing the context in which the data are collected and analyzed. It may involve not only the description of the field but also the composition of the research team. The interpretation of the context depends on the research: case study, micro, macro.

2.11. The importance of the researcher’s gesture

It passes through the awareness of oneself which is revealed by the writing of confession, an introspection of the seeker (Minowa, Visconti, Maclaran, 2012) by way of alterity, personal reconstruction of the other, which is also a form of introspection.

For Schein (1987) the ethnographer: 1) chooses his subject of study, 2) chooses the organization he wishes to study according to criteria he has determined beforehand, in the interest of his research, 3) has to obtain the cooperation of his subject of study, 4) the ethnographer collects concrete data in order to understand the culture in which he is interested, 5) the members of the group whom he studies could participate without intervening or being interested in the study itself.

3. Discussion

3.1. Identification of organizational identity: what are the methods currently used?
Organizational Identity

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approach</th>
<th>Method of analysis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Functionalist</strong></td>
<td>Identity is assimilated to an object and is assumed to be relatively stable over time. Compared to a living organism, it is supposed to obey similar laws (Gioia, 1998). As an objective social fact, it can be measured and managed. It can be analyzed through the speeches of the leaders. It is possible to make classification using tools.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Constructivist</strong></td>
<td>Identity is an illusion, invented to meet the objectives of the parties involved (Gioia, 1998). This approach suggests that organizational identity is fragmented, ambiguous, multiple, even contradictory. The narrative logic mode is used to understand the motivations of the actors. Observation focuses on singular events.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Interpretativist</strong></td>
<td>Organizational identity does not exist. It is a subjective experience, experienced by the members of the organization. It is an organizing process (Weick, 1969). It is a question of analyzing the way in which the actors construct this representation (Bouchikhi et al., 1998) and negotiate it during complex interactions between different stakeholders (Scott and Lane, 2000).</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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There are different ways to access the identity of the organization. We retain:

- Collecting and analyzing documents that allow a better understanding of the problem and the steps led within the company on management issues: 1) from its messages: management speeches, annual reports, analysis reports, newspaper Internal or external, information leaflet, advertising material. 2) from the history of the organization and its actors (founder), its traditions, its reputation,
- Conducting face-to-face semi-structured interviews with key players within the organization or group interviews, organized in the form of focus groups with various methodologies for facilitating discussions or brainstorming,
- Multiple choice questionnaires.

The use of these qualitative methods makes it possible to obtain detailed information from the actors on the ground on their degree of identification with the organization, the elements that underpin this identification (dimensions constituting the different identity logics present) and their degree of adherence to the dominant identity logic (organizational identity as defined by management).

According to Oliver and Ross (2006), some researchers have demonstrated that organizational identity can be so subtle and discrete that it is difficult to capture it through questionnaires or simple interviews, or even to measure or describe it. The use of narrative logic modes promotes an understanding of the motivations and intentions of the actors, rather than generating a rigorous classification and explanation.

It is also possible to use tools of researchers or consultants that will allow to categorize, to establish cognitive maps (Weick, Bougon, 1986). Metaphors can also be used to explain observation using other
terms or images using, for example, "stellar constellations" (Elsbach, 1998, p.236) to illustrate complexity and the dynamic nature of identification.

More recently, transversal techniques have developed under the impetus of researchers and consultants:

- Creative exercises allow the collection of data through participatory observation with management teams. For example, the technique inspired by the concept of "serious play" (Roos, Victor and Statler, 2004) refers to the integration of cognitive, social and emotional dimensions through play. It creates a new context for discussions about organizational identity through a standardized technique, and a facilitation process involving 3D building materials, in order to explore the identities of their organizations,

- Exercises mobilizing collective intelligence as the "platform of singularity" developed by a consultant (Mathieu, 2015) with a group of about ten people allows the writing of a set of short sentences leading to the formulation of a key sentence, characterizing the singularity of the organization. This exercise is based on a selection of words from the vocabulary of the founders, leaders and communication of the organization.

### 3.2. Ethnography as a method for identifying organizational identity

Ethnography came from anthropology and originated in the 1930s with Malinowski[1]. According to Rouleau (2013), the ethnographic approach is a commitment to a meticulous work of data collection. Initial work in firms appeared in the 1950s and 1960s through in-depth case studies (Selznick, 1949, Gouldner, 1954, Crozier, 1963) but it was in 1979 that the use of this approach was legitimized by Van Maanen (1979). The latter had introduced ethnography into organizational studies by studying police officers and how they interact with people (Van Maanen, 1973).

When, in the 1980s, the notion of culture was attributed to the success of the Japanese model, it became omnipresent in the theory of organizations (Rouleau, 2007), which encouraged the development of ethnography in this field of study, with works that have become classics and offer fine descriptions of the cultural habits and rules that structure organizations. Today, it also allows studying the practices in movement (Van Maanen, 2006). In studies in organizational theory, ethnography is currently being requested and is being institutionalized (Rouleau, 2013). Since 2012, there is a journal named the "Journal of Organization Ethnography". Numerous symposia on the subject are organized.

It is important to note that at the time of the development of the ethnographic method in the management sciences, the literature on organizational identity recorded major advances notably with Schein (1983) and his famous book "The role of the founder in creating organizational culture".
While the ethnographic method was commonly used to observe the phenomena related to culture, according to Hatch & Schultz (1997) there is a relationship between culture and identity. The two concepts are not separated but are both interrelated and distinguishable. « identity expresses cultural understandings ». This fact can justify using the ethnographic method for identity as well as for organizational culture to better understand these phenomena.

For Schein (1983, 1984) organizational culture is not what is thought to be seen first but is situated in depth. It originates in the mind of its founder who, at the creation of the organization, impacted and imprinted by his personality a culture within his group. This organizational culture can be broken down into 3 levels: 1) Artifacts and creations that constitute the most visible level of culture as they constitute the physical and social environment. It is the behaviors that express daily values. But they are not often decrypted, 2) the values which guide the group when it have to treat a dysfunction and can become beliefs. It is a high level of consciousness, 3) "basic" or underlying "postulates." When a solution to a problem works repeatedly, it becomes a "data," a postulate. These postulates are unconscious, invisible, and refer to the nature of reality, the nature of man, his activities, and relationships. They reflect the attitudes adopted within the organization as well as the behavior of the organization vis-à-vis the outside world. The assumptions that are taken for granted are less debatable and confronted than the values that can be explained and challenged. The postulate appears when the interviewee refuses to discuss a point of view because considered as an established thing: a business must be profitable, the school allows to educate, medicine allows to prolong life are postulates (Schein, 1984).

Moreover, about organizational identity Judge et al., developed the theory of imprinting, postulate that companies are "stamped" at their creation by different elements that resist change. Researchers have long known that the survival and success of a business depend on both environmental forces and strategic factors (Child, 1972, Hrebin and Joyce, 1985, Stinchcombe, 1965). In particular, organizations often have difficulty adapting themselves to the changes of the environment (Hannan and Freeman, 1984). However, organizations are subject to an organizational footprint process during their founding period in the sense that the organizational structure tends to reflect powerful elements of the
environment in which it was founded (Dobrev and Gotsopoulos, 2010; Marquis, 2003; Boeker, 1989; Stinchcombe, 1965). If this imprinting is badly managed, it can affect the adaptability of a firm’s strategy, structure and procedures and, subsequently, its probability of survival over the long term.

Marquis and Tilcsik (2013) described three essential characteristics of the organizational footprint: 1) the existence of a transitional period, short, particularly sensitive to the influence of the environment, 2) the entity impacted by a strong environment during this sensitive period reflects elements of this environment, 3) the characteristics developed during the sensitive period persist even in the presence of subsequent environmental changes. As these characteristics persist, the footprint can have strong influences on firms that go well beyond their founding stage, and often constrain the firm’s ability to change in subsequent periods. The framework developed by Marquis and Tilcsik (2013) highlights three different sources of footprints - both economic and technological, institutional and individual - that may have "marked" effects on companies during the foundation.

Child (1972) argues that some firms have capable leaders who can choose a new direction for the company and then direct it in that direction. Indeed, Greiner (1972) identified the strategic transition from founding entrepreneurs to professional managers as one of the first and greatest challenges for all new businesses.

3.3. What is the contribution of the ethnographic method to understanding organizational identity?

Organizational identity thus appears as a complex phenomenon that requires an adapted method to study it, especially as researchers adopt a dynamic conception of organization (Langley and Tsoukas, 2010), considered as a continuous process of organization or "organizing" (Weick, 1979). Thus, the objective is to understand how the identity of an organization is constituted, evolves, while positioning itself at the heart of the action. The understanding of the actual practices of the organizational actors, the way of acting and being of an organization, may be better captured by an ethnographic type of work. As such, recent works are diversifying and evolving to account for the organizational work that is carried out on a daily basis, and to capture the complexity of organizations (Ybema et al., 2009, Yanow, 2009, Van Mannen, 2011, Watson, 2011).

The advantage of ethnography compared to other qualitative methods is seen in its ability to analyze group dynamics and not just to focus on individuals. The method of ethnographic research has been recommended as a successful approach to studying complex phenomena, enabling to construct a new theory and to address subjects that are not easy to quantify (Fraenkel and Wallen, 1990).

According to Cunliffe (2010, p227) « Ethnography is about understanding human experience—how a particular community lives (...). It differs from other ap
approaches to research in that it requires immersion and translation. Ethnography is not a quick dip into a research site using surveys and interviews, but an extended period in which the ethnographer immerses herself in the community, she is studying: interacting with community members, observing, building relationships, and participating in community life. She then has to translate that experience so that it is meaningful to the reader. ».

Thus ethnography allows being within the company to gather elementary facts (Dumez, 1988). According to Geertz (1973), only an in-depth immersion allows the ethnographer to provide a detailed contextual account with localized information. Ethnography makes it possible to "see organizations from within" (Laude et al., 2012). Ethnography makes it possible to see things that are barely observable.

In fact, immersion is a singular method of ethnography. Only ethnography allows such an intimate approach to organization. The researcher, by becoming himself a member of the organization, can grasp personally and precisely the different aspects of an organization’s identity, while other methods run the risk of capturing only what individuals declare about their organization (always questionable), without grasping either their real behaviors or their inner life.

Furthermore, according to Watson (2011), only a deep immersion in the field setting allows to collect a strong material to be analysed.

The method of ethnographic research is a powerful approach to achieving an in-depth understanding of culture. It is well adapted to study the complex cultural and social phenomena otherwise too difficult to grasp. Wax (1980) suggests that ethnographic field research involves entering into the matrix of meanings of research and participating in their system of organized activities. It examines ways of thinking and social behaviors in their nuances for each group. We start from the assumption that there is no univocal way of looking at things.

According to Van Maanen (2011, 219) « Ethnography is first and foremost a social practice concerned with the study and representation of culture (...). It is an interpretive craft, focused more on 'how' and 'why' than on 'how much' or 'how many.' Ethnography claims a sort of informative and documentary status – 'bringing back the news' – by the fact that somebody actually goes out beyond their ivory towers of employment, libraries, classrooms, and offices to 'live with and live like' someone else. (...) One becomes an ethnographer by doing it. Fieldwork of the immersive sort is by and large definitional of the trade. However, as Tony notes, fieldwork practices are biographically and contextually varied – stunningly so. Studies differ in terms of working style, place, pace, time, and mix of evidentiary approaches (interviews, surveys, content analysis, network mapping, etc.) yet all rely on some form of lengthy participant-observation (...)."
4. Limitations of ethnographic method for organizational identity

The use of the ethnographic method requires considerable time for researchers. Conversely, the use of questionnaire-based methods or simple interviews produces results more quickly but does not capture the complexity of current organizations (Olivier, Roos, 2006).

5. Conclusion

Organizational identity has implication in the fields of management and transformation issues. In order to grasp all its dimensions and subtle phenomena, an ethnographic approach may prove useful. According to Rouleau, de Rond and Musca (2014) there is an interest to use ethnographic method to study organizations and to understand subtle changes. This method allows to make the difference between cyclical factors (change in order to perform) and structural factors (increasing complexity of their activities) by a diachronic study. Moreover, the method is valid in all paradigms of organizational identity (functionalist, constructivist and interpretative). Watson (2011) has conceptualized ethnography not as a research method but as a way to reach to “essence of the activity” by using a combination of several methods (participant observation, interviews, analysis of documents, statistics, surveys).


[1] Bronisław Kasper Malinowski (1884-1942) is an anthropologist, ethnologist and sociologist from Poland.