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Accomplishing Organizational Identity in Complex Sales Situations

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Innehåll

1. The complexity of complex sales.....	3
1. Who is meeting?	6
3. Research purpose	9
4. Organizational Identity	9
5. Organizing identifying and Mead	15
6. Method and data.....	18
7. The End.....	24

1. The complexity of complex sales

When a company sells its product and/or services to another company practitioners and researchers alike refer to this as business-to-business commerce, or B2B. B2B is distinct from B2C (business-to-customer) which is the kind of transactions most people are familiar with as they are involved in this type of transaction every time they buy something, but to begin the paper a brief presentation of the B2B field.

Initially the term was introduced as a way to specify marketing related communication as seen in this 1994 announcement by Marketing News:

The AMA has launched the B2B Marketing Exchange, an Internet bulletin board designed to provide information on coming events, research sites, courses, and articles of interest to business-to-business marketing academics and practitioners.

As said in the quote term was first relevant in relation to the internet (Lucking-Reiley & Spulber, 2001; Bush, 2009) but has since then become a concept of the business, and not just marketing communication, conducted between companies. One idea that is prolific, also based in the discipline of marketing, is that relationship marketing and management are key value adding process creating long term connections between the company and its environment (Kleinaltenkamp et al., 2006). This includes development and implementation of customer retention programs, partnering with customers, suppliers, and competitors, and other relationship marketing practices, in order to navigate the potential problems that a shorter term transactional strategy might bring to customer loyalty (Naidu et al. 1999). Palmatier et al. (2006) recognize the importance of the buyer-seller relationship and say:

Relationship marketing has undergone explosive growth during the past decade (Sheth and Parvatiyar 2000) due to widespread beliefs that it leads to improved financial performance.

In the B2B commerce situation supply chains, database and information management, market strategy fit and other factors seems to be what practitioners and their managers think will give them the edge (Hayes, 2001; Sigauw, Kimes & Gassenheimer, 2002). Lages et al. (2008) argues that relationship management can be improved and suggests a scale a scorecard for

measuring this important but intangible company asset. The belief is that if the information attained during research of and interaction with the potential client is codified and stored in the right way there is a greater chance of closing the deal. And if management can measure the productivity of the sales force in a better more efficient way they will be better able to manage them. Prescriptive step by step instructions are also common (Bosworth, 1995) in order to understand the sales process and then improve it. Anderson et al. (1994) studied relationships from between companies from a network point of view and La Rocca et al. (2008) draws on this when presenting a work-in-progress paper arguing that the buyer-seller relationship affects the companies' entire business network based on the assumption that *...interaction outcomes are central to the formation of relationships*. Relationships are thus important but what they bring to the table and how this is used separates researchers.

The people involved in the B2B activities, sales people and others, are seen as executors of a sales/marketing strategy and there are well documented processes in place to hire, train, coach and reward these individuals (Jenster et al., 2005). The people involved with sales, and the management of them gets a lot of attention and the sales situations are seen as a time to implement the skills learned. Granted there are situational factors that come into the equation but often in the context of helping the sales person to handle it. I think there is more to be learnt from studying these situations.

Hayes (2001) suggests that the codified information made available by the technology made it possible for sales representatives to create a more complex sales situation. These situations were created by engaging medical experts to aid the sales rep. with technical support during the sales process. The technically advanced product thus needed multiple individuals to work on the project in order to meet the customer's expectations and requirements, or perhaps to find problems in client firm and offer to solve these. Gardner (2003) provides a definition of complex sales:

Think for a moment about your company's sales environment. Do you have inside and outside sales reps, managers, technical specialists and customer service people involved in virtually every sale? Do sales opportunities involve multiple product lines and models? Are there multiple decision makers and influencers involved in the sale? Is your sales cycle anywhere from three to eighteen months? If you answered yes to any of these questions, your company is engaged in "complex sales."

The term complex sales thus indicate a separation from sales as the average consumer experiences it, retail or simple sales if you will. This experience might be described as walking into a store with a certain amount of information about a product or service and with a certain level of intention to purchase this item.

If the complex sales situation is the negotiations between two companies involving a multitude of individuals with separate and distinctive skill sets and knowledge, including technical knowledge (product/service specific), legal and financial expertise. Then this situation could be explained by the complexity of the product/service (Hessami and Karcianas, 2009) but also by the volumes of product/service and the price included. This is to say large amounts of money are involved and this often leads to many decision makers being involved. Governmental restrictions might be a result of the size, or other factors, a business deal (???) and these restrictions can be seen as a complexity making doing business harder. Insurances or specialized equipment (for engineering, physics or medicine purposes) requires well educated individuals within the fields pertaining to both the technical issues of the product/service and the intended use of it. This high level of complexity introduces the issue of knowledge asymmetry between individuals belonging to the same organization (relating to issues of communication) and also between the companies representatives (possibly underlying power issues in the sales process), much like the asymmetry described by Alvesson (2004) in relations to the knowledge intensive firm. One example of knowledge asymmetry represents a complexity of compounded knowledge. All the different technical, legal, accounting and financial nuances present in the situation might spawn information gaps and many different opinions of whose area of expertise best represents the interests of the task at hand. At one junction a decision might be best informed by the legal and accounting aspects of the project while at another production and logistics might be better. As in many instances it is probably never a clean cut between these which only adds to the complexity. Complexity in content and process of communication thus is an internal issue for both sides. Asymmetry connected to power issues could be seen as a strength by the ones who think they have the edge at the moment. This can occur both within each of the organizations and between the two.

Complex sales only exist within the B2B field and ones of comparable size as business-to-government etc. Transactions in B2B commerce is generally thought of as being conducted between two organizations. That is how I presented the concept in the beginning of the paper

that instead of selling to individuals who needs something for consumption, B2C, the company is selling to another company. It is however in actuality an individual, or rather group of individuals, representing each company who is conducting the transaction, is it not? Who is meeting and complexities that come with the perspective taking is the subject of the next section.

1. Who is meeting?

Playing with the idea of who is meeting is interesting as it can shine a light on the situation from a different angle and perhaps move the focus from the exchange of money for products/service and the measuring of this exchange. Sales is of course about making money and that is hard to do without keeping track of for example earning margins but I think there are interesting things to be found on the qualitative end of the methodological spectre of complex sales.

In the beginning of the paper I differentiated business-to-customer and business-to-business from the perspective of who is involved in the commerce or transaction. Without getting to far into differences between the two there is one difference that I think is especially interesting to look at, *who* is meeting in a B2B selling situation? In a B2C interaction there it is implied that the customer is an individual purchasing for private consumption or end user purposes. The content of the commerce, interaction, in B2B have been described as potentially complex reaching from price and decision makers to the technical specifics, logistical and time frame concerns (Gardner, 2003). Who is it that is actually interacting when we are referring to B2B commerce? There are implied actors in both types of commerce and if we introduce the complex sales concept within the B2B commerce we get a situation with both organizational and individual actors. This is a matter of perspective of course but as with many other things what we view our environment as can inform us about what we see.

The first thing that might come to mind is that it is individuals that meet. This is the basic unit of human interaction and socialization (Mead, 1934) regardless of intent or outcome. These individuals can be seen as being part of different entities and having different functions but seeing the situation as individuals meeting places focus on the individual input to the situation, individual understanding of the situation, and might cloud the organizational perspective. One way of getting away from this is to see the individuals as representatives of

the organization. This representative kind of interaction is a common one in today's global world and can be exemplified with the ambassador of a nation. The UN is a confederacy of nations but I think it is a hard sell to claim that it is the nations as such that meet. It is not that anyone has made such a claim explicitly but when votes were cast in a specific matter it is the nation that cast the vote and not the representative. This is the case with any representative democracy as it would be hard to gather all the individuals of a party, or nation, to get direct representation. While most of us might think of this process as having our voice heard through an individual representing this voice the meeting might carry, or create, something that the present individuals take with them about the other nations. The representative creates something as an individual that the nation gets accredited with. The interaction of representatives has a purpose to inform others of an opinion, intent, capability etc., but this interaction in turn also creates something.

One of the complexities mentioned before was the external restraints that might influence a complex sales situation. The decision, or negotiation, limitations that the representatives in the interaction work under might become interesting from a "who is meeting" perspective. One argument might be that the higher decision authority that the representative is given, the more the entire organization is represented. This is likely to be connected with the amount of money that is changing hands in one way or the other through the transaction but can happen at least two different ways. The first is through direct participation of the highest decision maker, the CEO, in the meeting. The other way is that a mandate is given to make the same decision to a different person. The contractual outcome would probably be the same but the meeting might be very different in content and process. The symbolic value of a corporate officer attending a meeting shifts the meaning of the meeting and possibly synergy outcomes as relationship strength and value. But is it the same two organizations in both meetings, CEO present or not, or is it different parts of the organizations that meet, or is the difference in completeness of organization?

Can we view a meeting as two organizations that meet? Viewing relationships from a network perspective (Anderson et al., (1994) suggests this. Physically it is the individuals, representatives, that meet but if we consider the possible implications of a meeting they go beyond the individuals present the meeting. We would have to focus on the symbolic exchange taking place and not between how it takes place. The monetary value of a sale can be seen on the invoice and in the annual report but the point of relationship building with your

supply chain is of a more symbolic nature. Understanding what this interaction and exchange means to the company is central to theories as Porter's five forces (1985), and stakeholder theory (Freeman & Reed, 1983). Jenster et al. (2005) claims that the sales person in complex sales situations is playing several roles as they interact with different people (accountants, layers, technical experts) and have multiple goals and projects at the same time. This will inevitably lead to role ambiguity, role conflict and role inaccuracy. Further they claim that the key to success in sales is to manage these roles, which cannot be eliminated, in an appropriate manner. So adding to the complexities presented above there are issues with the role, or identity, of the organizations representative in the sales interaction. Identity can thus be seen as one complexity in the sales situation. This view is closely connected to the social identity concept, based on Turner and Tajfel (1979) that some researchers depart from when describing the formation of organizational identity (Haslam et al. 2003).

Another way to view a meeting as two organizations that meet is by viewing the meeting not only as a part of the organization but as creating it. There will be more on this later but for now a short introduction. This is a notion of understanding the world that draws on Weick (1979), Blumer (1969) and the methodological tradition of ethnomethodology (Francis and Hester, 2004). Blumer thinks that it is through action that we can study human behaviour. The idea is that all behaviour is social, even when one is alone, as the individual acts with intention on his environment. Weick argues that viewing organizations through verbs (as processes) and stopping out nouns will lead to better understanding of organizations as they are comprised of streams of different things (e.g. materials, people, money and decisions). Methodologically this way of viewing the world is well represented by ethnomethodology. Seeing organizations as being accomplished in actions focuses on the interaction between individuals and how knowledge is used in situated ways to accomplish organizational activities. An accomplishment will for the purposes of this paper be seen as the outcome of an interaction. There is no inherent meaning or value in this definition of an accomplishment, it is simply what comes out of the interaction. It can be money, trust or identity. One process of organizational interaction is presented by Hatch and Schultz (2002) drawing on Mead (1934). They argue that the legitimacy of the organization towards its stakeholders is according to Hatch et al. (2002) something that is related to, dependant on, the identity of the organization. This identity is re-produced in the interaction with the company's "other" (stakeholders) and so this "other" is as important part of the re-creation as the organization itself. This "other" can be media, organizations in the supply chain, investors etc. There is both a practitioner and

an academic interest in what the relationship between actors in a B2B setting brings (legitimacy, value) and value is something that according to Grönroos (2007) is a co-creation between the two actors. The “other” that is of particular interest for this paper is the buyer in the complex sales situation. From the stand point of a market oriented organization the client is the “other” making this an important relational realization as it to some extent defines the organization more so that with an organization that is R&D or production oriented. One can however adapted a similar logic to the marketing/sales division of these companies saying that the division is re-creating identity in the relationship with the client. Fang et al. (2008) also point to the value created between two actors in new product development processes when there is a close link between seller and customer. As many authors on organizational identity (e.g. La Rocca & Snehota, 2008; de Souza, Carrieri and de Faria, 2008) have pointed out it is the process of formation and construction of identities that is the next step in identity research. So in the light of situated creation of organizations and of identities my research question is:

How are identities accomplished in the complex sales situation?

1. *What kind of organizational identities is created in the interaction of the complex sales process?*
2. *How are these identities accomplished?*

3. Research purpose

The purpose of the study is thus two fold. One is the micro contribution of the accomplishment of identities in situations of complex sales through a constructionist view of the world and the terminology of OI. This will be an attempt to contribute to the research into the formation of identities. To the B2B research field the intended contribution is to gain understanding of how the individuals involved understand, make sense of, their work situation beyond products and business deals.

4. Organizational Identity

In their 2007 article Cornelissen et al. tries to give an overview of the field of OI (organizational identity) to date. They present a three-tiered model along two dimensions that separates OI from corporate identity and social identity. Although I might not necessarily be able to place every article I read on the topic in the model, and do not think that this

constitutes a problem with this or any other model (they cannot be all-inclusive), I find the article model a good starting point when trying to address the field of OI. The axis of the model consists of analytic form (cognitive to symbolic) and focus (internal to external). This gives three broad field definitions: Social identity being interested in individual cognition and process, OI focusing on patterns of meaning and corporate identity concerning itself with communication of image. The article uses the gathering of interpretations of the different concepts as a way to push for cross-disciplinary studies but I will draw on the summarizing nature of the text to present the field for my own purposes. It is important to notice that the different identities are ontologically and epistemologically different. What the concept of identity is, and is made of or emanates from, differs between the disciplines and this presents different ways of how the identity concept is relevant to the organizational member.

The primary (most often used) definition of OI used in research is according to Cornelissen et al. (2007):

The shared meaning that an organizational entity is understood to have that arises from its members' (and others') awareness that they belong to it

This is not literally the definition used in many articles but it catches the essence of the concept. As the authors notice this is similar to the secondary definitions (less often used) of both social and corporate identity displaying an existing overlap between the different directions. It also points to the fact that it seems to be the level, or object, of study (group, organizational or corporate entity) that separates the perspectives. They are however connected so a brief look at them each in turn is warranted.

Social identity articles usually cite Tajfel and Turner (1979) and Ashforth and Mael's (1989) writings on SIT (social identity theory) as fundamental and infer that the group behaviour that is explained and made possible because of what SIT explains can be translated to an organizational level. Organizational identity then becomes a particular, potentially larger, form of social identity that would both be comprised and function as the social identity presented in SIT and self-stereotyping (Haslam et al. 2003). This process 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.

presents a problem as it is based on comparing the group you are a part of (in-group) with the group that you are not a part of (out-group). It is this comparison that brings the group self-esteem and a sense of self (identity). The identity is created by comparison to the outside and interpreting the findings in a favourable light for the in-group. Attributing winning, being better, to skill of the in-group or lack of skill of the out-group. The same way loosing will be attributed luck on the part of the out-group and misfortune on the part of the in-group.

Another concept that this line of thought uses, that I will not be using, is the level of commitment (the strength) of the individual's identity to the groups. This is something that is also seen in OI when management uses symbols to create identity (Dhalla, 2007; Alvesson et al., 2006). The usefulness of a notion of identity strength is mixed to me. Creating identity is probably more common in consultancies and PSF:s where other control tools are scarce, the work force is somewhat homogenous and the ambiguity of work conditions is high. In other, more conventional, organizations I think it is harder to see something like identity strength as different notions (or sides of identity) are emphasised depending on where in the organization you look (Corely, 2004). Individuals in management and production understand OI differently, connected to image and culture respectively.

In order to establish a sense of control some kind of measurement (a benchmark) is needed. Spreadsheets of the accountant, budgets of the sales department and inventories from shipping and receiving are control measures. They are primarily controlling the volume of goods and where these goods are physically and financially (who is carrying the cost) but since it is human activities that are responsible for any shift in the goods whereabouts the control measures also control these people. Identity strength is a way to control the members who are subject to the identity without using the operational function of the specific individual. Accounting has similar properties as it is a part of any and all functions of the organization but it is still connected to the function of the person. Identity strength tells management if you are, or to which extent you are, a part of what they consider to be the heart of the organization.

Identity strength is then a control mechanism not dependant on the function of the work itself and as a control mechanism it is constructed and enforced by management. There is probably some truth to the idea that certain individuals have more influence on the way, and to what extent, that members identify with their organization. These people would naturally not have to be management. This brings us to the concept of organizational identity...

In Hatch and Schultz (1997) corporate identity is described as a concept of marketing literature focusing on the visual aspects of the company and something that is controlled, manipulated, by top management (Melewar and Karaosmanoglu, 2006). This latter point is something that is exemplified in Dhalla (2007), who tries to flesh out the different components that comprise the identity of an organization and how to manage each one, thus controlling the identity. Though Dhalla calls it organizational identity I would be more comfortable to call it corporate identity for two reasons. The first is the assumption that management can control something as fluid and ambiguous as organizational identity. Corporate identity is the company's projected image (Conrnelissen et al., 2007) and top management articulates the content of this image. There thus seems to be one corporate identity that is correct, even though it can be experienced in different ways. There have been attempts to broaden the concept to encompass more than just the image, connecting it to underlying factors of what the organization is bringing the corporate identity concept closer to the organizational identity one. Admittedly the two concepts are becoming closer and are using similar definitions the perceived manageability of corporate identity presents a significant difference, one that I will utilize in furthering my argument.

Organizational identity can be seen as a perceptual lens that guides the members' sense making. This definition is one of the more commonly seen (Gioia, Schultz and Corley, 2000; Gioia and Thomas, 1996) and refers to those features that are perceived 'as ostensibly *central*, *enduring*, and *distinctive* in character [and] that contribute to how they define the organization and their identification with it' (Gioia and Thomas, 1996, p. 372). The emphasised words are what have become known as the CED definition of organizational identity (Albert and Whetten, 1985). In this definition there are some things that I, and others, see as problematic. One of these things is that OI is enduring, and issue pointed out by Gioia et al. (2000) who chose to describe the dynamics of OI as adaptive instability. Their argument is:

We argue that the seeming durability of identity is actually contained in the stability of the labels used by organization members to express who or what they believe the organization to be, but that the meaning associated with these labels changes so that identity actually is mutable.

OI is here seen as something that is subjective, it is not some “thing” but what might be seen as shared separately by the members. It is the belief it self (of what the identity is) that constitutes the identity of the organization. This is the interpretative perspective that Gioia (1998) presents in Whetten and Godfrey (1998). The other two are functionalist and post-modern. The functionalist view thinks of OI as something that exists outside of the one who perceives it. The second view identity as something sporadic and appearing spontaneously and thus questions the concept as a whole. I have been criticising view on identity that put a lot of stock into managerial drive and determination and would at this point like to say that ideas about identity can of course be initiated by management. Constantly driving a specific message through internal communication can take root and become a part of the sense making. So can an idea about product improvement that is realized (VOLVO = safety) that perhaps was not purposefully intended to be identity related. This last example also indicated that there are restrictions to the organizational identity as pointed out by Brunninge (2005). A car manufacturing company cannot suddenly, if ever, decide to change identity to something else, manufacturing cars is a big part of the identity. There thus seems to be some aspects of OI that can be seen as structural. But the influence of these structural aspects on identity might differ inside of an organization.

A large organization might produce many different things and have large support and supply chain functions. This can lead to discrepancies in identity statements (and the underlying sense making) of members from these functions. Barney et al. (2000) proposes the championing of an identity that is based on values, as such an identity is transferable across functional and geographical boarders. Hatch and Schultz (2002) presents a dynamic model of the process of identity construction. In this model they connect the organizations culture and image through its identity. Instead of championing, and presumably crafting, an identity they suggest a process that can exist in every part of the organization. This reasoning depends on the idea that the organization is a unitary actor with an identity emerging from language and behaviour. This identity is also symbolically enacted (Mead, 1934) and this behaviour through language and expressed culture is what distinguishes the organization and legitimises it for its

stakeholders. The identity concept, when seen in this way, becomes a metaphor in a clearer way than when seen as a sense making “tool” for the members which might evoke more material images in connection to identity. Cornelissen et al. (2007) also suggest as mentioned before (de Souza et al. 2008) that it is the process of formation and construction of identities that is the next step in identity research. An example of research in this direction is Alvesson and Empson’s (2008) study of how identity is constructed in consultancy firms and suggests dimensions that captures this formation.

There has been a lot of conceptualising articles dealing with the nature of the concept of OI and subsequently there is definitional confusion among authors and readers alike, as pointed out by more than one (Brunninge, 2005; Whetten, 2006). Keeping in mind Corley’s (2004) findings that the different hierarchal levels of the organization he studied had different understandings of what identity was (what they emphasized in describing identity) I would apply a terminology of OI to study the phenomenon of B2B sales situations (complex sales situations) and in order to gain knowledge of the interaction that produces, or re-creates, one facet of an organizations identity.

OI is something that is under researched in the B2B field (La Rocca & Snehota, 2008) and taking the complex sales situation as the unit of study information relating to the management of complex sales professionals, understanding the relationship between the organization and its customers might be found. But how does OI relate to the complex sales situation? A diverse group of people, with different sets of knowledge, constitute both sales and purchasing team. The time line of the process is usually long (3-18 months), there are decision makers on both sides and the price of the “deal” is considerable. The organizations’ cultures and image play roles in how the two perceive each other (Hatch et al., 2002). Complexities of the sale thus not only stem from the product but the interaction process as a whole. OI is traditionally defined as what in an organization is central, enduring and distinctive for an organization, or CED (Albert and Whetten, 1985). Often seen as a metaphor to aide decision makers when making strategic executive decisions the fact that the identity is considered organizational suggests that it is all of the organizational members who agree on what is CED, which is not something that is easily confirmed.

Understanding OI in a complex sales situation would be useful for managers for the same reasons that consultancy firms might find this process interesting. Both situations deal with

highly educated individuals doing advanced project based work with potentially large implications (good or bad) for the company. With solution selling, the practice of finding solutions in the client's organization and offering a way to fix that problem (Bosworth, 1995), being almost the norm (or at least the goal) even for producing firms this likeness with consultancies probably isn't coincidental as solution selling is the way consultants work. One difference might however prove a complicating factor in the comparison, the fact that there is an actual product involved. Comparing consultancy services is hard (Alvesson, 2004) if not impossible whilst products have spec-sheets and price lists and might require a buyer who is experienced and well informed of the product. There is thus a second party in the construction of OI in the complex sales situation, the buyer/customer. The relational, dialectic, creation of identity is drawn from Mead (1934) and adapted into an OI perspective by Hatch & Schultz (2002) and brings us to the next section.

5. Organizing identifying and Mead

One way of emphasizing that it is a process (re-creating) that occurs and is studied is to rethink, and perhaps rename, organizational identity as organizing identifying. This notion draws both on Weick (1979) Mead (1934) and Blumer (1969). Weick argues that viewing organizations through verbs (as processes) and stomping out nouns will lead to better understanding of organizations. While this is a little extreme to me, I agree with the sentiment to put focus on the verbs describing organizations, thus making it *organizing*, something that happens. There is an interesting parallel to be made between the OI concept and the recipes that Weick argues are the core of organizing. Citing Schultz (1964) Weick describes the recipes as schemas for interpretation and expression of action. The expressive schemas give direction to action, how to best approach situations in order to obtain the result you want and steer clear of unwanted effects. As an interpretative schema the recipe associates an action with its typical outcome and links this to the intent of the one performing the action, thus understanding the action. Organizing thus involves *shared* recipes which function as a way to make sense of experiences. Weick says:

The outcomes of organizing are reasonable interpretations of a slice of experience; these slices are treated as being amendable as well as prescriptive for future activities

In other words: a shared understanding of expressions and interpretations leads to organizing which leads to shaping and indicating of future actions. This is similar to the idea OI being shared meanings (Cornelissen et al., 2007) that not only might indicate what is CED about the organization but also seen as to guide decisions on many different levels of the organization.

Moving on to Mead and Blumer the link between OI and Mead has been made before. Hatch et al. (2002) attempts to translate Mead's dialectic concepts of "I" and "me" to an organizational level in order to show the dynamics of OI. This article holds on to the notion presented by Mead and emphasised by Blumer (1969) that identity is a process, *identifying*. There is no start or finish but a continuous interaction between the entity (individual, group or institution) and its other. When using the word identifying here I wish to emphasize that is a process. An alternative meaning of this word is the level of alignment between the individual's identity and the company's identity. This is an important control measure in consultancies and PSF:s (Alvesson, 2004) and not what I am referring to. This is not to say that this meaning of identifying will not become relevant to any future research based on the paper, the distinction is made to avoid confusion.

Mead (1934) introduced the idea of humans as capable of acting toward oneself as an object. This is what creates the self and what differentiates us from other animals. The individual is capable of seeing himself as different objects and what these objects are, how he sees himself, guides his actions towards others. This way of describing the reasons behind actions accepts the multitude of objects that constitutes the self (woman, mother, dentist, paraglider, gun enthusiast). Much in the same way we can see an organization as being a manufacturer, developer, marketer and consumer acting differently depending on what object it sees it self as at that moment. The basic assumptions of symbolic interactionism (Blumer, 1969) are three. First, humans act towards things on the basis of the meanings that the things have for them. Second, the meaning of these things comes from the interaction the individual has with his/her fellows. Thirdly, the meanings are handled in, and modified through, an interpretative process used by the person in dealing with the things he encounters.

The nature of human society must according to Blumer be seen as action as this is how we deal with social situations. Individuals may act singly, collectively or as representatives of an organization. Regardless of which action is taken the individual, every individual, builds action on a process called self-indication. The individual notes things, assesses them, gives

them a meaning and decides to act on the basis of the meaning. A group action is the fusing of many such self-indication processes where each individual aligns his action with that of the others by understanding the meaning of their action. This is where the “other” comes in. As the self-indicating process always takes place in a social context the individual takes the role of in order to understand the meaning of this others action. Taking the role, or the attitudes, of a group is what Mead referred to as the generalized “other”. An example from Mead himself of this process is the following:

In politics, for example, the individual identifies himself with the entire political party and takes the organized attitudes of that entire party toward the rest of the given social community and toward the problems which confront the party within the given social situation; and he consequently reacts or responds in terms of the organized attitudes of the party as a whole. (Mead 1934:156)

The example illustrates both the fusing of an individual’s self-indication process (which is influenced by belonging to the party) and the group’s action that might occur if the said individual is not alone in the tackling of problems that face the party. If is an opposing political party that is responsible for the problem than this other party would be the generalized other for the individual in the example. The same logic could be applied to an employee of a company.

There is a difference between Weick and Blumer which lies in the way that they understand the physical world and human interaction in this world. Weick sees the world as the raw materials that the mind (a different mind that Mead refers to) will process and this lead to action. Humans react to the things she encounters in the physical world and this reaction is the basis of the action. This way of looking at the world and the place humans and human interaction in it is one of the accepted views that Mead (1934) reacted against in his book. Blumer, following Mead, is convinced that human action is taken on the basis of our understanding of the social environment. Thus the “raw materials” Weick speak of are not raw but have meaning to us and this meaning is not only influences action but comes from us. But even as this rather fundamental difference exists I see common ground in the interest of processes, action, as the object of study in anything that includes humans. This of course leads

to more than studying action, observing action, it is about seeing even static objects as action or in a continuous process. This is connected with the discussion of who is meeting presented before. Even though the idea of dynamics and process of organizational identity is very much central to e.g. Hatch et al. (2002) I think they are describing the dynamics of an organization that is static in nature. What I am suggesting is that the organization is also viewed as something that is created in action.

At this point and with this suggested way of looking at the formation of identity I am not contesting the enduring part of the CED definition of organizational identity. What is enduring in the identity might be seen as the structural components of the organization and there is an adaptive instability around this structure. What's CED might also be seen as the accomplishments of the members interactions within the organization and with its customers.

6. Method and data

MacLean (2008) introduces Symbolic Interactionism (SI) like this:

...offers a useful theoretical perspective for building theoretical understandings of the processes that explain organizational misconduct. SI suggests that individuals act on their socially constructed view of the world (their "definition of the situation"), that definitions are created over time and via social interaction, and that definitions become sedimented into taken-for-granted social facts. These meanings create enduring patterns of action and structure.

The article is about misconduct in organizations but these meanings that are created in everyday situations are central to the research tradition. This is the process, that starting with Mead (1934), through Blumer (1969) that presents an interesting perspective on the creation of identity. Prasad (2005) also recognizes that the process is of significant importance and that it is the intimate understanding of social situations from the participant's point of view that the researcher is interested in. This is something Prasad (1993, 2000) employed to describe resistance in organizations and Jeon (2004) to study community nurses' interaction with family caregivers. In viewing the world in general as socially constructed there are however other interesting methodological schools to consider that are similar to SI. Ethnomethodology (Garfinkel, 1968) is the method of doing research that tries to find interesting and significant structures in ordinary every day activities, much like SI. The traditions view on meaning, being context specific, and the relational production of social

reality thus isn't irreconcilable with Mead's ideas and symbolic interactionism and I think it makes it a natural method for the study.

When applied to organizational work a perspective of organizations emerges that is in line with the idea of *organizing* presented before. By this understanding an organization *is* the activities in and through which it is accomplished by those who comprise its personnel. Specific phenomenon of organizations, e.g. rules and hierarchies, are constituted in through the way the individuals in the organization uses these to organize their lives. They are not entities with objectively decided meanings and content but the meaning is in how these words are used. Francis et al. (2004) cite Bittner (1973) as introducing ways of how the members of an organization use this concept. Shortly these are decided upon interpretations of correct organizational behavior that can be done before or after an occurrence, using the organization to create a sense of larger connectedness of events. Lastly the organization can be used to give meaning to seemingly pointless events, functions without value or tasks without function. This entire idea of using the entity of the organization as something that judge right or wrong, connects little things and gives meaning to even smaller is close to the concept of OI.

In an activity as sales where the activities goal is naturally connected to value and to the organization as a whole and value might be seen to acts as some kind of judge "Are you adding value in doing that?" understanding the methods of how this phenomenon is recognized as what it is, seems interesting. The concept of OI also seems to be relevant.

Practically the tradition of ethnomethodology presents issues that are not relevant in ethnography, the perceived closest tradition.

Three methodological steps are proposed by Francis et al. (2004):

1. Notice something that is observably-the-case about some talk, activity or setting.
2. Pose the question "How is it that this observable feature has been produced such that it is recognizable for what it is?"
3. Consider, analyze and describe the methods used in the production and recognition of the observable feature.

This model can then be applied for analysis in three different ways: self-reflection, analysis of recorded talk and action and "acquired immersion". The first two are rather self-explanatory. Though all involve some measure of immersion self-reflection is our own understanding of everyday activities, which we are immersed in. No study specific training or education is

needed for this observational data gathering method. Second is the preferred way of analyzing conversation analysis and is less observational more document studies. The documents, transcripts and videos, are however produced by the researcher involving the individuals being studied and their expressed permission. This can be seen as a kind of observation as it is first hand information involving the studied individuals but the analysis of what was observed comes only from the transcripts and/or videos. Lastly we have the acquired immersion. Acquired immersion is the way to gain understanding of more complex social situations. In doing this, the researcher comes to make every day observations in the same way, or in close approximation, as the people he studies. These people have some skill or competence that make them special (scientists, lawyers or professional musicians) and specifically one that the researcher does not have. If he had this skill, it would be a case of self-reflection. This immersion process, similar to the extreme examples of going native in ethnography (Prasad, 2005), is the only way for the researcher to become a part of the construction of the social activities being studied. And being a part of these activities is the only way to understand how they become understood as the activity they are. The understanding of a social activity cannot be separated from the production of the same so in order to understand it one must be able to be a part of the production of it. This understanding of social reality, the ethnomethodological way, can be seen as a case of in-group/out-group (from social identity theory) division, based on knowledge, which needs to be bridged in order for meaning to be communicated.

The three modes of analysis will all be relevant for the study. Analyzing transcripts of interviews and observation notes is central to any qualitative study, regardless of research tradition, and will be a part of the entire project. The ability to be self-reflective in a complex sales situation is dependent on both the product and on when in the sales process one is studying. Realizing that there are time restraints a product that is easier to understand. This is of interest as this reduces the time it takes to gain acquired immersion. This is however something that needs to be done to some extent as I am not familiar with complex sales. Becoming educated by studying products and markets and the particular company's sales process is the first step. In line with this is the fact that nothing is uninteresting in the analysis of material. This is the basic concept of indexicality (Garfinkel, 1968), that even seemingly nonsense utterances like: "hu?", "mmm" and "oh" are significant in the context they are uttered.

In accepting this approach to research one must understand the position where nothing is objective about social reality. Standing beside or even inside something, a social phenomenon, is not enough for ethnomethodologists to account for the reasons and mechanisms underlying the most mundane activity. This word mundane, as an object of study, even seems to be something researchers wear with pride when describing their research.

The analysis principals suggested by Francis et al. (2004) are illustrated by the following list:

1. The demonstrable relevance of sociological descriptions.
2. The consequentiality of members' orientations and understandings.
3. The situatedness of talk and action.
4. The inspectability of data.

What this list tells us is that the method is interested in members' orientation and understandings of social phenomenon. No pre-defined categories are used. The researcher has to show how the orientations and understandings are a part of the production of the social activity. Talking in order is an example of such (procedural) consequentiality when the speaker connects to what was said before him. The third principle connects to the understanding of contextually, that everything is locally produced and understood. Garfinkel's term for this was indexical; the meaning of a word is dependant on the specific situations in which it is used. Francis et al. (2004:30)

Rather, shared culture is accomplished in and through the making of observations of sameness and difference.

Here the authors are differentiating ethnomethodology from the practice of ethnography arguing that instead of culture being a determinant of behavior (action and talk) it is a result, an accomplishment, of these processes. Thus an observation in the ethnomethodological tradition is not a technique of a researcher but available observations to any one. Any one can, and does, make these observations which is why, in order to understand and describe the methods used in the production of these activates the researcher has to make himself a part of the studies phenomenon. Lastly the fourth principal speaks to the requirement for the researcher to make member's phenomena and methods available in talk and action and inspectable by readers of any analysis. Again separating the tradition from ethnography where

generalizations and examples are trusted to represent the experience of the researcher. This kind of ethnomethodology is what Prasad (2005) refers to as situational ethnomethodology, meaning a documentation of the production of social worlds of professions and other phenomena by relying on frameworks, rules and expectations.

6.1 Data gathering

When employing ethnomethodology, like SI, interviews and observations are used to gather data. Interviews are often open ended letting the interviewee answer questions as “naturally” as possible focusing on how things are created, accomplished, in interactions more instead of what is taking place. This is an extension of the idea that the situation, any situation, accomplishes meaning. One important difference between ethnography and ethnomethodology is that the weight of field work is not necessarily on lengthy involvement in the field but on close examination (Prasad, 2005) which of course this is related to the concept of indexicality. However, understanding the studied situation requires, as mentioned above, the same understanding as the individuals studied. This possibly requires a lengthy stay in the field and most certainly involves document studies. Lengthy field work and document studying are not a part of the data gathering as in ethnography but is a part of the immersion process vital for the researcher to acquire sufficient understanding of the social world he is to study. This, and other aspects of the tradition, is similar to the ethnography, e.g. thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973), but it is important for different reasons. It is in the analysis of the data where ethnomethodology really differs from ethnography, as stated above.

The main data of the study would consist of observations as the purpose is to understand identity accomplishment through meetings. Filed notes and if possible minutes from the meeting would be supplemented with interviews concerning the meetings.

6.2 Ethics and Access

As the ethnomethodology only allows for data that are a “natural” part of members’ orientation and understandings of social phenomenon the role of researcher becomes different from other methods. The ethnomethodologist becomes a part of the world he wishes to study, as the only way to do so is to experience the “lived-work” (Livingston, 1987). In an everyday situation this is not a problem, we are all apart of these, but when studying a profession becoming one of them is a requirement. A potential issue might be that of “becoming a part”

of the group in order to study it. What I mean is that professionals (mathematicians, teachers, account managers etc.) might have a problem with letting in a researcher for the purposes of being studied. Even though the individual(s) is of minor interest for the observation, it is the outcome of the interaction that is of value. This outcome is the livelihood, and real life, of the studied individual and assurances of anonymity might not be enough. This is not a question of the company letting the researcher in, this can however also be a problem, but an issue of getting as close as needed to the “lived-work”. It is hard to present a solution to this problem before hand so I will simply recognize the issue and move on to the kind of situations that would serve the study to observe.

6.3 Specific situations studied

In order to concretize the data gathering I would like to present some situations that would be of interest. These are theoretical situations based on conversations with two practitioners of complex sales in two different fields (high voltage products and fighter jets). Though they are different processes some overlaps were found leading me to believe that the following situations could be presented here to illustrate potential field work for the study. It should be said that the two individuals I have spoken to both work with products, but there are services that can be, and often are, connected to these.

The interaction with the client happens on several organizational levels over time. Often there is a representative from the buying organization that is involved with the process the entire time and the process can be said to be composed of the following steps.¹ Initially the selling company contacts the company or division of a company with which they like to do business. These are marketing efforts undertaken in order to inform the potential buyer about the existence of the product. This is an interesting step to observe as it probably is the one that happens most often thus carrying routine. Routine and framework can have the same meaning and thus a “mundane” activity as this might present interesting findings as the situatedness is reoccurring to some extent. This could be a more self-reflecting stage for me as a researcher having some understanding of marketing and sales. Also here the technical intricacies are lower than they are in steps to come.

¹ I realize that there probably are differences in how companies conduct their sales and have little to support any representativeness for other companies than the ones I have been in contact with. There are however similarities with Gardner's (2003) definition of complex sales.

When there is an outspoken interest from the client the sales effort and meetings become more operational which helps specify the demands on the product and deal as a whole. When the needs of client are met on paper there is a recommendation from the department to the executives controlling the money. When a decision to go forward has been made the process moves back to the operational level where lawyers and representatives from finance and technical departments negotiate the details of the deal this can take up to 9 months. These three steps possibly presents different accomplishments from each other as well as from the above mentioned. Firstly the meetings involved strike me as less routine both with regards to who is attending as the individuals involved change allot and the situations themselves occur less frequent. That many individuals involved is of course due to the complexities of the situation. Lawyers, finance and technical expertise brings complexity but also challenges to the researcher. It is here that the immersion becomes an important tool to understand how accomplishments, of the profession and of identity, are made.

Behind, or underlying, these meetings the individuals involved from each company have internal meetings also of interest for the paper. These meetings handle topics as strategy for the future and feedback from the near past. These internal meetings are also of interest as they relate to the client even though the client isn't there. These meetings might become important because they generate comparative data to the meetings with the client.

7. The End

I would like to end this paper with a short summary. Trying to understand how identities are accomplished in a complex sales situation is the goal of the proposed research. It is suggested that identity can be studied in the cross-section of the company and its "others". Sales division and departments are constantly in touch with its environment, this is their reason for existing, and is therefore an interesting object of study regarding identity and B2B commerce, a field that has mainly focused on the exchange between money and goods. It is by studying the interaction of complex sales that we can understand how these professionals' lived-work experience happens.

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