Who Are We Now? Strategies for the Resolution of Identity Ambiguity

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Propósito Central do Trabalho:
Many of the changes that have become more and more commonplace in organizations consist of subtractive changes, defined as instances in which an important aspect or attribute of the work context is permanently and abruptly removed (Corley & Gioia, 2004). Examples of subtractive changes include corporate spin-offs, mass lay-offs, and radical technological shifts. In this paper I propose that subtractive changes will elicit the experience of identity ambiguity, understood here as the perceived loss of a strong target of identification, evoking confusion as to who individuals believe they are within their work context, and who they will be in the future (Corley & Gioia, 2004). While previous literature has addressed the general dynamics of identity transitions (Ashforth, 2001), it has not yet focused on the state of identity ambiguity as a specific mode of social identity resultant from subtractive change. In this paper it is also suggested that individuals will exhibit varying responses to identity ambiguity, and that an examination of these is critical to understanding the dynamics of an individual’s identity in situations of subtractive change. Thus, the goal of this paper is to increase our understanding of how identity ambiguity develops from subtractive change, and to examine the outcomes associated with this ambiguity. I propose that individuals will tend to respond to identity ambiguity in predictable ways, depending on the strength of their identification with the attributes of their original work context, the strength of perceived norms and expectations of their new situation, and the value they place on this new context.

Marco Teórico:
Identity Transitions and Processes of Identification and Deidentification Previous authors have defined identification as embracing a identity of a social context as one’s own and deidentification as the process of distancing oneself from a particular social or work identity (Ashforth, 2001; Ashforth, Harrison & Corley, 2008). Furthermore, identification with one’s work context is said to enable individuals to satisfy needs such as safety, affiliation, self-enhancement and meaning and is said to include both cognitive and emotional components (Ashforth et al., 2008). It has been proposed that when the organization undergoes significant change, individuals will tend to deidentify from the original context and reidentify with the new, changed organization. However, it has also been noted that when organizational members are very strongly identified with their organization they will not deidentify, which in turn might impede major organizational changes (Fiol, 2002). Subtractive change Subtractive change has been defined as that in which a concrete aspect of the work environment that individuals identify with is removed from the context or ceases to exist. Examples of these include corporate spinoffs, de-mergers, mass lay-offs, and the obsolescence of key technologies. These are therefore organizational elements that define one’s core profession, cultural norms and values or sense of self-efficacy and their loss is concrete and beyond the control of the vast majority of the individuals affected (Corley & Gioia, 2004). The consequences of subtractive changes to an individual’s organizational identification are inherently different from identity shifts that originate from voluntary and intra-psychic triggers (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Ashforth, 2001: 110-112). Previous research in the field of identification and career transitions has tended to focus primarily on the second case, however, while individuals engaged in self-initiated deidentification may believe that they have some degree of control regarding their situation, others facing subtractive change perceive the change as being involuntary and see themselves as having very little or no control over the external situation that prompted their need to deidentify. Identity Ambiguity and the Perceived “Absence” of Identity The concept of identity ambiguity was initially
proposed by Corley and Gioia (2004) to address dynamics at the organizational level of analysis. Differently from a situation of identity transition or identity conflict, the issue here is the lack of a sufficiently strong identity or the lack of clarity surrounding the meaning assigned to existing claims to identity. Previous authors have addressed similar concepts, such as identity liminality, defined as: “a reconstruction of identity (in which the sense of self is significantly disrupted) in such a way that the new identity is meaningful for the individual and their community” (Beech, 2011: 287). Both identity liminality and identity ambiguity are focused on the moment within an identity transition in which one senses an absence of a strong identity. However, identity ambiguity by definition is sparked by a concrete subtractive change, thus individuals have the perception that they have very little control over the process and goals of eventual reidentification. Liminality on the other hand, may be sparked by intrapsychic mechanisms and presupposes that there is a clear identity “end goal” in sight.

Resultados e contribuições do trabalho para a área:
Proposed Model I will now introduce a theoretical model that extends our understanding of the construct of identity ambiguity following subtractive change and proposes a typology of strategies that individuals are likely to undertake in response to identity ambiguity. In proposing this model, I assume that all individuals in a state of identity ambiguity will attempt to regain identification of some kind. Whether or not they succeed at this and the different facets this new identity assumes for each individual is argued to be a function of the interaction between three main forces: the level of identification with the original organization or work context prior to the onset of any major change, the strength of organizational and social norms that drive deidentification with the old identity and movement toward a new identity, and positive valuation of the new organization or context. Based on how they are affected by these forces, it is suggested that individuals will engage in specific strategies for attempting to cope with or resolve identity ambiguity. I furthermore suggest the following propositions: Proposition 1a.: The strategy chosen by individuals to resolve identity ambiguity depends on the strength of the organizational or social norms of the new situation they are in, so that the stronger these norms, the more likely they are to attempt to adopt an identity that conforms, or appears to conform, to such expectations. Proposition 1b: Positive valuation of the new work context will, when associated to a perception of strong social or organizational norms, enable reidentification. Proposition 2: The strategy chosen by individuals to resolve identity ambiguity depends on the strength of their identification to their work context prior to major subtractive change, so that the stronger their level of identification, the less likely individuals are to modify their identity in order to conform to new norms and expectations. Proposition 3: When organizational or social norms are strong, original social identification is weak, and individuals facing identity ambiguity value key attributes of the new context, they will tend to change their identity to conform to the new norms. Proposition 4: When new organizational or social norms and original identification are both strong, individuals will tend to maintain their identity but alter their image, as this decoupling will allow them to gain the approval of others while maintaining their strong identification. Proposition 5: When organizational or social norms are weak and original identification is strong, individuals will tend to maintain their identity despite major subtractive changes. Proposition 6: When organizational or social norms are weak and original identification is also weak, individuals will remain in a state of neutral identification. Conclusion This paper has proposed an explanatory model of how identity ambiguity manifests itself at the individual level of analysis and what motivates different strategies for overcoming identity ambiguity. Thus, it contributes to the literature on identity in three ways. First, it extends prior work on subtractive change and its effect on identity, a topic that is still at a preliminary stage of theoretical development (Ashforth, 2001; Corley & Gioia, 2004); second, it extends the
relatively novel concept of identity ambiguity beyond the study of organizations (Corley & Gioia, 2004) to the individual level of analysis; third, it proposes a testable typology of responses to identity ambiguity. Finally, an important implication of this paper is the notion that identity is a dynamic construct that can change in time from a situation of strong identification, to ambiguity, to several other possible states. Given the very rapid rate of changes in organizational, it is clear that such a view of identity as fluid, dynamic and complex is indeed relevant to our current understanding of individuals within organizations and work contexts in general.

Referências bibliográficas: