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## **Perceived Threats in Changing the Traits of Organizational Identity**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research documents the empirical results of intentional change in an organizational identity where resistance emerges. We develop and test a theoretical model describing why members of an organization in such situations of change perceive a threat of organizational identity traits. Research results illustrate that the essentiality of organizational identity traits and their influence on members' self-esteem represent two antecedents that contribute to explaining such perceptions of threat. They also illustrate that the existence of multiple identities is an important element to consider when managing change in order to reduce the perception of threat. However, organizational identity traits' correspondence to external expectations is not relevant. Indeed, when the threatened organizational identity trait is dual to another one, there is a lower threat perception to change it, whereas when it corresponds to external expectations, there is not a lower threat perception. Accordingly our research documents the existence of the impacts of the two antecedents that have thus far only been treated separately within the current debate on resistance to change of organizational identity. We also examine multiple identities in organizations as an important moderator.

## **Keywords:**

Organizational Identity, Organizational Change, Survey.

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## **Perceived Threats in Changing the Traits of Organizational Identity**

### **INTRODUCTION**

Organizational identity is defined as the most distinctive, central, and enduring feature of an organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985), a concept that has become even more important in the last two decades. Researchers have shown that it represents a stable collective mental schema that, by limiting the interpretation of the environment, creates organizational inertia (e.g., Dutton & Jackson, 1987; Fiol & Huff, 1992; Gioia & Thomas, 1996). Given this growing importance, two schools of thought have emerged on why the stability of organizational identity exists. Both schools suggest that mechanisms of defense and resistance occur that are due to an organizational member's perceived threat to change in organizational identity traits. One school looks to cognitive barriers and claims that this threat perception to a change in organizational identity traits emerges when traits are central (Reger et al., 1994; van Rekom, 2002). The other school, meanwhile, explores cognitive-psychological barriers and argues that this threat perception to a change in organizational identity traits emerges when traits define to a member's self-esteem. (Fiol and O'Connor 2002; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996).

The present study follows this tradition of study and, in particular, aims to explain why members of an organization perceive a threat to change organizational identity traits in organizational radical changes. In line with this research objective, an explicative theoretical model (Whetten, 2002) has been developed. In compliance with the current debate on the cognitive and cognitive-psychological barriers, our model considers the essentiality of identity traits and their influence on self-esteem as two antecedents. Contrary to other current research, we integrate these two antecedents, which have so far been treated only separately in the debate of resistance to change of organizational identity. Apart from this added value, the model considers the existence of multiple identities (Albert & Whetten, 1985) and construed external image (Dutton and Dukerich 1991) as important moderators to be considered when

managing change in order to reduce the perception of threat of organizational identity traits. In addition, unlike current studies, it completes the discussion on the cognitive-psychological antecedent by integrating the concept of inner self-esteem (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1983), whereas the current debate discusses only outer self-esteem.

The model is tested empirically inside a changing organization, i.e. a University that changed radically its programs in order to adjust to the Bologna Declaration signed by European ministers of Education. This organization is interesting for our model testing since the reform affects what Albert and Whetten (1985) call equilibrium between the basic educational identity and the efficiency and profit oriented identity of universities. The empirical test follows a methodology that integrates a phase of qualitative analysis and a phase of quantitative analysis. The organization's identity traits are qualitatively defined in an inductive manner following the Kelly Grid (Fransella et al., 2004) and Issue (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991) approaches. They are then categorized according to the principle of hierarchical cognitive structure of individuals (Reynolds & Gutman, 1984) applied to the organizational identity field by van Riel (1995) and van Rekom (1998). This categorization is confirmed through a factorial analysis, after which the model is tested empirically with a Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) analysis (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988, 1992; Jöreskog, 1993; Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993) for each organizational identity trait.

In line with the previous assumptions, the paper has been structured in four parts. The first part presents the current debate that justifies how threats perception of organizational identity traits causes resistance to change organizational identity. This part aims to justify why our research focuses on organizational identity trait's threats perception. The second part presents the research model and hypothesis. The beginning of the third part specifies that the model will be tested according to a hierarchy of organizational identity traits (Reynolds and Gutman 1984) as applied in organizational identity by van Riel (1995) and van Rekom (1998). The different aspects of the test are presented: firstly, the research

population; secondly, the interviewing techniques and the results of the qualitative analysis from which organizational identity traits emerge; finally, the measures and the results of the quantitative analysis are presented. In the fifth part model/hypothesis testing is discussed.

## **1. THREAT PERCEPTION TO CHANGE IDENTITY TRAITS OF ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITY**

Member's threat perception is a key concept within the debate on organizational identity change. Studies that focus on resistance to change in organizational identity clarify that, when a radical change is involved, members perceive a threat of change in the organizational identity, consequently developing defense mechanisms that trigger resistance to change in organizational identity: denial, rationalization, idealization, fantasy, and symbolization (Brown & Starkey, 2000). Members highlight alternate identity attributes, portraying their organizations in the most favorable light, or alternate comparison groups, thus avoiding unfavorable social comparison (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996). These studies focus primarily on arguments that justify how members' threat perception creates resistance to change. Furthermore, studies that focus on acceptance to change in organizational identity clarify that the acceptance takes place after a period of resistance due to threat perception. When a radical change takes place, members perceive the change in the first period of de-identification as a threat, resulting in an initial period of resistance due to anxiety and uncertainty in loss of meaning (Chreim, 2000; Fiol, 2002). This threat perception and its consequential resistance to change also take place when the radical change represents a discrepancy with the construed external image. Indeed, members perceive a threat to change in organizational identity and react with an initial period of resistance due to anxiety and uncertainty (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Gioia et al., 2000). As Reger et al. (1994) specify, threat perception creates resistance to change in organizational identity because the very high non-concurrence between construed external image and organizational identity leads members to believe that the change is unattainable. After this initial period of resistance resulting from threat perception,

members will accept the change in organizational identity traits because members want to lower the discrepancy with the construed external image (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Gioia et al., 2000).

The presented summary of the discussion on threat perception and resistance to change in organizational identity shows that in some way the current debate diagnoses the issue of organizational narcissism exposed by Hatch and Schultz (2002) in their treatise of the dynamics of organizational identity. This affirmation is supported by the fact that Hatch and Schultz explain the concept of narcissism by drawing on the defense mechanisms presented by Brown and Starkey (2000). Organizational narcissism is a dysfunction of organizational identity that occurs when organizations are too subject to self-absorption mechanisms, such as the defense mechanisms described by Brown and Starkey in their study and presented earlier in this review. According to Hatch and Schultz (2002), the overprotection of these defense mechanisms does not permit the organization to interpret, evaluate, and deploy information in order to influence its routines and adapt to external changes.

## **2. THEORETICAL MODEL AND HYPOTHESIS**

So far two antecedents to this threat perception are discussed in the literature. A first group of authors refers to a cognitive antecedent, claiming that this threat perception emerges when traits are central. A second group of authors, meanwhile, refers to a social cognitive antecedent, arguing that this threat perception emerges when traits are relevant to members' self-esteem. These studies draw from the discussions conducted by social psychologists at the group level about the social identity of individuals and their self-esteem emerging from membership. The present study considers the principles of research of the two schools of thought as a starting point and develops them as follows. Figure 1 illustrates the theoretical model discussed in the following paragraphs. The two perspectives are integrated into a single model by empirically testing the cognitive and social cognitive antecedents together to examine whether the essentiality of identity traits or their degree of influence on self-esteem has the same impact on the emergence of a perceived threat of organizational identity traits (in the

model a correlation between the two antecedent is envisaged). In addition, we analyze the additional effects of two other variables that help explain the consequences of these antecedents on members' perceived threat of the organization's identity traits: the degree to which the identity trait of the organization defines the multiple identities and the degree to which it corresponds to external expectations.

*[Insert Figure 1 about here]*

## **2.1. THE SOCIAL COGNITIVE ANTECEDENT: TRAITS' INFLUENCE ON SELF-ESTEEM**

Starting with the definition of self-esteem as the degree to which people like themselves, many studies analyzed how the self-esteem of an individual is strongly linked to the organizational context where he or she works (see, for example, Brockner, 1988; Ashforth & Mael, 1996, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994; Albert et al., 2000; and Scott et al., 1998). These researchers analyze how individuals' identities are embedded in the organization for which they work. Clearly they take into account that organizational members also have other memberships (e.g., family and sports teams) that overcome the organizational context. These authors demonstrate that, since the learning and evolution of members' identities are similar to the values, beliefs, and knowledge of the organizational context where they interact, consequently self-esteem is as well, based on the following reasoning. The organization represents a context that ensures the situated identity of individuals, and the individual defines him- or herself in looking at the organizational identity and perceiving that he or she shares a common destiny with the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1996, 1989). The sense of belonging to an organization emanating from organizational membership is quite relevant due to the complexity of multiple social identities of individuals (Dutton et al., 1994). This happens because, although the social identity of individuals may occur in the absence of interaction with other members of the group, the social interaction with other members is essential for its development (Scott et al., 1998). As the organizational context present daily in individuals' lives, the embedding of members' identities into the organizational context is very

salient for the definition of the overall identity of the individual. Albert et al. (2000) note that the workplace shapes the identity of members, showing that the agency of human actions exists within the organizational framework. “By internalising (sic) the group or organizational identity as a partial definition of self, the individual gains a sense of meaningfulness and connection” (Albert et al., 2000:14).

Where does self-esteem stand in this explanation? Membership in an organization is strongly linked to the enhancement of members’ self-esteem (Dutton et al., 1994). Indeed, any positive or negative inter-group comparison affects members’ social identity and therefore their self-esteem (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). As Dutton et al clarify, this happens due to the association of organizational traits in enhancing members’ self-esteem. “The association with an organization that possesses positive traits enhances members’ self-esteem, because this affiliation provides them with the opportunity too see themselves with these positive qualities, strengthening the degree to which a member likes him- or herself” (Dutton et al., 1994:247). Dutton et al. base their argument on the work of Brockner (1988), a key author for the conceptualization of self-esteem based on organizational membership. He specifies that employees look to work in companies that permit them to enhance their self-esteem because, by enhancing his or her self-esteem, the employee tries to develop self-confidence and a positive evaluation about his or her self-concept as a member of the organization.

But why members perceive the change of traits that define their self esteem as a threat? Many authors’ research, including Elsbach and Kramer (1996), Fiol and O’Connor (2002) aimed to find an answer to this query. Elsbach and Kramer (1996) investigated why members perceive a threat to change in organizational identity traits that influence their self-esteem. They found that members wish to maintain the organization’s identity traits that make them proud since they consider their elimination as a threat to the items of the organization’s image that define their social identity as members of the organization because these traits gratify and reward them over time (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996).



Members want their organization to ensure, not abolish, the organizational identity traits that allow them to constantly experience their identity as a member, making them proud because they want to guarantee over time a positive connotation of their organizational identity image and, therefore, their self-image. As Elbach and Kramer discuss, this happens because of the self-esteem that emerges from the social identity of organizational members.

Similar to Elsbach and Kramer, Fiol and O'Connor (2002) reconsidered research on community development in the field of organizational identity and judged how, after an initial period of resistance to change due to a perceived threat of change to the organizational identity, the view of the radical change as a threat permits mobilization and sustains radical change both through the de/re-identification and the attraction of the construed external image and strong symbolic actions. As this study found, threat perception is an important topic in the debate because it represents an initial emotional resistance. They assert that members' self-image is strongly linked to the image of the organization and that, therefore, a threat to the organizational image is interpreted as a threat to the self-image of the members. It is important to remember that this argument is drawn directly from Elsbach and Kramer's (1996) study, whose main contribution, according to the authors, is its discussion of the emotionality of organizational identity and how this emotionality can create a threat perception and subsequent resistance. "[...S]ome organizational identity work has certainly implied the emotionality of identities (e.g., accounts of defensive reactions when identities are threatened)" (Fiol & O'Connor, 2002:10). According to the authors, organizational identity's definition of members' self-esteem indicates that the organizational identity's definition of members' emotions has an important role in the process of radical changes.

A first common ground among Elsbach and Kramer (1996) and Fiol and O'Connor (2002) discussions is that they draw from studies at the group level, particularly from the work of Steele (1988), a well-known author who developed another theory of social psychology of groups: the Self Affirmation

Theory (see, for example, Liu & Steele, 1986; and Steele & Liu, 1983). The Self Affirmation Theory explains why individuals tend to maintain their self-concept through group traits. People seek ways to see themselves as “[...] competent, good, coherent, unitary, stable, capable of free choice, capable of controlling important outcomes [...]” (Steele, 1988:262). In particular, individuals are motivated to maintain a consistent self-image because a stable view of self enables them to predict and control their world (Epstein, 1973). From this perspective, people with high self-esteem, more so than those with low self-esteem, try to maintain their level of self-esteem because it enables them to maintain their positive self-image over time (Steele, 1988; Liu & Steele, 1986). These self-enhancing biases arise from anything that threatens the individual’s image—“anything that threatens this image, from the negative judgments of others to one’s own behavior (e.g., contradiction of one’s values)” (Steele. et al., 1993:885). In response to an unparticular threat, individuals with a high self-esteem do not leave the threat un-rationalized; i.e., they do not accept the threat without counteracting it. On the contrary, when the threat affects their high self-esteem, people consider the threat’s implications; individuals do not affirm some other important aspect of the self in order to reinforce their image and self-esteem. Wiesenfeld et al. (1999) discuss these principles of the Self Affirmation Theory and suggest that it is not the inconsistency per se; rather it is the implication of the inconsistency for people’s self-esteem that explains the rationalization process. These arguments are supported by other authors as well, such as Rogers (1951), who believes that individuals try to strengthen a positive view of their self-concepts. Moreover, he states that individuals have the basic need to maintain and enhance the self since they try to exercise control over their self-concepts. Any threat to the organization of their self-concept implies an anxiety and a defense in order to avoid this disorganization<sup>1</sup>.

A second common ground between these two studies is that they provide explanations of the social cognitive antecedent on the basis of an image-based self-esteem. Indeed, since these studies draw upon a translation of the social identity group dynamics, they refer to a looking glass self-nature of the self-concept enounced by Cooley (1902; 1956).It is important to underline that this conception of members

self esteem is limiting because it does not address the inner self esteem. As Pierce and Gardner (2004) underline, self esteem within the organizational context has to do with the perceived value that individuals have of themselves as important, competent and capable individuals within their employing organization. Arising from this belief, these authors consider that organizational member's self esteem is determined, apart from the environmental structure, by the following forces: "messages self from significant other in one's social environment and the individual's feelings of efficacy, and competence derived from his/her direct and personal experiences" (Pierce & Gardner, 2004:593). These two forces represent two dimensions of self esteem: on one side organizational member's self esteem is related to individuals' need to include significant others expectations – this is the image based self esteem that is discussed by authors in the current debate -; on the other side it is related to individuals' need to test their competence and ability, i.e. to test their efficacy<sup>ii</sup>. These discussions of inner and outer self esteem in organizations emerge from the critic of the concept of image based self esteem that was developed in social psychology (Gecas and Schwalbe 1983; Gecas, 1989; Gecas 1982; Franks and Marolla, 1976). In synthesis the critic is that the self concept has been dominated by the metaphor of the looking glass self by Cooley, that is associated with individuals passive manner of experiencing social identity (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1989). This view of member's self esteem reflects a bias toward an over socialized view of man (Wrong, 1961 in Frank & Marolla 1976) that has given birth to a passive characterization of individuals within current research on self conceptions (Turner 1962; Frank & Marolla, 1976). As many authors underline (Gecas & Schwalbe 1983; Gecas, 1989) this critic was discussed by the same Cooley (1902; 1956) who himself warned that "the self concept dependent primarily upon the reflection of others was weak and incomplete". (Cooley, 1956: 202-203) Following this critic many authors developed in social psychology a conception of self esteem that refers not only on an image based self esteem of organizational members. These authors developed a concept of self esteem that is both as outer and inner (Gecas & Schwalbe, 1983; Frank & Marolla, 1976). The outer self esteem is image based. It emerges the passive experience of the self, that is the inclusion of significant others

expectations. The inner self esteem instead is self efficacy based. It emerges from an active experience of the self esteem, which is the observation of personal competencies. For the purpose of the present research this critic is important for the aim to develop an hypothesis to be tested on a measure that includes both inner and outer self esteem. The following hypothesis is formulated as a result of the current debate and is founded on the concept of self-esteem that includes both inner and outer self-esteem:

*H1: The degree to which the organization's identity trait defines the member's self-esteem increases the degree to which he/she perceives a threat to change it.*

## **2.2. THE COGNITIVE ANTECEDENT: TRAITS' CENTRALITY**

Organizational identity traits that are central are those traits that are most important and essential, which is supported by Albert and Whetten's (1985) original definition of central characteristics of the organization. "What the criterion of central character means is that the concept of organizational identity, whether proposed by a scientist, by another organization, or by the organization itself, must be a statement of identity which distinguished the organization on the basis of something important and essential" (Albert & Whetten, 1985:266). Many authors, such as Elsbach and Kramer (1996), Fox-Wolfgramm et al. (1998), Reger et al. (1994), and Corley et al. (2000), use a synonym for Albert and Whetten's concept of central organizational identity traits: core organizational identity traits (or core organizational identity features). Several authors instead elaborated on Albert and Whetten's definition of central characteristics of an organization (Gustafson & Reger, 1995; van Rekom, 2002), challenging Albert and Whetten's statement that no theory is able to provide an understanding of what is important and essential for an organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985:266). Gustafson and Reger (1995) developed the concept of organizational identity traits' intangibility and their degree of importance, while van Rekom (2002) developed the concept of organizational identity traits' essentiality.

But why when a central trait is changed members perceive a threat to change the identity of the organizational identity? When central organizational identity traits are changed, members lose the logical order (Reger et al., 1994) and coherence (van Rekom, 2002) of that which defines the social context where members define their own identity. As a consequence, they perceive a threat in changing these central traits. This section will present two explanations of the cognitive antecedent that arise from the previously discussed principle that central identity traits define the meaning of other organizational identity traits. In particular, the theoretical background behind these explanations will be emphasized.

Being the core on which other traits lay, central identity traits are rooted in the basic assumptions of the organization's identity—they imply other traits of the organizational identity (Reger et al., 1994). Drawing from this principle, Reger et al. explain why central traits are more subject to resistance than other traits. Their view is that, since central traits define the implicational cognitive dynamics to organizational identity, they represent a cognitive barrier to the acceptance of new identity schemas that are inconsistent with the past schema, permitting members to interpret their social context according to the logical order of things (Reger et al., 1994). Reger et al.'s arguments regarding threat perception in changing core constructs draw on the principles enounced by Kelly (1955) in the personal construct theory (see also Bannister & Fransella, 1977; Fransella et al., 2004), which is a cognitive theory of individuals' personalities. This theory defines the threat as "the awareness of imminent comprehensive change in one's core structures" (Kelly, 1955:489) and predicts that individuals' understanding of themselves and their social setting depends on a logical and organized set of constructs that allows them to elaborate mental schemas of reality. It is a sort of causal system of meaning that permits them to interpret their actions and their social context and to assure person's maintenance processes. As Reger et al. (1994) emphasize, the mechanism described by Kelly takes place both at a collective level and at the individual level for the organization's members. "[The

personal construct theory is unique because it is used to explicate individual's understanding (or construal) of themselves and others in social settings, and it was specifically developed to aid clinicians in their efforts to modify the self identity of others (Fransella & Bannister, 1977; Kelly, 1955). Accordingly [the] personal construct theory is especially germane for understanding the individual's cognitive hindrances that impede fundamental change in an organization's character." (Reger et al., 1994:570).

The essential features of an organization result in the meaning of others features and, therefore, define the coherence of members' meaning of the whole organizational identity (van Rekom, 2002). According to van Rekom, in allowing other traits to exist, essential identity traits are more subject to resistance. In particular, organization members perceive a threat to the coherence of identity altogether when traits that define the meanings of other traits are not preserved. "The most essential elements are those features which, if absent, members believe most strongly that the organization would no longer be the same. These appear to be those features which they perceive to have most causal impact on the other features of the organization" (van Rekom, 2002:17). To complete van Rekom's reasoning, it is important to note that van Rekom considers the organizational identity's essential features as immutable, comparing them to the mutability of the non-causal features; the causal impact of essential features on others shows that these features are deeper compared to others that are more peripheral.

Van Rekom's argument draws upon Sloman et al.'s (1998) and Ahn's (1998) discussion of the centrality of a feature and cognitive coherence. As Sloman et al. (1998) show, any element can be reduced to sets of features that, despite being treated independently because they are separable and additive, contribute to the entire element's meaning. Nevertheless, these authors also emphasize that features depend on one another because they are the function of relations to other features. In particular, the feature that accounts for other features' meanings and for the overall coherence of features' meanings is the one that is central. "The centrality of a feature represents the degree to which

a feature is integral to the mental representation of an object, the degree to which it lends conceptual coherence” (Sloman et al., 1998:190). Their belief is that features that are responsible for the conceptual coherence are the ones that are less likely to be mentally transformed since such revision would force a cascade of revisions of other beliefs and of the whole coherence of things.. Ahn (1998) presents a similar argument, suggesting that features that result in other features are deep features that influence the categorization of all other surface features. These deep features represent the essence of an object since they provide more inductive power than those subject to their effect. As such, they “seem more responsible for conceptual coherence and consequently would be judged to be more central in categorization” (Ahn, 1998:140). For the same reason, these deep features are more difficult to change without changing other aspects of the conceptual representation of things; thus, they are more difficult to change than other features. As van Rekom (2002) asserts, the presented arguments can be translated into the organizational setting to explain why members believe it less feasible to change features that cause other features of an organization. “The argument presented by Sloman et al. (1998) suggests that the more a feature is believed to cause other features, the less people can imagine this feature to be changed. In the concepts of human organizations, if people cannot imagine that a feature can be changed, they may believe that such a change is not feasible” (van Rekom, 2002:6). In light of these considerations the following hypothesis can be formulated:

*H2: The degree of essentiality of the organization’s identity trait increases the degree to which an organizational member perceives a threat to change it.*

### **2.3. ELEMENTS THAT CAN INFLUENCE THE IMPACT OF THE ANTECEDENTS**

The suggested model considers the presence of a series of factors that may have an additional effect on the impact of the two antecedents on perceived threat to identity traits. The additional effects are analyzed on the basis of the ongoing debate on the existence of multiple identities of organizations and on the interrelationship between identity and image.

## **Degree to which identity traits define the multiple identities of organizations**

Albert and Whetten (1985) state that organizations have multiple identities in that they are composed of two or more identity traits that the members do not expect to fit with each other. Being incompatible, these organizational identity traits define the duality of an organization. Hence, organizational identity is a hybrid and can be either holographic or ideographic. In the former kind of identity, the incompatible traits are simultaneously present at the different levels of the organization (e.g., department and unit); on the other hand, in the latter kind of identity, the incompatible traits are individually present at the different levels. We argue that the degree to which identity traits define the multiple identities of an organization is relevant to the present research because, when a trait is incompatible, it might be less subject to perceived threats. This statement is supported by Rokeach's (1968) reasoning on dissonance among the elements in the system of values. As argued by Rokeach, the dissonance between two central values, which are more subject to inertia, can lead to their change: "a value may be brought into dissonant relation with another. [...] Such experienced dissonant relations should give rise to motivational forces, leading an individual to change his values and attitudes in such a way that they would become more psychologically consistent with one another" (Rokeach 1966; 1968).

Although Rokeach's explanation does not refer to organizational identity duality, we argue that it can be applied to it since it gives an interpretation to the historic statement by Albert and Whetten (1985) that multiple identities in organizations ensure a better adaptability to change. They emphasize that an organizational identity that is dual permits major adaptability since it permits the integration of environmental conditions into an adaptive organizational modification. Interpreting their statement with Rokeach's discussion on the dissonant relation, it is possible to argue that an organization having two central traits that are incompatible is more prone to change since its members find a consistency in disrupting the ultimate meaning of aspects of the organizational identity. In light of these discussions, we consider that the impact of the two antecedents can be moderated (Baron & Kenny, 1986) by the



degree of incompatibility of the identity trait with another one, i.e., the degree to which that trait defines the multiple identities. Therefore, the following hypothesis can be formulated:

*H3: If an identity trait is a multiple with regard to another, the impact of the two antecedents on one of these two traits is lesser.*

### **Correspondence of identity traits with external expectations**

When organizational members assess the identity of their organization, they take into consideration the expectations of the external reference group (Scott & Lane, 2000). Indeed, over time each member repeatedly interacts with external reference groups, thus defining the identity schema of the organization: “over time, through repeated interactions with the same audience and/or with similar situations, situated identities become generalized and represented in a focal person’s memory as self-schema” (Scott & Lane, 2000: 46)”. Such a situation occurs because, as argued by Levellyn (2002), organizational identity has a personal dimension of the relational type. Its traits are perceived as a function of the expectations of the external reference group as well (Scott & Lane, 2000). We argue that their perceived inertia can be influenced by this correspondence. This statement is supported by several authors who claim that change in the organizational identity occurs when the organization’s members wish to correct a gap between the perceived identity and the interpreted external image—the image they believe the organization has promoted to the outside world. Indeed, their construed image is an attractor that motivates a change in organizational identity (Reger et al., 1994, Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). This gap represents a cognitive discrepancy between the current and the expected state (Reger et al., 1994). The organization’s members are motivated to change the identity when such a discrepancy carries a negative connotation on the external image of the organization (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991). As a consequence, the impact of the two antecedents can be moderated (Baron & Kenny, 1986) by the degree of correspondence of that trait with the expectations of the external reference group. It can be argued that:

*H4: If an identity trait corresponds to an external expectation, the impact of the two antecedents on that trait is higher.*

### **3. METHOD, ANALYSIS AND RESULTS**

The theoretical model previously illustrated has been tested in a university which implemented a series of changes from 2003 to 2005 in order to adjust to the Bologna Declaration signed by European Ministers of Education in 1999. The change consists in the transformation of 4-year curricula into 5-year curricula – i.e. 3-year bachelor courses plus 2-year master courses. The adaptation of universities to the Bologna system represents an interesting opportunity to test the model of the present research, as it may imply identity change of universities because of its basic objectives: mobility of students, employment in the common European job market, and international competitiveness/attractiveness of the European university system. Indeed, the implementation of the necessary reforms in universities may affect what Albert and Whetten (1995) call equilibrium between the university's normative identity, i.e. its basic educational mission, and the utilitarian identity, i.e. the identity oriented towards efficiency and profit. Achieving the above objectives does not only imply a formal change of curricula, but also a change of the conception itself of university.

#### **3.1 MODEL TESTING ON THE HIERARCHY OF OI TRAITS**

As argued by Reynolds and Gutman (1984), individuals' cognitive structure makes them perceive the environment according to a hierarchy meaning in their memory. This principle was applied to the organizational identity by van Riel (1995), van Rekom (1998), who highlights that people perceive the identity of an organization as a retained network of meanings from which emerges the image of an organization. Organizational identity is represented in different hierarchical levels; people perceive the organization's identity traits in a concrete manner through clearly visible attributes that express the abstract values and traits of an organization representing the rules of conduct of the organization and the collective belief. According to this view, the different levels are linked; identity attributes represent

the concrete expression of the organization's identity traits according to the following hierarchy of traits from tangible to intangible: “ attributes level”=> “benefices & emotional rewarding level”=> “value level”. This hierarchical model is in line with the definition of organizational identity stated by Albert and Whetten (1985), which has been adopted in the present research. According to this definition, the most distinctive, central, and enduring features of an organization can be translated into an institutionalized affirmation that may be concrete or abstract. As a consequence of this conceptualization of the hierarchical levels of identity traits, the research hypotheses formulated in the next paragraphs refer to identity traits that have been institutionalized into abstract traits or in a more concrete form into attributes. Hence, the hypotheses and the theoretical model will be tested both at the abstract level of identity traits and at the concrete level of identity attributes. The choice to run separate models does not presume that identity traits are independent. Correlation matrices have been produced and show that traits are correlated. These data do not mean that it is wrong to test hypothesis for each identity trait independently, whereas they show that, although the organizational identity traits are not independent, the higher correlations take place between the traits at the attribute level that are aggregated on the “value level” as qualitatively predicted by the interviews. This result can be interpreted as it follows: certainly traits are not independent because, following the principle of tangibility and intangibility of the collective schema, at the end, on the last instance; they are all representing the organizational identity of the organization. Anyway traits may be classified according to a hierarchy from the attribute to the value level.

### **3.2. COLLECTING QUALITATIVELY THE TRAITS OF THE UNIVERSITY**

The empirical testing of the model is divided in two parts. In the first, preliminary phase, semi-structured interviews have been carried out with all typologies of members of a university, namely collaborators, professors, researchers, assistants and students. The aim of the interviews is to determine the specific identity traits of the university. Organizational identity can be defined on the basis of an

inductive or deductive approach (van Rekom & van Riel, 2000). The present research adopts an inductive approach since it is necessary to determine the identity traits subject to inertia. In order to ensure total inductivity, the 34 interviews have been carried out with two different techniques. Such techniques have been chosen because they inductively highlight elements which are not consciously accessible such as organizational identity traits (van Rekom, 2002). Sixteen interviews have been carried out following the *issue critical approach* (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991), and the remaining eighteen with the *kelly grid approach* (Fransella et al., 2004). In each interview the *laddering* technique has been used (van Rekom, 1997) in order to analyze the hierarchy of values (Reynolds & Gutman, 1984). The 34 interviewees have been selected with a bottom up approach, i.e. an approach which considers not only the inspired identity of university leaders, but also the one experienced by all members through their different points of view. We select them on the basis of their profile and of their membership of the four faculties of the university: faculty A, faculty B, faculty C and faculty D. In order to be selected, interviewees had to be members of the university for at least three years. Most respondents have been in the university for a period between three and ten years.

### **Interviewing techniques**

The *issue critical approach* is a sort of semi-structured interview which highlights organizational identity through a critical episode in the history of the organization known to respondents. Starting from that episode, each interviewee is asked to answer to a series of questions. In the specific case of the University for example interviewees were asked to list three attributes which describe the introduction of the new bachelor and master programs in their University, or to compare this event with others happened in the past. Laddering is used in each question, by asking “why?” and “why is it important?”. In the present research laddering has been executed in a smaller number of questions than in the original study by Dutton and Dukerich. The complete list of original questions is available in Dutton and Dukerich (1991).

The *kelly grid approach* is fairly different from other classic interviewing techniques. The preparatory phase consists of the definition of the cards which will be given to the respondents. The cards contain elements linked to the organization under scrutiny. In the second phase, during the interviews, the cards are given to the respondents in triads in order to deduce the constructs which define the phenomenon under scrutiny. For each triad the interviewee is asked to think of an element which distinguishes two cards from the third one. Respondents often mention items which are too concrete or too general. Hence, it is important to use *laddering* in order to understand which element lies above or below a construct expressed by the interviewee. Finally, in the third phase, during the interview, the respondent is also asked to evaluate the constructs which have emerged. For example, the respondent is asked to: (1) rank the constructs (Ranking Grid), (2) evaluate to what extent each construct applies to the previously listed cards on a scale from 1 to 11 (Rating grid) , (3) consider what would happen to other constructs if one specific construct disappeared (Resistance to Change Grid). These three phases are described in detail in the manual on the Repertory Grid Technique by Fransella et al. (2004).

In the present research cards have been designed on the basis of cultural artifacts (Schein, 1984), i.e. in conformity with concrete elements which express the values and basic assumptions of an organization. Three groups of cards have been defined: the first group represents the professors of the faculties, the second one the institutes of the faculties and the third one represents the university under scrutiny and other universities. Professors and researchers have been given the cards of professors, institutes and universities. Students and collaborators have been given the cards of professors and universities and, when possible, also the ones of institutes, because some students and collaborators do not know all the institutes. Since the respondents must know the given cards well (Fransella et al. 2004) , all interviewees have received cards concerning professors and institutes of their own faculty. In the present research the evaluation was carried out on the basis of the *rating grid*, the *ranking grid* and the *resistance to change grid* presented before.

### **The identity traits of the university and the degree to which the Bologna system threatens them**

The interviews were carried out in March 2005, they lasted for 60-90 minutes on average and they were recorded with the respondents' consent. It is important to underline that the two kinds of interviews highlighted the same traits, in particular the same 5 identity traits and the same 10 attributes (Table 1). Such results show that questions were highly inductive. As we will see results show that there is multiple identity of the university under scrutiny. The following is a synthesis of the elements which define its identity in accordance with the hierarchical conception of identity traits by Reynolds and Gutman, which has been adopted in the present research. The traits are presented discussing both the identity attributes and traits which define the organization under scrutiny.

*[Insert Table1 about here]*

Enriching: Respondents emphasized that the organization in which they study or work gives them the opportunity to create direct contact between students and professors and to come across other cultures. These two elements characterize their university as a place where researchers, assistants, students and professors have the possibility to enrich themselves both analytically and culturally more than in other universities, where the environment is impersonal and anonymous.

Externally consolidated: Interviews also highlighted that the university wants to be connected with the local context and to have a positive image. All respondents underlined that their university is more determined than others to obtain external awareness and support. This is considered by all interviewees as a typical feature of a young university like theirs and also an increasingly important one in a context where universities have to open up to a European exchange system of master courses.

International: Respondents emphasized that their university is known for the scientific production of research and for the articles of international level as well as for the presence of people of international prestige. Due to the recent foundation of the university, it is not possible to make a comparison with

other universities which were created more than 100 years ago. Despite that, most interviewees consider internationality as a fundamental value which guides the behavior of all university members.

Professionalizing: Another item which distinguishes the academic context under scrutiny is the offer of curricula oriented towards the job market which prepare students to apply theory in their future professions. Respondents feel that their university can, more than others, give students appropriate and versatile professional skills. Many interviewees believe that the offer of curricula oriented towards the market is incompatible with the orientation to international research, because the fundamental role of the university is to produce and transfer scientific knowledge without getting too close to market needs. This is why the basic values of internationality and professionalization are partially incompatible and as such they define the existence of a multiple, dual identity of the university.

Innovative: Respondents stated that their university offers unprecedented curricula in the academic context and that it is willing and open to experiment. Compared with others, this university allows its members to keep up with the times in the academic and professional scenario. Interviewees believe that other universities with a longer tradition can hardly be so up to date and dynamic.

Threats perception due to changes introduces to adapt to the Bologna System: The analysis of interviews pinpointed that all university identity traits are somehow threatened by the introduction of the Bologna system. On that there is a different point of view among different faculties. In faculty A and in faculty B some interviewees underlined that with the master programs the university seems to leave out the focus on research and to dangerously break the equilibrium between theory and practice of courses. In faculty A and in faculty C interviewees underlined that the courses programs are getting into a standard European offer which is why the novelty of courses and in general the enrichment is threatened. More, in faculties A, B and C consider that the university, despite cares about its external image, is not well prepared to face the competition with the new mobility of students.

### **3.3 PARTICIPANTS TO THE SURVEY, MEASURES, CONTROL VARIABLES AND RESULTS**

In the second, detailed, part, a survey has been carried out among all university members in order to analyze which of the identity traits emerged during the preliminary phase are subject to threat. The survey was not carried out on a sample, but on the entire university population through an on-line questionnaire. Except for a few cases, the surveyed population corresponds to the population included in the university annual report. For faculties D and C they correspond, while for faculties A and B there are some differences, which might be due to two main reasons: (1) official data are collected at the beginning of the year, while the survey was carried out in the period between 30 May and 11 June 2005; (2) there is a margin of error in the definition of the mailing list. 21% (468 N) of the university's members responded. The answer rate does not introduce a strong bias since in the sample it is possible to find the same proportions of members. The evidence is given by the fact that there is not a strong profile bias<sup>iii</sup>. A Structural Equation Modeling (SEM) type of analysis has been chosen to verify the testing of hypotheses (see Anderson & Gerbing, 1988, 1992; Jöreskog, 1993; Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993). Precisely all data are produced by using AMOS 5.0 (Arbuckle & Worthke, 2004). Thereafter are presented first measures validity and reliability and the results confirming trait's classification that was qualitatively defined in the first phase from "attribute level" to "value level".

#### **Measures**

The two surveys' questionnaires have been built on the basis of measures emerged in the preliminary phase and on the basis of scales inspired by other studies in the literature. This procedure for the definition of measures is commonly adopted in other studies in the field of organizational identity, such as for example Dukerich et al. (2002), where researchers need to test hypothesis on the different traits of the organizational identity. In the questionnaire were included the identity traits that were qualitatively collected at the "attribute level". The reason for that is that, since the attribute level represents that tangible expression of the "value level", it permitted to consider the latter through a



factor loading testing in the measurement simultaneous models. The below measures were thus applied to each trait of the organizational identity at the “attribute level”. Thereafter, each measure is presented according to the conceptual domain that inspired them.

*Influence of identity traits self esteem (on inner and outer):* This measure has been defined on the basis of the critic that has been conducted about the concept of self esteem that is not only image based but also self efficacy based. As underlined, organizational identity traits define not only members outer but also their inner self esteem. Taking inspiration from this discussion I developed a measure based on two items at the attribute level. In order to measure outer self esteem, i.e. the one emerging from the experience of identity based on the looking glass self process, each respondent stated which attributes can influence positively or negatively their pride in being members of *Alpha* and *Beta* on a 5-point Lickert scale (1 no influence at all; 5 strong influence). In order to measure inner self esteem, i.e. the one emerging from the experience of one’s own actions, each respondent stated which attributes can influence positively or negatively their achievements as members of *Alpha* and *Beta* on a 5-point Lickert scale (1 no influence at all; 5 strong influence).

*Essentiality of identity traits :* The measure of essentiality used in the present study is the one validated by van Rekom (2002). Applying this study’s measure we measure essentiality with one item. Each respondent gave his/her opinion about whether the university would be the same if changes affected identity attributes. The opinion was given on the basis of a 5-point Lickert scale (1 not at all the same; 5 absolutely the same).

*Perception of threat to organizational identity traits :* The measure has been defined on the basis of studies in psychology, such as Sandler et al (1990), which determined the measure for the perception of threat. Such studies underline that the perception of threat is crystallized in people’s worry to see something happen. In the present research, people are worried that an identity trait might disappear. More, we considered that when individual are feel threatened by a situation, there is the reduction of

flexibility, both at an organizational and at an individual level and the development of a desire to maintain past resources (Staw et al. 1981). Hence, taking inspiration from these studies we developed a measure on two items. each respondent stated, on a 5-point Lickert scale, his/her degree of worry about the possible suppression of the identity attribute and his /her degree of desire to maintain it

Correspondence of identity traits with external expectations :In order to define this measure, respondents were asked which external reference group has expectations which should never be disappointed by their faculty according to the list of identity attributes.

Degree to which identity traits are incompatible , i.e. define multiple identity :The identification of traits considered by members as incompatible has been carried out only in the preliminary phase on the basis of the potential of a detailed analysis of meaning made possible by the qualitative approach. We believe it very difficult, if not impossible, to confirm and measure such incompatibility through a quantitative approach. This statement is supported by the fact that the measurement of meanings between construct require a qualitative measuring method such as Laddering and Kelly grid (van Riel 1995:83). For these reasons the testing of hypothesis 3 will thus consider the following attributes that in the qualitative phase were identified as incompatible, i.e. defining a dual identity: “Has scientific researches and articles at an international level” and “Is attentive to the job orientation of courses “.

Control variables: The control variable is connected to the heterogeneous perception of identity traits. As argued by Bartel (2001), organizational identity is perceived in a different way by each member, since they consider it on the basis of their own role and position in the organization. At the levels of department or role, there is some interdependence of tasks, physical proximities and interpersonal similarities inside the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). These are considered as a natural fragmentation of organizational identity. The existence of the heterogeneous perception is relevant to the present research because it is based on the principle of interrelationship between organizational identity and member's identity, which is essential in the formulation of the research hypotheses.

Moreover, heterogeneous perception of identity has been taken into consideration because in a situation of change the fragmentation of the different points of view may represent an important cause of resistance to change (Corley, 2004). For these two reasons it is seemed important to control whether the model is true in spite of an heterogeneous perception of traits in the different faculties and campuses as well as in the different roles.

### **Reliability and validity of measures**

The use of a single instrument to collect all variables poses the threat of common method bias. To address this both the procedural and statistical remedies suggested by Podsakoff et al. (2003) were considered. Procedurally was organized a pretest, were provided labels in the scale, and was given the possibility to answer both electronically and by paper. This last element is only partially achieved in both organizations because the majority of respondents used the online format. The distance between question on predictor and dependent variables was assured. Apart from these procedural remedies, also the first statistical remedy suggested Podsakoff et al. (2003) and by other authors such as Schriesheim (1979) Podsakoff & Organ (1986) was considered. Statistically the Harman one-factor test (Harman 1967) was conducted. The principal component factor analysis with varimax rotation was performed for each measure within each trait's model, both at the "attribute level" and at the "value level". Since all indicators load on one factor that accounts for no more than 50% of variance, the common method bias is not a concern for the present research.

The validity and reliability of measures has been conducted according to SEM. By considering the measurement model with SEM, it is possible to scrutinize the different loadings of the observed items by mapping the specific error variance of the observed variables into the research model (Anderson & Gerbing, 1988, 1992; Jöreskog, 1993; Jöreskog & Sörbom, 1993); this permits to achieve a precise evaluation of the internal consistency than in the first generation of regression analysis (as Gefen et al. 2000 and Bagozzi and Fornell, 1982 call them).

Taking into consideration the conceptual distinction between types of measurement models that are formative and reflective (Jarvis et al. 2003), we developed a principal factor (reflective) model – i.e. a model where the measurement error is taken into account at the item level and where the direction of causality is from latent construct to measure - and not a composite latent variable (formative) model – i.e. a model where the measurement error is taken into account at the latent construct level and where the direction of causality is from measure to construct (Jarvis et al. 2003: 201). This choice is justified by the fact that the measures are expected to be correlated, given that they measure for the same trait its “threat perception”, “centrality” and “self esteem definition”. More it is due to the fact that changes in the construct do not cause changes in the indicators, that indicators are defining characteristics of the construct and not the manifestation of the construct, and that indicators are not interchangeable.

In table 2 the validity of items defining the latent construct (the values of factor loadings) for each latent construct of the measurement models and the reliability of latent construct and items defining the latent construct (their Rsquare – R2) are reported<sup>iv</sup>. Looking at this table, in synthesis, it is important to stress that, though being reliable (see R2) and valid (see the factor loadings) the items for the latent construct that represents the dependent variable – trait’s threat perception - are the weakest compared to the ones for the latent antecedent measuring trait’s self esteem definition, which includes the highest factor loading and R2 both in *Alpha* and *Beta*. Anyhow, since the low R2 and factor loadings of the dependent variable are present only for a couple of items - all other item’s values of this latent construct are considerably high both for item reliability and validity of items – measures validity and reliability can be considered rather good. The same is true for latent construct reliability. The R2 of the dependent variable is lower considered to the one of the latent antecedent, but is not too low to menace measures reliability. Apart from these considerations coming from the tables, it is important to stress also that that for some models there is a slight correlation between the residuals of items that can be explained by the close distance or similar scale’s label of questions in the questionnaire. Anyway, as explained before, the survey method does not suffer of common method bias; therefore these

measurement errors are acceptable. Although all these results already confirm the validity and reliability of the survey method with a more sophisticated test than the first generation statistical tools, an overview of the survey method reliability was run also testing the Crombach's alpha for each measure that included at least two items. The values of the reliability test were good.

*[Insert Table2 about here]*

SEM gives global fit measures -Goodness of Fit Indices (GFIs) - of the overall model that supports results on the path value's reliability and validity previously illustrated. These global fit measures certify the degree of appropriateness and truthfulness of a model. From a statistical point of view, these indices measure if, given the structure and the values, the model implies a variance and a covariance which are suitable to the ones of the population.

As you see in table 3, the established measurement models are highly appropriate both in the descriptive and in the inferential. The identified models are appropriate in the AIC, BCC, BIC, and CAIC theoretical indices, which indicate that the models have a high informative value in regard to the theoretical concepts under scrutiny, since for each model the default model's AIC, BCC, BIC, and CAIC values are lower than or equal to those in the saturated model. Only in one model, is one of the traits "international"; the AIC,BCC,BIC, and CAIC values are slightly higher than in the saturated model, which indicates that this model has a low informative value in regard to the theoretical concepts. This is probably because this trait is less threatened by the university adaptation of the Bologna System. Chi-square<sup>1</sup> is never three times higher than the degree of freedom (Cmin), and the values of the Root Mean Square Error of Approximation (RMSEA) and the approximate value of significance (p-close) are very good, except for *Alpha's* attributes of "spirit of experimentation," "direct contact between students and professors," and "people of international prestige"; the RMSEA

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<sup>1</sup> For the present research, it is sufficient to look at the AIC, BCC, BIC, CAIC values because these measures better fit surveys where an ex-post sample is included. Reporting good fit measures that would better fit an ex-ante sample is valuable in confirming research hypotheses. Therefore, all the major and principal inferential global fit values are reported.

values of these attributes are slightly above the criterion of appropriateness (.082, .074, .075 respectively), and their p-close values are only sufficient (.159, .104, and .158 respectively). A similar situation is present for *Beta*'s model on the traits at the attribute level, "people committed to work outcomes," where the RMSEA is .087, the p-close value is .347, and the RMR is 148. Besides, the RMR is very good for all traits at *Alpha* and is slightly critical for traits at *Beta*. Anyway the value goes only slightly beyond the value limit of .080.

*[Insert Table3 about here]*

## **Results**

SEM structural models and confirmation of H1 and H2: The identification of structural models (Table 4) leads to the conclusion that both the degree of influence of a trait on self esteem and its degree of essentiality have an impact on its degree of threat perception. For some identity traits these antecedents even explain 83 percent or 80 percent of the variance. This high Rsquare is explained by the fact that it refers to the attributes and traits that are fundamental for university member's self esteem, i.e. "cares about its external image" and "Is part of the local community" and to the trait "Externally consolidated".

In general, it can be noted that the impact of antecedent 1 is bigger than the impact of antecedent 2. This is true both for models established for identity attributes and for models established for identity traits. Moreover, the impact of antecedent 2 is very high for the identity trait which is highly essential, i.e. being enriching, and for the trait whose values of essentiality, despite being on average, are higher than the ones of other traits, i.e. being innovative. This is true both for models established for identity attributes and for models established for identity values. These results are supported with good GFI's as reported before in table 4. This table is worth also for the structural models because the measurement

model's GFI's measures are valid also for structural models given that these Global fit measures are computed statistically simultaneously for measures and the hypothesis testing.

*[Insert Table 4 about here]*

It is interesting to notice that the analysis reveals the existence of a slight correlation between the two antecedents. It is present both in models of attributes and in models of values.

SEM structural models and confirmation of H3: In order to test whether two incompatible traits have a moderating effect on the theoretical model, the following identity attributes must be taken into consideration: research and international scientific articles and orientation of courses towards the job market. Indeed, members perceive university as a place for research and elaboration of international scientific articles and they think that courses should not be too oriented towards job preparation. Therefore, the following moderating effect can be foreseen: among respondents who consider the existence of research and international scientific articles as essential, the effect of antecedents 1 and 2 is lower as regards the perception of a threat of the attribute "orientation of courses towards the job market". In order to verify the existence of such moderation, a multi-group analysis through AMOS 2005, which identifies additional effects among variables, has been carried out (Yang – Wallentin et al., 2003).

Results of such analysis support the hypothesis 3. Firstly, evidence is given by the fact that antecedent 1 – influence on self esteem of traits - has a less impact on the group who considers research and international scientific articles as essential (.44 compared to .48). Secondly, evidence is given by the fact that the impact of antecedent 2 – essentiality of traits - is inverted: when a member perceives research and scientific articles as essential, the influence of professional orientation of courses on his/her self esteem reduces the perception of threat (-.02 compared to .21). In general, these findings show that, in the case of two incompatible attributes, resistance to change one of them can depend from the other in such a way that one of them can reduce resistance to change the other. Support to these

findings is given by positive Goodness of Fit Indices and significance tests. The model is significantly better- i.e.  $C_{min} = 7.563$  and  $P = .023$  assuming measurement model correct- when considering that there is a difference between the two groups. Moreover, taking into consideration the difference between the two models leads to theoretically significant and informative values (AIC BCC are lower for the default model than saturated one) and to good RMR (.046), Rmsea (.029 and P-close (.683). In spite of a difference between the regression coefficients, measures are not significantly different ( $C_{min} = 990$  and  $P = .609$ ). Therefore measurement model is correct and values indicated above are thus more reliable.

SEM structural models and confirmation of H4: In order to assess if there are any additional effects due to member's interpreted correspondence of an identity trait with external expectations, it is necessary to take into consideration the following traits: "offers novel programs of study", "has spirit of experimentation", and "has courses that relate theory to practice". Indeed, these are the only traits on which it is possible to do a multiple group analysis since they are interpreted by members as corresponding to external expectations. It is thus possible to foresee the following moderating effect: among members who do not interpret the university's external image as "offering novel programs of study", "having spirit of experimentation", and "having courses that relate theory to practice", there might be a higher impact of the two antecedents. Results of such analysis do not support the hypothesis 4. The evidence is given by the fact that there is no significant difference between who perceives the traits as correspondent to the external image. For "offering novel programs of study" the  $C_{min}$  is 5.738 and  $P$  is .057; for "having spirit of experimentation"  $C_{min}$  is 2.755 and  $P$  is .252; for "having courses that relate theory to practice"  $C_{min}$  is .032 and  $P$  is .984.

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

The objective of the present research was to define an empirical test of a theoretical model based on current approaches. These approaches have been integrated and completed with the aim of



investigating the conditions which explain the emergence of threat perception of organizational identity traits. The present research supports the hypothesis that members of an organization perceive a threat of the distinctive organizational characteristics which ensure their inner and outer self esteem and that they are worried about their possible suppression. As regards inner self esteem, results show that members perceive a threat of the organization's characteristics which, being positive for the organizational image, are positive also for the image that members have of themselves. As regards inner self esteem, results show that members perceive a threat of the organizational characteristics which give them the possibility to achieve their professional goals. In other words, members resist to change of the identity traits which make them proud of their actions and to be part of the organization. These findings are very interesting because so far studies on organizational identity have not considered the interrelationship between the organizational and the individual identity on the basis of the concept of inner self esteem.

The detailed analysis of the case study also supports the hypothesis that the essentiality of identity traits is another important antecedent which explains resistance to change. Indeed, results show that, in order to avoid any turmoil, members do not want to give up organizational characteristics which, in their view, influence the basic meaning of the organization. This hypothesis has been widely debated at a theoretical level, but it has seldom been tested empirically. The present research is one of the few studies, together with the one by van Rekom, to test such hypothesis empirically.

The present study shows that the construed correspondence of a trait to external expectations does not have any moderation effect, but that there is some moderation between two traits which define the multiple identity of an organization. Threat of a trait which is in contrast with another one is lower, because there are some implications between central, incompatible traits. In the organization under scrutiny, there is a multiple, ideographic identity given by the attributes of international scientific research and orientation of courses towards the market. Several members have pointed out that the one excludes the other, since in their view the university should transmit knowledge without getting too

close to the needs of the job market. The empirical analysis of the model has shown that among members who consider research as essential, the impact of the two antecedents is lower. Therefore, members perceive less threat about the change of the professional orientation of courses. The identification of this moderating effect is noteworthy, because it represents a theoretical and empirical attempt to interpret differently than current studies the historic statement by Albert and Whetten (1985) that multiple identity in organizations ensures a better adaptability to change. In the past decade several researchers have investigated this matter on the basis an approach that does not conceptualizes the change of organizational identity traits, but the continuous change of their interpretation, e.g. Gioia, Schultz and Corley (2000), Gioia and Chittipeddi (1991). These studies have interpreted the concept of adaptability of multiple identity in the adaptive instability, i.e. continuous adaptability of multiple interpretations of identity traits over time. This kind of adaptability is made possible through a series of acts of internal communication which make it possible to accept the future identity. Contrariwise, in the present research the concept of adaptability has been interpreted in the dissonance between the two dual identity traits. A bigger adaptability is possible because the incompatibility between two identity items makes their suppression easier.

#### **4.1. SOME STUDY LIMITATIONS AND SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH**

The present research has led to an interesting result which had not been foreseen in the beginning: the identity trait is subject to resistance more for its influence on members' self esteem than for its essentiality. This outcome has emerged from all empirically identified models, both from the ten models of identity attributes and from the five models of identity values. At present, cognitive and cognitive-psychological theories which are at the basis of the present research do not give any theoretical explanations of such difference. It is also important to underline that findings should be considered in the light of the study context. Finally, it is important to notice that with the current study it was not possible to study the addition of new features, since in the university under scrutiny there

was not such a situation. Since our research focuses on episodic changes, it would be interesting to study our hypothesis on new organizational identity traits. Efforts will be made to show the applicability of the theoretical model also in other situations of organizational change.

#### **4.2. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS**

Can any aspect of organizational identity be changed if necessary? In the light of discussions in the present research, the question becomes rhetorical. Indeed, on the basis of our approach, each organizational identity feature is potentially subject to resistance, since by definition each identity trait influences the members' self esteem and it determines what is most essential in an organization. As argued by Albert and Whetten, these traits would not be identity characteristics otherwise. However, that does not mean that in a situation of change identity is immutable, thus non-manageable. The main conclusion to be drawn from the present research is that it is necessary to carefully consider how much identity traits define the multiple identity of the organization. Playing on the dissonance between two elements is an initial, fundamental step when forced to break with the organizational past. It should also be noted that the present study highlights the necessity to manage each organizational change by interpreting it from an identity point of view. The organizational being is not detached from events and actions, and as such it should be carefully taken into consideration during processes of organizational change.

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**Table 1: Identity traits of the university in Reynolds e Gutman's hierarchy: from identity attributes to identity traits**

<b>Identity Trait</b>	<b>Innovative</b>		<b>International</b>		<b>Professionalizing</b>		<b>Externally consolidated</b>		<b>Enriching</b>	
▲ Identity value	Innovation		Internationalization		Professionalization		External consolidation		Enrichment	
▲ Emotional rewarding	To be in the forefront	To be dynamic and fresh	To be international	To be prestigious	To fit job market and to be considered prepared	To be interdisciplinary professional	To be recognized	To be legitimated	To be considered intelligent, prepared, not only a number	To be multicultural
▲ Benefice	Academics behind the times	Academic novelties	Recognition	Recognition	Study that mirrors market needs	Analytical and professional preparation	Awareness	Help, sustain	Analytical enrichment & informal interaction	Cultural enrichment
▲ Identity attribute	Offers novel programs of study	Has a spirit of experimentation	Has scientific researches and articles at an international level	Includes people of international prestige	Is attentive to the job orientation of courses	Has courses that relate theory to practice	Cares about its external image	Is part of the local community	Allows direct contact between students and professors	Allows comparison with other cultures

*Nº of times that the attribute is named by interviewees and is laddered to values (or vice versa) with Issue approach*

7 8 7 6 3 10 10 10 9 5

*Nº of times that the attribute is named by interviewees and is laddered to values (or vice versa) with Kelly grid*

- - 8 9 7 9 4 4 6 5

*Total Nº of times that the attribute is named by interviewees and is laddered to values (or vice versa)*

7 8 15 15 10 19 14 14 15 10



Table 2: Factor loading of items that define the latent constructs & Rsquare of latent construct and of items that define the latent constructs

	Factor loading Antecedent 2		DV		Rsquare Antecedent 2	Rsquare DV	Rsqtuare Antecedent 2		Rsquare DV	
	Item 1	Item 2	Item 1	Item 2			Item 2	Item 1	Item 2	Item 1
MODELS ON THE “ATTRIBUTE LEVEL										
offering of novel programs of study	.72	.79	.40	.51	.96	.48	.52	.63	.16	.27
spirit of experimentation	1	.63	.42	.60	1.26	.52	.1	.39	.18	.36
caring about its external image	.77	.72	.43	.56	.95	.53	.59	.52	.19	.31
being part of the local community	.71	.73	.36	.45	.102	.34	.50	.53	.13	.24
courses that relate theory to practice	.73	.74	.37	.53	.91	.56	.53	.55	.14	.21
attention to the job orientation of courses	.76	.77	.45	.73	.81	.37	.58	.60	.21	.53
scientific researches and articles at an international level	.77	.73	.39	.47	.61	.57	.38	.74	.20	.40
direct contact between students and professors	.87	.77	.31	.55	.74	.42	.59	.54	.15	.22
comparison with other cultures	.88	.62	.45	.63	.88	.26	.75	.60	.10	.30
people of international prestige	.83	.11	.45	.58	.94	.53	.70	.65	.20	.34
MODELS ON THE “VALUE LEVEL”										
innovativeness	.81	.78	.43	.57	.61	.19	.66	.61	.19	.33
external consolidation	.75	.72	.35	.55	.52	.13	.56	.52	.13	.30
professionalization	.78	.77	.43	.68	.60	.19	.60	.60	.19	.46
enrichment	.76	.87	.32	.56	.75	.10	.57	.76	.10	.31
international	.93	.69	.33	.81	.48	.11	.87	.48	.11	.65

Antecedent 1= degree to which trait's is central is not present because there was only one item measuring it

DV= dependent variable- degree to which members perceive a threat to change identity trait

Antecedent 2= degree to which trait defines members self esteem

**Table 3: Indices of models' global fit for Alpha and Beta**

	chi square	df	rmsea	pclose	RMR	AIC,BCC,BIC CAIC
MODELS ON THE "ATTRIBUTE LEVEL"						
offering of novel programs of study	8	3	.060	.298	.045	Default<Saturated
spirit of experimentation	12	3	.082	.104	.036	Default<>Saturated
caring about its external image	7	3	.056	.345	.041	Default<Saturated
being part of the local community	7	3	.056	.348	.041	Default<>Saturated
courses that relate theory to practice	6	3	.052	.395	.034	Default<>Saturated
attention to the job orientation of courses	5	3	.044	.488	.033	Default<Saturated
scientific researches and articles at an international level	4	2	.050	.403	.024	Default<Saturated
direct contact between students and professors	10	3	.074	.159	.043	Default<>Saturated
comparison with other cultures	1	3	.000	.966	.015	Default<Saturated
people of international prestige	6	3	.075	.158	.026	Default<>Saturated
MODELS ON THE "VALUE LEVEL"						
innovativeness	3	2	.000	.946	.000	Default<Saturated
external consolidation	1	1	.007	.785	.546	Default<Saturated
professionalization	6	3	.093	.426	.019	Default<Saturated
enrichment	5	3	.039	.548	.023	Default<Saturated
international	15	2	.118	.016	.038	Default>Saturated

**Table 4: Impact of the two antecedents on members' threat perception to change their organization's identity traits**

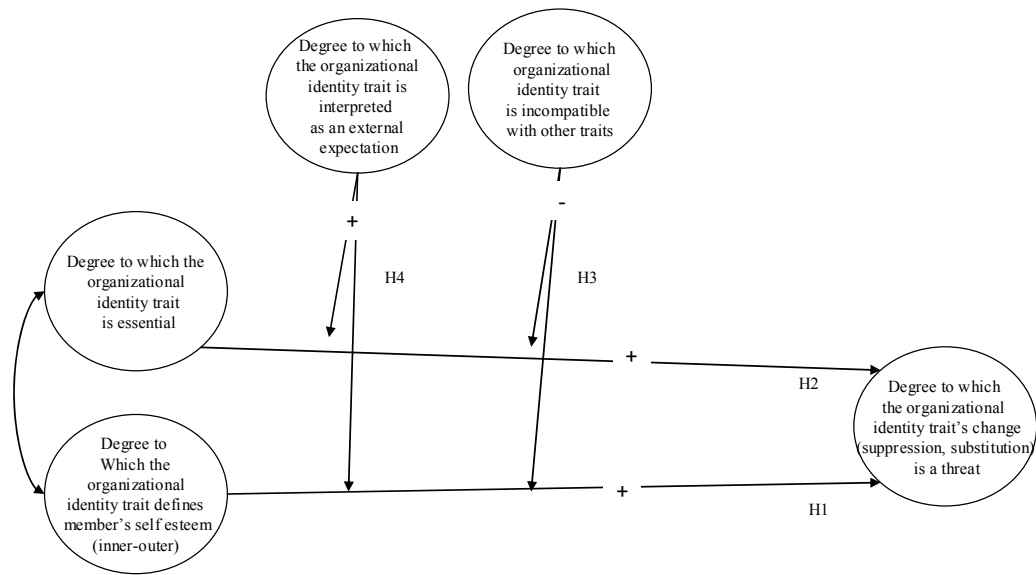
	Regression weight antecedent 2 on DV H2	Regression weight antecedent 1 on DV H1	R2 (% of variance explained DV)	Correlation between Antecedent 1 and antecedent2
MODELS ON THE "ATTRIBUTE LEVEL"	.44	.19		
offering of novel programs of study	.45	.27	.29	.35
spirit of experimentation	.88	.06	.31	.17
caring about its external image	.85	.18	.80	.31
being part of the local community	.70	.19	.83	.25
courses that relate theory to practice	.75	.07	.61	.31
attention to the job orientation of courses	.43	.18	.56	.03
scientific researches and articles at an international level	.68	.20	.26	.30
direct contact between students and professors	.66	.21	.56	.23
comparison with other cultures	.52	-.07	.54	.22
people of international prestige	.44	.19	.30	.30
MODELS ON THE "VALUE LEVEL"				
innovativeness	.53	.26	.41	.25
external consolidation	.87	-.01	.75	.27
professionalization	.69	.18	.60	.37
enrichment	.57	.21	.42	.21
international	.49	.13	.28	.25

*DV= Dependent Variable - degree to which members perceive a threat to change identity trait*

*Antecedent1= degree to which trait's is central/ Antecedent 2= degree to which trait defines members self esteem*

*Antecedent 2= degree to which trait defines members self esteem*

Figure 1: Theoretical model on antecedents to member's threats perception of organizational identity trait



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<sup>i</sup> These principles from the Self Affirmation Theory were originally enounced to explain the implications of a threat to self-image without considering a threat to the group image or members' social identity. Indeed, Steele (1988) does not include in his arguments the conception of an individual's self-esteem emerging from membership in a group (i.e., from the social identity). Nevertheless, these concepts can be applied to the discussion of self-esteem threat responses emerging from the social identity of a membership. Researchers have considered the Self Affirmation Theory's principles presented herein as relevant to the way in which people cope with threats to their social group identity (see, for example, Abrams & Hogg 1988; Hogg & Terry, 2000; and Sherman & Cohen, 2005). Sherman and Cohen (2005), for example, assert that "originally, [the] self affirmation theory (Steele, 1988) focused on how people respond to information and events that threaten a valued self image, [...] a major advance in [the] self affirmation theory concerns its relevance to the way people cope with threats to their social (i.e., group) identities" (Sherman & Cohen, 2005:19). They continue their argument, underscoring that this happens because individuals defend events that indirectly impact their self-esteem through a threat to the group's members' self-esteem. They state that, "people will defend against threat to collective aspects of the self much as they defend against threats to [an] individual or personal aspect of the self. They may do so even when these events do not directly implicate oneself (e.g., when the threat involves the behavior of another group member rather than one's own behavior)" (Sherman & Cohen, 2005:19). Thus, people respond to collective threats according to the mechanism of the self-affirmation illustrated before—they consider these threats as threats to their personal identities.

<sup>ii</sup> It is important to underline that Pierce and Gardner (2004) discussion of organizational member's test of their efficacy expectations is not the same as discussing member's test of their outcome expectations. Learning from Bandura, it is possible to distinguish between them. An efficacy expectation is a belief that one can successfully perform a particular action. It is a judgment of one's personal efficacy. An outcome expectation is an estimate that a given action will lead to a certain outcome (Bandura, 1977:193)

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<sup>iii</sup> Professors in the sample 9% - professors in the real population 12%; researchers in the sample 19%, and researchers in the real population 12%; collaborators in the sample 8% - collaborators in the real population 4%; students in the sample 61- students in the real population 75%. At Alpha it was not possible to control for a gender bias because I did not find numbers on the proportion of men and women of the real population

<sup>iv</sup> It is important to jog the memory on the fact that since measures of trait's concurrence is performed through a dummy variable and the measure of trait's incompatibility was performed qualitatively, the measurement models do not include factor loading s or R2 for these measures..