An Exploratory Study on the Relationship between Learning Networks and Organizational Identity

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Abstract

Organizational learning leads to distinctiveness of organizations, and distinctiveness is one of the criteria by which organizational members categorize groups. Organizational learning is the mechanism by which organizational identity becomes salient. Although research has made great efforts on organizational identity, few focus on between-level dynamics. This study adopts a network perspective of organizational learning, which considers learning in the context of collective action managing to connect individual perspective with organizational level of learning. Both learning networks and organizational identity highlight social context as the basis to achieve organizational goals and performance. But the recursive process of the organizational self-definition may be related to the learning process of an organization's remaining adaptive and flexible for survival. This paper purposes a network perspective to explore the relationship between learning network and organizational identity. This study develops a framework of propositions regarding learning networks and their relationships with organizational identity-discriminated as institutionalized attributes and adaptive attributes. This study contributes to enriching the theory development of learning networks and extending the scope of learning in organizational identity.

Keywords: organizational identity, social network, organizational learning

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Introduction

Organizational learning leads to distinctiveness of organizations in terms of capabilities (Argote & Ophir, 2002). Distinctiveness is one of the criteria by which organizational members categorize groups (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Consistent with this line of the research, this study examines the relationship between organizational learning and organizational identity. Literatures relating the two concepts confirm that learning leads to change in organizational identity (e.g. Child and Rodrigues, 2003;); organizational learning as the mechanism by which organizational identity becomes salient. Although research has made great efforts on organizational identity, few findings focus on between-level dynamics. Corley and Gioia (2003) suggest that intersubjective meaning embedded in action and social interaction within collectives such as structures, cultures, practices, and behaviors are the basic mechanisms that support a mutually recursive relationship between organizational identity and organizational learning. Ashforth et al. (2011) say that identification occurs as higher-level identities are enacted through goals, operating routines, information flows, and other institutionalized practices. Namely, enactment of identities at higher levels of analysis simultaneously constrain and enable the form and enactment of identities at lower levels, and therefore, the focus should be on between-level rather than within-level dynamics. Barraquier (2013) in a qualitative study reveals porosity of identity and mobility of attributes and suggests that group identity is more appropriate than an organizational identity perspective.

This study adopts a network perspective of organizational learning (Elkjaer, 2004; Skerlavaj et al., 2010). A network perspective considers learning in the context of collective action while managing to connect individual perspective with organizational level of learning, so much as socially constructed learning theory implies that learning occurs as a result of people actively engaging one another (Elkjaer,2004; Gherardi, Nicolini, &Odella, 1998). Also, Wenger (1998) links the learning process with the identity: "Because learning transforms who we are and what we can do, it is an experience of identity" (p. 215). Gioia, Schultz, and Corley (2000) say the adaptive instability of organizational identity. Doiron (2013) suggest that organizational learning enables organizations to maintain, refocus, or transform identity in response to environmental changes and provides salient, sensegiving referents to members. The first purpose of this study tries *to understand how learning in collective sensemaking, that is, network learning, is related to instability of organizational identity*? Chughtai and Buckley (2010) verify the mediating role of learning goal orientation in the relationship between organizational identification and in-role job performance, error communication and feedback seeking. The argument centers on the theme that collective learning-related behaviors make impacts on the adaptive nature of organizational identity. The second research question is to learn *if the network (group, or collective) learning performs as an antecedent to change in organizational identity?* This study has the following advantages: **first**, it enriches the theory development of learning networks; **second**, the study extends the scope of organizational identity by analyzing its stability and instability nature; **third**, the inter-dependence and inter-impact analyses between organizational learning and organizational identity will be of great interest for readers

Literature Reviews

A third way to organizational learning: a network perspective

Elkjaer (2004) identified a dual development of the OL field and used "acquisition" and "participation" as metaphors of the differences. Acquisition perspective is more likely to be the technical school, and on the other hand, the participation perspective is about the social school in terms of the definition that learning is located in social activities. Argyris and Schon (1978) and March and Olsen (1975), as major representatives of the technical school of OL, follow the positivist epistemology and espouse prescriptive generalization of OL. The positivist epistemology sees the world as an objective, only one reality. Nevertheless, knowledge acquisition by individuals is an indispensable, but usually insufficient, component of organizational learning; Cooks and Yanow (1993) propose the perspective ignores the social and cultural aspect of the OL process.OL scholars, such as Weick and Roberts (1993) and Hedberg (1981), start from this set of assumptions: the reality is socially constructed and the constructions are not generalizable. The social school of OL has a core assumption that learning occurs, and knowledge is created, mainly through conversations and interactions between people (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Cook and Yanow, 1993; Gherardi and Nicolini, 2000; Nicolini and Meznar, 1995; Wenger, 1998). Basically, the social-cultural perspective is a reaction to the dominance of learning models drawn from cognitive psychology and management science, and it asserts that knowledge and learning don't exist in individual's head or in structures of organization but within human contact in a social setting, which is the driver and substance of OL.

Some scholars purpose that the two perspectives are not sufficient in understanding the learning process in the organization (Poell, et al. 2000; Elkjar, 2004). Elkjar (2004) further suggests the "third way" in making a synthesis of the participation perspective and acquisition perspective. The third way is a departure from pragmatic theory with an assumption of mutual formation of individuals and organizations (Elkjaer, 2004). Skerlavaj and Dimovski (2007) upgrade the third way by expanding the understanding of organizational learning as both relational and individual-level phenomena to multiple levels of research (individual, group, intra-organizational, and relational). Skerlavaj and Dimovski (2007) name the "third" way as a network perspective of organizational learning and suggest it is an overarching perspective. Table 1 makes a comparison of the acquisition and participation perspectives with the network perspective.

Table 1: Three perspectives to organizational learning

	Acquisition perspective	Participation perspective	Network perspective
Learning content	To be skilled and knowledgeable about organizations.	To become a skillful practitioner in organizations.	To be skilled and knowledgeable about organizations and to become a skillful practitioner in organizations.
Learning method	Acquisition of skills and knowledge	Participation in communities of practice	Acquisition of skills and knowledge and participation in communities of practice. The learning process needs to be contextualized within the framework of other social processes.
Organization	System	Communities of practice	Social worlds
Level of research	Individual	Relational	Multiple levels (individual, group, intraorganizational) & relational level

Source: Adapted from Elkjaer (2004); Sˇkerlavaj et al. (2010)

The network perspective recognized an individual as primary source and destination for learning, while acknowledging that learning takes places primarily in social interaction (Sˇkerlavaj et al., 2010). Learning content in the network perspective includes elements of the learning as acquisition of knowledge as well as analytical and communication skills. In the understanding of organizations as system, the acquisition perspective has an assumption that individual members are able to think of the organization as an abstract entity, system (Huber, 1991). Learning organization is an example that depends on individuals' capacity for thinking of organizations as systems (Senge, 1990). Participation perspective places its focus more on collective learning process, and less on individual learning process. The network perspective includes individual, collective learning process and also interaction between individuals and organizations in social worlds. The foundation of the network perspective appears to be multiple-theoretical and multi-level framework of social network theories, and by applying a multi-level approach.

Sˇkerlavaj et al. (2010) suggest that the network perspective is sensitive to the role that the organization plays in fostering learning. The organization has a critical role to play in the development and fostering of relational ties among individuals to enable learning. In other words, the organizational context should be taken into consideration in understanding the learning process. This research is based on the network perspective to find source of learning in intra-organizational and relational level. This research argues that learning network perspective seems to best describe organizational learning and helps explain learning phenomenon in work places. Learning network theory (Poell et al., 2000; Van der Krogt, 1998) describes the way learning is organized within the context of work organizations. Learning networks operate in every organization. This research follows the line of theories in exploring a real-life case study of social networks within organizations.

Learning network theory

The learning network theory is a descriptive and interpretative model of how learning can be organized in organizations (Poell et al. 2000; Van der Krogt, 1998). The learning network theory provides issues such as effects of power structure and hierarchy, ideology and power, interests of actors in organization and treats conflict as normal factors to organizational learning. Learning network theory regards employees as the central actors of learning and employees have their own views and interests as to how and why they should learn. The learning network perspective draws from the discipline of sociology and cultural anthropology, with its emphasis on power and actor interests (Poell et al. 2000). This argument corresponds with Easterby-Smith's (1997) suggestions in conceptualizing organizational learning not *"as managerial level that can be pulled by senior executive at their behest."* Learning network perspective moves away from management-driven perspectives and regards employees as (co-)organizers of their own learning process.

Learning network theory comprises three main components—the learning actors, the learning process that they organize, and the learning structure that they create. First of all, those who are engaged in organizing learning are actors and could be internal and external. Second, about the learning process, the development of learning policies refers to influencing the general direction of the learning network, that is, what people should learn and in what way they should learn it. The development of learning programs comprises the making of coherent sets of activities in which people learn. The execution of learning programs are activities in which people are actual learning, such as solving difficult work problem or taking on-line course. Third, learning structures refer to certain more stable patterns developed from people who have been interacting to organize learning activities over a longer period of time. According to this theory, learning networks are not limited to network-type organizations, matrix organizations, or team-based organizations. People learn in every organization, even in hierarchical or chaotic one, and the learning network merely represents how learning is organized. Four theoretical types of learning networks and their characteristics are presented in Table 2.

Table 2 Four theoretical types of learning networks

	Learning networks			
components	Liberal	Vertical	Horizontal	External
1.Learning process	Single activities	Linearly planned	Organically oriented	Externally coordinated
(1) Development of learning policies	Implicit	Planning	Learning	Inspiring
(2) Development of learning programs	Collecting	Designing	Developing	Innovative
(3) Execution of learning programs	Self-directing	Guiding	Counseling	Advisory
2. Learning Structure				
(1) Content structure (profile)	Unstructured (individually oriented)	Structured (task or function oriented)	Open or thematic (organization or problem oriented)	Methodical (profession oriented)
(2)Organizational structure (relations)	Loosely coupled (contractual)	Centralized (formalized)	Horizontal (egalitarian)	Externally directed (professional)
(3) Learning climate	Liberal	Regulative	Integrative	Inspiring

Source: Adapted from Van der Krogt(1995, 1998) and Poell et al. (2000).

Learning network theory assumes that an organization displays characteristics of one, or of more in hybrid forms. The liberal learning network is mostly seen in organizations where loosely-coupled structure is developed, and there is an entrepreneurial learning attitude. Also, organizations that take the notion of individual employee empowerment (Andrews and Herschel, 1996) seriously are likely to develop a liberal learning network. The vertical learning network is common in many large organizations where the organizational structure is centralized and dominated by the management, though the growing unpopularity associated with Taylorism still plays a dominant role in organizational reality (Wilson & Cervero, 1997). In the vertical learning network, learning policies are developed by the management and these are translated into pre-designed learning programs by HRD and training staff. The horizontal learning network has gained popularity through the extensive literature on learning organizations, up to the point where a total integration of learning and work in teams seems to be advocated (Senge, 1990). The horizontal learning network is characterized of horizontal structure and egalitarian relationships among the actors, and open, thematic learning activities in the profile of learning. The external learning networks exist in environments where employees have a strong orientation towards their professional field. Nevertheless, the external learning network may also be the source of the conflicts of powers. On one hand, managers may find that professional field is not easy to control and call it inflexible; on the other hand, professions usually

offer their members greater status and job security and the external network receives great popularity among employees (Poell, et al. 2000).

Learning networks and organizational identity

If learning is promoted through social interactions as assumed by learning network theory, a relationship of organizational learning with organizational identification may exist. And both learning networks and organizational identification occur in a social context as an individual in the organization attempts to understand his or her relationship to the collective group. A learning network perspective highlights the structure of learning relations that surround an individual, providing communication, information and feedback to shape an individual's attitudes and behaviors. Learning networks can be helpful to improve the understanding of how an individual construct one's identity and identification through many episodes of learning activities.

Literatures on organizational identity tend to follow social identity theory and self-categorization theory and suggest it is a process of self-definition (e.g. Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000). Social identity theory highlights self-categorization, social comparison, and the construction of a shared self-definition in terms of ingroup-defining properties (Hogg and Vaughan, 2008).Social identification is the perception of belongingness to a group (Mael and Ashforth, 1992). Mael and Ashforth (1992) and Pratt (1998) contend that through social identification individuals feel "psychologically intertwined" with a group's destiny. Identification is viewing a collective's or role's defining essence as self-defining.

Corley et al. (2006) reflected on the history and future of organizational identity research, and they suggested two distinct perspectives with different underlying ontological and epistemological views: the "essentialist" or the social constructionist. The essentialist or institutional (Elstak, 2008) define organizational identity as the central, enduring, and distinctive attributes that distinguish an organization from others in its social category. However, postmodern perspectives have suggested a dynamic approach (Hatch and Schultz 2002).That is, a social constructionist describes organizational identity as being adaptive, unstable, and less enduring. A dynamic process of organizational identity emphasizes the interactive process of members' sensemaking (Ravasi& Schultz, 2006). A sense-making process allows organizational members to overlay new events on top of past experiences, and to meaningfully interpret and incorporate new information into a frame of explanatory reference (Nicolini & Meznar, 1995; Weick, 1995). Barraquier (2013) in an ethnographic study on the incremental transformation of identity suggest that two types of identity perceptions concurrently exist in the organization: "identity of organizations" and "identity in organizations." Identity of organizations can refer to a claimed and institutionalized identity while identity in organizations can be tacit, and potential to make changes on a claimed identity. Craig (1998) suggests that identity in organizations involves experience and exploration, and which are shared from within, that is more tacit and embedded in organization members' perceptions (Whetten and McKey,2002). Barraguier (2013) names this type of identity as adaptive identity. This research adopts a social constructivist perspective toward organizational identity. Besides, this research applies learning network theory to analyze how a learning network with sense making bring new elements of identity or sustain a claimed identity.

The liberal learning network. The liberal learning network can be found in entrepreneurial work place, such as in small and medium-sized enterprises, or in large corporations consisting of small self-supporting units (Poell et al. 2000). This network allows employees to create their own sets of learning activities and their own relevant learning situations. Individual can explore experience and organize work-related learning. Traditional organizational theory has assumed that responsibility for acquiring information has usually been assigned to specific managers to obtain information from outside of the work-unit or organization, filter and adapt it for use by organizational work-units (Guerber et al. 2014).Today, as organizations become flatter and leaner, and as technology facilitates information access; information gathering and brokering activities have been extensively performed by employees (Guerber et al. 2014). Therefore, in the liberal learning network, an individual in a loosely-coupled structure is more likely to have information and perceptions of the environment and learn outside demands that drive identity change.

Proposition 1.

Individuals with *the liberal learning network* are potential to bring new attributes to organizational identity, that is, to create adaptive identity.

The vertical learning network. This type of learning is found in machine-bureaucratic workplace characterized of a simple and narrow work content, and a regulated work climate. In the vertical learning networks, learning programs have a great deal of central planning and pre-designed work with managers as dominant actors. Therefore, the vertical learning network and its related working place give birth to a strong and anchored organizational identity background. Sometimes, CEO characterizes "a specific conceptual domain for organizational identity" (Whetten, 2006).Organizations may use communication strategies to encourage identification. For example, bragging and outsider praise serve a normative purpose: highlighting desirable identity attributes that should be adopted (DiSanza & Bullis, 1999). Sensegiving which refers to attempts to guide the "meaning construction of others toward a preferred redefinition of organizational reality" (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991:442) is a top-down process to manage identity construction. Therefore, in the vertical learning network, an individual is more likely to get organizationally sanctioned information or material to craft organizational-based identities.

Proposition 2.

Individuals in the vertical learning network are more likely to craft attributes of identity that are consistent with identity of organizations, that is, the institutionalized identity.

The horizontal learning network. The horizontal learning network is involved with broad, complex learning content. And normally this network is found in autonomous multidisciplinary work groups, or project teams that are created to solve problems never encountered before. As the teams or groups learn, the people working together are increasingly able to make sense of events internal and external to the team. The sense-making process is grounded in identity formulation. Weick (1995) suggest that the collective identity of an organization is born out of and inherently changed by

sense-making activities. Employees in this network are more engaged with sense-making and learning processes due to the context for problem solving and learning; employees are more likely to construct, and reconstruct meaning, potentially changing the nature of the organization's identity. Literatures on organizational identity suggest as members undergo the sense-making process, the perceptions they have of the organization and the worlds will change accordingly (e.g. Elkjaer, 1999).

Proposition 3.

Individuals in the horizontal learning network are more likely to make sense-making process and therefore, reconstruct the attributes of organizational identity, that is, to create adaptive identity.

The external learning network. This learning network is coordinated from the professional associations outside the organization. Learning regarding work innovation is introduced by the professional field. The learning activities are aimed at improving the employees' professional capabilities and work standards. Then, the impact of the professional discipline on the learning network is obvious in terms of professional relationships among actors, and the innovative learning climate. Stormbroek-Burgers et al. (2011) suggest that most professionals' network has the characteristics of homogeneity within social network, which is positively influence organizational identification. Therefore, professionals' interactions with others could be in a way that induces self-verifying responses that support a sense of consistency in the professional identity as well as organizational identity. Nevertheless, incremental changes invoked by innovations introduced by the external learning network will affect organizational identity in a slow way.

Conclusion

This study is an exploratory research on difficulties and facilitators in learning networks and organizational identity in Taiwanese settings. Especially, the patterns and profiles in learning networks render insights to learning contexts, actors, and structures and therefore to organizational performance in the medical industries.As learning is particularly controlled in situated settings when the concept of learning networks is introduced into interview questions, research will have detailed situations of network learning. It is a way to facilitate organizational learning. Hence, knowing the dynamic process of intra-organizational learning networks provides managers with a useful tool for improving organizational performance goals, thus giving solutions to competitive advantages and idiosyncrasies of organizations.

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