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Zhang, Ying; Biniari, Marina G.

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Forging a Collective Entrepreneurial Identity within Existing Organizations through Corporate Venturing

Ying Zhang*

*Lecturer of International Management and Organization
University of Strathclyde Business School
University of Strathclyde
199 Cathedral Street
G4 0QU, Glasgow
UK
y.zhang@strath.ac.uk
Tel: +44 (0)141 553 6159*

&

Marina G. Biniari

*Assistant Professor of High Growth Entrepreneurship
Aalto University
Department of Industrial Engineering and Management
School of Science
P.O. Box 15500, FI-00076
Finland
marina.biniari@aalto.fi
Tel: +358 50 44 19 093*

*Corresponding author

Both authors have contributed equally to this publication.

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Abstract

- Purpose

This study unpacks how organizational members construct a collective entrepreneurial identity within an organization and attempt to instill entrepreneurial features in the organization's existing identity.

- Design/methodology/approach

The study draws on the cases of two venturing units, perceived as entrepreneurial groups within their respective parent companies. Semi-structured interviews and secondary data were collected, and analyzed inductively and abductively.

- Findings

The data revealed that organizational members *co-constructed* a 'corporate entrepreneur' role identity to form a collective shared belief and communities of practice around what it meant to act as an entrepreneurial group within their local corporate context and how it differentiated them from others. Members also *clustered* around the emergent collective entrepreneurial identity through sensegiving efforts to instill entrepreneurial features in the organization's identity, despite the tensions this caused.

- Originality/value

Previous studies in corporate entrepreneurship have theorized on the top-down dynamics instilling entrepreneurial features in an organization's identity, but have neglected the role of bottom-up dynamics. This study reveals two bottom-up dynamics that involve organizational members' agentic role in co-constructing and clustering around a collective entrepreneurial identity. This study contributes to the middle-management literature, uncovering champions' identity work in constructing a 'corporate entrepreneur' role identity, with implications for

followers' engagement in constructing a collective entrepreneurial identity. This study also contributes to the organizational identity literature, showing how tensions around the entrepreneurial group's distinctiveness may hinder the process of instilling entrepreneurial features in an organization's identity.

Keywords: corporate entrepreneurship; collective entrepreneurial identity; corporate entrepreneur; communities of entrepreneurial practice; role identity

Introduction

Organizational identity consists of shared meanings and claims around organizational members' collective response to the question 'Who are we as an organization?' (Albert and Whetten, 1985). Through their identities, organizations differentiate themselves from other organizations (Hatch and Schultz, 2002) and guide their members toward pro-organizational outcomes (Dutton and Dukerich, 1999). Corporate entrepreneurship scholars have long suggested that the 'entrepreneurial' features of an organization's identity describe an organization that promotes innovation, risk-taking, and proactiveness (Covin and Slevin, 1991). In turn, such organization-level 'entrepreneurial' features are critical in sustaining members' engagement in corporate entrepreneurial behavior, such as venturing (Zahra *et al.*, 1999). Despite the importance of forging an organizational identity that incorporates entrepreneurial features to foster members' entrepreneurial behavior, empirical studies of how such entrepreneurial features emerge as core elements in an organization's identity remain scarce.

Conceptual studies in corporate entrepreneurship have suggested that strategic intent, top managers, and work practices inform the entrepreneurial features of an organization's identity (Covin *et al.*, 2018; Covin *et al.*, 2019; Garrett and Neubaum, 2013; Ireland *et al.*, 2009; Kuratko *et al.*, 2005). These works have assumed that top managers, through their strategic choices, instill entrepreneurial features in companies "by design and experience" (Kuratko *et al.*, 2005, p. 700). However, organizational identity scholars have argued that organizational members may play an active role in forging an organization's identity through sensemaking, negotiation, and interaction (Corley and Gioia, 2004; Gioia *et al.*, 2010; Pratt and Foreman, 2000). This stream of literature adopts a social constructionist perspective to propose a dynamic identity formation process, involving the co-evolution of bottom-up meanings and top-down demands (Gioia *et al.*, 2010; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006). Such a view

of organizational identity formation challenges the long-held views among corporate entrepreneurship scholars that a company's entrepreneurial identity results from a top-down process and that the meanings encapsulated in a company's identity are static. Along these lines, to develop a deeper understanding of how entrepreneurial features are instilled in an organization's identity, an empirical focus on how organizational members contribute to the construction of those features is needed.

To illuminate these issues, this study focuses on how organizational members contribute to constructing collectively shared beliefs and understandings about the entrepreneurial features of an organization's identity, and instilling those entrepreneurial features in an organization's identity as "central, distinctive and enduring" elements (Albert and Whetten, 1985, p. 265). This study adopts a social constructionist perspective on identity formation (Gioia *et al.*, 2000; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006). Accordingly, the development of entrepreneurial features in an organization's identity is viewed as a dynamic process that draws upon members' idiosyncratic lived experiences and understandings of specific organizational and non-organizational discourses and practices. This study also acknowledges that such bottom-up dynamics cut across the individual, group, and organizational levels of analysis (Ashforth *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, efforts to instill entrepreneurial features in an existing company's organizational identity are likely to cause tensions (Gioia *et al.*, 2010; Pratt and Foreman, 2000) between the emergent entrepreneurial features and the established features of the organization's identity. Accordingly, this study examines the extent to which the entrepreneurial features of a collective identity can permeate the broader organizational identity (Ravasi and Schultz, 2006).

Empirically, this study investigates how two corporate venturing (CV) units enabled their respective parent companies to temporarily construct and articulate entrepreneurial features as central to their organizational identity. CV activities – creating new business

ventures within parent companies – constitute evidence of corporate entrepreneurial behavior (Sharma and Chrisman, 1999). The data revealed a process involving two bottom-up dynamics through which a group-level entrepreneurial identity was constructed and instilled as a central feature of the parent company's identity. Specifically, the data showed that the two units' members *co-constructed* a collective entrepreneurial identity by developing communities of practice and shared meanings regarding their role as 'corporate entrepreneurs' and labeling themselves as an 'entrepreneurial' group. The data also revealed that, through *clustering*, the two units' members attempted to make their collective entrepreneurial identity a central, distinctive, and enduring feature of their parent company's identity. However, tensions identified between the CV units and other organizational members mitigated the efforts to make the collective entrepreneurial identity a central and enduring feature of the parent company's organizational identity.

This study offers three main scholarly contributions. First, it contributes to the corporate entrepreneurship literature (Covin *et al.*, 2018; Covin *et al.*, 2019; Ireland *et al.*, 2009; Kuratko *et al.*, 2005; Zahra *et al.*, 1999) by unpacking the *co-construction* and *clustering* bottom-up dynamics that enable the construction and penetration of a collective entrepreneurial identity within an existing organization's identity. Second, contrary to previous studies that have tended to focus on the role of leaders in instilling entrepreneurial features in an organization's identity, this study portrays middle managers as agents of collective identity construction (Lok, 2010). It thus contributes to the middle-management literature (Floyd and Lane, 2000; Kuratko *et al.*, 2005) by expanding the championing role of middle managers and highlighting their contribution in solidifying the features of a collective entrepreneurial identity through the development of a community of venturing and sensegiving practice. Third, this study contributes to the organizational identity literature by showing how internal tensions between the emergent and existing features of an

organization's identity may hinder the integration of an emergent collective identity (Pratt and Foreman, 2000).

Theoretical background

The entrepreneurial features of an organization's identity capture "the organizational self-claims associated with the willingness to take risks, be proactive, and seek innovation" (Aguilera *et al.*, 2018, p. 88). While these behavioral aspects of an organization's identity capture the organization's entrepreneurial orientation, they are likely not homogeneously shared among members (Wales *et al.*, 2011). Therefore, such entrepreneurial features are likely to coexist alongside other features of the organization's identity (Corley, 2004; Wales *et al.*, 2011).

An organization's identity has multiple features. This notion stems from Albert and Whetten's (1985, p. 265) seminal definition of organizational identity as exhibiting features of *centrality*, capturing "the essence of the organization"; *distinctiveness*, differentiating "the organization from others"; and *endurance*, projecting "some degree of sameness or continuity over time." A social constructionist perspective highlights the fluidity of organizational identity features as members make meanings and claims around 'who we are' and 'what we do' (Gioia *et al.*, 2000; Moss *et al.*, 2011; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006). Anthony and Tripsas (2016, p. 418) argued that it is beneficial to align an organization's identity features, especially those tied to 'who we are' and 'what we do' as an organization. Otherwise, tensions may arise when members conduct activities that violate the organizational identity's expectations and features (Pratt and Foreman, 2000).

Corporate entrepreneurship scholars suggest that the entrepreneurial features of an organization's identity can guide members to perceive opportunities (Aguilera *et al.*, 2018; Navis and Glynn, 2011) and take entrepreneurial actions with confidence (Barnett, 2008; Zahra *et al.*, 1999). However, this stream of literature has tended to assume that the

entrepreneurial features of an organization's identity reflect top managers' entrepreneurial strategic vision (Covin *et al.*, 2018; Covin *et al.*, 2019; Kuratko *et al.*, 2005; Zahra *et al.*, 1999) or the adoption of dominant institutional templates regarding entrepreneurial behavior (Souitaris *et al.*, 2012). Proponents of this approach have pointed to an *a priori*, top-down, static formation of the entrepreneurial features of an organization's identity. By contrast, the social constructionist perspective on organizational identity suggests that beliefs regarding 'who we are as an organization' become shared through a process of collective sensemaking and negotiation among members with respect to the central, distinctive, and enduring features of the organization (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Fiol, 2002; Gioia *et al.*, 2000; Ravasi and Schultz, 2006). Such a perspective brings to the fore the members' active role in constructing the features of their organization's identity through individual and collective processes.

However, there have been few empirical studies on how organizational members contribute to constructing the entrepreneurial features of their organization's identity through such bottom-up processes. This is surprising considering the close link between entrepreneurs' identities and those of their ventures in the independent entrepreneurship context (Aguilera *et al.*, 2018). Indeed, while external demands may inform the identity of new ventures (Fisher *et al.*, 2016), studies adopting a social constructionist perspective have suggested that, drawing on discursive resources (Anderson and Warren, 2011; Clarke and Holt, 2010), entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial groups engage in identity work that informs the identity of their ventures (Dey and Teasdale, 2013; Downing, 2005; Grimes, 2018; Marlow and McAdam, 2013; Muhr *et al.*, 2019; Phillips *et al.*, 2013). Such identity work involves "forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising" a self-concept that ensures a "sense of coherence and distinctiveness" for the individual (Sveningsson and Alvensson, 2003, p. 1165).

Individuals' role identities as entrepreneurs may also inform their venture's identities (Anderson and Warren, 2011; Cardon *et al.*, 2009; Shepherd and Haynie, 2009). A role identity – “a definition of self-in-role” – encompasses “the goals, values, beliefs, norms, interaction styles and time horizons that are typically associated with a role” (Ashforth, 2001, p. 6) and carries expectations of certain behaviors (Jain *et al.*, 2009). Fauchart and Gruber (2011) argued that the founders' role identities influence their ventures' business models. Similarly, the work of Cardon and colleagues (2009) suggested that the distinctive features of founders' role identities may shape their entrepreneurial aspirations and behaviors and explain differences in the features of new ventures (Powell and Baker, 2014). In a subsequent study, Powell and Baker (2017) went one step further to suggest that co-founders may jointly shape the identity of their venture by choosing appropriate organizing roles for themselves as founders and constructing a collective identity for their venture.

Recent studies have started to unpack these bottom-up processes through which a founder's entrepreneurial identity could enable the formation of a collective entrepreneurial identity (Drori *et al.*, 2009). Building on Drori *et al.*'s work (2009), Ashforth *et al.* (2010) theorized on the bottom-up processes through which individuals construct their individual identities (i.e., ‘I am an entrepreneur’), which in turn initiates the development of a shared and negotiated understanding of a collective identity that defines a group (i.e., ‘we are an entrepreneurial team’). This collective identity then informs the broader organizational identity if other groups recognize the collective identity as a central and enduring feature of the organization (i.e., ‘this is an entrepreneurial company’).

Building on Ashforth *et al.*'s (2010) conceptual work and on studies unpacking identity construction processes in the independent entrepreneurship context, one could expect that the processes through which members construct a role identity as corporate entrepreneurs may influence the construction of a collective entrepreneurial identity. Conceptual studies

suggest that members draw on organization-level role schemas regarding what it means to act as a corporate entrepreneur (Corbett and Hmieleski, 2007) in order to form a shared understanding of what it means to act entrepreneurially. Role schemas represent individuals' and group members' perceptions of their entrepreneurial role (Blatt, 2009; Farmer et al., 2011). Other studies, drawing on social identity theory, suggest that individuals are likely to draw on an organization's entrepreneurial strategy, as an artifact of its organizational identity, to draw inferences on how they perceive the risk taking, innovative, and proactive features of their role as entrepreneurs within organizations (Monsen and Boss, 2009).

However, role schemas regarding how to act as a corporate entrepreneur or entrepreneurial strategies are not always explicit or available within organizations (Miles and Covin, 2002). In such cases, it is quite likely that employees may experience role ambiguity (Monsen and Boss, 2009). To overcome such ambiguity, employees may engage in identity work (Anderson and Warren, 2011) to construct a role identity of what it means to be a corporate entrepreneur in light of their entrepreneurial propensity (Clargo and Tunstall, 2011). Such identity work could involve experimenting with alternative "central (innovator, risk bearer, action oriented [Covin and Slevin, 1991]), and peripheral (organizer, facilitator, communicator) characteristics, which taken together define this person's 'entrepreneurial' identity" within the context of the organization (Shepherd and Haynie, 2009, p. 303). Empirically, however, the dynamics of this process remain understudied.

Similarly, identity scholars have suggested that interactions among individuals allow for a structure of collective action to emerge that transcends the individual (Ashforth *et al.* 2010; Morgeson and Hofmann, 1999). Accordingly, when individuals observe others acting as 'corporate entrepreneurs' or interact with an 'entrepreneurial' group, they may engage in collective identity construction processes (Down and Reveley, 2004; Obschonka *et al.*, 2012). However, little is known about the nature or dynamics of the collective actions that may

facilitate the development of a collective entrepreneurial identity within an existing organization. Therefore, this study addresses the following research question: How do organizational members contribute to the construction of a collective entrepreneurial identity within an organization, and how do they instill their collective identity's features as central and enduring elements of the existing organizational identity?

Methods

Research setting and design

To illuminate these issues, a case study research design (Eisenhardt, 1989; Eisenhardt and Graebner, 2007; Yin, 2003) was adopted, involving the cases of two CV units. The "Acto" and "Bravo" CV units (pseudonyms) operated within two respective parent companies: the "Acto" unit in Corporation A (pseudonym), and the "Bravo" unit in Corporation B (pseudonym). These two cases were selected because their parent companies not only were of comparable size and had distinctive organizational identities prior to their engagement in CV activities, but were also recognized by third parties as entrepreneurial companies due to their involvement in CV activities. Table 1a provides details on the two cases' key characteristics.

Corporation A, a multidivisional company operating in the telecommunications sector, employed 104,700 people around the world in 2003; it was widely recognized as a leading engineering company. Corporation B, a multidivisional company operating in the information and news services sector, employed approximately 15,000 people in 86 countries; it was recognized as a leading media company. The "Acto" unit was founded by a middle manager in early 1999 as a response to the organizational need to create new internal ventures. The "Bravo" unit was founded by a middle manager to invest in external ventures as a response to changes in the external environment. Neither of the parent companies had any prior engagement in CV activities, and neither had claimed to be an entrepreneurial company through its mission statement or communications prior to the initiation of its

venturing unit. However, both parent companies referred to their respective CV units as prime exemplars of the entrepreneurial features of their organizational identity. The venturing units were in operation between 1999 and 2003, coinciding with the third and biggest wave of CV investment. CV investment reached \$18 billion in 2000, followed by a severe slowdown in 2001 (Dushnitsky, 2012), making this period deserving of scholarly attention in terms of CV.

Data collection

This study combined semi-structured interviews and secondary data as the main data sources. Using multiple informants and data sources can help to diminish biases (Miller et al., 1997), enable triangulation, and provide a richer account of the empirical setting (Schwenk, 1985). In early 2003, eight interviews were conducted with informants from each venturing team (four interviews per unit). The informants included the founder and key functional members of each unit, and one senior manager outside the unit. The founder of each unit was prompted to recall what had motivated him/her to found the venturing unit, how the unit was organized, and how the unit's activities had evolved over time. The interviews with the units' key functional members followed a similar interview protocol. Senior managers were interviewed to verify the evolution of the unit's activities, the unit's interaction with other units, and its impact on the respective parent company.

All informants were assured anonymity, and interviews lasted between 90 and 120 minutes. All interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The transcripts of the interviews amounted to 250 pages of single-spaced text. Table 1b outlines the primary and secondary data sources used in this research and the period covered by each data source. Table 2 summarizes the characteristics of each informant.

- Insert Tables 1a, 1b, and 2 About Here -

Interview data were supplemented with extensive secondary data. The secondary data covered the timeframe from one year before the initiation of the CV unit to at least three years after its cessation. Secondary data were collected on the informants (i.e., interviews with media, academic literature, web content from the companies' sites), the CV units (i.e., web content of each CV unit, public media coverage, academic literature), and the parent companies (i.e., web content, media releases and coverage, annual reports, and industry reports). In addition, reflective field notes were kept throughout the fieldwork process. These secondary data amounted to an additional 230 pages of single-spaced text.

Data analysis

During the initial stages of the data analysis, it was observed that, although the two units operated in significantly different corporate contexts, their members talked vividly about the entrepreneurial features of each unit. These features were shared among the unit's members, perceived as a taken-for-granted reality characterizing their units. The interviews and the secondary data also indicated that these features differentiated the two CV units from other units within their respective corporate context. As such, the CV units temporarily generated an entrepreneurial identity for their parent companies.

Following these preliminary observations, the focus of the analysis was on the factors contributing to or hindering the formation of the collective entrepreneurial identity. An iteration between inductive and abductive coding strategies (Fisher and Aguinis, 2017; Miles and Huberman, 1994) was employed to compare the data across the two cases. First, it emerged that founders of the two units engaged in the construction of a positively valued 'corporate entrepreneur' role identity that was embraced by their fellow unit members. In parallel, it was noticed that these distinctive entrepreneurial roles were enacted through entrepreneurial practices related to venturing activities (Souitaris and Zerbinati, 2014), which were embraced by other unit members. To this end, the interviews with the unit members and

secondary data related to the two units were thoroughly examined. The coding process proceeded to capture how the CV units were portrayed both inside and outside the parent companies' boundaries. The interview transcripts with the senior management and secondary data related to the two parent companies were meticulously reviewed to yield further insights. As a result, a coding scheme of categories and subcategories emerged around the 'corporate entrepreneur' role identity, the communities of entrepreneurial practice the unit members developed, and the tensions the unit members faced in constructing a collective entrepreneurial identity.

There were numerous iterations among the data, emergent constructs, and relevant literature to gain a deeper understanding of the collective entrepreneurial identity formation process. This iterative process enabled the most relevant and important constructs and their inter-relationships to emerge, resulting in the selection of themes to abstract a process model. Tables were also constructed to compile relevant data per construct and case.

Findings

The data analysis revealed two bottom-up dynamics involved in forming a collective entrepreneurial identity and instilling its features in the existing organizational identity. First, the *co-construction* dynamic captures the formation of a collective entrepreneurial identity at the individual and group level. In doing so, members of the venturing units engaged in an ongoing process of identity work by drawing on their own experiences to construct their role as 'corporate entrepreneurs' and enact their role through various practices. While this process was conducted individually, by sharing and revising these practices among themselves, members of the venturing units collectively made sense of these practices as 'entrepreneurial.' Through this collective process, the members affirmed how these practices made them an 'entrepreneurial' group that differentiated them from others. Second, the *clustering* dynamic captures the interaction between the emergent collective entrepreneurial

identity at the group level and other features of the organization's identity. Through the clustering dynamic, members of the venturing units aimed at creating synergies between the emergent collective entrepreneurial identity and their company's organizational identity, while managing any tensions arising from these efforts.

Figure 1 depicts how the *co-construction* and *clustering* dynamics unfolded and related to each other. In the interest of clarity, the two dynamics are presented sequentially. In practice, however, their relationship is likely to be recursive due to the tensions between the emergent collective entrepreneurial identity and the company's existing organizational identity. The data suggest that the presence of such tensions could prevent a collective entrepreneurial identity from becoming a central and enduring feature of an organization's identity.

- Insert Figure 1 About Here -

Co-construction dynamic

The *co-construction* dynamic captures the process through which organizational members make sense of their role as a 'corporate entrepreneur' and share the outcomes of this sensemaking process with other unit members to forge a collective entrepreneurial identity. The unit members collectively refined and revised what it meant to act as corporate entrepreneurs through interpersonal interactions. They enacted those meanings to develop practices through which they could differentiate themselves from others and exemplify their entrepreneurial behavior. In doing so, a shared understanding of what it meant to be and to act as an 'entrepreneurial' group emerged.

Founding the "Acto" unit. In 1997, the CEO of Corporation A's R&D division was anxious over its ability to commercialize a portfolio of over 15,000 patents its scientists had created. The CEO realized that the company needed to start commercializing its IP by creating an incubation process for the division. In late 1999, he approached Alan, a middle

manager with business development experience, to “*go away and make it happen.*” Between December 1999 and April 2000, Alan interacted with key R&D scientists to understand their areas of expertise and the business potential of their patents. He noticed the frustration of the scientists, whose ideas were not being transformed into ventures. Alan started to perceive himself as instrumental in extracting the company’s “*hidden value.*” His proposal to the CEO was to establish the “Acto” venturing unit as a vehicle for creating new ventures by commercializing the division’s patents and fostering an “*entrepreneurial climate*” among the scientists. For Alan, to act entrepreneurially meant exploiting existing opportunities, by commercializing the division’s IP, and exploring untapped but promising opportunities, by enabling scientists to recognize business opportunities and champion their development. He was aware that the latter part of his proposal was explorative, “*mapping out an uncharted territory for [Corporation A].*” He intrinsically identified with the challenge to act on this opportunity and to drive the company through this process. He commented, “*the challenge was very exciting, and I had the right experience.*” In April 2000, he was appointed Creative Director of the “Acto” unit, and he self-identified as its founder.

Founding the “Bravo” unit. In Corporation B, Bryan was aware that, when considering new business opportunities, there was “*encouragement [from the company] to take risks, but also much control to stop the risks being too much risky.*” He perceived the pursuit of opportunities and taking small, calculated risks as essential attributes for someone to “*be entrepreneurial*” within Corporation B. He had been acting along those lines for quite a few years. Given his interest in information and network technologies, Bryan had pursued a series of business opportunities in this area, testing their viability through commissions with small firms to build technological projects for Corporation B. The development of Internet technologies in the mid-1990s in Silicon Valley made Bryan realize that Corporation B

needed to develop a new business model to invest on a bigger scale in emerging start-ups in order to gain access to their technological expertise.

This presented both a business opportunity and an opportunity to pursue a personal goal to found and develop a business entity within Corporation B. As Bryan explained: “*I suppose the reason I was motivated [to set up the venturing activities within Corporation B] was that it was my thing, my project, my idea, my responsibility, and my opportunity.*” In 1994, Bryan negotiated with his line manager and the CFO to leave his sales position, secure some funds, and move to Silicon Valley to carry out minority equity investments in such start-ups. With no prior venturing experience, he proactively started to network with start-ups, understand their technology, and familiarize himself with venture capitalists’ practices. In 1995, he made the first minority equity investment in Beta, which achieved \$848 million market capitalization in the first week of its public offering. Bryan continued to make similar investments between 1995 and 1997, and, in 1997, he started negotiating with senior managers for the formal establishment of a CV fund. In 1999, the “Bravo” unit was formally established, securing a \$112 million annual budget for three years. Bryan self-identified as the founder of the unit, and he was appointed as its CEO.

Constructing a ‘corporate entrepreneur’ role identity. In the process of identifying the opportunity to establish a venturing unit within their respective organizational contexts, both Alan and Bryan started to enact a ‘corporate entrepreneur’ role identity. For them, this meant that they undertook the formal founder role of their CV units. They also focused their attention on identifying innovative solutions to their parent company’s problems. In doing so, they demonstrated proactiveness, acting beyond the scope of their job description. In Alan’s case, he took the initiative to engage with the scientists in the R&D division to understand their needs. As a result, he revised the CEO’s initial plans to set up an incubator. He adopted a strong process orientation in conducting CV activities and mobilizing the scientists’ passion

for commercializing their IP patents. He challenged them to “*think outside the box,*” to be enthusiastic about moving away from their day-to-day tasks, and to develop viable ventures. In the case of Bryan, the idea to develop a venturing process and invest in external start-ups was an immediate solution to the threat Corporation B faced from the emergence of Internet-based start-ups. His personal drive for the unit to have a process orientation enabled the “Bravo” unit to set clear due diligence processes for conducting venturing. He also took a hands-on approach to invest in early-stage start-ups throughout the life-cycle of the unit. The following quotes capture what it meant for both Alan and Bryan to act as entrepreneurs within the context of their parent companies:

We were conscious that we had lots of ideas, but what staggered me was these were people with PhDs. They seemed to be very confident about their subjects, but if you asked them to talk about their own ideas, they got embarrassed. So what we had to do was to create a culture there, where bringing forward ideas was good; there were no bad ideas, and it wasn't a formal thing; you did not have to ask your line manager. I did much work in [creating this process]. We decided the best way to do that was to create businesses around them, and hence our model was about creating high-tech businesses. (Alan, Corporation A)

I think what we did was showing people that you could change the company, you could change the culture, you could change the speed of operation, you could change the way [outsourcing projects to small firms] was used; but you had to do it by process and by formal, well-thought-through, well-structured ideas... We built a whole new business from the germ of an idea. (Bryan, Corporation B)

For both of them, enacting a ‘corporate entrepreneur’ role identity also meant demonstrating persistence and determination in overcoming organizational (in the case of “Acto”) or external (in the case of “Bravo”) conditions that might have inhibited the pursuit

of their opportunities. For example, Alan explained, *“In the first year, I didn’t have any budget, and I just went and did things and justified why I was doing it.”* For Bryan, determination to secure deals was instrumental in the early stages of setting up the “Bravo” unit. As he explained: *“And yes, it was me approaching the [small] companies. We had to fight our way to get into the deals.”* When their parent companies decided to decrease their involvement in the venturing activities, both founders modified their unit’s business model accordingly in order to ensure that the unit could continue to function. Bryan explained, *“It was not easy – it was never easy. We had to make the case; sometimes, it took a long time to make the case.”* Enacting their entrepreneurial role identity also meant that they both had to incur significant personal and business-related risks in dropping their corporate role as middle manager to create and run the venturing unit. Bryan explained that moving to Silicon Valley meant that he *“had chosen to step down, to go and do the job in America because I had to work in the American structure.”* In 1995, Bryan was fired just months before Beta’s IPO due to the lack of tangible returns for Corporation B, only to be re-hired within a few hours of being fired.

The data also revealed that, in the process of setting up the CV units, the interactions of the two unit founders with others were essential contributors to the process of (re)crafting what it meant for them to act entrepreneurially. Their interactions with senior managers, scientists (in Alan’s case), and start-up companies (in Bryan’s case) allowed them to receive feedback on their ‘corporate entrepreneur’ role identity. For example, in the case of Corporation A, Alan quickly recognized that, for him, to act entrepreneurially meant responding to an internal-to-the-company opportunity to utilize the company’s innovation output and human capital. As a result, the “Acto” CV unit’s business model was that of an internal CV unit. In the case of Corporation B, Bryan realized that acting entrepreneurially

meant responding to an external opportunity by integrating external knowledge into the company. As a result, the “Bravo” CV unit’s business model was that of a CV capital fund.

Sharing meanings of the ‘corporate entrepreneur’ role identity with others. In parallel, by setting up their venturing units, both Alan and Bryan demonstrated their entrepreneurial behaviors within their respective organizational contexts. For example, Alan explained that the scientists who engaged with the “Acto” unit’s venturing activities by leading the incubation of their IP “*had an opportunity to be a part of their own company, to deliver a dream, to have ideas that could be implemented.*” Similarly, Bryan commented that the members who joined the “Bravo” venturing group from within Corporation B did so enthusiastically, as they were joining a prestigious group where they could engage in venturing activities, and this prospect excited them:

The two people I recruited were from inside the company. They saw it [the “Bravo” unit] as very prestigious. People used to want to join, and when we recruited people, everyone always said yes. I never had someone say no. So, we were considered to be a prestigious thing to do; it was fun; it was exciting. (Bryan, Corporation B)

Constructing a shared, collective entrepreneurial identity. Through this collective process of pursuing opportunities within the firm, a collective entrepreneurial identity emerged among the venturing units’ members. This identity encapsulated members’ entrepreneurial roles both as individuals and as a unit. As the two venturing units formed, their founders actively built teams around them to support these activities. Alan and Bryan exuded enthusiasm, excitement, and passion about venturing activities, which attracted other employees to join their teams. As demonstrated through their behavior and practices, Alan’s and Bryan’s corporate entrepreneurial roles inspired the new members who joined the two venturing units. Other organizational members started to perceive Alan’s and Bryan’s behavior as entrepreneurial. By identifying with the entrepreneurial behaviors that Alan and

Bryan exemplified, the members that joined the two venturing units began adopting those behaviors, while making sense of and affirming their distinctive role as corporate entrepreneurs. The members of both units also drew on their skills and prior experiences to negotiate the ‘corporate entrepreneur’ role identity exemplified by Alan and Bryan and achieve a better fit with their aspirations. Martin’s and Andrew’s experiences are indicative of this process:

I left Corporation A and went to a start-up, and then I joined the [“Acto” unit] to create some more start-ups. So, coming into the [“Acto” unit], which was one of the most entrepreneurial environments I’ve ever been in, we were trying to maximize the potential of an idea rather than say “that won’t work” or “that could go wrong.”
(Martin, Corporation A)

I think the reason venturing was attractive to me was two-fold, I had all the skillsets for doing that; I had run a couple of companies as well, so I understood how to run companies. The other thing is that I had the skills to help start-up companies grow. I also liked [Bryan], and I liked his vision of things. So a lot of those characteristics were right. (Andrew, Corporation B)

While the two units’ members shared the same work principles as Alan and Bryan, they also actively contributed with their diverse skills and expertise to collectively revise their response to the question: ‘Who are we as a unit?’ The data indicate that the development of a community of practice among the members of each venturing unit was fundamental in forming a collective response to this question. The communities of practice that emerged in both cases served as the focal point for social interaction, collective identity construction, and continuous learning among the members of the CV units. Martin reflected on this process in the case of the “Acto” unit: “*When we started, we didn’t know what we were doing. It was only by looking at what other people were doing, and we learned how to do it.*” The active

engagement of all members in this process contributed to the formation of a collective entrepreneurial identity – one that was distinct from the champions’ initial influence on how venturing should be conducted.

The establishment of such communities of practice spread enthusiasm over the success of the group’s activities and a passion for venturing. Furthermore, it allowed for the continuous refinement of the group’s activities and their collective entrepreneurial identity. The data indicate that the development of a shared understanding of who they were as an entrepreneurial group, what their entrepreneurial behaviors encompassed, and how those behaviors were enacted among a small group of enthusiastic individuals fostered members’ commitment to their unit’s goals. Table 3 summarizes the two venturing units’ communities of practice, which encapsulated the units’ entrepreneurial identities and projected them to others. First, the data revealed that the members of the two units engaged in an array of CV practices to identify business opportunities. Concurrently, they set up and formalized investment practices to conduct due diligence on these opportunities (“Bravo” unit) and established processes to incubate these opportunities (“Acto” unit). Second, both units engaged in sensegiving practices to champion – within and beyond the boundaries of their respective companies – the nature of their venturing activities and to convince scientists (“Acto” unit) and external start-ups (“Bravo” unit) to collaborate with them.

- Insert Table 3 About Here -

By establishing a community of venturing and championing practice through sensegiving, the members of the CV units were able to develop coherent stories around their practices and achieve consistency within the group with respect to their pursuit of new opportunities, their investment focus and venturing approach, and their business model. As a result, the entrepreneurial identity of both units crystallized and solidified. Importantly, it was

observed that, throughout the interviews, members used consistent discourse to describe the entrepreneurial nature of the units, as these quotes demonstrate:

[What we were doing] was a mixture of entrepreneurial activities and financial investments at the same time. Well, to start with, it was more entrepreneurial. (Martin, Corporation A)

We were entrepreneurial because we went and negotiated hard and fought hard to become independent to do our own thing. (Andrew, Corporation B)

Clustering dynamic

Clustering captures the efforts of the emergent entrepreneurial group's members to create synergies and manage the tensions between the unit's collective entrepreneurial identity and the existing features of the parent company's organizational identity when interacting with others. In both cases, the *clustering* of the two identities occurred through the storytelling efforts of the unit's members in order to produce a vocabulary and rhetoric that portrayed the parent company as 'entrepreneurial' because of its involvement in venturing activities through the unit. Through these storytelling efforts, each unit sought to validate and gain the endorsement of their contribution to their parent company as an 'entrepreneurial' unit. Senior and top managers, who sought to portray their company as entrepreneurial, quickly adopted the unit's vocabulary and rhetoric. The two units' founders illustrated this point, explaining how they had developed 'stories' to justify their CV unit's existence to the parent company's boards and clients, as the following quotes illustrate:

Was our progressing internally difficult? No. We worked just on the basic logic [of] anybody who has ever created a company... there were pretty obvious questions, and of course people had to prove that people would buy their product ... [So], what we were saying was that we could recognize, understand new technologies that would be disruptive in the marketplace; they would either create a new market or seriously

disrupt the existing one. That would be our raison d'être if you like – that would be our starting point. (Alan, Corporation A)

You have to wait [to make] the case [for the “Bravo” unit] sensibly and responsibly, and you have to do your lobbying to get people to agree and to understand what the business logic was...So we had to explain to [Corporation B] why it was important to us to be associated with [start-ups]. When you explain the thing, they understood it very quickly. (Bryan, Corporation B)

The expansion of the venturing units and the successful financial performance of their first investments created stories that justified the existence of the CV units within the parent companies. For each CV unit, top management supported the unit members' sensegiving efforts by approving the unit's adoption of a brand name to capture its distinctiveness, and by acknowledging the unit's attributes and successful contribution to the company. In both cases, organizational discourse (e.g., corporate annual reports, media releases, and corporate websites) drew on the venturing unit to project an 'entrepreneurial' organizational identity.

Despite the relatively small size of the “Acto” and “Bravo” venturing units, both units were mentioned in their parent company's annual reports – in 2001 and 1999, respectively. The “Bravo” unit enjoyed one-page coverage featuring a group photo of Bryan and his colleagues and praising their financial contribution to the corporation. The “Acto” unit was featured in a section of Corporation A's website informing employees and third parties how the “Acto” unit could help them *“to develop new business opportunities and keep ahead in the information age,”* and *“how innovation and technology”* could be commercialized. In addition, internal and external audiences could access Alan's profile and narrative of how he got involved in the “Acto” unit. Combined with the financial success of the two CV units, this process culturally elevated the units' entrepreneurial identity within the parent companies.

The parent companies used the success stories of the two venturing units to project an “*entrepreneurial, future-looking*” and “*innovative*” image – a discourse used to describe the two venturing units and their members beyond the corporate media releases. Within Corporation A, the “Acto” unit was perceived as an entrepreneurial unit, projecting the company’s aspirations toward renewal, innovation, and creativity that appealed to some of its employees, especially those in the R&D division. Alan and his colleagues argued that, at a time when the organization had a much more negative image, the innovative image projected through the “Acto” unit was like a “*bright light*” for the employees. Externally, the “Acto” unit enabled Corporation A to project an organizational identity with entrepreneurial features to the venture capital market, as well as to universities and its clients. Chris argued that, through the activities of the “Acto” unit, the perception of Corporation A’s organizational identity as combining technological and entrepreneurial excellence with a commercialization capability strengthened the company’s competitive edge. The organization gained a lot of “*free publicity*” by positioning its identity as containing the entrepreneurial features of innovation and creativity exhibited by the “Acto” unit, as the following quotes suggest:

Corporate venturing activity in [“Acto”] has been part of the showcase for showing how innovative [Corporation A] is, and that if a customer comes to us with a problem, we can always find a solution. So it very much helps us in our image. (Chris, Corporation A)

At the time, because of the debt of the global strategy collapsing, there was a very negative air around the [Corporation A’s] share price. You couldn’t look at the share price and say “We drove it up,” but what you could say is, “At a very low period when people who believed that maybe [Corporation A’s] days were over, this [the “Acto” unit] was a bright light, which said that there really is innovation within [Corporation A].” I could send you one or two very thick dossiers of [“Acto” unit’s] PR. This was at

a time when [Corporation A] was getting incredibly bad press around the debt, so you would be staggered to see the positives where [the “Acto” unit] was selected in the marketplace.. [as an entity] which gives you [Corporation A] passion, ideas, [helps you] move faster, more entrepreneurial. (Alan, Corporation A)

Similarly, the “Bravo” unit operated as a CV capital fund, projecting the attributes of its collective entrepreneurial identity internally as a “*money machine*” unit due to its high returns, and externally as a forward-thinking team that was keen to invest in innovative, cutting-edge start-ups. Bryan and Colin argued that, until 2000, the top managers were using the venturing activities and successes of the “Bravo” unit to affirm to third parties that Corporation B was innovative, creative, and future-looking in the new technological era. By inviting Bryan to meetings with clients, the top managers were able to showcase certain entrepreneurial activities that differentiated them from other companies, as the following quote demonstrates:

They would say, “Hey, we are going to see Morgan Stanley, we are going to see Deutsche Bank, can you come along and tell them what is happening in [the “Bravo” unit], because there isn’t much happening in terms of our products?” So [Bryan] went, and the feedback was like, “Oh, we didn’t realize that there was so much happening at [Corporation B] that you guys were winning.” They used us - not all the time, but a couple of times- that sort of stuff. It gave [Corporation B] the entry card into the ‘hip club,’ you know, the Internet club, the new media club, the new world club. (Colin, Corporation B)

Tensions in instilling features of the collective entrepreneurial identity in the organizational identity

Although the data demonstrate that the synergies between the CV units’ entrepreneurial identity and the parent companies’ organizational identity enabled the formation of a

collective entrepreneurial identity within both parent companies, this collective identity did not succeed in fully penetrating the company's organizational identity. Through sensegiving, the championing practices of the two units made salient the entrepreneurial features of both companies' organizational identities. However, an array of tensions hindered those entrepreneurial features from becoming central and enduring elements of the parent company's identity, especially given the units' small size.

On the one hand, intra- and inter-organizational sensegiving championing practices informed organizational members and external parties of both CV units' functional role and entrepreneurial nature. Additionally, academic case studies were written about both units, portraying them as exemplars of corporate entrepreneurship. Academics also drew on both units' approaches to venturing to generate typologies of venturing activities. As Alan mentioned, *"All sorts of companies, universities, and media were very keen to talk to us, and we shared that around."* This, combined with the media attention both units enjoyed for over two years, increased their visibility. More importantly, this prominence legitimized the projection of the unit's entrepreneurial identity as a component of the parent company's organizational identity.

On the other hand, the data revealed that, in both cases, other organizational members had difficulty making sense of this synergy and questioned the extent to which the venturing unit and its entrepreneurial activities were central and enduring features of the parent company's organizational identity. This difficulty stemmed from the operational role of the two units and the publicity they enjoyed. In the case of Corporation A, some groups perceived the "Acto" unit and its practices as distinct and a threat to their way of doing business. As the following quote suggests:

It sounds obvious to say it, but there was a more entrepreneurial culture inside [the "Acto" venturing unit] [as] we were prepared to go outside [and hire] a CEO or a

Head of Sales into the [unit] because we needed to fix a problem now, and it would cost... And, if the right person costs more than the equivalent [Corporation A's] person, that caused a problem inside [Corporation A], because they said: "Well, hold on a second, we have ways of doing these things." We said, "We know, but these aren't the ways of the entrepreneur, we need this person, we need them now, please sign it."
 (Alan, Corporation A)

Chris further explained that the tension reflected the low levels of intra-organizational trust among units that had characterized Corporation A for many years. Aware of this political tension, the "Acto" unit members tried to change the perception that they were a separate, competing unit and sought to create more trust across the business. He explained these efforts in the following quote:

There was a lot of mistrust in the past between 1997/98 times – well, as one part of the business was seeing the other one as doing something against them. We were very much seen as going our separate ways, the various divisions, and creating separate businesses. Now, regarding the corporate venturing activity, there is not quite the same distrust. There is a lot more trust about [the Acto Unit]. We are all pulling together, and our various corporate venturing activities are now seen as contributing to the greater organizational good. It has certainly aided what we are doing in the corporate venturing. (Chris, Corporation A)

In the case of Corporation B, the success and media attention of the "Bravo" unit caused political tension with other units, which prevented any learning and collaboration among them. As Andrew suggests:

So basically what happens is, the spotlight goes onto a particular segment, other people want to shine too, they realize that they have got a boring, steady business – they want to innovate, and so they do it. But they don't actually take advantage of the

assets within the group – they do it their way. Because otherwise, they are going to give even more credibility to the other group. (Andrew, Corporation B)

Recognizing this political tension, the “Bravo” unit members tried to strategically navigate the negative perceptions of other organizational members by directly influencing the decision-making of Corporation B’s top management teams through their impressive financial contribution and impact. As Colin expressed:

[Bryan] had a very clear picture of the framework for technology within [Corporation B], and that wasn't believed by everybody. So he had a clear vision of what it was that he was trying to do from a technology perspective, and that just wasn't believed by some of his counterparts. And maybe other people didn't know much about it. But you saw results, the financial results, the impact that it was making. But a lot of people had very little to do with it, so they were intrigued that we could make so much money, apparently so easily, but not really understanding how it impacted on them at all. (Colin, Corporation B)

Furthermore, the relatively small size of the two CV units and the volatility of their performance complicated any further efforts to make their collective entrepreneurial identity a central and enduring feature of their parent company’s identity. Following the 2001 collapse in the dot com market, both units began to suffer significant losses. Institutional stakeholders, such as shareholders and the media, started to question the parent companies’ ‘entrepreneurial’ identity. Such negative evaluation put pressure on the top management to distance their organization from the venturing activities. Both units were spun off by 2003 as independent venture capital firms.

Discussion and implications

Collective entrepreneurial identities are important for mobilizing entrepreneurial behavior (Powell and Baker, 2017) and diffusing an entrepreneurial mindset within organizations

(Zahra *et al.*, 1999). Despite their importance, however, we know little about how collective entrepreneurial identities are constructed within existing organizations. To address this important but understudied issue, this study investigated how organizational members contribute to the construction of a collective entrepreneurial identity within an existing organization, and how the features of such an identity can penetrate the organization's identity.

Implications for theory and research

First, the findings of this study challenge the previously held assumption in the corporate entrepreneurship literature that collective entrepreneurial identity formation is a top-down process, decided *a priori* by top management alone (Covin *et al.*, 2018; Covin *et al.*, 2019; Garrett and Neubaum, 2013; Ireland *et al.*, 2009; Kuratko *et al.*, 2005; Zahra *et al.*, 1999). Instead, by adopting a social constructionist approach to organizational identity, this study theorizes and reveals the *co-construction* and *clustering* bottom-up dynamics through which organizational members individually and collectively construct a collective entrepreneurial identity within an existing organization and embed features of that collective identity at the organizational level. The theoretical insight from this finding is that members who enact a corporate entrepreneurial role could actively construct collective entrepreneurial identities within organizations. This study suggests that corporate entrepreneurs may do so by sharing their entrepreneurial practices with others and managing tensions arising between the emergent entrepreneurial and existing non-entrepreneurial features of an organization's identity.

Indeed, this study not only suggests that instilling entrepreneurial features in an organization's identity is a bottom-up process, but also reveals that this process cuts across different levels of analysis (Ashforth *et al.*, 2010). Existing work in the corporate entrepreneurship literature has mainly viewed an organization's entrepreneurial identity as an

organization-level construct (Covin *et al.*, 2019; Covin and Slevin, 2009; Ireland *et al.*, 2009). This study reveals that the construction of an organizational identity in which entrepreneurial features are central and enduring can be traced to individual and collective processes. The co-construction dynamic, as revealed in this study, highlights how an individual-level identity construction process – constructing and enacting a ‘corporate entrepreneur’ role identity – influences the identity construction processes of others who engage in the same entrepreneurial activity. Accordingly, this study extends previous studies on how entrepreneurs’ identity work matters not only in start-ups (Anderson and Warren 2011; Downing 2005; Grimes 2018; Muhr *et al.*, 2019; Phillips *et al.*, 2013) but also in the corporate context.

Additionally, this study contributes to the corporate entrepreneurship literature (Covin *et al.*, 2018; Covin *et al.*, 2019; Garrett and Neubaum, 2013; Ireland *et al.*, 2009; Kuratko *et al.*, 2005) by illuminating an identity-centric mechanism that shapes the evolution of informal corporate entrepreneurial activities such as venturing into formal, legitimate initiatives, groupings, and collective practices within an organization (Burgelman, 1983; Zahra, 2015). Indeed, this study reveals that developing a community of practice that extends beyond venturing (Souitaris and Zerbinati, 2014) to include founding and championing through sensegiving may facilitate the development of a shared understanding and coherent story among members to articulate what it means to be an entrepreneurial group within an existing organization. Therefore, this study highlights the critical role of establishing communities of practice (Fiol and Romanelli, 2012) in this process. Such communities of practice symbolically solidify the identity of an entrepreneurial group within an organization. Along these lines, entrepreneurial groups within organizations are depicted as social groupings that incubate communities of entrepreneurial practice to instill entrepreneurial features in a company’s organizational identity. With this view, this study is among the few (for an

exception, Powell and Baker, 2017) to offer empirical support for the transcending effects of individuals' identity work and social interactions in informing collective entrepreneurial identities within existing organizations.

Second, the findings of this study reinforce previous theoretical work on the championing role played by middle managers in corporate entrepreneurship (Floyd and Lane, 2000; Kuratko et al. 2005) by highlighting their agentic role as identity workers. In detail, the findings of this study reveal that middle managers' identity work in the corporate entrepreneurship context involves crafting, revising, negotiating with others and solidifying what it means to act as a corporate entrepreneur in a local corporate context. Indeed, by crafting and revising their entrepreneurial self-concepts while still acting as middle managers, the champions of entrepreneurial activities actively work to construct their role identity as corporate entrepreneurs. This role identity construction process echoes what Jain et al. (2009, p. 922) referred to as "hybrid role identity," based on their study of university scientists who construct an entrepreneur role identity on top of their academic role identity.

Additionally, the proposed model in this study reveals that the champions' identity work is influential in the construction of the shared 'corporate entrepreneur' role schema within the organizational context (Corbett and Hmieleski, 2007). As champions and leaders of their respective venturing units, these individuals enact their role as corporate entrepreneurs, which others can identify with and embrace. While this may suggest a top-down identity construction process within an entrepreneurial group, this study reveals that the followers in these entrepreneurial groups do not merely adopt the champions' 'corporate entrepreneur' role identity. Although the followers observe and embrace the champions' corporate entrepreneur' role identity, they also engage in active *co-construction* to negotiate with the champions what it means to be an entrepreneurial group before solidifying the group's entrepreneurial practices. Consequently, this study suggests a more inclusive process

of collective identity construction in which both the champions and followers of entrepreneurial initiatives act as identity workers.

Third, this study contributes to the organizational identity literature (e.g., Ashforth *et al.*, 2011; Corley and Gioia, 2004; Gioia *et al.*, 2010; Gioia *et al.*, 2013; Pratt and Foreman, 2000) by examining the construction of identities across the individual, group, and organizational levels of analysis in the corporate entrepreneurship context. Specifically, this study extends this stream of research by offering empirical support to how the development of communities of practice within an organization enables members to enact newly adopted roles and construct collective identities (Fiol and Romanelli, 2012). Prior research has examined the factors enabling and inhibiting entrepreneurial behaviors at the individual (Grimes, 2018; Phillips *et al.*, 2013), group (Powell and Baker, 2017), and organizational level (Fisher *et al.*, 2016). In this study, the co-construction and clustering dynamics reveal how these separate streams of literature could be bridged, by offering a more comprehensive account of the cognitive mechanisms that mediate the individual, group, and organizational levels of analysis (Ashforth *et al.*, 2011) in the corporate entrepreneurship context (Corbett and Hmieleski, 2007).

In particular, the co-construction dynamic provides processual accounts of what Gioia and colleagues (2010) referred to as a consensual identity constructed by organizational members at the individual and group level. The clustering dynamic echoes the identity plurality and interplay occurring at the organizational level, thereby extending Pratt and Foreman's (2000) political perspective on the management of multiple organizational identity features in the corporate entrepreneurship context. Additionally, this study theorizes that cultural mechanisms, such as the development of coherent stories and the employment of discursive practices to describe corporate entrepreneurial behavior within an organization, may be selected and employed by groups and organizations that aspire toward developing a

collective entrepreneurial identity. The degree of coherence of these stories and practices across levels of analysis appears to determine the extent to which a collective entrepreneurial identity may be established within an organization (Fiol and Romanelli, 2012).

Lastly, this study also reveals the tensions that emergent collective identities encounter when members attempt to instill them as central and enduring features of an organization's identity. The *clustering* dynamic highlights that these tensions are related to intra-organizational competitive dynamics between the emergent entrepreneurial group and existing organizational groups. While the sensegiving championing practices of middle managers aim at managing these tensions, the success and attention received by emergent entrepreneurial groups may hinder the integration of their collective entrepreneurial identity features into the organization's identity. Therefore, these findings align with previous studies revealing that internal rivalry and social comparison is likely to prevent the emotional embeddedness (Biniari, 2012) and cultural integration of entrepreneurial groups within organizations. To this end, such tensions are also likely to surface when CV groups and functions are created within organizations, given that such groups often adopt a different logic to organize their activities from that of the parent company (Biniari et al., 2015; Souitaris et al., 2010). Understanding the cultural nature of these tensions illuminates that identity construction at the individual and collective level is highly dependent on how identity workers, organizational leaders, and other organizational members make meanings and foster cultural synergies between emergent and existing identity features.

Implications for practice and society

This study offers implications for managerial practice and society by highlighting organizations' need to construct complementarities and balance among multiple and often conflicting identities (Jain *et al.*, 2009; Shepherd and Haynie, 2009) to minimize employees' experiences of role ambiguity (Monsen and Boss, 2009). Acknowledging this need has

implications for organizational leaders who can enable middle managers to realize their role as corporate entrepreneurs through formal training and coaching (Clargo and Tunstall, 2011). Discursive practices, such as metaphor building and drawing (Clarke and Holt, 2017), may also be effective tools in collective entrepreneurial identity construction, while facilitating knowledge sharing. Apart from formal training and coaching, organizational leaders may also focus on attracting employees who are willing to act as ‘corporate entrepreneurs’ by designing and advertising jobs that project the organization’s entrepreneurial identity claims (Moser et al., 2017). Constructing such recruitment-related entrepreneurial identity claims could facilitate the construction of collective entrepreneurial identity within an organization. In detail, one of the strategies for attracting and recruiting employees who are willing to act as corporate entrepreneurs may focus on the dissemination of the organization’s distinctive entrepreneurial identity features through various communication channels such as organizational websites, job descriptions, recruitment materials, and social media. The construction of such recruitment-related entrepreneurial claims (Moser et al., 2017) could also contribute to the development of newcomers’ sense of organizational belongingness and maximization of their retention (Monsen and Boss, 2009). Along these lines, this study has broader implications for entrepreneurship educators at the society level to introduce more role-identity-based pedagogy into university curricula.

Limitations and future research directions

Drawing inferences from only two case studies and interviewing mainly members of the two venturing units is likely to undermine the generalizability of this study’s findings. To overcome this limitation, expert practitioners in CV were asked to validate this study’s findings. Future studies could explore in more detail how other organizational members discursively inform the clustering dynamic of the emergent collective entrepreneurial identity within organizations. Future studies could also benefit from research methods such as

drawing (Clarke and Holt, 2017) to develop insight into how employees make meanings when crafting their entrepreneurial identities.

This study also unpacked the intra-organizational processes that could lead to the development of entrepreneurial practices within existing organizations. Souitaris and Zerbinati (2014) highlighted the presence of external pressures informing this process. Future studies could adopt a social constructionist approach to study how both internal and external discourses and demands influence this process.

This study was situated during the third CV wave in the early 2000s and drew on predominantly male figures' identity work to analyze the construction of the 'corporate entrepreneur' role identity. Therefore, this study might have unintentionally valorized a 'heroic' masculine image around the corporate entrepreneur (Ogbor, 2000). Future research should explore less successful cases of CV activities, as well as other gender or ethnic minority groups of employees who aspire to act entrepreneurially within their organizational contexts. It is anticipated that such studies will be able to uncover more plurivocal and multifaceted features of the 'corporate entrepreneur' role identity revealed in this study.

Conclusion

There has been little empirical investigation on how organizational members construct a collective entrepreneurial identity within their corporate context to influence an organization's identity. Drawing on empirical data and building on existing research, this study identifies a multi-level, bottom-up process of collective entrepreneurial identity construction that transcends the individual level to the collective level. Therefore, this study approaches collective entrepreneurial identity formation as a social constructionist process, rather than as an *a priori* characteristic of an organization.

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Table 1: Case characteristics and data collection

a. Case characteristics: Background information on corporate venturing (CV) units and parent companies' involvement in CV activities

	CV unit's characteristics				Parent company's involvement in and utilization of CV activities	
	Unit's objective	Unit's business model	Duration of unit	Numbers of members	Years and degree of intensity	Utilization
Corporation A "Acto" CV unit	To commercialize R&D division's intellectual property (IP)	- Internal CV - Incubating IP patents	3 years (2000–2003)	20	High (2000–2003)	To develop innovation capabilities and to project innovativeness and renewal to third parties
Corporation B "Bravo" CV unit	To gain access to external start-ups	- Corporate venture capital - Minority equity investments to external start-ups	2 years of informal activity (1995–1997) 4 years of formal activity (1997–2001)	5	- Low (1995–1997) - High (1997–2001)	To develop technological capabilities and to project innovativeness and renewal to third parties

b. Multiple data sources and periods covered

	Founders			Corporate Venturing Unit			Parent Company		
	Pre-study period	Study period	Post-study period	Pre-study period	Study period	Post-study period	Pre-study period	Study period	Post-study period
On identity formation	PINtF	INtF PINtF	PINtF	WCV CoPR	INtM INtC WCV, CoPR	WCV CoPR	AR-Co WCo	INtS INtC, INtM AR-Co, WCo	AR-Co WCo
To triangulate identity formation claims	PMF WCV CoPR AFL	INtM, INtS PMF WCV, CoPR, AFL	PMF WCV CoPR	PMCo AFL IDR, AR-Co	INtS PMCo IDR AR-Co	PMCo IDR AR-Co	PMCo IDR AFL	PMCo IDR AFL	PMCo IDR

Data sources legend (period covered)

Interview data:

INtF: Interview with CV unit's Founders (2003)

INtM: Interview with CV unit's Members (2003)

INtS: Interview with parent company's Senior Manager (2003)

Secondary data:

PINtF: Interviews of CV units' Founders to Public Media (1999–2002)

PMF: Public Media Coverage on the CV units' Founders (1997–2002)

PMCo: Public Media Coverage on the Parent Company's Involvement in CV (1995–2005)

CoPR: Parent Company's Press Releases

Regarding their CV Activities (1995–2005)

WCV: Web Content of Each CV Unit (2002, 2003)

WCo: Web Content of Parent Company (2002, 2003, 2004, 2005)

AR-Co: Annual Reports of Parent Company (1995–2005)

AFL: Academic Literature on the Founder and / or on the CV Unit (1999–2002)

IDR: Industry Reports (1999–2005)

Table 2: Interviewee characteristics

Case	Interviewee	Association with CV unit	Core responsibility in CV unit	Duration of involvement in CV unit
Corporation A “Acto” CV unit	Alan	Founder	Creative Director	1999 - time of interview
	Martin	Direct - Head of Business Development	Business development	2000 - time of interview
	Chris	Direct - His team merged with “Acto” in 2000	External investors relationships	2000 - time of interview
	John	Indirect – Senior manager	Venture acquisitions	2002 - time of interview
Corporation B “Bravo” CV unit	Bryan	Founder	CEO	1994 - time of interview
	Andrew	Direct - Partner & CFO	Portfolio Manager	1999 - time of interview
	Colin	Direct – Partner	Investment Manager	2000 - time of interview
	Helen	Indirect – Senior manager	Governance structure	None

Table 3: Developing a community of practice to construct a collective entrepreneurial identity

Activities	“Acto” venturing unit	“Bravo” venturing unit
Corporate venturing practices		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Actively looking for IP that could be commercialized by continuously interacting and ideating with scientists - Introducing an IP screening process: developing technical, business, financial criteria and the stages of the process - Crafting and executing the incubation process - Integrating external consultants into the incubation process - “Constantly sort of looking to reinvent, to improve.” Martin 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Scouting start-ups operating in the field of information and network technologies - Meeting representatives from start-up companies - Developing due diligence and screening process of business plans - Carrying out CV investments - Reviewing the progress of the investment portfolio
Championing practices through sensegiving		
Intra-organizational communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Selecting the discourse with which to communicate the rationale of the unit – “I actually created what I call ‘Drop-in.’ The word ‘drop’ was carefully chosen as if you could drop-in for a chat.” Alan - Scheduling meetings on a weekly basis with scientists - Projecting enthusiasm, professionalism, and trust during meetings with scientists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Occupying space in annual reports (in 1999), demonstrating case studies of the unit’s success stories and investment activities - Frequent reporting to senior management on the performance of the investment portfolio and recent technology acquisitions - Proactive reporting to senior management on technological trends
External communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Engaging with universities and the academic community in knowledge exchange activities - Projecting the commercial and innovative image of the unit to shareholders, media, and external investors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Engaging with the academic community in knowledge exchange activities - Participating in networking events with venture capitalists and start-ups - Projecting the commercial and innovative image of the unit to shareholders, media, and external investors

Figure 1: Forging a collective entrepreneurial identity within an existing organization: A bottom-up process

