More than a Metaphor: Organizational Identity Makes Organizational Life Possible

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Recent papers by Cornelissen (2002a, 2002b) and Gioia, Schultz and Corley (2002a, 2002b) have debated the utility of organizational identity as a metaphor for understanding organizational life. In the present paper we argue that this debate is limiting because it frames issues of organizational identity purely in metaphorical terms and fails to explore the social psychological basis and consequences of the discontinuity between personal and organizational identity. Extending this debate, we argue that the power of organizational identity as a theoretical and applied construct derives from the fact that it has the capacity to be both an externally shared and negotiated product and an internalized aspect of the collective self. Consistent with recent research informed by the social identity approach to organizational psychology, we discuss how an appreciation of the identity-based dynamic between the social facts of organizations and the socially-structured psychology of organizational members is essential for both theoretical and practical understanding of organizational life.

A series of recent articles in the British Journal of Management have drawn attention to (and fuelled) controversy surrounding issues of organizational identity (Cornelissen, 2000a, 2000b; Gioia, Schultz and Corley, 2002a, 2002b). In many ways, this debate is very timely, because in recent years interest in the topic has increased dramatically. This fact is signalled, amongst other things, (a) by Albert et al. (2000) and van Knippenberg and Hogg (2001) who have edited Special Issues devoted to this topic, (b) by the publication of several recent volumes (e.g. Haslam, 2001; Haslam, van Knippenberg, Platow and Ellemers, 2003; Hogg and Terry, 2001; Tyler and Blader, 2000) summarizing research in this area, and (c) by the exponential rise over time in articles whose titles and/or abstracts make reference to the term ‘organizational identity’ (see Figure 1). Certainly, the trends revealed here suggest that these issues need to be tackled (and, if possible, resolved) at the earliest opportunity – before the organizational identity bandwagon becomes unstoppable and any of its inherent limitations or failings prove uncorrectable.

In his contribution to this process, Cornelissen sounds a number of notes of caution that relate to the utility of the organizational identity construct and its potential uses. Three are particularly significant. First, he suggests that, as a metaphor, organizational identity has been accepted more or less uncritically, and that, upon closer inspection, its credentials appear somewhat suspect. Cornelissen claims that, to prove useful in this capacity, organizational identity needs to ‘provide for fresh, and previously non-existent insights into the reality of organizational life’ that
might contribute to hypothesis testing and theory development (2000a, p. 263). Second, he argues that when researchers work with the metaphor they run into the ‘logical impasse’ that arises from the dissimilarity ‘between the individual-level construct of identity and the collective-level construct of organization’ (2000a, pp. 264, 266). Third and finally, he protests that regardless of the way that researchers deal with these issues, in practice, the organizational identity metaphor is often used as a political tool of regressive managerialism ‘with the aim of giving [members of the organization] some sense of purpose and directing their creative energies towards the realization of corporate objectives’ (2000a, p. 266). His ultimate warning is thus that the metaphor of organizational identity needs to be turned back at the border of organizational science lest the field as a whole be contaminated by its ‘hidden cargo of dubious implications’ (2000a, p. 267).

For Gioia and his colleagues this contribution smacks of scaremongering of the most pernicious and censorious form. Their spirited defence of research into organizational identity focuses mainly on the first of Cornelissen’s objections. They point out that research into organizational identity is very much in its infancy and that, far from proving barren and stale, the metaphor is proving to have enormous generative capacity—not least because it is ‘part of the lay organizational vocabulary’ (p. 270) that organizational members themselves use to describe both their own experience and features of the organizational world around them. In this way they emphasize the validity of the concept in capturing organizational reality as it is actually experienced in the field. In response to the second point they note that there is no necessary equivalence between individual and collective identity and that, on the contrary, researchers have begun to identify ways in which the structure and content of these is markedly different (e.g. Gioia, 1998; Weick and Roberts, 1993). Cornelissen’s third point they dismiss perfunctorily. Of course the concept (like most others in organizational science) is open to abuse, but ‘to imbue this possibility with grave moral overtones . . . borders on the reactionary and the ridiculous’ (Gioia, Schultz and Corley, 2000a, p. 274).

The subsequent round of debate serves to reiterate these central points, but Gioia and colleagues (2002b) characterize this as mere ‘shadow boxing’. They therefore leave it to readers to make up their own minds about the merits of the two cases. Entertaining and informative as this sparring match proves, there are a number of reasons why we believe it is premature to foreclose on the debate and why we are compelled to enter the ring in order to extend the contest. In essence these relate to what we perceive to be ‘unfinished business’ that surrounds each of the three components of the original debate. Indeed, because Cornelissen examines this issue from the perspective of communication sciences and Gioia, Schultz and Corley mainly address the implications for research in organizations, we think that there is much to be gained by augmenting their debate with a more explicit consideration of social psychological theory that addresses the interplay between individual and collective levels of self-definition and identity (see also Ellemers, De Gilder, and Haslam, forthcoming; Ellemers, Haslam, Platow, and van Knippenberg, 2003).

In the first instance we are concerned that in being restricted to a dispute about the value of organizational identity as a metaphor, the ground
of the original debate was too circumscribed. Organizational identity is more than just a metaphor. Moreover, we would argue that, for social psychologists at least, there is considerable value in using the term in a non-metaphorical way to refer to psychological and social realities – realities associated with the construct’s status as an organizational motivator and product. Second, while we agree with Gioia and colleagues’ argument that there is a qualitative difference between individual identity (i.e. a person’s sense of their unique personal identity; Turner, 1982) and organizational identity, we feel that there is much to be gained from attempts to enunciate more fully the psychological basis of this difference. As we see it, the construct of organizational identity is valuable for the very reason that it allows us to deal with the problem identified by Cornelissen (2000a): the impasse between individual and collective levels of analysis – which represents the key paradox of social psychology (Turner and Oakes, 1986). Elaboration of this link also allows us to understand the distinct consequences of the discontinuity between personal and organizational identity and helps to clarify the theoretical and practical dividends that can flow from working with the latter rather than just the former.

But precisely because we agree that this work has the potential to deliver novel and powerful insights, we also feel, third, that its application to organizational practice does pose particular dangers. These are worth exploring, we believe, because they go beyond those routinely associated with other approaches.

**Organizational identity is more than just a metaphor**

We would argue that one of the main limitations of the exchange between Cornelissen and Gioia, Schultz and Corley is that the scope of their debate is constrained by treating organizational identity primarily as a metaphor. For Cornelissen, then, to speak of an organization as having identity is akin to using metaphorical analogies in which organizations are seen as being like machines, brains, organisms, and so on (e.g. Morgan, 1997). Thinking about organizational identity in this way may have its uses (not least for Cornelissen’s analytic purposes of using ‘live’ metaphors to generate novel insights that may guide theory development), and again we would not want to rule these out at this relatively early stage of research development. Nevertheless, it is apparent that, conceptually, organizational identity is far more than mere metaphor as it can be defined and measured as a distinct psychological construct that plays a specific role in organizational behaviour (thus qualifying as a ‘dead’ metaphor, in Cornelissen’s terms). Indeed, we think that part of the confusion has risen from the fact that Cornelissen connects his arguments to the literature on the personal (individual) self and personal (individual) identity and concludes that this has limited value for further theorizing about organizational identity. We agree that this may be the case, but think it is crucial to consider that organizational identity refers to a social (collective) identity not a personal one (see also Gioia, Schultz and Corley, 2002a). This is important because it implies that to understand organizational identity we can draw on an extensive body of theory and research that focuses on the psychological and behavioural processes associated with such social identities and which points to their difference from personal identities. This social identity approach (e.g. Tajfel and Turner, 1979; see also Haslam, 2001; Oakes, Haslam and Turner, 1994) informs us of the ways in which individuals can be seen as part of a collective entity in the mind of themselves and others, by analysing processes of (self-)categorization and psychological commitment. Furthermore, it (a) elaborates on the likely causes of such ties between the individual and the collective, (b) specifies the circumstances under which these ties are likely to increase or decrease in strength, and (c) details the consequences for social and organizational behaviour.

From this point of view, to speak of Organizations X and Y as having identities that are, respectively ‘vibrant, progressive and multi-cultural’, and ‘traditional, formal and reserved’ is not simply a figure of speech – it describes aspects of those organizations that can be perceived to be more or less real both by those who are members of them and by others who come into contact with them. As a result, if presented with a forced choice, most readers of this article would have no difficulty deciding which of these organizations was (say) the British Army and which was the clothing company Benetton. Moreover, in describing
any organization in this way, they would not be doing so as if it had particular characteristics (i.e. metaphorically), they would perceive it as actually having those characteristics. And the impact of this would not be confined to their perceptions: it would serve to inform and shape their behaviour – for example, the way they might dress for a job interview (e.g. Sani and Thompson, 2001), the way they might address a senior member of the organization (e.g. Postmes, 2003), the sorts of activities they would (or would not) seek to engage in with employees of the organization (e.g. Veenstra and Haslam, 2000). Such behaviour would then help to create significant material realities – for example, whether employees dress casually or wear suits, whether they address each other formally or informally, whether they accept a draconian regime or go on strike.

Looked at in social psychological terms, we can see that organizational identity relates to stereotypic attributes of an organization that are conferred upon it by those for whom the organization is relevant and meaningful. Thinking about organizational identities as stereotypes is helpful for a range of reasons, not least because it allows us to draw on the large body of research that pertains to this topic (e.g. in social psychology; Oakes, Haslam and Turner, 1994; Spears, Oakes, Ellemers and Haslam, 1997). Three features of stereotypes that are particularly relevant to the present discussion are, first, that they are widely shared within particular social groups and communities (Haslam, 1997; Tajfel, 1981); second, that they provide a basis for socially coordinated action (Reicher, 1982; Sherif, 1967; see also Hodgkinson, 2001; Hodgkinson and Sparrow, 2002), and third, that while they are often characterized by stability over time they are also context-dependent and hence potentially fluid (Haslam and Turner, 1992). As the above examples of Organization X and Y suggest, these things are true of organizational identity too (for elaboration of similar ideas see Gioia, Schultz and Corley, 2000; Scott and Lane, 2000).

In relation to the second of these points, a significant feature of organizational identities, as with stereotypes, is that they are used not only to describe others (e.g. members of Organization Y are traditional, formal and reserved) but also to describe ourselves and to inform our own behaviour (e.g. as a member of Organization X, I am, or aspire to be, vibrant, progressive and multicultural). In this sense organizational identity overlaps with conceptualizations of organizational culture (see also Albert and Whetten, 1985; Gioia, Schultz and Corley, 2000) in serving as a potential source of norms and values that guide our behaviour towards both ingroup and outgroup members. However, in addition to offering scope to define the content of what we are, organizational identification also captures the extent to which people define themselves as members of a particular group or organization. That is, identity strength (organizational identification) indicates whether people engage in a process of self-stereotyping whereby their behaviour is oriented towards, and structured by, the content of that group or organization’s defining characteristics, norms and values (Turner, 1982), resulting in the internalization of a particular organizational identity.

For reasons we will discuss further below, it is this combination of strength of identification and content of the resulting identity which sets organizational identity apart from other related concepts, such as organizational culture. That is, while organizational identity and organizational culture alike may be seen as capturing the essence of what belonging to a particular organization means and involves, the degree to which people actually self-stereotype themselves as a member of that organization – in either an enduring sense (organizational identification; akin to Rousseau’s, 1998, notion of deep-structure identification) or in a particular context (organizational identity salience; akin to what Rousseau, 1998, calls ‘situated identification’; see also Fiol, 2002) – determines how this is reflected in their self-conceptions and individual behaviour. Indeed, while examinations of organizational culture often take a descriptive perspective (e.g. Albert and Whetten, 1985; Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail, 1994), an approach that also takes into account strength of identification implies that the connection between the individual and the collective can be defined in such a way that this has predictable and concrete consequences. For instance, at any particular point in time, identification (and identity salience) can be measured using standardized psychometric instruments (e.g. Doosje, Ellemers and Spears, 1995; Mael and Ashforth, 1992; for a review see Haslam, 2001, pp. 365–370).
When combined, these features that emerge when we consider organizational identity in terms of process (strength) as well as outcome (content), can have very practical ramifications. Testament to this, in recent years a large body of research has quickly emerged which documents the utility of organizational identification as a predictor of individual behaviours that play a major role in determining key organizational outcomes – including loyalty, productivity, organizational citizenship, desire to comply with organizational rules, reactions to organizational change, and willingness to communicate (e.g. Abrams, Ando and Hinkle, 1998; Fiol, 2001; Jetten, O’Brien and Trindall, 2002; Ouwerkerk, Ellemers and De Gilder, 1999; Postmes, Tanis and de Wit, 2001; Tyler and Blader, 2000; van Dick, 2001; van Knippenberg and Ellemers, 2003; van Knippenberg and van Schie, 2000). This burgeoning literature suggests that organizational identity is a construct that speaks to, and captures, key empirical realities. So, far from being a metaphor that is past its use-by-date (as Cornelissen, 2002a, implies), it is a mental and material building block whose time has come as an analytical tool relevant to contemporary organizational practice.

Organizational identity is a contextually defined aspect and product of the collective self

Although we have argued for the value of organizational identity (and identification) as empirical tools, we have not yet elaborated on the theoretical gains associated with the use of these concepts. In particular, we still need to explain why organizational identification is a superior predictor of organizational outcomes, why organizational identity is qualitatively different from other forms of individual-based identity and what the psychological and behavioural implications of this difference are. We side with Gioia, Schultz and Corley (2000a) in believing that these claims are justified, but we also sympathize with Cornelissen’s (2000a) view that there is often considerable conceptual vagueness in popular treatments of these issues. Indeed, as Albert, Ashforth and Dutton (2000) observe, despite their growing popularity, there is a ‘lack of consensus regarding the meaning and definition of the terms organization[al] identity and identification’ (p. 15). Amongst other things, this arises from the fact that researchers have focused on specific aspects of organizational identity and identification to examine how they differ from other related constructs, such as organizational culture, or organizational commitment (e.g. Albert and Whetten, 1985; Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Mael and Tetrick, 1992).

We think this disagreement is a healthy sign that the added value of emergent explanatory concepts is critically assessed in relation to existing insights. Indeed, such work to refine conceptualization and measurement is common practice in organizational psychology as a whole. At the same time, it is important to note that these efforts have led to the conclusion that organizational identification and organizational identity do provide a unique contribution to the understanding of behaviour in organizations above and beyond other existing notions (e.g. Ouwerkerk, Ellemers, and De Gilder, 1999). Thus, the breadth of definitional concerns does not seem to constitute the core problem in this debate. It is true, however, that in the absence of a properly articulated account of the processes that underpin organizational identification and which contribute to the creation of organizational identity, it is all too easy for these ideas (and the tools with which they become associated) to be employed in mechanistic and reductionistic ways (for discussion of this point see Ellemers, Haslam, Platow and van Knippenberg, 2003; Turner, 1999).

Our own approach to these issues is informed by 25 years of social psychological research into issues of social identity. In the first instance, this work was reflected in the development of social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), a theory of intergroup relations which focuses on the role that psychological and structural factors play in leading people to respond to social inequalities (e.g. as associated with status and power differences) in various ways. In particular, the theory details different strategies that may be adopted in order to cope with social disadvantage, and specifies a limited set of situational features that are conducive to the use of strategies that either affect the individual’s sense of self, or enhance the collective self – which is derived from common group memberships. Illustrative of this work, early research confirmed theoretical
predictions that members of devalued groups can (a) associate the individual self with another – more socially valued – collective (individual mobility; e.g. Ellemers, 1993; Ellemers, Wilke and van Knippenberg, 1993), (b) aim for a cognitive redefinition of the value of the group (social creativity; e.g. Mummendey and Schreiber, 1984; Spears and Manstead, 1989), or (c) engage in attempts to improve the group’s actual outcomes (social competition; e.g. Sherif, 1967; vanmanem and Pettigrew, 1972).

Empirical observations suggest that such identity management strategies also emerge in work organizations. For instance, to the extent that the organization offers opportunities for personal advancement, people tend to display organizational citizenship and compliance (e.g. Haslam and Reicher, 2002). By contrast, employee turnover tends to increase if the public image of the organization becomes less favourable, which can be considered as a form of individual mobility (e.g. Meyer and Allen, 1997; see also Mael and Ashforth, 1992). Evidence of social creativity can be gleaned from studies showing that people who do ‘dirty work’ (e.g. garbage collectors, dog catchers, exotic dancers; Ashforth and Kreiner, 1999) find new dimensions on which to define their work (e.g. having flexible hours, working outdoors, meeting new people). In a similar vein, when faced with low official rankings of their programmes, faculty members of business schools in the United States have been observed to engage in socially creative intergroup comparisons (e.g. by constructing performance tables based on geographical region or source of funding) in order to maintain a positive organizational identity (Elsbach and Kramer, 1996). Finally, union activity can be seen as a form of social competition which aims to collectively improve employee conditions or other work outcomes (e.g. Veenstra and Haslam, 2000).

Having established that social identity principles are applicable to the analysis of certain key forms of organizational behaviour, it is important to consider Tajfel and Turner’s concept of social identity in greater detail. Social identity was originally defined as ‘an individual’s knowledge that he or she belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him or her of this group membership’ (Tajfel, 1972, p. 31). Tajfel (1972) argued that social identity was special because it was implicated in intergroup behaviours (e.g. social conflict, social creativity). These were qualitatively different from interpersonal behaviours (e.g. individual mobility) that were not informed by participants’ group memberships, even though they might be aligned with other people’s behaviour for individually instrumental reasons. Turner (1982) subsequently elaborated on this idea by arguing that social identity is the cognitive mechanism that makes group behaviour possible. Together with colleagues, he used this insight as a basis for the development self-categorization theory which focused, inter alia, on the cognitive substrates of this process (Turner, 1985; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher and Wetherell, 1987; Turner, Oakes, Haslam and McGarty, 1994).

Self-categorization theory suggests that a person’s subjective sense of self – who they think they are – can be defined at varying levels of abstraction (Turner, 1985). These definitions take the form of self-categories that range from conceptions of the self as a unique individual, through to more inclusive definitions in terms of significant group memberships. In the workplace, then, employees might define themselves in terms of progressively more inclusive team, departmental and organizational identities. Of course other forms of organizational identity are possible too (e.g. based on profession, division, job description) and other types of social identity can also become salient in organizations (e.g. based on gender, class, ethnicity; Ashforth and Johnson, 2001; Nkomo and Cox, 1996; Schmitt, Ellemers and Branscombe, 2003). Regardless of the specific dimensions on which they are defined, each of these different forms of organizational identity defines the individual in terms of a social identity that is shared with other members of an ingroup but not with members of an outgroup.

As noted in the previous section, Turner (1982) argued that social identification of any form reflects depersonalized self-categorization, whereby an individual perceives his or her perspective, motivations and interests to be psychologically interchangeable with those of others who share the same social identity (see Figure 2). Importantly, this leads to behaviour that is qualitatively distinct from that which is predicated on personal identity – because it is socially structured, in the sense of being shaped by, and oriented towards, the emergent norms of the group as a whole.
Indeed, research has demonstrated that when the achievement of individual and collective goals are pitted against each other, those who identify in terms of the collective may sacrifice their individual self-interest in the pursuit of what seems best for the group, for instance by personally taking the blame for the group’s failure, in order to deflect doubts about the group’s value (Taylor and Doria, 1981).

Building upon this framework, a major contribution of self-categorization theory has been to provide an analysis of social identity salience (Oakes, 1987; Turner, 1985). This specifies the processes that dictate whether a person defines themselves in terms of personal or social identity and, when social identity is salient, which particular group membership serves to guide behaviour. This enables us to predict, in any given organization, when employees will see themselves and act as individuals, rather than in terms of the department or team to which they belong, or in terms of the organization as a whole (see also Ellemers, De Gilder and Haslam, forthcoming).

The details of this analysis are presented elsewhere (e.g. Haslam, 2001; Oakes, Haslam and Turner, 1994). Very briefly, though, the theory asserts that social identity salience is interactively determined by perceiver readiness (or cognitive accessibility) and fit (Oakes, 1987; Oakes, Turner and Haslam, 1991; after Bruner, 1957; see Figure 3). This means that people are more likely to define themselves in terms of a particular identity to the extent that it has prior meaning for them and it matches subjectively-relevant comparative and normative features of reality. For example, other things being equal, members of Organization X are more likely to define themselves in terms of their membership of this organization if they have worked there for a long time (cognitive accessibility), if the organization is in competition with another (comparative fit), and if they are proud of the organization (normative fit). This is because their personal histories should serve to make the identity cognitively accessible, the intergroup context should increase the comparative fit of the identity, and a positively-defined social self-category should be more normatively fitting.

Moreover, these same principles serve to determine which aspects of any given organizational identity will be seen as most defining of it in any given context. For while the norms, the values, indeed the individuals that define an organizational identity should be those that contribute to a positive and distinct self-definition, the meaning of both positivity and distinctiveness will vary predictably as a function of the frame of reference within which the organization is apprehended (Doosje, Haslam, Spears, Oakes and Koomen, 1998; Haslam and Turner, 1992;
Turner, 1985). Reliability, for example, would be expected to play a greater role in defining an organizational identity where reliability was associated with high status and other relevant organizations were unreliable, than it would if reliability was associated with low status (e.g. being old-fashioned) and other comparison organizations were seen to be equally reliable.

Critically, once a particular organizational identity has become salient for a particular group of people and once particular norms and values have come to define it, this should have impact not just on the psychology of individuals but it should also help translate that psychology into collective products – plans and visions, goods and services, organizations and institutions. In particular, this is because, as a form of social identity, shared organizational identity is a basis not only for people to perceive and interpret their world in similar ways, but also for processes of mutual social influence which allow them to coordinate (and expect to coordinate) their behaviour in ways that lead to concerted social action and collective products (Haslam, 2001; Turner, 1991).

This is because, to the extent that other people embody a salient organizational identity, they will be perceived to be qualified to inform the self about subjectively relevant features of social and organizational reality. Indeed, their input (e.g. in the form of leadership; Ellemers, De Gilder and Haslam, 2003; Haslam and Platow, 2001a, 2001b; Turner and Haslam, 2001) will routinely be sought out on this basis.

Organizational evidence that speaks to the utility of these ideas is provided by studies of communication and group productivity (e.g. Lea, Spears and Rogers, 2003; Moreland, Argote, and Krishnan, 1996; Postmes, Spears and Lea, 1998; Worchel, Rothgerber, Day, Hart and Butemeyer, 1998). These show that factors which serve to increase a sense of social identity (as a member of a team or organization), make people (a) more willing to communicate with each other, (b) more open to others’ communications, and (c) more likely to interpret communicative acts in similar ways (e.g. in the spirit in which they are intended). At the same time, such processes also increase the likelihood that individual group members will develop shared understandings (e.g. transactive memory systems and shared mental models) that allow them to produce collaborative products that exceed expectations based on group members’ potentialities as individuals (see Haslam, 2001; Postmes, 2003). In short, shared organizational identity (or the lack of it) is responsible for the oft-noted difference between a team of champions and a champion team.

In exactly this way, shared organizational identity can be seen to be the basis for forms of ‘collective mind’ akin to those observed in Weick.
and Roberts’s seminal research into the interrelated activities of flight deck crews (1993). Ultimately then, the real power and utility of organizational identity as an analytic construct derives from the fact that it is as an embodiment of the dialectic relationship between, on the one hand, socially structured individual psychology and, on the other, collective organizational products. Recognition of the fact that individual psychology can be (and typically is) socially mediated means that psychological analysis need not be reductionistic as implied by Cornelissen (2000a) and MacKenzie (1978). At the same time, the fact that collective products are always underpinned and made possible by individual psychology means that organizational analysis does not have to avoid psychology in order to be valid. Indeed, we would argue that, far from having ‘limited value for further theorizing’ (Cornelissen, 2000b, p. 278), programmatic elaboration and testing of the ideas outlined above is essential for a complete understanding of organizational functioning (see Haslam, 2001; Haslam et al., 2003).

**Organizational identity is an important leadership tool**

Although necessarily brief, the above overview gives some sense of the roles that organizational identity and organizational identification can play in contributing to organizational functioning. Furthermore, we hope that our analysis gives some sense of the ways in which these constructs can be investigated and applied in order to enrich organizational research and theory. It should also be clear that the concepts have some applied value, primarily because we have argued that organizational identity (of some form) is a necessary substrate of all collaborative forms of organizational activity. What this means in practice is that without a sense of shared organizational identity there can be no effective organizational communication, no heedful interrelating, no meaningful planning, no leadership. In fact, in the boldest terms, we would argue that organizational identity makes organizational behaviour possible (pace Turner, 1982, p. 21).

If one accepts the truth of this statement, then it stands to reason too, that – rather than being ‘just another’ analytical and managerial tool – organizational identity and organizational identification should be of particular interest to those who are seeking to structure and harness the collective energies of organizations. Indeed, in this vein, Reicher and Hopkins (1996a, 2001) characterize effective leaders as ‘entrepreneurs of identity’ whose primary project is to create, coordinate and control a shared vision of ‘who we are’ and ‘what we want to be’ (see also Fiol, 2002; Haslam, 2001).

But although there are grounds for expecting organizational identity to be the basis of collective achievement, the value of such achievement cannot be assessed independently of the content and purpose of the collective to which the identity relates. History is replete with examples of brilliant leaders who have achieved pernicious (but otherwise impossible) goals through feats of identity entrepreneurship. Accordingly, while there is a tendency for researchers to characterize organizational identity as something of a universal elixir, we are far less sanguine. Contrary to Gioia, Schultz and Corley (2000a), we therefore believe that there are non-reactionary grounds for being wary of the uses to which organizational identity and organizational identity research can be put and for ensuring that the ‘cargo of assumptions and implications’ that the social identity approach brings to organizational science is inspected and interrogated (cf. Cornelissen, 2001a, p. 267). For this reason, this cargo is something that we have been at pains to expose and explore in our own writings on this subject (e.g. Haslam, Eggins and Reynolds, 2003; Haslam, 2001, Chapter 11).

**Conclusion**

In this article we have presented what we see as the strong case for organizational identity as an empirical, theoretical and practical construct that can be used to enhance understanding of organizational processes. In order to do this it has been necessary to take the debate beyond a consideration of metaphor and to consider instead the status of organizational identity both (a) as an aspect of psychological processes that take place within the minds of individuals and (b) as a collective product of those processes and the activities they encourage. Once one acknowledges that individual psychological processes can be
(and typically are) socially mediated – so that society and cognition have the capacity to shape each other (the interactionist thesis of Asch, 1952; Turner and Oakes, 1986) – it becomes apparent that there is no ‘logical impossibility’ in this. On the contrary, when approached as an aspect and product of the socially structured self, organizational identity (together with organizational identification) becomes a fertile ground for both theoretical and applied progress.

Ironically, then, we would argue that if anything were to hold back research progress in this area it would be a pre-occupation with metaphor, not with organizational identity. Incidentally too, much the same point was made by self-category theorist a decade ago in work which heralded the demise of the cognitive miser metaphor as a conceptual tool for understanding social cognition and stereotyping (e.g. after Fiske and Taylor, 1984). There the researchers argued:

‘Do we now need a new metaphor for social cognition? We think not. No metaphor will ever match the complexities and subtleties of the interaction between the psychological and the social at work in social cognition. At best any metaphor will mislead just where theory needs to advance creatively. More than another partial model, incorporating various implicit and untested assumptions, we need to rediscover the interactionist metaphor as a conceptual tool for understanding social cognition and stereotyping (e.g. after Fiske and Taylor, 1984). There the researchers argued:

Cornelissen (2000a) was therefore correct to assert that, as a metaphor, organizational identity has limited value. But he was wrong to imply that this is all it is or can be, and wrong to suggest that the way forward is to discover and work with a better metaphor. As we noted above, the primary value and force of organizational identity arises from the fact that it is a psychological and social reality. Membership of organizations shapes our sense of who we are, and our sense of who we are (and who we are not) is the foundation for the structures and achievements of the organizational world. Accordingly, in order to capitalize on the very welcome upsurge of interest in this topic, organizational identity needs to be understood and investigated not as a figure of organizational speech but as a fact of organizational life.

References


