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The Interplay between Internal and External Identity Work when Institutional Change Threatens the Collective Identity: The Case of a Wholesaler Faced with the Rise of Central Purchasing

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Abstract

An organization's identity, as defined by its members, must be aligned with its collective identity prescribed by institutions. This alignment is broken when an institutional change threatens the collective identity and jeopardizes the existence of a group of organizations. They then undertake to carry out identity work, both internal and external, in order to establish a new alignment. Based on a single case study, this research article explores the interplay between the two forms of identity work: internal and external. The findings of this study reveal that introspective internal identity work feeds the work to repair the collective identity with traditional values that have been rediscovered thanks to a reflexive examination of self by the organization. By internal extrospection identity work, the external identity repair work is fed with new values that the organization internalizes and enacts in its practices. Based on these findings, this article puts forward new theoretical propositions, as well as a model of the interplay between internal and external identity work that aims to realign the organization's identity with that of the collective.

Keywords: *Organizational identity*; *Identity work*; *Institutional change*; *Wholsesaling*

Just like individuals, organizations possess an identity allowing their members to answer the essential questions: 'who are we and what do we do as an organization?' (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Whetten & Mackey, 2002). Organizational identity is not immutable, however, and is often susceptible to threats (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). In this research study, we look at threats to organizational identity brought about by an institutional change. Nowadays, the pace of institutional change is accelerating not only due to the intensification of exogenous shocks and technological ruptures but also as a consequence of the resurgence of social activism exacerbated by the multiplication of media (Micelotta et al., 2017). For example, the rise in ecological concerns generates threats to identity in numerous sectors, such as the automotive industry (Jourdan et al., 2019) and pesticides (Maguire & Hardy, 2009).

The link between organizational identity and institutional change is at the heart of neo-institutional theory (NIT) (Glynn, 2008, 2017; Kraatz et al., 2016). In particular, this approach reveals a paradox in the link between organizational identity and the institution (Lok, 2020). On the one hand, organizational identity has a collective dimension, which is determined by the environment and is attributed to a group of similar organizations (Glynn, 2017). According to this vision, this facet of organizational identity is collective and shared (Glynn & Abzug, 2002; Wry et al., 2011). On the other hand, an organization's identity is considered to be its most distinctive element, revealing its most particular intrinsic characteristics (Albert & Whetten, 1985). This perspective highlights the self-defined facet of organizational identity (self-identity) (Gioia et al., 2010).

Besharov and Brickson (2016) pointed out the necessity of aligning these two facets of organizational identity so that the

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organization can build distinctive characteristics while adhering to institutional prescriptions. This alignment is jeopardized when an institutional change threatens the collective identity of the organization by casting negative values on it (Taupin, 2012). Institutional change influences the image that an external audience has of a group of organizations (Gioia et al., 2000). Through a ricochet effect, this triggers an examination of identity within each organization. Organizations then set to work on their identity in order to align their self-identity with the collective identity (Besharov & Brickson, 2016; Glynn, 2017).

This work on identity is carried out at two levels: external identity work aiming to influence the external perception of 'what it is' and internal work drawing on a reflexive examination of 'self' (Brown, 2015; Leung et al., 2014; Lok, 2010). Organizational identity is thus situated at the crossroads of internal mechanisms guided by members and external mechanisms that reflect conformity with and influence of external cultural codes and symbols (Cornelissen et al., 2007).

While the previous research study has already established a link between identity and institution (Glynn, 2017), the complexity of the identity dynamic, which involves both the organization's internal and external processes in the field, has not been sufficiently studied. Leung et al. (2014) pointed out that many studies have, thus far, focused on just one dynamic to the detriment of the other, rather than exploring the interplay between the two. For example, some authors (e.g., Clegg et al., 2007; Tracey et al., 2010) have shown the identity work done to build a collective identity in an environment, characterized by the coexistence of multiple and contradictory institutional pressures. Others, however, have focused on internal efforts to adapt organizational identity to changes in the environment (Ravasi & Phillips, 2011).

Given the lack of research studies examining both external and internal dynamics (Leung et al., 2014), and in response to calls by Kraatz et al. (2016) to examine the interaction between the identity and institutional environment, we formulate the following research question: how do organizations combine internal and external identity work to respond to institutional change that threatens their collective identity?

In order to explore this research question, we investigate the case of a fruit and vegetable (henceforth F&V) wholesaler called POMA[1], which was confronted with institutional change due to the creation of central purchasing departments (CPDs) in France in the 1990s. CPDs began to displace wholesalers because they enabled large food retailers to establish a direct relationship with producers. The rise of centralised purchasing led to a change in intermediation and the role of wholesalers being called into question. There was a negative shift in the perception of wholesalers, who were now seen as a 'drain on profit margins' and blamed for rising

prices (Dugot, 2000). The emergence of CPDs thus threatened the collective identity of F&V wholesalers.

The findings of this study reveal that the POMA F&V wholesaler began to carry out external work on its identity, which we call *identity repair work,* as well as internal identity work that took two forms: *introspective identity work* and *extrospective identity work.* The identity repair work sought to counteract the negative representations of the F&V wholesalers' collective identity, while the internal identity work acted on the organization's own identity through two dynamics. Thanks to the introspection dynamic, the organization reconnected with its traditional values, whereas in the extrospection dynamic, they took into account external expectations about 'what the organization should be' and internalized new values. These traditional values and new values would act as a link between the internal and external identity work. The introspective work fed the external repair work with traditional values in order to respond to the threat against the collective identity. Therefore, the identity repair work was able to draw on new values thanks to the internal work of extrospection.

Based on these findings, we make two contributions. The first contribution introduces and describes the role of traditional and new values in the construction of a new organizational identity. The second involves advancing new theoretical propositions, and modelling the interplay between internal and external identity work.

This article is organized as follows: firstly, we review the literature on the relationship between identity and institution, and explain why it is important to explore the interplay between internal and external identity work. Next, we present the empirical context as well as our data, and describe the data analysis process. The third part presents the study findings, which bring to light the interplay between the internal and external identity work. Finally, we close with a discussion of our contributions, and present our modelling of the interplay between internal and external identity work.

Theoretical framework

The two facets of organizational identity

Organizational identity allows us to apprehend the organization as a whole that is unified around the values invoked and internalized by its members (Hatch & Schultz, 2002). It allows them to answer the following questions: 'who are we and what do we do as an organization?' (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Whetten & Mackey, 2002). In addition to its symbolic and cognitive dimension (Whetten, 2006), organizational identity influences the actions and practices of the organization (Corley & Gioia, 2004; Glynn, 2008).

NIT allows us to put the collective dimension (Dansou & Langley, 2012) of organizational identity into perspective

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[1]. We use a pseudonym in order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

(Glynn, 2017). This identity is shaped by the environment and stems from belonging to a group of similar organizations (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). Wry et al. (2011, p. 449) associated collective identity with 'groups of actors strategically constructed and fluid, organized around a shared purpose and similar outputs'.

This collective facet of organizational identity is influenced by the institutional environment composed of shared values, norms, myths and social constructions (Meyer & Rowan, 1977). The organization is classified into a given group, and its organizational identity is closely linked to the process of categorization (Hsu & Hannan, 2005; Kraatz et al., 2016). According to NIT, an organizational identity is shared by organizations perceived as having the same purpose and which use the same means to achieve this purpose (Wry et al., 2011). An organization's identity is, therefore, shaped by its belonging to a group of organizations and the internalization of external cultural codes (Hsu & Hannan, 2005). For example, the study by Carroll and Swaminathan (2000) on the rise of microbreweries in the United States in the 1980s and 1990s underlined the importance of the 'craft' value that underpins the collective identity of these organizations, in contrast to the big beer brands that are associated with commercial and industrial values.

More recently, neo-institutional researchers have called for a reconciliation of this collective vision of identity with a self-defined and individualizing vision of the organization (Ben-Slimane, 2019; Gautier & Bonneveux, 2020; Michel, 2020).

The self-defined facet of organizational identity, however, is defined and constructed by the organization itself. According to Gioia et al. (2013, p. 170), 'the social constructionist view sees organization members as meaning creators – as the ultimate generators of the labels, meanings, and other cognitive features that produce the 'understandings' (Ravasi & Schultz, 2006) that constitute the essence of organizational identity'. The history and memory of the organization play a preponderant role in the formation of this self-identity (Dalpiaz et al., 2016). It is also influenced by the founders who imprint the organization with their own values and vision (Battilana et al., 2015). This facet of organizational identity involves the work of self-perception and self-categorization (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991).

According to Besharov and Brickson (2016), an alignment between self-identity and collective identity is achieved when the organization's most distinctive and central elements respond to institutional expectations and pressures. Nevertheless, an institutional change may threaten the organization's identity and alter its legitimacy, consequently impeding its access to resources (Deephouse et al., 2017; Maguire & Hardy, 2009). In such a situation, the alignment between self-identity and collective identity may be broken.

Alignment of the two facets of organizational identity and institutional change

According to Glynn (2017), organizational identity is inextricable from institutional dynamics. In line with the work of Gioia et al. (2000, p. 67), this intertwining of organizational identity and institutional dynamics becomes clear when we consider that the change in values and perception of the organization in its environment acts as 'a catalyst for members' reflexive examination of their organizational self-definition'. When the identity of a group of organizations is threatened and challenged by the external audience, institutional change resonates within the organization and consequently triggers an examination of the way the organization defines itself (Gioia et al., 2000). It is not just the way institutional change is understood and interpreted by organization members but more the examination of identity that it triggers within the organization.

Gawer and Phillips (2013) perfectly illustrated this intertwining of identity and institutional change in their study of computer equipment manufacturers who faced with the emergence of collaborative platforms. They studied the specific case of Intel Corporation, and showed the concomitance of internal identity work to build a new identity for Intel and the work of legitimizing new practices associated with the shift to a platform model. Thanks to these efforts, Intel was able to contribute to shifting the new collective identity of computer equipment manufacturers towards open innovation, while also changing its original self-identity as a computer chip manufacturer. The work of Gawer and Phillips (2013) thus illustrated how an organization undertakes both internal and external identity work to realign the collective identity. However, the interplay between these two types of identity work and their mutual influence still raises many theoretical issues and questions.

Interplay between internal and external identity work in identity alignment

According to Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003, p. 1165), 'identity work refers to people being engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness'.

Identity work may be ongoing, when it is a matter of managing contradictory institutional prescriptions about the organization's identity (Giorgi & Palmisano, 2017) or a response to a change in the environment (Ravasi & Phillips, 2011). This reveals the perpetual 'becoming' process of the organization and contrasts with a static vision of identity as an inalienable attribute of the organization (Lok, 2020).

Regarding the definition of organizational identity, based on its self-defined and collective facets, identity work may concern both the internal dimension 'who are we?' and the

external dimension 'how are we perceived by others?'. Studies on identity work have put these internal and external dimensions into perspective in the complex relationship between identity and institution (e.g., Brown, 2015; Creed et al., 2010; Leung et al., 2014; Lok, 2010). Nevertheless, the relationship between them raises questions to which there are no conclusive answers in the literature. The literature does not show how self-identity and the collective identity evolve together or how one influences the other in response to an institutional change.

By interplay between the external and internal identity work, we are referring to the way the internal identity work influences and is influenced by the external identity work. This bidirectional understanding departs from the unidirectional understanding whereby organizational identity is an antecedent or a consequence of institutionalization (Glynn, 2017), or a filter of the response to institutional change (Besharov & Brickson, 2016; Kodeih & Greenwood, 2014). This unidirectional vision of identity does not allow us to see the complexity of an organization's identity (Daudigeos, 2019), which may simultaneously transform their identity and act on the institution that shapes their collective identity.

The interplay between internal and external identity work shows just how much collective identity in the field is in constant interaction with the organization's identity (Glynn, 2017). According to Lok (2010), when the identity work is oriented towards the outside, it plays a role in shaping the collective identity, whereas the internal identity work consists in examining and revising the organization's self-identity. These two dynamics are often studied separately (e.g., Gawer & Phillips, 2013; Leung et al., 2014).

The study by Leung et al. (2014), for example, on a feminine cooperative in Japan provides a perfect illustration of internal and external identity efforts. The authors describe the work of this feminine collective to change the vision of the reductive social role of women in Japan and the institutions that define this role. This effort was the result of both the internal identity work on their own vision of themselves and the external work to shift the perceptions of others towards a new more substantial role. The relationship is, therefore, unidirectional, and the authors do not show how the two dynamics influence each other. In other words, how does the internal work feed into the external work and how does the external work generate tensions or, on the contrary, support the organization's self-identity?

While its self-identity allows the organization to answer the question 'who are we as an organization?', the reflective examination brought on by the threat to the collective identity triggers questions 'who do *they* think we should be?' (Gioia et al., 2000, p. 68). This questioning leads actors to examine the values that underpin and define their identity. For example, Christiansen and Lounsbury (2013) discussed the examination of identity at the Carlsberg brewing company concerning its responsibilities in relation to binge drinking and the abuse of alcohol by young people. These reflections prompted the company to integrate a code of responsible practices in its communication.

Elsbach and Kramer (1996) described how *Business Week's* ranking of the best American business schools has threatened the identities of certain schools and devalued their status, thus pushing them out of the ranking of the top five or 10 schools. This threat led to an examination of identity in the schools, mainly concerning their status and the balance to be found between their research and teaching activities. In these two examples, the institutional change pushes the organization to change its self-identity; however, it does not show how the same work modifies the collective identity of brewers or American business schools.

This literature review shows that the interplay between internal and external identity work, which is an important element in understanding the role of identity in organizational responses to institutional change, has received very little attention.

In order to contribute to filling this gap, we formulate the following research question: how do organizations combine the internal and external identity work to respond to institutional changes that threaten the collective identity?

Presentation of the case study, data collection and analysis

The empirical part of this study investigates the identity work carried out by the POMA company, which faced a threat to its collective identity as an F&V wholesaler. The emergence of CPDs, which transformed the business of intermediation by creating a direct link between food retailers and producers, constituted a major institutional change for wholesalers. The social perception of the role of F&V wholesalers shifted to that of a redundant actor, labelled a 'drain on profit margins' and blamed for rising consumer prices (Pardo & Paché, 2014).

Description of the case

An F&V wholesaler is an intermediary between two professionals. Starting in the 1960s, F&V wholesalers in France became major players who accompanied the rise of the large supermarket chains (Michel & Pardo, 2012). They became indispensable in bringing to market 70-80% of fruit and vegetables until the start of the 1990s. At that time, they were the only ones who were able to deliver such large quantities to major food retailers for mass consumption (Michel, 2016).

This position was challenged in the 1990s with the emergence of CPDs in the food retail industry. CPDs changed

intermediation by creating a direct link between large retailers and producers. They made their appearance thanks to technological progress, together with the creation of logistics platforms and the restructuring of F&V producers in consortiums after the introduction of European legislation in 1996 (CE 1200/96). The orders for all the stores of a supermarket chain were grouped together in the CPD, enabling them to source significant volumes directly from the producers, thus breaking the link between a supermarket a wholesaler. Consequently, the role of F&V wholesalers was called into question in the 1990s. Experts and the media (e.g., F&V report, Géode, 2005) expressed doubts about the ability of wholesalers to bounce back.

> In 1990–1992, large food retailers began a movement of centralization, consolidation and optimization of their F&V supply. At the time, nobody thought the wholesalers stood much of a chance, and some of them were just written off. (LSA article, Déniel, Sept-2005)

In 1998, even the federation of F&V wholesalers forecasted the disappearance of 50-80% of them within 10 years (1998 strategic report by Cabinet Adrien). Nevertheless, although some of them did, indeed, disappear, a few F&V wholesalers managed to survive, including the POMA.

POMA is a family company founded in 1920. Like other F&V wholesalers, the owners bet on the large supermarket sector in the 1970s with major investments in logistics equipment to store and deliver produce, as well as a beefed up the sales team. This bet paid off because POMA became a local leader with 250 employees in 1991 (compared with 13 in 1975) and annual sales of €47.7 million (*Les Echos*, n 16040, December 1991).

In the 1990s, the company suffered the shock caused by the growth of CPDs in food retailing, thus triggering a profound examination of identity. 'The central purchasing departments developed significantly and at that moment everything changed. They decided to do our job' (interview, senior management advisor at POMA). POMA lost more than half of its sales in 1992 when its main partner, Leclerc, decided to set up a CPD (POMA internal strategic report). The following quote illustrates the concerns raised by the POMA members about their role as an intermediary:

> An intermediary cannot exist if they have no real function. It can be many things: purchasing capacity, logistics, etc., but a wholesaler only exists if they have a real function in the sector. The day their function is just to consume profit margins, they cease to exist. (CEO, POMA)

This study is carried out on the efforts made by POMA between 1990 and 2012 to answer these concerns and restore its identity as a wholesaler. POMA and all of the wholesalers defined themselves as the main partners of the large food retailers and as F&V experts. This partnership and their expertise were called into question and threatened by the emergence of CPDs.

The POMA case was chosen because the company continued its growth while maintaining its activity as a wholesaler (with annual sales of €80 million and 400 employees in 2012). In addition, an exploratory study of F&V wholesalers as a whole confirmed particularly the active role played by POMA within the profession (Michel, 2016). Finally, this in-depth study of POMA provides a transparent case, the data of which are easily accessible (Yin, 2003).

Data collection

This research study is based on a single embedded case study (Musca, 2006; Yin, 2003) of an exploratory nature, the aim of which is to produce new theoretical knowledge (Gioia et al., 2013a; Langley & Abdallah, 2011). An embedded case study allows researchers to carry out several units of analysis within the same case (Musca, 2006). By looking at the identity work done to align the organization's self-identity and collective identity, this study considers two different units of analysis because the identity is embedded both at the organizational level and at the industrial level (Ashforth et al., 2011; Kraatz et al., 2016).

The collection and analysis of data were done iteratively, that is, data collection carried out simultaneously with data analysis and the search for new respondents was done based on the information already collected (Corley & Gioia, 2004).

Data collection was done between September 2011 and June 2012. Thirty-four semi-structured interviews were conducted with 25 respondents, thereby recording 52 h of interviews (see Table 1). We interviewed certain key people several times, such as the CEO of POMA, whom we met five times. Multiple interviews allowed us to become familiar with the context of the firm and to dive deeper into certain points following a phase of reflection and data analysis. Prior to and during the period of observation, we also conducted 12 additional interviews with experts in the F&V sector and other wholesalers in order to understand the emergence of the CPDs and their effects on wholesalers.

In order to triangulate our data and avoid any *a posteriori* rationalization bias in the interviews, we also collected 35 internal documents (e.g., strategic reports, archives, letters and memos) and carried out observations at POMA. These observations (attendance at executive committee meetings) helped us to learn about the F&V wholesale sector and understand the internal functioning of POMA.

Table 1. Description of data collected

Type	Source	Description
Semi-structured interviews	25 POMA members	Total of 34 interviews (four top management, three administrative department, four operational managers, four sales department, eight logistics department and two quality control): total of 52.2 h
	12 F&V experts	Total of 12 interviews with representatives of professional bodies, consultants, clients and suppliers: total of 19.7 h
Documents	35 internal documents	Strategic reports, quality surveys, minutes of meetings, etc.
	External documents	Eight news articles on POMA, two external reports of the federation; as well as Xerfi studies and articles from the trade press
Non-participant observations	Attendance at meetings	four meetings observed (executive committee and facility managers)
	Informal, continuous observation	two full weeks of informal observation in the field; 1 day of observation in the warehouse
Other	Interviews with external experts and professionals	Two suppliers, three clients, two F&V sector consultants, two members of Interfel and one UNCGFL (wholesaler federations) and two former members of the consortium
	Online data	Multiple internet sources, including the websites of the company, federations and social media

POMA is the name, there is no definition

Data analysis

The data analysis phase began with the construction of a narrative (Zietsma & Lawrence, 2010), detailing the state of the F&V wholesale sector and the way it was structured before the emergence of CPDs. The narrative then described the context of the emergence of the CPDs, the ensuing changes in intermediation and the place of wholesalers in the F&V sector, and then the reaction of POMA. This first phase drew on all the data collected, including the interviews with experts, and a logbook.

The coding phase that followed was inspired by grounded theory, moving through the successive stages of abstraction with the aim of developing original theoretical contributions from the field (Dumez, 2013).

This phase began with open coding, staying as close as possible to the discourse of the actors, with the initial aim of situating POMA's position in relation to the appearance of CPDs. We also sought to understand how POMA members perceived and described their role as a wholesaler following this event.

Next, we conducted axial coding (Strauss, 1987) using NVIVO software. The aim of this second phase was to bring out categories and themes based on resemblances and differences between units of meaning (Dumez, 2013). Homogeneous units of meaning were grouped together under one heading. This operation used categories that allowed us to understand how POMA members evoke their organizational identity and how it influenced their way of responding to the threat to their identity as a wholesaler. For example, we grouped together testimonials, reflecting their 'belief in a relationship of proximity with the supermarkets, which justifies their existence' with those that fell under a second heading: 'a culture of fresh and living produce which rests on the belief in an atypical and complex product'.

These two extracts resemble each other because they reflect POMA's attachment to values rooted in its history. Therefore, they were grouped together in the same category, which describes how POMA members 'reconnect with traditional values and beliefs'. The next phase involves grouping together units of meaning in second-order categories. These categories were interpreted through an iterative back-and-forth process (Gioia et al., 2013a) between the data and the neo-institutional literature on organizational identity. In this phase, we were able to identify two levels of intervention: the organizational level, from which the work on self-identity operates, and the collective level, from which the organization may act on the collective identity of F&V wholesalers.

During the last phase of coding, the level of abstraction increased as we interpreted these elements using theoretical developments specific to the notion of identity work (Creed et al., 2010; Gawer & Phillips, 2013; Leung et al., 2014) and aggregate dimensions emerged, which departed from the specificities of the field (Gioia et al., 2013a). This phase confirmed the distinction between internal identity work, which acts on the perceptions of organizational members, and external work, which acts on the perceptions of the external audience. In POMA's case, the latter was aimed at shaping or repairing constructions of self, which we labelled as *identity repair work,* drawing on neo-institutional research (e.g., Giorgi & Palmisano, 2017) that highlights the importance of identity work and repair efforts following an institutional change.

The internal identity work was based on two types of work: *introspective* work, centred on the organization itself, which revisits its original identity, and *extrospective* work, which is open to external expectations to redefine 'how others would like me to be'.
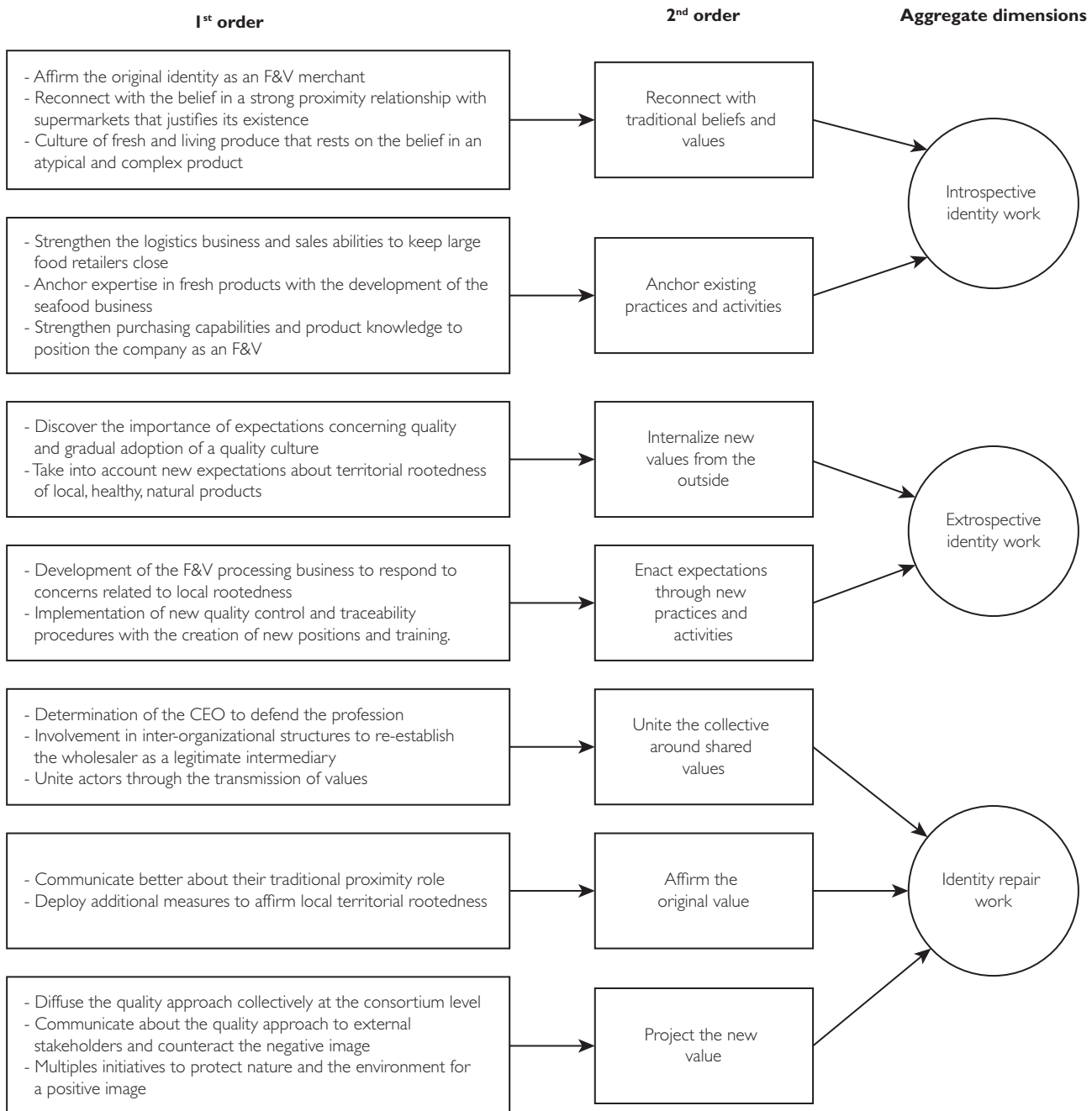
Figure 1. Data structure

Figure 1 shows the data structure that emerged from this coding work and Supplementary Table 1 offers illustrative data for each theme. We extended the analysis by dynamically relating the results with the ultimate aim of modelling them (Gioia et al., 2013a). The objective of this study was to make connections between the second-order categories, which link the empirical data identified in the first-order categories, and theory (with aggregate dimensions). This was done by placing the two pivotal values – quality and proximity – at the intersection of the internal and external identity work. These two values, upon which the identity repair work was based (affirm the original value and project the new value), emerged from the internal dynamics of introspection and extrospection. Figure 2 provides a schematic
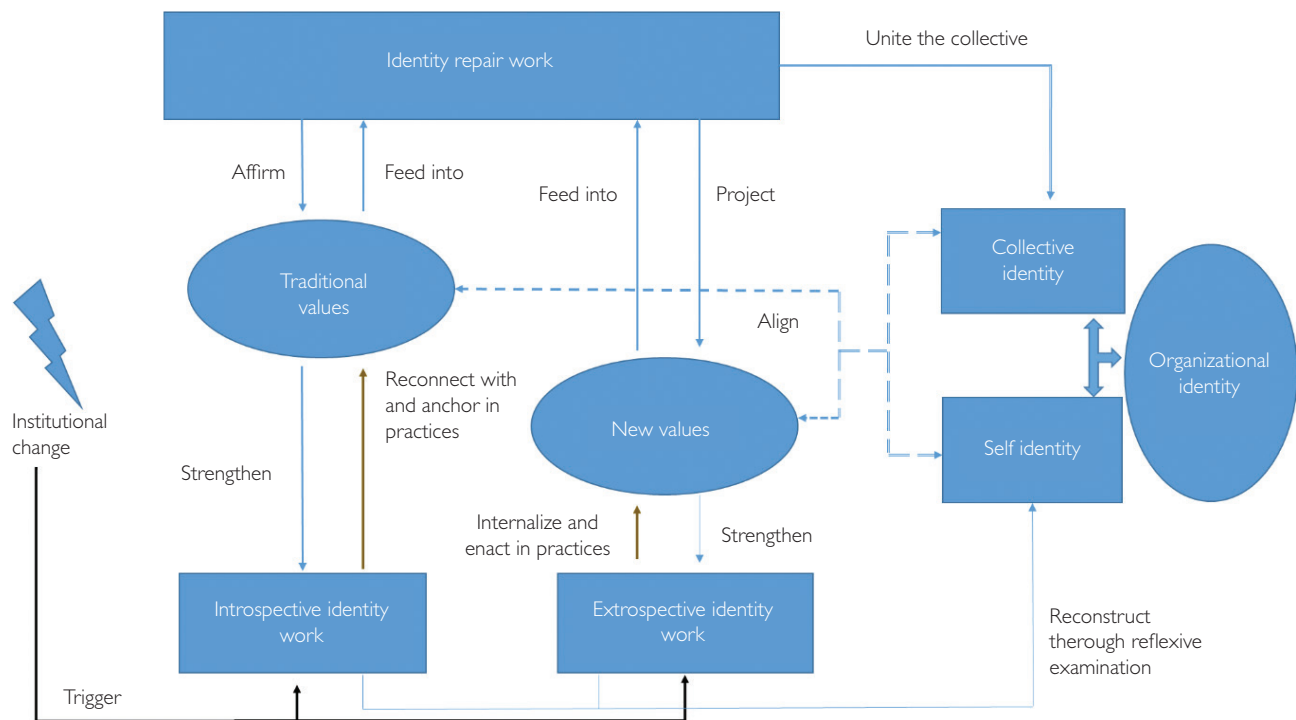
Figure 2. Model of the identity work to align organizational identity

representation of the interplay between the internal dynamics (introspection and extrospection) and the external dynamic of identity repair work.

Findings

There was a significant institutional change due to the rise of CPDs, which destabilized wholesale practices in the F&V trade in France, thereby generating a threat to the identity of F&V wholesalers and putting their profession in jeopardy. Consequently, POMA reacted to this threat by engaging in identity work, both internally and externally. In this case study, we explore how an organization combines its internal and external identity work to respond to an institutional change that threatens the collective identity.

Based on the study findings, we identify three forms of identity work at POMA: introspection, extrospection and repair (Figure 1). These three types of identity work interact with each other around the values of proximity and quality.

Introspective identity work

The work of introspection is internal identity work that arises from the echo of the institutional change within the POMA organization. In this work, members of the organization revisit the organization's past and present memories,

beliefs and values in order to answer their identity question: 'who are we as an organization?' At the heart of this introspective work lies the affirmation of their belonging to the 'F&V wholesaler' collective:

> We are an F&V wholesaler. That remains our hallmark. (logistics organizer, POMA, 2012)

In response to the challenge to the collective identity of the profession, this introspection work prompted the organization to revisit and reaffirm its original identity through efforts to *reconnect with its traditional beliefs and values and anchor its existing practices and activities.*

Reconnect with the organization's traditional beliefs and values

POMA members reconnected with their original identity as an 'F&V merchant', which was always their core business. Notwithstanding other activities that developed over time, such as banana ripening and the importation of other exotic fruits in 1979, POMA members refocused on the F&V trade to define their business. 'I think that the core business has always been the wholesale trade' (interview no. 2, CEO of POMA, 2011). In this quote, the CEO underlines the historical dimension of the business: 'that is part of our existence', he added.

The F&V trade is characterized by product knowledge and relationships with customers in the food retail sector. This knowledge is especially associated with the F&V activity. The CEO of POMA himself said that he 'had always been immersed in F&V' (interview no. 1, 2011) and had thus presented a way of thinking that was steeped in F&V culture, which is a culture of *fresh and living produce* that rests on strong beliefs about an atypical and complex product. As the senior management advisor pointed out, 'once again, F&V is particular' (interview, senior management advisor, 2011). Indeed, fruits and vegetables are fragile and depend on the weather conditions, so their quality is both unique and uncertain. In addition, daily market fluctuations determine their prices, which adds to their complexity and specificity. This particularity justifies the wholesaler's profession: 'for a product like yogurt, everybody just uses suppliers', said the senior management advisor, 'but F&V is a whole other business. To start with, it's a living product'.

POMA members restored meaning to their profession by defining it in terms of managing the complexity of fresh and perishable products. They also emphasized the importance of customer relationships and the value of proximity that enables them to be agile and responsive in the face of this complexity.

> In F&V… it's related to the business of fresh and living produce. It can't come from too far away… Relationships are important, I would say. (Interview no. 1, CEO and member of management committee, POMA 2012)

The value of proximity, supported by the relationship with supermarkets, is also found in the desire to reconnect with their role as a partner of the food retail sector, despite the shift towards disintermediation. The reflexive examination of 'what is POMA' led its members to strengthen this role and the value of proximity relationships in the construction of their identity. Rather than pushing them away from the supermarkets, the CPDs paradoxically encouraged POMA salespeople to reconnect with the belief in a strong proximity relationship with supermarkets, justifying their existence.

> My salespeople imagined themselves having an atypical relationship with supermarket department heads. (Interview no. 5, CEO of POMA, 2014)

As it got involved with the retail food sector in the 1960s and 1970s, POMA developed the real customer relationship expertise and a supermarket culture, built on a kind of devotion and the conviction of maintaining a unique relationship with each store.

This unique relationship embodied the sense of being in the service of the grocery stores by remaining close enough to help them out when needed and being attentive in order to satisfy particular needs. These proximity and customer relationship values are traditional because 'the wholesale business was traditionally conducted on a one-to-one basis' and they have remained important according to the senior management advisor: 'in our business, we talk to each other every day'. According to POMA members, these relationships have survived and give them meaning, in contrast to the CPDs which are ruled by the economic efficiency imperatives of prices and quantities, but do not know the specificities and constraints of each store. Thus, despite disintermediation, POMA's identity remains linked to its original mission of 'serving the grocery stores' (interview, POMA logistics manager, 2012) and the value of close relationships.

Anchor existing practices and activities

While affirming their beliefs and the traditional values of the F&V business and proximity to the stores, POMA would also anchor them in its activities to restore meaning to their way of working.

Firstly, POMA strengthened its logistics activity and beefed up its sales skills to keep large food retailers close to the company. Building on a first experience with its Danone account, POMA became a logistics service provider for Leclerc's F&V CPD in 1992 and for Auchan in 1998. By reactivating its experience with Danone, POMA found an opportunity to better serve grocery stores through logistics services, which is in keeping with its traditional value of proximity.

The development of this (initially) secondary activity fits with the aim of reconnecting with the traditional value of proximity and regaining the trust of the supermarket chains. Although this activity 'had been developed in response to constraints', it became an essential element for keeping large food retailers close and serving the business, as illustrated by the following quote:

> When Leclerc was in the process of setting up their platform, I fought hard to be their logistics service provider. It was the same when it came to Auchan and I fought for it again. (Interview no. 4, CEO of POMA, 2012)

In addition, POMA strengthened its sales capabilities in dealing with the supermarkets. The importance of this function is mentioned by the members of the logistics and sales teams, who sometimes commented: 'a lot of importance is given to the sales people and you definitely don't want to upset a salesperson' (interview no. 2, CFO and member of the executive committee, 2012).

Secondly, POMA secured its role as an expert in fresh products – to offset the insufficiencies of the CPDs – by developing a business in fresh seafood.

In the 1990s, the seafood business had not yet been challenged by the CPDs. Seafood and F&V shared certain characteristics as they were both *fresh and living* products. Both were 'harvested products' according to the POMA facility manager (interview no. 2, 2011), with a 'very irregular and perishable supply', which explains their complexity and specificity. As he describes it, 'I'm an F&V man, but I am not lost when it comes to seafood products. We are really in the same profession'.

The executive went on to explain that this initiative allowed them to anchor 'the role of proximity at the interface of fresh products, F&V and seafood, which is our core business'. In order to further corroborate this thesis of the importance of introspective identity work, we cite the decision made by POMA to extend its product range to include frozen items, following a completely different logic.

> What stopped me from getting into [frozen products] at the time was I said to myself that I had a culture of fresh produce, I had a culture of perishables, but not necessarily a culture of 'dead' products. (Interview no. 2, CEO of POMA, 2011)

At the same time, POMA strengthened its capabilities in purchasing and product knowledge, thus positioning itself as an expert in F&V. Product knowledge, for example, was extended to all POMA members, including the logistics team. Purchasing competencies were strengthened by the conviction that their identity as a wholesaler rested on commerce.

> [F&V wholesale] is a real profession that is essentially purchasing. In our organizations, I think that purchasing is a key component because the bulk of the profit is made in purchasing. (Interview, Director of Caupona consortium, 2011)

CPDs are 'suppliers' (interview, management advisor, 2011), which is an important nuance that allows them to redefine their role on the basis of purchasing expertise. The senior management advisor went on to explain the importance of the buyer as a 'conductor' who orchestrates the sale. As a sales manager mentioned, 'here the buyer is seen as someone who has more clout' (interview, manager in charge of 'Plaisir Frais', 2012). This role is entrusted to the facility manager, reputed to be the best buyer, with 'outstanding' expertise and 'exceptional knowledge of the products'.

Through this introspective work, the company reaffirmed its original identity and strengthened its initial practices underpinned by relational proximity and expertise in fresh produce.

Extrospective identity work

Through extrospective identity work, POMA also explored the ways of transforming its identity by embracing new values that corresponded to the expectations of the external audience. Thanks to this extrospective work, POMA internalized new values coming from the outside and 'enacted' them with new practices and activities.

Internalizing new values from the outside

In this extrospective work, POMA looked at external expectations to answer the following question: 'how would others like us to be?'

In doing so, they discovered the importance of expectations in terms of *quality* that began to develop in the 2000s. The quality value mainly concerns quality management required by new certifications and standards, such as the Qualipom'fel certification, for customer satisfaction and compliance with the ISO 9001 standard for the control of processes. The quality value also includes the importance of *service*, whereas wholesalers had previously only been concerned with the product.

POMA's internalization of the first element of process control was the consequence of an appreciable evolution towards more transparency, and compliance with standards and regulations on food safety and hygiene. In 2002, for example, the European Union introduced the Food Law to control hygiene and the traceability of foodstuffs. POMA management realized that there was a lack of transparency in its processes, which had hitherto been governed by informal oral conversations, and launched an effort to learn about quality management systems, codes and vocabulary.

POMA members gradually absorbed this quality value to the point of incorporating it into their self-definition as an F&V wholesaler. According to one of the buyers, quality 'is the core of our business', whereas before the 2000s, 'there was no formal procedure. According to the former quality manager, ours was a very strong oral culture' (interview, 2012). This manager retraced the internalization of the quality culture over a period of about 10 years:

> There has been an internalization of the system, which is much stronger today. Ten years ago, we only communicated a little about quality principles. Today it is much more entrenched in our attitudes and behaviours. (Interview, former quality manager POMA, 2012)

The second type of external requirement that was taken into account in redefining POMA's role were new expectations concerning territorial rootedness for local, healthy and natural products. Spurred by the excesses of globalization and a series of food scandals, these expectations were manifested in normalized pressures, such as the French National Nutrition Health Plan launched in 2001.

POMA members integrated these new expectations of territorial rootedness and local consumption. The CEO explained that the assimilation of their local role 'is barely ten years old', and that 'it emerged as a response to an adaptation of the

environment'. He linked it directly to food safety crises and the need for reassuring consumers about the product. According to the CEO, local rootedness was the best answer to respond to current challenges in quality.

Enacting expectations through new practices and activities

The new values based on expectations concerning quality and local consumption were formally enacted in the organizational processes at POMA.

One of the most striking actions undertaken was the implementation of new control and traceability processes with the creation of new positions and training for employees. A quality manager was recruited in 1998 to set up the quality process and obtain the Qualipom'fel certification the same year:

> I joined the POMA group because they were looking for someone to set up the quality system and have it certified according to the Qualipom'fel standards. The POMA group was the first F&V distributor certified in France. (Interview, former quality manager POMA, 2012)

Since then, the quality manager has become one of the key roles. He set up the Qualipom'fel certification process and then ISO 9001 in 2008. He was also a proponent of the diffusion of the quality value, thus instilling in all employees the vocabulary and practices associated with process control and safety.

This new key competence was strengthened by training for all logistics and sales teams provided by the interprofessional technique centre for F&V, which integrated standards of hygiene and food safety, as well as taste in quality control. Finally, a new post of 'quality inspector'[2] was created, which did not exist before quality control was introduced. The quality inspector oversees arrivals and shipments of merchandise and checks their quality based on the health criteria. Henceforth, 'one of the key roles in the wholesale business is the quality inspector' (interview, Director of the Caupona consortium, 2011).

The integration of new concerns about nutrition and health, stemming from local rootedness, was also manifested in the creation of a non-industrial processing facility for raw and ready-to-use F&V called 'Plaisir frais' (fresh pleasure). This facility offers a unique service, customized based on the particular requests of each customer using local products with high taste quality and 100% natural. The facility manager explained the link between this activity and 'the evolution in consumers' expectations' (interview no. 2, 2012). He emphasized the superior quality of the products, as illustrated in this quote:

> We have a great strength, which is that our products are never frozen. We work with fresh produce and when you taste both, there is no comparison… We work to order. Everything you want in the F&V range. (Interview no. 2, facility manager and member of the executive committee, 2011)[3]

By extrospection, POMA internalized a new value, centred on quality and local produce, which it integrated into its practices and activities.

Identity repair work

The identity repair work was oriented outwards and aimed at repairing the identity of the profession, which had been altered by the emergence of CPDs. Essentially, its purpose was to counter the negative view of the profession and to make its externally perceived image acceptable again. These efforts were coordinated with the internal work of introspection and extrospection, revolving around the two values of proximity and quality. This work includes three mechanisms: uniting the collective around shared values, affirming the original value of proximity and, finally, projecting the new value of quality.

Uniting the collective around shared values

The identity repair work first became evident in the POMA group's involvement in professional bodies. This was essentially spurred by the CEO's determination to defend the profession:

> There was Mr Poma's desire to keep the business alive or rather to keep the profession alive. (Head of accounting, POMA, 2012)

POMA got involved in interorganizational bodies to re-establish the wholesaler as a legitimate intermediary in the F&V sector. The CEO of POMA got personally involved in the professional federation of F&V wholesalers (UNCGFL) and became its vice-president. He was, therefore, a stakeholder in the collective projects, aiming to define the new collective identity of wholesalers. The Qualipom'fel quality certification in 1998 was the result of one of the projects that took shape within this professional organization. Their involvement in new modes of locally sourced consumption, starting in 2005, was also the result of collective thinking within the federation of F&V wholesalers, which the CEO of POMA took charge of personally ('I made it my own').

The CEO of POMA got involved in the federation, not only to participate actively in the collective decisions that defined the scope of the profession but also to represent the profession to other influential stakeholders:

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2. The quality inspector (*agréeur* in French) is responsible for receiving products and inspecting them.

3. Interviews are only numbered for respondents who were interviewed several times.

I would say that collective action at the professional level is always important because a national federation is its voice both within the sector and in dealing with public authorities… (Interview no. 2, CEO, POMA, 2012)

Moreover, the CEO of POMA was one of the three founders of a consortium of wholesalers called Caupona, which is created in 1995. He has been its president since then and thus has a significant influence over the consortium's different orientations, ensuring that they follow those of the federation. He mobilizes POMA's own resources in this consortium to ensure that the rules are applied and diffused to other wholesalers.

In order to achieve these collective orientations, mainly revolving around the importance of proximity and quality in the wholesaler profession, the CEO of POMA continued to reiterate its values and messages, both in writing (minutes of meetings, editorial of the internal newsletter, and local and regional press) and through his interventions in the Caupona consortium. As the CFO pointed out, 'Mr Poma is trying to develop the values that are dear to him' (interview, 2012).

Affirming the original value of *proximity*

External representation as a proximity actor is an integral component of the identity repair work, which stems mainly from the organization's original identity, founded on customer relationships and the need for agility and responsiveness, given the specificity of F&V produce. The identity repair work consists in better communicating their traditional role of proximity and making it known through the involvement of the POMA group in the territory.

Firstly, POMA communicated more about its traditional role of proximity. The CEO of POMA explained that 'we have been doing local for 40 years, but we haven't communicated about it enough'. As previously mentioned, the idea of advertising the proximity role of wholesalers arose from a collective reflection within the federation of F&V wholesalers. The director of the federation pointed out that this value has been reaffirmed by the collective since 2005, while emphasizing its traditional dimension: 'wholesalers have always been proximity operators' (interview, 2011). The CEO of POMA was even more involved in diffusing this collective dimension, leveraging his position as president of the Caupona consortium of wholesalers. He ended one editorial for the consortium saying, 'we were a bit like [Molière's] bourgeois gentleman, who had been speaking prose all his life without knowing it; we have been doing proximity like that' (interview no. 4, 2012). The CEO of POMA also relayed the message to the media. For example, during an interview with a local newspaper, he made sure to emphasize their local engagement: 'the market is global', he conceded, but 'I never eat melons before the month of July' (newspaper article, extract from an interview with Mr Poma). POMA members also highlighted the benefits of their Plaisir Frais food

processing business in terms of expectations for locally sourced food in an article titled 'Flavours and colours in dishes' (September 2008, *Hôtellerie-Restauration* magazine).

Secondly, the POMA group got involved in various organizations affirming their territorial embeddedness, such as the *Dégustons l'Alsace* association founded in 2005. This association was co-founded with several actors from the territory (grocery store managers, restaurant chains, producers, etc.), with the aim of promoting the gastronomic riches of the region. Since 2006, POMA has participated in events, such as *Dégustons l'Alsace* (Let's taste Alsace), held every year during *la semaine du goût* (Taste Week). Dégustons l'Alsace brings together producers, restaurant owners, large supermarkets and POMA who organize events to better inform consumers about the region's products. POMA members promote this external projection of their role in the territory on a daily basis. The manager of the Plaisir Frais facility handed out 'Dégustons l'Alsace' stickers, for example, and explained that it can help to change the way POMA is perceived by local producers:

I spent a year and a half explaining to producers that our aim was to promote all local production and never to say 'we're going to make a ton of money'. I told them that Mr Poma had got involved in the Dégustons l'Alsace events. Right away they were more attentive and open to the approach. (Interview, Plaisir Frais manager, 2012)

Projecting the new value of *quality*

Quality is the second value used by wholesalers in their identity repair work in order to restore meaning to 'who they are and how to act'. This value was constructed through extrospective work. These efforts to repair the identity were different because it was about projecting a new value rather than affirming a traditional value.

As mentioned, the federation of F&V wholesalers internalized the quality value by creating a quality certification. As vice-president of the association, the CEO of POMA played a key role in the construction and diffusion of the quality approach among Caupona wholesalers.

In addition to setting an example as the first member of Caupona to have both the Qualipom'fel and ISO 9001 certifications, the POMA group used its own resources in certifying other Caupona members. The quality manager assisted other Caupona wholesalers to complete their certification process. In 2011, the CEO of POMA was also behind a collective undertaking by Caupona to introduce Maximum Residue Limits (MRLs) for pesticides in F&V.

He said, 'Now we must talk about health'. I think that Mr Poma, being a member of those bodies, must have heard about it because there was an 'F&V Partnership' undertaking that combines this verification and analysis of pesticides. (Interview, Director of Caupona consortium, 2011)

The identity repair efforts continued by communicating this quality approach to external stakeholders to counter the negative image of wholesaler opaqueness. For example, POMA organized warehouse visits not only for its customers but also for schools by participating in the national 'Fresh Attitude' operation of the interprofessional association INTERFEL, aimed at having a broader public discovery or rediscovering F&V. When the human resources director served as a tour guide for middle school students during a warehouse visit in December 2011, he showed off the modern equipment used by the group (e.g., cold storage rooms and food processing facility) and emphasized their quality control function (observation December 2011). The quality inspector testified to the importance attributed to the quality control function during these visits by outside people: 'We show them how important our job is' (interview, 2012).

More generally, the CEO of POMA diffused a 'responsible fresh produce' discourse to external stakeholders, conveying 'a message on health, hygiene and good practices'. The Director of the consortium mentioned the press dossier made for SIRHA (trade fair for restaurant and food service industry) on 'responsible fresh produce' and underlined the CEO's role in diffusing this message and transforming their image:

> That was Mr Poma's speech yesterday. He totally subscribes to this line of thinking with a message about health, hygiene and good practices. The idea is to at least transform the image. (Interview, Director of Caupona consortium, 2011)

The goal, therefore, was to transform the image of F&V wholesalers and to associate their collective identity with positive practices. To do so, POMA members got involved in multiple initiatives oriented toward nature and environmental protection. For example, the group hosted an art exhibition in 2008 on the theme of F&V to 'appear in Alsace as innovators, as trailblazers', as the CEO described it in *Les Echos* (article published 07/04/2008). In the same vein, the quality manager was charged with communicating about their initiatives for the environment, such as collecting rainwater in tanks. According to the quality manager, these 'small actions', contribute to projecting to external stakeholders the role they play in safeguarding quality.

Summary: The future of F&V wholesalers through proximity and quality

The new identity of POMA, constructed in response to the rise of the CPDs, was founded on the two values of proximity and quality. For POMA, the role of proximity actor is associated with its original identity, reaffirmed and embodied in its daily practices and close relationships with supermarkets. POMA was subsequently able to integrate the quality value, which also influenced its identity and practices, going so far as to create a new role as 'quality guarantor'. The affirmation of

these two values arose from the interplay between internal and external identity work.

Proximity was a traditional value for POMA, which resurfaced thanks to the organization's internal introspective identity work. This value allowed them to reconnect with the F&V profession, which rests on the importance of the customer relationship with supermarkets and POMA's ability to respond quickly given the complexity of fresh and living produce. Through a reflexive examination of its identity in the face of the threat to its collective identity as an F&V wholesaler, POMA was able to reconnect with its original traditional identity as a proximity actor, which had been diluted over time because of its multiple diversifications (e.g., ripening facility and import-export business).

For POMA, the interplay with the external identity repair work consisted in promoting proximity – stemming from its introspection – as a rediscovered value in order to reconstruct the collective identity of F&V wholesalers. This is how POMA promoted the value of proximity externally through its discourse and actions. The CEO contributed to the adoption of a discourse based on proximity by the F&V wholesalers federation, as well as its engagement in their local activity. In return, this collective identity repair work strengthened the proximity value at POMA and supported its members in their proximity efforts. Through the interplay between the internal introspective work and the repair work, the proximity value evolved from a value underpinning POMA's self-identity to a value that helped to construct its collective identity as a wholesaler, thanks to its adoption by other suppliers and its translation into shared cognitive schemes in the field.

The second interplay, between the internal and external identity work, occurred around the quality value. While the quality value was also the fruit of internal identity work, triggered by the threat to the collective identity of F&V wholesalers, its adoption was different from that of the proximity value. The quality value was the result of an externally-oriented dynamic to answer the question: 'how are we perceived by others?'.

Through this extrospective identity work, POMA members identified quality as a new value on which to base their organizational identity. They internalized the expectations of the audience in terms of quality and enacted them in their practices (e.g., certification process, the key roles of quality inspector and quality manager). Becoming aware that it was being threatened by the image of a wholesaler as an unnecessary and cumbersome actor, POMA was able to introduce the new quality value into the identity repair work. The aim was to transform the perception of a wholesaler from a simple trader to an expert and to safeguard F&V quality. POMA's efforts in the wholesalers' federation resulted in the diffusion and promotion of the quality value for the entire profession. Collective identity repair and the gradual alignment of the collective

identity with self-identity would consequently strengthen the quality value within POMA itself, thereby sending positive signals to maintain its commitment to this new value.

The study findings reveal the interplay between POMA's external work to repair the collective identity and its internal efforts of introspection and extrospection. This is how the values of proximity and quality fed into the identity repair work of the wholesaler profession, leading to a new alignment between self-identity and collective identity (Figure 2).

Discussion

In this research study, we have focussed on how the organization combines the external and internal identity work in order to respond to a threat to its collective identity. We looked at the threats brought about by institutional changes, whose pace and magnitude (Micelotta et al., 2017) have intensified in the current period owing to the resurgence of technological ruptures and social activism amplified by the media.

The distinction between external and internal identity work (Gawer & Philips, 2013; Leung et al., 2014; Lok, 2010) draws its meaning from the dual nature of determinants and processes of constructing organizational identity. The organization's identity is made up of a collective dimension that it shares with other similar organizations and a self-defined dimension through which its members construct meaning, labels and their most distinctive characteristics (Glynn, 2008; Glynn & Abzug, 2002; Kraatz et al., 2016).

This research study builds on the assumption of an alignment between the collective facet and the self-defined facet of identity. When this alignment is broken due to an institutional change that threatens the collective identity, the organization undertakes dual identity work: both external, to influence the way the collective identity is defined, and internal, in response to questions that the institutional change generates within the organization. While the existing literature sheds some light on each of these two dimensions of identity work, it does not show the interplay between them in response to the institutional change that impairs the collective identity.

The findings of this exploratory study of an F&V wholesaler, facing a threat to the identity of its profession, show one form of external identity repair work and two forms of internal identity work, introspective and extrospective. Based on these findings, we make two contributions: the first introduces and presents the role of traditional and new values in the construction of the new organizational identity. The second contribution, shown in Figure 2, is a model of the interplay between internal and external identity work.

Contribution to the role of values in identity work

Lok (2020) underlined the contradictions between identity work, defined as a perpetual effort of becoming, and organizational identity, considered as an inalienable attribute of the organization. Identity is thus both the most distinctive and most central element of the organization (Albert & Whetten, 1985), and also an unstable element that constantly evolves over time (Gioia et al., 2000; Patriotta & Lanzara, 2006).

In this study, we contribute to explaining how the internal and external orientation of identity work emerges and enables the organization to reconstruct its self-identity in the face of an institutional change. Lok (2010) discussed the importance of identity work to link self-identity to institutional pressures. The self-identity is constructed on the basis of the particular trajectory of the actor (organizational or individual), which is contingent on the field and institutional pressures (Brown, 2015; Delacour & Leca, 2011). Nevertheless, the mechanisms used to describe the process of constructing the self-identity (e.g., learning, deployment, framing, narration, etc.) do not allow us to determine the part of identity construction oriented towards the self and the part that is open to others and the institutional environment.

The study findings reveal the importance of values in identity work. Indeed, POMA's internal identity work led to the construction of two values: quality and proximity (see Figure 2). The proximity value is the fruit of the introspective identity work; in doing this work, the organization reconnected with the proximity value and anchored it in its practices and activities. The quality value, however, came out of the extrospective identity work. By projecting itself into the expectations of the audience, POMA developed this new value and enacted it in its new practices.

According to NIT, institutions convey a set of values that organizations adopt and use to construct their distinctive attributes and characters (Glynn, 2017). Our work subscribes to this current research that recognizes the important role of values in the construction of organizational identity (e.g., Kraatz et al., 2016; Leung et al., 2014; Vergne, 2012). And this research study contributes to it by showing how these values are constructed and how they influence the organization's actions. The interplay between internal and external identity work goes beyond the process of adopting and integrating values, in which organizations draw on elements from their institutional environment to construct their own identity. Studies on the launch of new products (Rosa et al., 1999), creation of small and medium companies (Bargues & Valiorgue, 2019) and creation of new industries (Aldrich & Fiol, 1994) demonstrate how organizations construct their distinctiveness using values in the field. This process does not take into account the organization's agency, nor its capacity to construct values by itself that it will then use to shape the collective identity of the

profession. Indeed, through its identity repair work, POMA used its values to respond to the threat to its collective identity and refute the social indictment of wholesalers as a 'drain on profit margins'.

Proposition 1: In the event of a threat to an organization's collective identity, the alignment between self-identity and collective identity is achieved through a combination of traditional values and new values.

This research study responds to the call by Kraatz et al. (2016) to place the concept of values at the heart of organizational identity construction and contributes to the literature by showing how these values are constructed, anchored and enacted through the interplay between internal and external identity work. Our second contribution specifically concerns this interplay between internal and external identity work.

Contribution to the interplay between internal and external identity work

This research study shows the identity work carried out by an organization when it is confronted with a threat stemming from an institutional change. This threatening context forces a realignment between the organization's identity as defined by its members and its collective identity (Besharov & Brickson, 2016). The interplay between the two dynamics of internal and external identity work reveals the complex interaction between organizational identity and the institution whose reflexive examination of self is the driver (Gioia et al., 2000). This study carries on from previous research, which pointed out the existence of a complex relationship between internal and external identity work in relation to the institution, although it did not delve any deeper into this interplay (e.g., Gawer & Phillips, 2013; Leung et al., 2014; Lok, 2010). The findings of this study reveal how, through internal identity work that transforms their self-identity, organizations also influence, through external identity repair work, the institutions that prescribe their collective identity. In the same vein as Rao, Monin and Durand's study (2003) in the field of French gastronomy, we describe how the change in identity feeds into and influences institutional change.

What we mean by the interplay between internal and external identity work is the dynamic by which the internal work feeds the external work with traditional and new values. These values reconstruct the collective and self-identities, which through their alignment produce a new organizational identity, as shown in Figure 2.

The work of introspection prompts the organization to reconnect with its original identity, rooted in past beliefs, competencies and activities. This is triggered by the echo that the institutional change may have within the organization, prompting the organization to seek elements of identity needed for resilience. Withdrawal into oneself is a well-known phenomenon in psychology. It is often the response of individuals and organizations whose identity comes under attack and who are stigmatized (Vergne, 2012). The form of identity work that we bring to light here is similar to what Brown (1997) calls 'ego-defence mechanisms'. These mechanisms assume that organization members are attached to their identity, have a positive view of it, and will attempt to maintain and restore it. The introspective identity work feeds the identity repair work with traditional values that the organization will endeavour to breathe life into and diffuse throughout the field like a new component of the collective identity for the entire profession (see Figure 2).

The first mechanism of coordination between internal and external identity work include the efforts made by the organization to transcend its own identity and to transmit its traditional values to the entire profession. Our observations corroborate the thesis of Daudigeos, Boutinot and Pezé (2015) whereby traditional collective representations – which shape the raison d'être of all the members in the field – are a major component in the analysis of institutional changes. The deeper the traditional value is rooted in the collective identity and is accepted by the collective, the more it is strengthened within the organization, supporting its members in their association with that value. The combination of the diffusion of the traditional value, coming from the introspective work, and with the diffusion of the same value to the collective, achieved through identity repair work, is what brings about the alignment between the collective identity and the self-identity.

Proposition 2: In the event of a threat to its collective identity, the organization, which proceeds to carry out introspective identity work on what it is as an organization, will feed its external identity repair work with existing traditional values.

On its own, the combination of introspective identity work and identity repair work would limit the organization's response to institutional change to mere resistance or denial (Brown, 1997), resting solely on existing traditional values. However, our findings show that organizations also transform their identity by opening up to the outside. This transformation concerns the second link between extrospective identity work and identity repair work (see Figure 2).

The organization acknowledges certain criticisms and shortcomings (e.g., lack of transparency) and works to overcome them by transforming its self-identity. As shown by Ben-Slimane and Leca (2014), it is a matter of showing empathy to the stakeholders in its environment in order to understand their expectations and the image that the group of organizations should project.

Thanks to this capacity for empathy, the extrospective work helps to identify a new value that the organization can then feed into its identity repair work. Linking this internal identity work with the external work, the new value contributes to the reconstruction of the organization's self-identity and to

diffusing it to the collective as a response to the threat to identity brought on by institutional change. In return, the diffusion of this new value to the collective and its adoption will strengthen the organization's commitment to the new value., thus enabling the organization to further internalize and enact the new value in its practices.

Proposition 3: In the event of a threat to its collective identity, the organization, which carries out internal extrospective identity work to find out 'how we should be perceived', feeds new values into the external work to repair its collective identity.

This research study thus reveals two different interplays at work between internal and external identity work prompted by the threat of institutional change to the collective identity. Taken together, these two interplays echo the thesis whereby organizational responses to institutional changes are not necessarily binary, where acquiescence and resistance constitute the two extremes. Indeed, the organization may embrace new values while striving to maintain certain existing elements (Ben-Slimane, 2012).

Conclusion, limitations and future research

This research study linking internal and external identity work rests on a single exploratory case study. While it is perfectly suited to building new theories (Gioia et al., 2013a), this method has limitations in terms of the extent to which its results can be generalized. Nevertheless, the findings drawn from the case of the POMA, faced with the emergence of CPDs in the food retail sector, can be applied to other contexts when the institutional change is severe enough (Micelotta et al., 2017) to threaten the collective identity of an organization. New empirical research studies could be built on this first effort to model the dynamics of internal and external identity work.

We suggest other avenues of research that may be followed to pursue the debate over the links between identity and institutional change. In particular, we invite researchers to explore the form of distributed agency in carrying out identity work. While the role of leader in identity dynamics has already been underlined by numerous studies (e.g., Kraatz, 2009; Ravasi & Phillips, 2011), it would be useful to apprehend this effort as collective and distributed (Battilana et al., 2009), and thus, reveal the role of other actors in the process. In the case of POMA, the CEO contributed significantly to the orientation of responses to organizational change. Under the leitmotif of 'watchdog of the business', he guided POMA in defending the profession and defining the role that the company would play. Similarly, his presence in many industrial bodies and representative organizations at the collective level was also decisive in conducting the identity repair work. Still, other actors, such as the facility manager and the quality manager, played key roles in developing

the identity work. The interaction between all the members of the organization to advance the reflection on 'who they are' remains somewhat underexplored. Further research could lead to a better understanding of the internal dynamics of the transformation of organizational identity.

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