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Organizational Identity: Components and Construction

IDENTIDAD ORGANIZACIONAL: COMPONENTES Y CONSTRUCCIÓN

RESUMEN: El objetivo de esta investigación fue comprender el proceso de construcción identitario de los mandos medios de una empresa multilatin colombiana a partir de la siguiente pregunta de investigación: ¿cuáles son los componentes que intervienen en el proceso de construcción identitario de los mandos medios? Los mandos medios son aquellos individuos que están localizados debajo de los *top managers* y por encima de la primera línea de supervisión. El marco teórico que se utilizó fue el la Identidad Organizacional (oi). Para ello, se revisaron los antecedentes orientados a discutir investigaciones cuyo fundamento epistemológico considera la oi como un proceso y no como un elemento invariante o estático. El estudio de caso se abordó desde una perspectiva cualitativa. Por su parte, el proceso de construcción identitario se compone de tres categorías: *reconocimiento, trascendencia y seguridad*. La investigación se realizó bajo la modalidad de estudio de caso y se circunscribe a una organización relativamente nueva que se encuentra en un proceso inconcluso de adoptar una oi específica. Los componentes explican el proceso y permiten dilucidar una nueva manera de abordarlo a nivel de la gestión, a la par que, por su claridad y facilidad comprensiva, pueden ser utilizados para otras investigaciones, así como para consultorías y asesorías. Por último, la integración de conceptos desde las ciencias sociales para la conceptualización y el análisis enriquece el diálogo con el campo administrativo.

PALABRAS CLAVE: estudios organizacionales, identidad organizacional, organizaciones, mandos medios, reconocimiento, trascendencia, seguridad.

IDENTIDADE ORGANIZACIONAL: COMPONENTES E CONSTRUÇÃO

RESUMO: o objetivo desta pesquisa foi compreender o processo de construção identitário dos colaboradores de médio escalão de uma empresa multilatin colombiana a partir da pergunta de pesquisa "Quais os componentes que intervêm no processo de construção identitário dos colaboradores de médio escalão?" Esses são os indivíduos que estão abaixo dos *top managers* e por cima da supervisão de primeiro nível. O referencial teórico utilizado foi a Identidade Organizacional (oi). Para isso, foram revisados os antecedentes dirigidos a discutir pesquisas cujo fundamento epistemológico considera a oi como um processo, e não como algo invariante ou estático. O estudo de caso é abordado de uma perspectiva qualitativa. O processo de construção identitário é composto por estas três categorias: *reconhecimento, transcendência e segurança*. A pesquisa foi realizada sob a modalidade de estudo de caso e está vinculada a uma organização relativamente nova, que se encontra em um processo inacabado e imaturo de adotar uma oi em específico. Os componentes explicam o processo e permitem evidenciar uma nova maneira de abordá-lo no âmbito da gestão, ao mesmo tempo que, por sua clareza e facilidade comprensiva, podem ser utilizados para outras pesquisas, bem como para consultorias e assessorias. Por último, a integração de conceitos a partir das ciências sociais para a conceitualização e a análise enriquece o diálogo com o campo administrativo.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE: colaboradores de médio escalão, estudos organizacionais, identidade organizacional, organizações, reconhecimento, transcendência, segurança.

L'IDENTITÉ ORGANISATIONNELLE: SES COMPOSANTES ET SA CONSTRUCTION

RÉSUMÉ: Le but de cette recherche était de comprendre le processus de construction identitaire des cadres moyens d'une entreprise multi latine colombienne à partir de la question de recherche: quelles sont les composantes qui interviennent dans le processus de construction identitaire des cadres moyens? Les cadres moyens sont les individus situés en dessous des cadres supérieurs et au-dessus de la première ligne de supervision. Le cadre théorique utilisé a été l'identité organisationnelle (oi). Pour ce faire, on a passé en revue les antécédents visant à discuter des processus et non comme quelque chose d'invariant ou de statique. L'étude de cas a été abordée dans une perspective qualitative. Le processus de construction identitaire se compose de ces trois catégories: *la reconnaissance, la signification et la sécurité*. On a mené la recherche sous la modalité d'étude de cas, et limitée à une organisation relativement nouvelle qui est dans un processus inachevé et immature d'adoption d'une oi spécifique. Les composantes expliquent le processus et permettent d'élucider une nouvelle façon de l'aborder au niveau de la gestion, en même temps que, en raison de leur clarté et de leur facilité globale, ils peuvent être utilisés pour d'autres enquêtes, ainsi que pour des services de consultance et de conseil. Enfin, l'intégration de concepts issus des sciences sociales pour la conceptualisation et l'analyse enrichit le dialogue avec le domaine administratif.

MOTS-CLÉ: cadres moyens, études organisationnelles, identité organisationnelle, organisations, reconnaissance, signification, sécurité.

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ABSTRACT: The objective of this research was to understand the identity construction process of the middle managers (MMs) of a Colombian multilatin. From the research question, *i.e.*, what are the components involved in the identity construction process of MMs?, it was established that MMs are those individuals whose level in the organization is below top managers and above first-level supervisors. The theoretical framework used was organizational identity (oi). To this end, literature review focused on the discussion of research works whose epistemological basis considered oi as a process, not as an invariant or static element. The case study used a qualitative approach. Identity construction processes are made up of three categories: *recognition, transcendence and security*. The research was conducted under the case study method and targeted a relatively new organization that is in an unfinished and immature process of adopting a specific oi. The components explain the process and make it possible to elucidate a new way of approaching it at the management level; at the same time, due to their clarity and understandability, they can be used for other studies, as well as for consultancies. Finally, the integration of concepts from the social sciences for conceptualization and analysis nourishes the dialog with the administrative field.

KEYWORDS: Organizations, organizational identity, middle managers, recognition, transcendence, security, organization studies.

Introduction

This article presents the components involved in the organizational identity (oi) construction process by the middle managers (MMs) of a Colombian multilatin. This research deals with the institutionalization of oi as an administrative procedure that seeks to turn this phenomenon into a management variable, which implies controlling aspects related to the construction of an individual's meaning. This is done in order to maintain uniformity of thought and, as a result, standardize the behaviors and ways of proceeding in organizations, limiting the individuality of the subject to a depersonalized and efficient productive tool (Gonzales-Miranda, 2016).

The process to control individuals' oi focuses on the design, construction, and execution of policies, methods, and countless actions that seek to manufacture a subjectivity in them (Barker, 1999; Deetz, 1992, 1994; Knights & Willmott, 1989). Thus, the search for identity regulation is an increasingly intentional modality of organizational control (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Baltà, 2019; Wei & Clegg, 2017). However, the effect of forcing this loyalty may amplify cynicism, spark dissent, or catalyze resistance (Ezzamel, Willmott, & Worthington, 2002).

These forms of control want to process subjectivity in order to constitute more adaptable employees who are capable of moving more rapidly between activities and assignments with different orientations. In practice, however, this fluidity and fragmentation of identity may result in employees more vulnerable to the typification of corporate identifications (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002). Given that managing the interior life of people is considered potentially less annoying and more effective than the traditional external forms of administrative control (Alvesson & Willmott, 2002), identity regulation is intended to cover the deliberate effects of social practices regarding identity construction and reconstruction processes.

The attention is then placed on the arbitrary effects of the forms of *oi* regulation. In this regard, it should be clarified that *oi* itself is not a negative aspect or framework. On the contrary, over the years it has become an independent theoretical perspective for organizational analysis, distancing from organizational culture—with which *oi* is commonly associated—to contribute comprehensive, valid, and relevant elements for the understanding of the organizational phenomena that take place within organizations. From this perspective, and according to Alvesson and Willmott (2002), even though the management wants to manage, control, and define employees' and *MMs*' identity, it cannot do it because they are not passive individuals who can be easily molded to a particular *oi*. It is therefore understood that managing identity control is not necessarily something feasible that is easily achievable; however, *oi* regulation can be considered a relevant and influential aspect that has not been studied sufficiently and is increasingly important in the organizational field (Deetz, 1992; Gonzales-Miranda, 2016; Knights & Willmott, 1989; Kunda, 1992; Mujib, 2017). This desire to establish a specific *oi* in the individuals expresses the predominance of a positivist epistemology and a view that articulates and legitimizes the functionalist forms of organizational analysis (Burrell & Morgan, 1979).

This research aimed at answering the following questions: What are the components involved in the identity construction process? How is this process developed by *MMs* to construct an *oi*? The interest of the research, therefore, focused on the social process through which *MMs* build a specific *oi*,¹ which is modified by the executives' intention so that it serves to meet organizational objectives. Despite these intentions, *oi* is a construction process that individ-

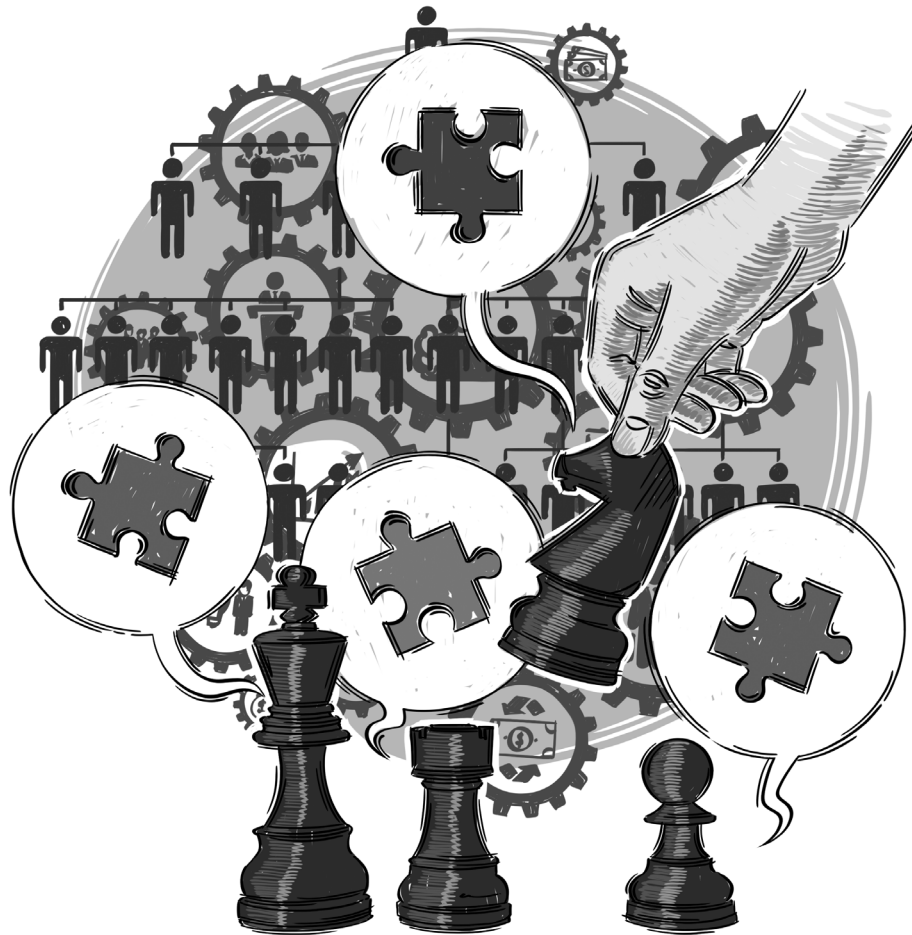
uals carry out from their experience and in which different components intervene and mix in order to constitute what *oi* represents for individuals. These components are the recognition that is anchored in the past, the transcendence that seeks the future, and the security that holds the development of this process in the present.

The contribution of this paper is evidencing these components and explaining how they are articulated to build an *oi*. As discussed in the background, it is difficult to find in the literature on this subject an analysis of the process and, thus, of the components involved in *oi* construction. Emphasis has been placed on this topic with the purpose of encouraging research works that delve into this topic and show the construction process as such. To this end, the paper is divided into four sections, in addition to the introduction. The first section presents the research background and the conceptual framework (the latter conceptualizes and theoretically delimits the three components—recognition, transcendence, and security—that will later be developed based on the data gathered). The second section explains the methodological aspects and describes the emerging categories that came up. The third section analyzes the three components and their articulations. Finally, the last section discusses the results and reflects on the implications of this study for organizational studies.

Background and conceptual framework

oi has been studied by social sciences such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, and anthropology. In fact, it could be said that *oi* finds in them disciplinary foundations that will later allow it to reach the organizational sphere. Along with this, and thanks to the development it has achieved over the last years, there are three paradigms or conceptions about what *oi* is: (1) the essentialist paradigm of social actors, (2) the social construction paradigm, and (3) the linguistic-discursive paradigm. Each of these paradigms has its own understanding of *oi*: a set of characteristics that identify these conceptions, a device for cognitive elaboration, and a continuously narrated argument (Harquail & King, 2010). In addition to the above, analysis perspectives such as narration and discourse, identity construction, regulation and resistance, and other minor perspectives including stability and change, *oi* and psychoanalysis, contractions and conflicts, among others, are identified (Gonzales-Miranda, Gentilin, & Ocampo-Salazar, 2014). For the purposes of this study, *oi* is conceived within the social construction paradigm and from the identity construction perspective. Thus, this section will focus on this delimitation, emphasizing identity construction processes as such, given that this is the subject matter of this study.

¹ It is worth mentioning that part of the results of this research were published in Gonzales-Miranda (2016). This work highlighted *oi* as a liminal space, but its components were not developed. The current paper focuses on such components and delves into their articulation, which is reflected in the background and the conceptual framework—structured and developed to analyze such composition.



oi construction is an ongoing and iterative cognitive process embodied by the employees, who draw on multiple modalities to assimilate the situation of the organization, with the ability to approach it in different ways through information that evokes, in turn, different perspectives on that experience (Harquail & King, 2010; Baltà, 2019). The construction of an oi by a member of the organization consists in processing, examining, interpreting, and expressing the embodied information, which is formal and informal, official and unofficial, symbolic and material; as well as the information that is shared is collective, interpersonal, and specific to that individual. Similarly, the individual's oi conceptualization is based not only on physical stimuli and experiences, but also on socially constructed habits and intentional managerial actions to produce certain beliefs about what an organization is (Baltà, 2019; Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994; Humphreys & Brown, 2002a).

The identity approach in the organizational context, as *perfection*, extends to the theorization of identity as a process of *becoming* (Chia, 1996; Tsoukas & Chia, 2002), which suggests that, instead of being ontologically certain, identity arises from the organizational process (Clegg, Rhodes,

& Kornberger, 2007; Echeverri, 2017). In this sense, it can be understood that individuals identify themselves with the organization; however, the level or degree of identification cannot be considered as something systemic, but as a process of formation and configuration within the complex framework of structures, subjectivities, and actions, allowing possible reconfigurations to take codes from previous identities that have a connotation of autonomy in its restructuring, not because of the willfulness of the agents but because of the changes in practices and structures (Sainsaulieu, 1996).

In consequence, the constructivist vision of identity implies the negotiation, by its members, of the shared meanings of *what we are* for the organization, paying attention to the interpretive schemes that the members collectively construct to give meaning to their organizational experience (Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000; Whetten, 2006). Ravasi and Schultz (2006) noted that this vision implies an emphasis on the meaning construction processes associated with the social construction of identity as meaning and meanings of structures that are negotiated intersubjectively among the members of the organization; this vision

even lends itself to preserve it from expectations resulting from external pressures (Schreiter & Ravasi, 2018).

For their part, Haslam, Cornelissen, and Werner (2017) reviewed the metatheories on *OI* and created an integrative social interactionist model in which *OI* is understood as the result of the recursive interaction between the processes of identity consensualization and contestation that tend to have dynamic (bottom-up and top-down) tensions.

Accordingly, it can be said that *OI* is progressive, complex, recursive, reflective, and in permanent construction (Ybema *et al.*, 2009) and negotiated by the members of the organization through their interactions with each other and with the participation of interested external parties (Hatch & Schultz, 2002; Coupland & Brown, 2004), putting aside the pretensions of rigid linearity and causality to open spaces to understand the complexity of their construction characterized by discursive and emergent aspects and immersed in a continuous process of reconstruction, so that stability will be a momentary achievement or a resistant fiction (Simpson & Carroll, 2008).

In this regard, diverse studies have been conducted with *OI* as the theoretical framework, but focused on different subject matters that include the founders' perspective (Anglin *et al.*, 2017; Rodrigues & Child, 2008), the negotiations at different levels (Ybema *et al.*, 2009), the complaints about the decisions of the organization as an entity (Whetten, 2006; Whetten & Mackey, 2002), and the managerial identity (Mantere & Whittington, 2020), among other topics.

Miscenko and Day (2016) reviewed the conceptual and empirical literature on work identities and found that *OI* is the most popular type of identity at the collective level, being widely studied regarding its background, outcomes, and interaction effects. However, some issues related to identity development over time and the way in which *OI* is operated and assessed have been little addressed (Foreman & Whetten, 2016; Araci, 2019; Resende, Demo, & Nascimento, 2019).

Thus, despite the existence of a series of studies on *OI* construction (e.g., Brown & Lewis, 2011; Coupland & Brown, 2004; Denissen, 2010; Fiol, 2002; Gonzales-Miranda & Uribe-Correa, 2018; Hinsley, 2017; Humphreys & Brown, 2002b; Madsen, 2016; Pendse & Ojha, 2017, among others) and the fact that some researchers deal with some of the dimensions of identity formation in organizations (Clegg *et al.*, 2007; Corley & Gioia, 2004; Czarniawska & Wolff, 1998), there are not thorough studies about the way *OIs* are formed in their beginning (Gioia, Price, Hamilton, & Thomas, 2010). For these authors, only three works have studied *OI* formation *per se*: Czarniawska and Wolff (1998), Clegg *et al.* (2007), and Corley and Gioia (2004). Each of these

studies addresses only some aspects of *OI* construction, but, as a whole, they are a good starting point—apart from recent research works, some of them already mentioned, that put such construction process aside—for a more holistic consideration of *OI* construction phenomenon.

Czarniawska and Wolff (1998) studied two universities. One of them achieved success since it managed to acquire an identity in tune with its institutional environment; it was therefore recognized as *one of us* by the other universities in the region. The other university did not receive such recognition and remained a stranger in its institutional context. This comparison does not deal with the details of the *OI* formation process that took place between them, but offers some clues about two important aspects. Firstly, the cases suggest that new organizations may try to imitate existing ones. Secondly, the way new organizations present themselves to their external audiences may be critical, not for the formation of their identities, but for their survival.

Similarly, Clegg *et al.* (2007) stated that *OI* construction takes place in a broader context than that of the industry where the organization competes, so *OI* is defined in relation to those that are rivals and those that are not. Based on their study on the development of companies in the coaching business, these authors argued that members of organizations commit themselves to *OI* construction works not for their own good, but to facilitate the legitimacy formation. Their findings suggest that the resolution of ambiguity is an important part of *OI* formation process.

Corley and Gioia (2004) studied a company that tried to consolidate as an independent entity after being ranked among the top 100 companies by Fortune magazine. The authors found that facing the problem of its ambiguity and defining its competitive domain were essential for understanding *OI*. They also found that the attempts to follow leaders, the choice of new models for the industry, the discrepancies between the identity and the external construction of the image were significant factors for establishing *OI*.

These three studies on *OI* formation suggest that the participation process requires a receptive external context in order to achieve legitimacy through mimetic methods and construct some dimensions of distinctive nature in the organizational field. These conclusions are closely related to research works that suggest the importance of belonging to groups, industries, or organizations, since identity attains greater legitimacy within broader contexts (Suddaby & Greenwood, 2005).

Therefore, Foreman, Whetten, and Mackey (2012) allude to the legitimacy and reputation of the organization in terms of evaluative statements on the suitability of *OI* characteristics (central, durable, and distinctive) in relation to the

social requirements from which they are assessed and the specific expectations of the organization's (internal and external) audiences regarding its behavior. In this way, legitimacy will be related to the evaluation criteria established by other organizations, as categorical requirements to belong to the group of companies of which they are members, whereas reputation corresponds to the organizational expectations of individuals. The authors call it *oi's* multi-level property, which shows the tension for the differences existing between the organizational objectives and the individual expectations of the members in the identity construction process.

The results of the research presented in this paper go deeply into this field of *oi* and aim at understanding this matter as an ongoing construction process that involves both external and internal actors (Aracı, 2019; Oliver & Vough, 2019). This research places relevant considerations regarding the role of the organizations of origin (*oos*) from which individuals who currently work at the studied organization come, since they are constantly evaluating the legitimacy and the reputation of the current organization they work for in contrast to that from which they come.

Given that the results of the research confirm that the components of the identity construction process are *recognition*, *transcendence*, and *security*, it is necessary to briefly conceptualize them in this section. To this end, social sciences—specifically philosophy and anthropology—were used to define concepts, extend understanding, and establish relationships with the identity construction process in the organizational context. This not only favored the analysis of data, but also became one of the relevant contributions of this study. It should be noted that such categories emerged after data analysis, but were placed in this section to give clarity to the document.

Recognition

The recognition topic has been addressed by the current director of the so-called Frankfurt School, Axel Honneth, who criticizes recognition and the possibilities of considering it an ideology. Honneth (2006, pp. 129-130) states that this term has been used with a merely rhetorical and substitutive purpose, making it "an instrument of symbolic politics, whose underground function is to integrate individuals or social groups into the dominant social order through the suggestion of a positive image of themselves." Thus, social recognition will only serve to generate attitudes that conform to the system, strengthening submission through mutual recognition.

Honneth's proposal, therefore, is based on the possibility of a rational and appropriate way of recognition that consists

in publicly asserting, in a performative way, valuable qualities already existing in human beings. In the words of Kant (1999), recognizing others means perceiving qualities that intrinsically motivates us to behave not in an egocentric manner but in accordance with their purposes, desires, or needs. This is how recognition must constitute a moral action, since it is determined by the value of other people. The recognition behavior is oriented not according to one's own purposes, but according to the evaluative qualities of others.

It is clear that for Honneth the forms of social recognition cannot have only one ideological function. Ideologies of recognition provide the emotional disposition to perform the expected tasks and obligations without resistance. These persuasion systems must meet the following conditions in order to not be considered ideologies: (1) the quality must express the positive value of a subject or group of subjects, excluding those discriminatory, and therefore exclusive, statements; (2) the analyzed persuasion systems must be worthy of credit for the people affected, since the performative function is lost when individuals do not find any good reason to identify with the value statement current for them—there is a criterion of credibility; (3) value statements must be contrasting, that is, in each case, they must express new values or specific capacities (Honneth, 2006, pp. 140-142). Honneth adds a fourth aspect of vital importance to the conditions described above: (4) "The recognition should not be exhausted in mere words or symbolic manifestations, but should be supported by actions: an act of recognition is in some way incomplete if it does not lead to behaviors that effectively bring to light the articulated value" (2006, p. 146).

In the Latin American context, the recognition topic is tied to the critical conception of modernity (Dussel, 2000; Echeverría, 1989; 1996; Gandler, 2012; Oliva-Mendoza, 2013; 2016), which has led to consider it as a fundamental problem for the definition of the "Latin American identity" (Dussel, 2000). In this sense, Bolívar Echeverría's proposal stands out concretely, which distinguishes four *ethe* of capitalist modernity: realist, romantic, classic, and baroque. The four *ethe* favor recognition or ignorance, distancing or participation regarding the implicit contradictions of capitalism (Echeverría, 1996). This author adds that modern *ethe* constitute social life in tune with historical decantation; each *ethos* "thus has had its own way of acting on society and a preferential social dimension from where the *ethos* has expanded its action" (Echeverría, 1989, p. 32).

Gandler (2012) complements Echeverría's perspective and states that there are aspects of the realist, romantic, and classic *ethe* in Honneth's theory of recognition. However, this theory is limited because it does not perceive the

different forms of modernity. Furthermore, Gandler (2012) adds that the "baroque form of coexistence is 'letting each other live'... knowing that real understanding and, therefore, real recognition, is not possible under the conditions provided by the competition society as an omnipresent rule of social organization" (p. 62). Accordingly, he considers that the baroque ethos distances itself from the ideal of "recognition," since this ethos favors forms of coexistence other than that of valuing others.

Transcendence

The conceptualization of this category was addressed from Marcel Mauss's proposal (2009) known as *giving-receiving-repaying*. In his *Essay on the gift. Forms and functions of exchange in archaic societies*, this author delves into the gift and its repayment. Thus, he reflects on economic anthropology, showing that the *gift* is agonistic, because the commercial relation creates a binding social bond for those who receive it. In other words, the gift creates social ties that *bind* people who receive the gift. What is the rule of law and interest imposed on archaic societies according to which the gift received must be returned? What power resides in the thing given that causes its donee to reciprocate it? Mauss suggests that the thing offered has a spirit; therefore, it is an obligation between spirits (between the souls of the people involved in the exchange), because offering something to someone is offering something of one's own, something of one's own soul. Receiving something from someone means assenting to the spiritual essence of his soul.

The thing given or received is not inert. It grants a special power. It is alive and often personified. It strives to produce its return to the original place or some equivalent to replace it (Mauss, 2009). According to the author's reflections, the gift cannot be rejected because that rejection would reveal the fear of having to return it and, therefore, the receiver would run the risk of being socially humiliated until such exchange is carried out; moreover, he would be declaring himself defeated beforehand, although in some cases he would be considered victorious or invincible. "The obligation of worthy return is imperative."

Godelier's (1996) work introduces a critical view of Mauss's proposal. Although the gift theory focuses on archaic societies, Godelier takes modern society as framework and suggests a fourth obligation: "keeping-for-giving and giving-for-keeping." The author emphasizes that, in social life, "there are some things which must be kept and not given. These things that are kept—valuables, talismans, knowledge, rites—affirm deep-seated identities and their continuity over time" (Godelier, 1996, p. 33). In other

words, although these goods become gifts, they are not disconnected from their original owners; they are goods inherited by their ancestors and were given by the gods, which raises the notion of "sacred," that is, that they can be possessed, but not appropriated. They are inalienable. Godelier adds that the strategies of giving and keeping complement each other and are interdependent, since the different identities are hierarchically constituted and lead to a process of production and reproduction of hierarchies between individuals, groups, or societies.

Security

Bédard (2004) proposes conceiving the organization as a system or as a whole that rests on three pillars or essential and complementary functions: (1) production and creation, (2) protection and security, and (3) government and general interest. For purposes of this research, it is pertinent to delve into the second pillar.

An organization is not only a set of departments that perform a specific function. Each organization is presented as a social group with the will to resist or eliminate internal or external threats. Bédard (2004) states that the general meaning of the organization is protection and security, aiming at guaranteeing the group's permanence based on these two aspects. In this sense, security, from the point of view of the organization, should favor and ensure "a humane environment free of fear, anguish, distress, or concern caused by the feeling of danger or risk. In a positive sense, this general function designates any activity that focuses on consolidating and reinforcing the social group, both internally and externally" (p. 98).

In this regard, it is relevant to make reference to Ashforth and Schinoff (2016), who state that individuals formulate their identity narratives by connecting their present, past, and expected future. If said identity narratives are socially validated, individuals get to feel safer and strengthen the or construction process by being more receptive to the executives' instructions to define themselves as members of a group. Consequently, identity construction takes place through feelings or affections, behaviors, and thoughts or cognitions (Brown, 2020).

To conclude this section, it is relevant to define *MMs*. According to Mintzberg (1983, p. 31), they "are the managers who stand in the hierarchy of line authority from the CEO down to the first-line supervisors to whom the operators formally report." This spatial image of the "center" evokes a representation of the confusion, complexity, and ambiguity of the middle line. The middle thus becomes an unenviable place, since it is localized and essentially lacks

power and control (Ainsworth, Grant, & Iedema, 2009). Therefore, not only are there certain ambiguities regarding the oi construction process from the theoretical point of view, but also the actors (MMS), in their function within the organization, play an enviable role to understand how they build an oi.

Methodological Aspects

The research consisted in a case study conducted in Comercial Nutresa S.A.S. (CN), a Colombian food company engaged in the sale and distribution of non-perishable products that belongs to Grupo Nutresa (GN), one of the most important groups in Colombian food industry. The company was created in 2010, integrating the sales and distribution areas of some companies with great experience and recognition of GN, thus structuring an organization with an identity created from others, *i.e.*, the members of this organization come from other oos that are part of GN.

The business model of CN consists of three channels for product commercialization: traditional, self-service, and large chains. These are supported by five management areas: Commercial Logistics, Customer Development, Commercial Services, Organizational Culture and Development, and Commercial Planning. The incorporation of the new sales company required a negotiation, specifically a re-negotiation with the unions, of the benefits that the employees enjoyed in the oos. This necessarily led to carry out a double bargaining exercise of collective accord and collective agreement, which accounts for the great influence of oos in the creation process of the new company and, therefore, its oi.

The objective of the research was to understand the oi construction process of the MMS of this company. In consequence, the work focused on the CN's administrative units, called commercial fronts (CFs), in each of the Colombian regions where they operate. This body is made up of a representative (MM) of each of the company's management areas that, at the same time, embody the functional areas of the organization. It is worth specifying that the actors and the authorities of the organization granted the corresponding permissions to publish the results of this research.

The process included thirty-one semi-structured interviews with MMS in eight regions of the Colombian territory where the studied organization operates, five semi-structured interviews with executives, three non-participant observations, and various official documents. The interviews were mainly conducted with executives and MMS in order to obtain information on the institutionalization process of oi and on MMS' construction of meaning within this process.

Three reports were prepared based on the non-participant observations developed in an activity called *Deployment of the Strategy*, which took place in the cities of Medellín and Barranquilla. Documentary review was used to obtain information on how institutionalization processes are implemented in the organization. For this reason, emphasis was placed on official documents that reflected such intention. The same preliminary categories (pre-categories) were used for the three information gathering techniques (semi-structured interview, participant observation, and documentary review).

For its analysis and interpretation, information was systematized using Atlas.ti—a specialized program for qualitative research. It is worth mentioning that interpretive methods such as that used in this research did not start their development with a preconceived theory. In that sense, the concepts or hypotheses are elaborated based on the data. A fundamental characteristic of this methodological approach is its circular nature (Flick, 2008a, 2008b), forcing the researcher to address the entire research process from the new steps and their relationship between the interpretation of the data and the selection of the empirical material.

In this way, some pre-categories were created based on the theoretical framework, whose conceptualization was the result of the document review and the first approaches to the problem raised. These pre-categories were useful for the construction of the emerging categories, which constitute the findings of the research, since they were created from the data. The purpose of introducing the preliminary and emerging categories was to highlight their importance and the opportunities that they offer to reflect and elevate the knowledge acquired during the research to a theoretical level, without this implying the emergence of a new theory on oi. The only intention is to present the results of the analysis made, in order to show—and justify at the same time—the relationships explained in the findings section, and the possibility that these offer to develop similar research works in other organizational realities. Table 1 presents the preliminary and emerging categories.

Table 1 shows all the categories designed for this research classified into three subgroups: *preliminary*, *emerging*, and *main emerging* categories. The first subgroup has been intuitively constructed by the researcher based on the documentary review and the first approaches to the case study. The second subgroup corresponds to the emerging or interpretive categories that are the result of data analysis. It is the set of meanings that the researcher has managed to synthesize in a phrase or word that resignifies reality based on interpretations derived from the data collected.

Table 1.
Preliminary and emerging categories.

Middle Managers (MMs)	
Categories	
1. Preliminary categories	2. Emerging categories
1.1. OI of MMs	2.1. Personal/professional/organizational history
Attributes of Comercial Nutresa	Early identification
Giving-receiving-repaying	Family motivation
Criticism of the administration model	Resignations
Discrediting	Relation to work
Power and hierarchy	2.2. Organizations of origin (oos)
1.2. Personal identity	Recognition
Family stability	Detachment
Personal recognition	Adaptation
Personal training	<i>Relations</i>
1.3. Professional identity	Paternalism
Professional stability	Performance
Transcendence	3. Main emerging categories
Professional training	Recognition
Professional recognition	Transcendence
<i>Role of the MMs</i>	Security
• Criticism of the head office	
• Need for autonomy	
• Relation to the strategy	
• Alignment-institutionalization	

Source: author.

They are given a new meaning thanks to the sense that social actors and the researcher himself construct in the analysis process.

Thus, there are three pre-categories: OI of MMs, personal identity, and professional identity. The first one alludes to the OI that MMs have built throughout their history in the organization; it does not refer to the OI that is being built, but to the identity aspects that individuals bring with them. The second corresponds to the personal matters of the individual and the third relates to the development of the profession that individuals deploy within the organization. The construction of an OI takes into consideration the interaction of these three identities.

In addition, some emerging categories have been highlighted and classified as main emerging categories. They represent the components through which MMs construct an

OI in CN. In this sense, they express the findings of the research that is the object of this article. Their construction was based on the preliminary and emerging categories, the latter being transversal to the process. For this reason, the emerging categories are no less important for the results of the research, but they contribute at a different level to that of the main categories.

It is, therefore, imperative to point out that the main emerging categories are not stagnant elements unconnected to each other. On the contrary, they are intertwined and closely related. This is important because, in order to delve into these categories, the analysis was made separately and, subsequently, their integration and relationships were explained. The following section presents the components that, together, make up the OI from MMs' perspective and that, in turn, become the findings of the research presented in this paper.

Findings

Every main emerging category presented below is analyzed, depending on the case, from a specific theoretical conceptualization already discussed. Consequently, based on this conceptualization and in line with the objectives of the research, the corresponding elaboration process is carried out. The purpose of the emerging theory is not to reconcile the different theoretical disciplines, but to use diverse concepts or theoretical frameworks to delve into the problem raised and enrich its understanding, building bridges and establishing new relationships for the study of organizations.

Ideological Recognition that Clings to the Past

It is important to determine whether recognition for the MMs of CN is an ideological construction with which the company expects that individuals have an emotional structure that drives and allows them to fulfill their commitments and adopt a series of specific behaviors while mitigating resistance, in such a way that they are forced to properly fit in a system established beforehand. Therefore, the conditions or requirements suggested by Axel Honneth (2006) are evaluated to consider recognition as an ideology.

Furthermore, the value that CN executives show to MMs is directed to state that they are indispensable for the business operation. There is thus a reification of the individuals as a result of clear instrumental rationality, which confines them to an efficient environment within the system gears. However, value statements are positive in the sense that they encourage MMs to perform their roles, that is, they

are incentives that drive them to complete their tasks. Although there are encouragement words and expressions that highlight their skills regarding their disposition and great incidence in the strategy of the company, the reason of this type of expressions is based on a model that is partially shared by all the executives, which means that it does not have the approval and credibility of those who express such value assertions. Consequently, it translates into a verbal support based on an ambiguous—and in some cases fictional—belief.

The second condition demands that statements are worthy of credit and meet the criterion of credibility. This is, precisely, what remains in question as a result of the ambiguity of the governance model of CN that contradicts the discourse professed by the management. In other words, the search for the MMs to have a nonexistent autonomy, the lack of structural and strategic conditions of the positions to make democratic decisions, the imbalance of experience, and the inappropriate wage of the members of the CF, among other aspects, make that the credibility, with regard to the skills to execute the business strategy, as well as the responsibility in terms of the model efficiency, falls into discredit.

The third condition aims for an effective contrast to show a difference between the previous and current positive statements. In this regard, MMs get disappointed when they remember the relationship with their oos and the positive recognitions received from them. Although there are positive statements that recognize the autonomy of the subjects, they are not significant compared with those expressed by the companies of origin. Furthermore, for MMs the old statements were more valuable. In this sense, recognition clings to the past, not to the present, as a result of the relationship with the new company.

Lastly, the fourth condition becomes the support or guarantee for such positive statements on the individual to be really put into practice or for their declarations to have assertive meaning in reality and become reliably concrete. The change should become evident in the creation of recognition spaces within the organization, aspect that is not confirmed. The spaces or processes defined by CN, such as career plans and hiring policies, suggest the lack of a structure, policy, or strategy that allows the positive values given to MMs to materialize effectively.

In this way, the analysis based on the proposal by Honneth shows that the recognition provided by the executives has an ideological touch and, at the same time, intertwines with a modern ethos of ignorance, distancing from valuing others. The aim is then to constitute a subject in agreement with a governance structure created for productive

efficiency purposes. The value statements on MMs' actions and skills do not aim for their wellbeing and, therefore, do not constitute actual recognition of who they are, but they serve as an identity instrumentalization device. Accordingly, such recognition does not bear relation to the sense of the concept defined herein nor is it a respect category; it thus becomes a systematic alienation instrument.

Moreover, it is worth noting that it is not that the coexistence of MMs at CN configures a constant tension or that a respect and tolerance environment is not fostered. It is only that the results show that the performative recognition comes from the oos, from the immediate past when the results of MMs' actions favored authentic and clear aspects of a positive, nonideological recognition.

Transcendence that Configures the Future

Transcendence is the second main emerging category and a critical component in the identity construction process of MMs. It is formed by two nuances. One, in relation to the *activities* that MMs carry out and, in consequence, it is the *work* that seeks to remain in time. The other represents the *relationships* and *image* that is expected to leave in the company as legacy. The latter is connected to the MMs' desire to leave their footprint as members of the organization.

Transcendence means that the MMs' career is taken into account and remains inscribed, thanks to its impact, in the history of the organization. The actions performed by individuals entail a transformation in the concrete reality that circumscribes them. There is thus a glimpse of a dynamic that seeks, through action, the transcendence of the individual. This process of conquering the reality allows individuals to *fulfill themselves* from their own actions. However, the key of these transcendental executions focuses not only on the very actions and the desire that triggers them, but also on the driving force or the cause that produces them. The recognition received by the oos drives MMs' actions to transcend as a gesture of gratitude for the opportunities received in their processes of training and living. This is based on the fact that they received something sacred, inalienable, and, therefore, non-negotiable from the oos, which remains in the memory and life of MMs. In this sense, the cause or driving force that inspires transcendence lies in the recognition obtained along the work history and it is expressed in the need to reward the achievements.

Indeed, transcendence in the *giving-receiving-repaying* process refers to the relation that MMs confer to the imperative obligation to reward the opportunities provided by the oos for opening the doors to work and thrive as individuals.

This type of reward manifests in a commitment of MMs to the organization, in a forced responsibility at the company. This turns into a feeling of debt, but with the characteristic of trying to repay or reward in greater amount (which not only refers to money) what has been received.

On the one hand, this category relates to the oos, to the personal and professional history of the individual beside the oos, given that the reward is not in memory of CN as such. On the other hand, this category is based on the conditions that allowed many of the MMs to have access to a better standard of living, which refers not only to the occupational and financial aspects but also to the professional training opportunities, the building of a family, the knowledge of other cultures and regions, among others. These considerations lead MMs to give back what they have received, as an expression of appreciation for the possibilities and opportunities. The passage from one quality of life status to another is linked to stability, which they appreciate. A correspondence takes place—where *I give you* and *you give me*—through which what is received is amply rewarded. This restitution, as a transcendental action, manifests mainly through teaching when, for instance, the MMs want to share their experiences and help with that to build the generational replacement. Elaboration on each one of these elements is presented below.

Giving: It refers to the aspects that MMs have given to the oos. It entails actions characterized by the personal sacrifices that they had to make, such as the postponement of their personal plans or the acceptance of their transfer to other regions for the sake of the company; the time of their service at the company, understood as loyalty; and the confidence in the business model effectiveness, reason why they did not accept other job opportunities during the process of establishing CN.

Receiving: It groups what the MMs have accepted from the oos. MMs note the professional training received from their bosses, the formal workshops, and the experience. This last aspect stands out since they are proud to be hired by any of the companies of CN, given the prestige this firm entails in the Colombian society.

Repaying: It has to do with the reward that the MMs give as compensation for what they have received. Repaying refers to the transcendental actions that they expect to give back to CN. As a particular aspect of these actions, MMs do not aim for any type of additional reward, they reciprocate for free and generously. In other words, they are willing to sacrifice for the sake of the company, to give more than what is expected from their duties.

Experience transcends consecutively the vague but real borders. Made up by the personal, professional, and

organizational history, experience is a transcendental movement. However, the transcendence of the being cannot be unveiled or proved in an isolated and simultaneous way, ignoring the particular reality by means of the actions that, in the end, help to constitute this same reality; in other words, transcendence happens in the experiential immanence, in the same way that the consubstantiality of the experiential world essentially transcends oneself. Therefore, transcendence takes place unsystematically in the daily experience, without explicitly turning into an object that can be experienced. Nevertheless, as long as this transcendental event becomes constitutively part of the realization of the experience, this experience becomes a transcendental reality. Along with that, transcendence suggests a sense of durability and, in consequence, the action and impact that this generates on individuals manifest in a plan that tends to perpetuate.

Security that Maintains the Construction of an Organizational Identity in the Present

CN must provide the terms, spaces, agreements, and other aspects to ensure that the MMs participate in the construction process of a new oi. Without security, the development of such construction is thwarted because the individuals' purpose is integrity and continuity of employment. Some activities that respond to the mentioned need of security, which were present or implemented, include:

- A collective agreement.
- A wage plan balanced according to the best employment conditions of the oos.
- The promise of no workers dismissed after the creation of CN.
- Assistance by the Culture and Development area to the CFS of the regions to support adaptation processes.
- The implementation of a series of training and personal knowledge workshops, as well as training promoting dialog and understanding between the employees and the teams.
- The commitment to foster promotions within the company.

Despite the above, one year after the creation of CN, around fifty MMs were dismissed in four years, which led the remaining MMs to doubt and distrust the company. The security broke and this caused resentment and disappointment in CN because, from MMs' point of view, the promise of dismissing no one from the organization after its creation as a result of the integration of sales and distribution departments of some companies of CN was not kept.

Moreover, a series of events that reduced the security and, therefore, the MMs' credibility of CN occurred. In this way, several aspects that characterize the identity construction process in relation to security can be identified:

- Personal and professional aspects take place at an individual level, but aspects that are strictly organizational take place at a social or group level, since the organization defines and implements them. Thus, the security category combines or includes two levels of analysis: personal and organizational.
- Security favors and supports the set of fabrics of meanings that are involved in the construction of a personal and professional identity in the light of the organizational life of the individual. In that sense, security guarantees the identity process and supports it over time.
- There is an organizational balance structured by the existing tension for aspiring to keep the personal and professional aspects and the exclusively organizational aspects aligned. It is clear that the individuals prioritize the personal aspects closely linked to the professional ones over the organizational aspects, hence the struggle. The individuals will be subjected to different forces and strategies that steer them to meet the objectives of the company. From their relative and delimited freedom, the MMs opt for making the appropriate decisions to avoid that the strictly personal aspects get thwarted or be at risk of not being completed. In case that the personal aspects are not ensured, this balance will break.
- Security favors the creation of bonds that maintain the relationship balanced and prevent the individuals from breaking the employment relationship. In this manner,

security fosters job stability and reduces employee turnover, establishing a specific way of operating each organization.

- What the MMs have built along their careers and have tried to figure out about themselves finds a space in the organization to understand it further. Although the levels of development and expansion are different and many times the degrees of awareness are not the same, there is a personal knowledge process that is necessarily tied to the organization, due to the close relationship that the individual builds with it.
- Security ensures the continuity of the oi construction. In addition, it prevents the recognition from becoming an ideology, when it shows, through specific actions by the organization, that the positive statements encourage change and are supported in practice.
- Profession is in itself an identity construction given that technical knowledge requires recognition and legitimization of a particular community.

In summary, the constructs described above are the components that, in their relations, structure and favor the existence of an oi: a recognition that clings to the past, a transcendence that seeks to realize in the future, and a security that ensures and supports the process in the present. This process is represented in figure 1.

In this sense, oi is a construction process that is strongly connected to a time matter on the one hand, that is, the process necessarily requires considering time-related criteria (past, present, and future) that greatly affect its construction; it is a purely dynamic, permanent, active process. On the other hand, this construction process has and requires the consideration of personal aspects that

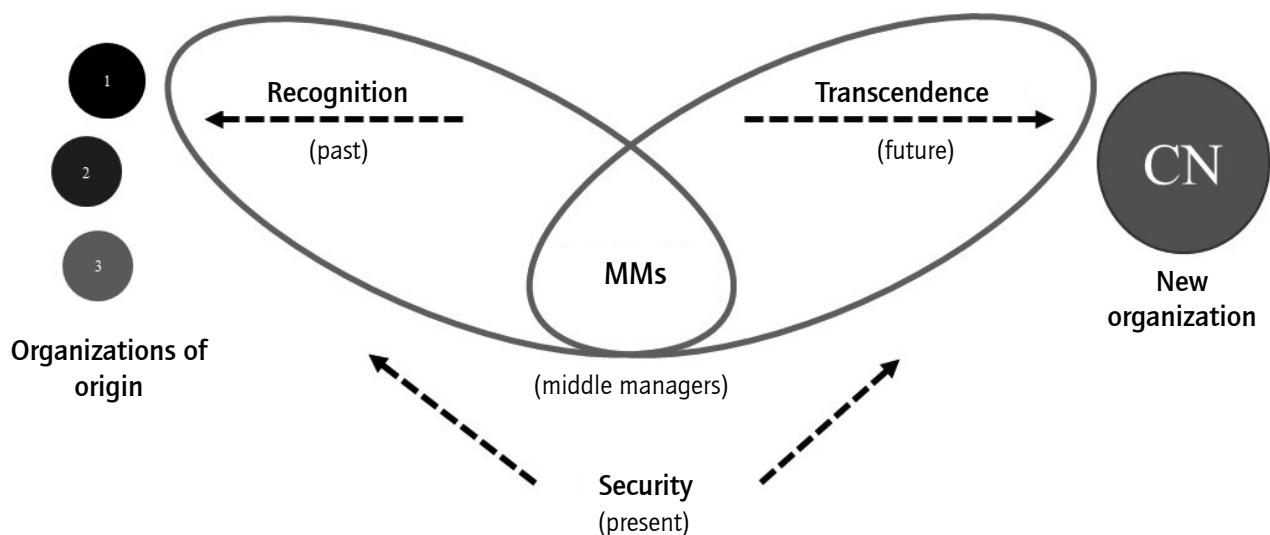


Figure 1. Components of the identity construction process. Source: author.

intertwine in the organizational field and take precedence over it, being difficult to predict, let alone to control. Thus, there are forces that favor tensions where recognition remains in the past, in a memory that honors remembrances with some degree of nostalgia and certainties that generate trust and strengthen self-esteem, which encourage the hope of overcoming them in the future. The search, but above all its realization, will be satisfied in the future, according to the possibilities provided by the new organization where the individual works. In this manner, the transcendental component starts with some expectations to be fulfilled, which become a criterion to value the new company and, in turn, the driving force that encourages actions leading to fulfill them.

The results of this research suggest the possibility that these dynamics of recognition and transcendence, which are graphically directed towards opposite routes, create a tension that grows in an environment of relative insecurity. Furthermore, the value statements on the actions and tasks performed are an impassable and immanent matter in the individual who expects reward for the work done. Nonetheless, this does not occur immediately; the individuals are subjected not only to the verification of their actions, but also to the development of the interpersonal relationships and the trust needed for that. Likewise, the actions involve considering the near future in terms of a life plan that aspires to the durability of the work carried out and its impact on the organization. In this sense, it is a process that takes time while such aspirations are met and consolidated as a reference point that guides the behavior and directs the efforts. As in every process, things do not always turn out as planned; this entails a degree of insecurity and risk for the individuals, since the conditions for their development do not always meet the expectations and promises.

Accordingly, individuals take part in a duality that causes tension. It is, on the one hand, the search for a real and non-ideological recognition that occurs in the past and, on the other hand, the hope of a future that drives and guides their actions forward. This tension places individuals in a situation of uncertainty, requiring the existence of certain organizational conditions that guarantee that the tension does not end up "breaking" and frustrating the construction of a specific *oi*. This is where security emerges to support the process, ensuring that the tension starts to dissipate and the process gradually develops. Security stabilizes the *construction process* by providing the individual with the appropriate conditions to conduct a proper process of adaptation and development. In consequence, security is crucial to avoid that the tension breaks the employment relationships and to favor the construction

of an *oi* that allows the individual to get fully engaged with the organization. It is a foreseeable and, arguably, normal process within organizations; it is not always conscious, but requires much attention and clarity to conveniently assist individuals in the identity construction process.

Discussion and Conclusions

The results of the research present three components in *oi* construction process. The identification of these categories is one of the main contributions of this study. The conceptualization of these components and the understanding of the construction process favor the approach to this social phenomenon more clearly and, therefore, provide better possibilities to assist the individuals from the management in organizations. Moreover, this paper dismisses the possibility to conceive the *oi* as a linear and static construction that considers affiliation and identification to be exempt from dissonances and resistances and, as a result, feasible to be built by the organization where the individual serves openly and without difficulties.

Recognition suggests the search for a positive, real, and concrete value statement that can be duly confirmed by actual actions. In the course of their lives, individuals require assertive statements about what they do, think, or feel, as a way to assert themselves in the world and build an identity of their own and of the organization. In this manner, although it begins with the recruitment of the individual, the *oi* is a story that is built on a personal and professional identity that has been in the making for a long time. This defines the possibilities of intervention as for the management that could be executed from organizations, since there are constitutive aspects of the *oi* to which the management will not have access and, consequently, will not be able to control or manipulate, since they are not subject to negotiation whatsoever, as they are inalienable.

Transcendence is related to the desire for the work to remain over time for leaving a legacy as representation of the activity developed. It is noteworthy that the repercussions of these executions are not restricted to the borders of the organization, given that *MMs* expect to overcome the limits that are exclusively organizational to leave their mark on the society. Thus, the construction of an *oi* goes beyond the organizational field. Security favors and supports the set of fabrics of meanings that are involved in the construction of a personal and professional identity in the light of the organizational life of the individual. In that sense, security guarantees the identity process and supports it over time; it is a task whose main responsible is the organization as such, beyond the influences and desires of the very individuals.

In this way, the process whereby an oi takes shape unfolds in a constant but unstable balance situation. The dynamics presented in this paper show a process characterized by the strengths that make up its development as such. The pressure that these components apply towards different directions, regardless of their magnitude, has to be balanced. If balance is not accomplished, the employment relationship breaks and the organization, as social process, is suspended.

The results of the research illustrate the comprehensive identity construction process. In this regard, the social phenomenon studied favors the understanding of the organization as a process and the way the components of its construction set up to configure a specific organizational reality. These results serve to analyze different organizations not with the purpose of universalizing these results but in order to have the possibility to analyze different realities. In that way, it is possible to adapt these components, restructure the definitions presented herein, and use them to analyze organizations in the field of oi.

There are limitations that open new research possibilities. First, the analysis is circumscribed to a particular organization, thus restricting the study; this is typical of the case study, which hinders the universalization of results. Second, the historical context, which strongly influences the analysis of the data, is limited to an organization that was recently incorporated, where the remembrances of the oos are still very present, reason why the construction of the oi of the new organization is still in its first steps. In this regard, it is possible to use these results to analyze other type of organizations that are in similar context and development circumstances. Third, the components described are created from the MMs, which suggests that, depending on the level and context to be analyzed in other organizations, these results could not apply. Lastly, and with regard to the aforementioned, the components resulting from the research are conditioned by a context, a theoretical framework, and a methodology. This indicates that the oi construction process of another organization may not relate to these results; however, it does not mean that what has been pointed out in this study does not have methodological rigor to support the results.

The field of oi is known and used as analysis framework in Europe and the United States, but the studies conducted from this theoretical framework are few in Latin America. The components explain the identity construction process and favor a new way of addressing it from management. At the same time, thanks to their clear and understandable nature, they can be used for other research works and consultancy processes. The integration of these concepts from

social sciences for conceptualization and analysis enriches the dialog with the administrative field.

The results of the research also allow outlining reflections related to the organization that can be understood as an ambiguous construction, where its semi-structured and undefined processes encourage its study thanks to the adaptation and adjustment process in which it constantly is involved. What is being organized or *organizing* favors many study and reflection possibilities, since the transition that the organization experiences facilitates the examination of its factors and components in the process that is to be structured.

In conclusion, based on the results of this research, the organization is the synthesis of the confluence in the present of a history that has passed and a history that is yet to happen. The experience of the present integrates a changing and dynamic reality of what was and what will be. In this sense, every study of a process that *has happened and is happening* finds in the experience of the present the point of analysis to understand a reality in constant transformation. The organization can be understood thus as an interweaving of past histories that structure, in the present, the future visions.

Disclosures

Authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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