

Project Summary

Heng (Alice) Xu

My thesis research is an in-depth cultural study of a biotechnology company I call BioCo (a pseudonym). I am interested in the identity work that the organization and its employees are engaged in. And the research question is how occupation and organization interweave to provide sources of identity for employees.

The issue of identity has been the area of pursuit for several disciplines including philosophy, sociology, and social psychology. Recent years have seen growing interest among organizational scholars on this topic as well (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Gioia & Thomas, 1996). This is in part related to the surging writing on organizational change in general. When organizations undergo significant changes, the issue of identity that underlies organizational life can no longer be taken for granted. Therefore, an understanding of identity work – how organizations and employees construct identity, how it permeates through everyday work, how it affects different occupational groups – is essential in understanding the organizational terrain nowadays characterized by constant changes.

The studies of occupational and organizational identity have often been unconnected because occupation and organization were largely treated as separate mechanisms of organizing. Over the years, however, scholars have been discussing occupation and organization as closely intersecting with one another in shaping how work gets done (Barley & Kunda, 2004; Van Maanen & Barley, 1984). Therefore what could contribute to the existent literature is a conceptual understanding of identity that incorporates both

elements from occupation and organization, and how they work together to shape employees' experience.

BioCo provides a good setting to develop such an understanding. The media and general public portray BioCo, as well as many others in the industry, as ruthless profit pursuers that charge extraordinary prices for their drugs. Within BioCo, however, an almost opposite identity is presented, that of a savior rescuing the lives of unfortunate patients. In the study, I seek to explore where this organizational savior identity comes from, and how it is maintained despite the contradictory rhetoric from external sources. At the same time, examinations of different groups within BioCo enable me to juxtapose organizational identity with occupational identity to form further interesting questions. For example, for groups with strong occupational identity, e.g. scientists, what is the role of organizational identity? For service groups like purchasing who lack a strong occupational identity, does the organizational goal then become an alternative source for identity? Why or why not?

My focus on identity in everyday work requires particular attention to details and often seemingly mundane aspects of organizational life. Consequently, I use an ethnographic method of both observation and interviews to collect data for my research question. I started my fieldwork in March 2005. During the beginning few months, I worked with a group of purchasers, followed selected projects, and observed their interaction with internal clients and external suppliers. Through these interactions, I quickly learned about many parts of BioCo because purchasers work with most other departments. Then, I conducted interviews with a variety of scientists, clinical researchers, administrative and managerial personnel. In addition, I collected external and

internal publications, attended employee orientations, company presentations, seminars, and participated in volunteer events. These fieldwork activities yielded data in the form of field notes, interview transcriptions, and documents. I will conduct a number of follow-up interviews to compliment my current data.

My preliminary analysis suggests that occupational and organizational identities play important role in employees' experience, and that the relationship between the two is complex. Strong occupational identity does not necessarily mean that there is no need for organizational identity. Scientists while embracing the science ethos appreciate an understanding of the organizational goals. Weak occupational identity, on the other hand, does not necessarily lead to reliance on organizational identity.

“Overhead” service groups often do not have adequate access to organizational rhetoric. Instead, they draw identity from the internal clients they support.

- Barley, S. R., & Kunda, G. (2004). *Gurus, hired guns, and warm bodies*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Dutton, J. E., & Dukerich, J. M. (1991). Keeping an eye on the mirror - image and identity in organizational adaptation. *Academy of Management Journal*, 34(3), 517-554.
- Elsbach, K. D., & Kramer, R. M. (1996). Members' responses to organizational identity threats: Encountering and countering the business week rankings. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 41(3), 442-476.
- Gioia, D. A., & Thomas, J. B. (1996). Identity, image, and issue interpretation: Sensemaking during strategic change in academia. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, 41(3), 370-403.
- Van Maanen, J., & Barley, S. R. (1984). Occupational communities: Culture and control in organizations. *Research in Organizational Behavior*, 6, 287-365.