The Local Selves of Global Workers: The Social Construction of National Identity in the Face of Organizational Globalization

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Abstract

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This article seeks to further understanding of the significance and impact of national identity in the context of organizational globalization. Arguing against the tendency of organizational researchers to pose this identity as an objective, cognitive essence, the article claims that national identity constitutes a symbolic resource that is actively and creatively constructed by organizational members to serve social struggles which are triggered by globalization. It offers support to this claim with ethnographic field data generated from an Israeli high-tech corporation undergoing a merger with an American competitor. The implications of the article concern the need for researchers to take into account the space for choice that organizational members have in defining national identity and the interrelationships between the enactment of this identity and processes of resistance to globalization.

Keywords: organizational globalization, international mergers and acquisitions, national identity

Processes of organizational globalization are generally characterized by two underlying counterforces. On the one hand, paramount economic and technological forces fuel the organizational crossing of traditional national boundaries, making international structures both potentially lucrative and feasible (Castells 1989; Ó Riain 1997). On the other hand, social and cultural forces seem to have an opposing effect. The economically inspired and technologically enabled blurring of national boundaries is continually counterbalanced by social and cultural forces that sustain them. Notions of locally transcendent work organizations are continually challenged, if not rent asunder, by the persistent relevance of national identities to the social reality of those engaged even in the most extreme contexts of global work (Ben-Ari 1996; Thompson and Tambyah 1999). Consequently, Kenichi Ohmae's often cited *The Borderless World* (1990), as well as many other 'advice tracts and change manifestos' that accompany global transformation, as with any form of organizational transformation (Van Maanen 1998: 193), are as yet, at best unfulfilled visions. Generally, corporations have not reached the stage in which people who 'work "in" different national environments ... are not "of" them [but] what they are "of" is the global corporation' (Ohmae 1990: 96; see also Hannerz 1996).

While organizational scholars attend to the persistent national issue, their conceptualization of it seems limited. According to the dominant point of view on this topic, that of the field of cross-cultural research, national identity imprints a value-based and cognitively constraining 'culture' or collective 'software' in peoples' minds (Hofstede 1991). Representing these 'identity-based systems of interpretation and sense making' (Bacharach et al. 1996: iii) with a small set of continuums (individuality–collectivity, masculinity–femininity, power distance, and so forth (Hofstede 1981, 1991)) writers of this field claim that these identity-based cultural systems manifest themselves in organizations through stubbornly distinctive behavioral patterns (for example, Harzing and Hofstede 1996; Kanungo and Mendonca 1996; Thomas et al. 1996; Erez and Earley 1993; Peterson 1993; Hickson and Pugh 1995; Dukerich et al. 1996; Peterson et al. 1996; Olk and Earley 1996) that hinder the global ambitions of management. Among various drawbacks, such as that of being static and minimalist (Tayeb 2001; see also Roberts and Boyacigiller 1984; Tayeb 1994), this conceptualization is also overly objectivist and essentialist. In the final analysis, it treats national identity as merely the passive embodiment of a predetermined cultural template, and thus fails to take into account the freedom that members have in defining what national belonging means, in shaping this identity.

This shortcoming, it is claimed here, is substantial. Relying upon a long tradition of sociological and anthropological thought that conceptualizes identity as a social construct, this article argues that, in organizations undergoing globalization, national identity constitutes a symbolic resource that is actively mobilized by members for the social goals of resistance. Any attempt to grasp its significance and impact must thus take into account the active agency of members in its enactment. This article offers empirical evidence in support of this claim from an ethnographic case study of one of the most widespread and potent forms of organizational globalization: an international merger. Specifically, it draws upon field data collected in an Israeli high-tech company undergoing its first year of a merger with an American competitor.

This article consists of five sections. It begins by reviewing sociological and anthropological literature that speaks to the importance of conceptualizing identity as a social construct. After describing in the second and third sections the ethnographic study from which the data are drawn (the setting and method), the article goes on to illustrate the value of this conceptualization by elaborating the meanings that were imputed to national identity in the studied setting. It concludes by discussing the implications of the study for furthering the understanding of organizational globalization, national identity, and the relationship between them.

National Identity as a Social Construct

The notion of identity as a social construct has a long history in social thought. In many ways, it dates back to the work of 'Early Interactionists' (Reynolds

1987) such as Cooley (1902), Thomas (1937), and perhaps most strongly Mead (1934), who spoke of identity as a collectively defined, dynamic, and symbolic process. According to these writers, the meanings that arise in relation to group attachments are dynamic products of communication and interpretation processes that transpire *between* and, as Mead's well-known distinction between the 'I' and the 'me' indicates, *within* people. Later taking up many of their insights, Erving Goffman (1959) claimed that identities are constructed for the purpose of managing impressions during everyday life performances, their shape divergently shifting from interaction to interaction (see Van Maanen 1979a). To use a term later developed by Stone (1962), identities are in this sense 'situated' — flexibly cast as fluid social objects in accordance with the interpretational mood realized in the interaction (for a thorough review of social-psychological notions of identity, see Weigert 1983).

Post-modernists, it may be added, have taken this claim a step further. For them, not only are identities multiple, but the symbolic means for their construction are also multiplying, becoming increasingly fragmented and limitless as globalization progresses (for example, Featherstone 1990, 1995; Appadurai 1990; Lavie and Swedenburg 1996). Identities, in this view, are mobile constructs (Sarup 1996); unbounded interplays of differences (Hall 1996); infinite combinations of cultural possibilities that can be picked up and chosen like clothes from shelves (see, in this regard, Mathews 2000). The notion of identity as a social construct is thus characteristic of an ongoing tradition of sociological and anthropological thought.

The notion of social construction also coincides with literature on national identity. Many of those who study this identity agree that it is to a large extent a cultural phenomenon. 'Generalized,' Clifford Geertz writes, 'the "who we are" question asks what cultural forms — what systems of meaningful symbols — to employ to give value and significance to the activities of the state, and by extension to the civil life of its citizens' (1973: 242). Whether engendered by 'arbitrary historical inventions' (Gellner 1983: 56), 'imagined communities' (Anderson 1983), 'narrations' (Bhabha 1990) or even 'reconstructed ethnic cores' (Smith 1991), national identity is not merely an objective essence; to a large extent it is a social construct. It is deeply rooted, everywhere prevalent, with consequences that are often too 'real' to bear, but a cultural phenomenon all the same. Put differently, national identity does not merely imply the embodiment of a cognitively constraining cultural outlook, as cross-cultural writers suggest, but is itself a flexible cultural creation into which people impute variable and fluctuating meanings.

Moreover, not only does the theoretical literature support the claim that national identity is a social construct, but ethnographic studies of global organizations offer evidence concerning the agency of members in this regard. The 'locals' of the global organization have been shown to resist the global regime of work (Graham 1995), possessing the ability to 'actively appropriate' (Raz 1997) various elements of it, and indicating that they 'are not passive in relation to [culture] as if they merely receive it, transmit it, express it' (Van Maanen 1992: 24). Ethnographic studies of global organizations, in other

words, suggest that members should be viewed as active constructors of their global reality. National identity, it is argued here, is one of the targets of their construction efforts.

In order to explore the social construction of national identity we draw on ethnographic data collected by the first author during a year-long study of Isrocom: an Israeli high-tech corporation undergoing a merger with an American competitor. (It should be noted that the name of the studied organization, its merger partner and parent company are all disguised.) Geared toward the establishment of close familiarity with everyday life, ethnographic research enables a search for the meanings imputed to the objects of the social worlds that people inhabit (Blumer 1969; Geertz 1973). Designed to unravel 'the specific, always contextual understandings and explanations given by social actors that provide purpose and meaning to their behavior' (Van Maanen 1979b: 12), it remains close to the ways that these actors experience and make sense of themselves and others. Thus, it seems appropriate for a study of identity. The next two sections will elaborate on the characteristics of the Israeli, high-tech corporate setting that was studied and outline the ethnographic methods that were used.

Setting

To a large extent high-tech corporations spearhead processes of organizational globalization. (For discussions of high-tech corporations and globalization, see, for example, Flamm 1985; Castells 1989; Henderson 1989; Balakrishnan and Koza 1990; De Meyer 1994; Saxenian 1994; Ó Riain 1997.) Isrocom, the Israeli company that is studied in this research, is representative of a significant subset of these high-tech corporations: successful local organizations in the process of global expansion. Founded in the early 1980s in a modest apart-ment in Tel Aviv, by the winter of 1998, the time at which the merger and this study began, the company had an international pool of clients, and it generated profits that turned its parent company, Com, into a favorite of financial analysts from all over the world. Furthermore, by the time of the merger, Isrocom also had an established international structure to support global activities, and it relied upon operational sites in remotely scattered places all over the world. At these sites, the company employed workers from diverse nationalities and backgrounds.

Despite the global scope of its operations and success, however, up to the merger the company remained predominantly local. Most strikingly, the dominant majority of its 1000 employees were Israelis living in Israel. The entire R&D and manufacturing operations were located in Tel Aviv, and even marketing and customer-support activities, both global in scope, were managed in Isrocom's headquarters, and, for the most part, conducted by Israeli workers living in Israel or abroad. Moreover, within Israel, the company was conventionally portrayed as a local success. In the 1990s, it was awarded a special national export prize by the government, and the general press fondly and continually reported the economic figures that had made it 'one of the

few Israeli high tech companies to fulfill the dream of international status' (this is cited from an Israeli newspaper and the reference is not specified in order to protect the anonymity of the company that was studied). Thus, on the whole, the company's global quest had been founded, managed, and conducted by Israelis. To use the words of one of its top managers, it presented the pursuit of 'a dream ... to be like Ericsson: a company from a small country that conquers the global market' (again, this is cited from an Israeli newspaper and the reference is not specified in order to protect the anonymity of the company).

With respect to its local character, the merger marked a significant turning point in Isrocom's history. It marked a new, more sophisticated form of global adventure. The American competitor was a company of Isrocom's size, technology, and market strength called Amerotech. When Amerotech was united with Isrocom, the latter's local population barely amounted to a half of the total employee population; its work processes and hierarchy were spread across the ocean; and it lost its superiority and exclusiveness as the headquarters that set a dominant local tone for worldwide operations. Globalization reached deep, challenging the local organization's internal character, structure, and standing. It was to determine not only what the organization does, its operational goals and ambitions, but also what the organization is, its internal quality and formal identity.

Though in many ways representative of many high-tech corporations undergoing globalization, a certain aspect of Isrocom's merger appears to have been quite unique. The merger came into being through a stock-for-stock transaction between Com, Isrocom's parent-company, and Amerotech. For all practical purposes, this transaction was an acquisition: the definitive agreement stated that Com's shareholders were to own the majority and Amerotech's the minority of the resulting joint company's stock. Though formally defined as a merger between Com's two largest operating units, Isrocom and the thus acquired Amerotech, within Isrocom as well as in many newspaper reports the transaction was often referred to as an Israeli acquisition of an American competitor.

This, it seems, is a somewhat unique merger constellation not only business-wise, but also in terms of wider social and cultural trends that characterize the relationship between Israel and the USA. This relationship is much too complex to be fully represented here, yet in order to provide the reader with a general sense of the context, it seems fairly plausible to say that, meta-phorically speaking, it is the USA that has in many ways been on the social and cultural acquiring side in its relations with Israel. Through various powerful channels, such as TV, movies, music, and economic and political dependence, its presence is both common and inescapable. Furthermore, at least with regard to Israel's majority Jewish population, the most potent symbol of the western world has represented much to be aspired to for a nation that from its early Zionist days embarked upon a historical project of westerniz-ization (for example, see Khazzoom 1999; Shohat 1989). Seeking to repress oriental social sectors and oriental aspects of the Jewish identity, even at the price of accepting a stigmatized self-image as a flawed model of modern 'high' culture (Khazzoom 1999), Israelis have generally been committed to

a concept of self-improvement that is defined by role models such as, and in many ways especially, the USA. Indeed, this commitment has been so total and robust that thousands of Israelis have been unable to resist 'the magic pull of America'. Most of those who emigrated from Israel left for a chance to live the seductive American 'real thing' rather than the peripheral and pale version of it (Sobel 1986). The context of an Israeli acquisition of an American competitor is thus, in some ways, an upside-down sort of social constellation.

Nonetheless, while perhaps limiting the representativeness of this research, the findings render this constellation an advantage. As will soon be outlined, the fact of an Israeli acquisition of an American competitor constituted one of the strongest illustrations of the symbolic role of national identity, of the way that wide social and cultural issues are re-appropriated into the organizational realm through complex twists of meaning and recruited into processes of social construction. In terms of the issue under discussion, in short, the Israeli acquisition actually turned out to be an opportunity. Nonetheless, in order to make the influence of the corporate power issue explicit, whenever it seems of relevance to the findings, it will be specifically stated so.

This research, in sum, focuses on the Israeli side of an international high-tech merger. It should be stressed that the study does not encompass the American side. Though undoubtedly interesting, conducting an ethnographic inquiry at two places at the same time would have compromised, if not eliminated, the precise advantage of the ethnographic method: its ability to offer in-depth insights concerning the concretely local, everyday world of experience through an unmediated and long-term presence in the field. We hope that other researchers will be able to complement our findings with studies of other places and other merger sites.

Method

Lasting a year, the ethnographic study of Isrocom began on the first day of the merger. Various fieldwork techniques were used as a means of acquiring an appreciation of globalization as an everyday, lived experience and of the ways in which members socially and culturally managed and reacted to it. To begin with, more than 130 in-depth and unstructured interviews (Spradley 1979) ranging from 45 minutes to 2 hours were conducted with organizational members from all departments and hierarchical levels. The interviews usually began with a promise of anonymity, a general statement concerning the research interest in studying the merger, and a question or two about the informant. After that, the interview flowed according to whatever topic people wanted to talk about, going along with their line of thought. While interviews were usually tape-recorded as a way of assuring the validity of the material to be used for analysis, sometimes interviewees requested not to be recorded. In such cases, manual notes were taken during the interviews.

Additionally, participant observations were conducted at both formal and informal events. With regard to the former, approximately 60 training sessions,

international conference calls, and work meetings were observed throughout the year. All of them were documented with field notes as they unfolded. Further descriptive elaboration was completed after the event, in order to fill in as much as possible of what was left out due to the pressure of keeping apace with the ongoing interactions. Similarly, informal events were observed and documented practically every day. These ranged from coffee breaks to chance encounters in the elevators.

By the end of the year thousands of pages of data had been accumulated. The task of 'making sense' of them basically consisted of three main procedures of analysis. The first one involved coding and categorization (see Strauss 1987). The field notes were intensively and minutely scrutinized, line by line and word by word, in an attempt to generate, verify, discard, combine, or modify coded groupings. For each of these codes a computer file was then opened, and all of the code's citations, descriptions, and other bits of information were copied and pasted into it. The material within the files was then read once again and categorized in an attempt to identify underlying themes. During this process, it should be noted, the issue of identity surfaced again and again in various ways. Most significantly, practically every page of the field notes documented explicit verbal expressions of 'us' or 'we', or behavioral patterns and physical artifacts that seemed to symbolize attachment to a group: the Hebrew spoken among members, men wearing skullcaps, a national holiday celebrated as an organizational event and so forth. While various identities surfaced as central categories in this process (for example, organizational identity, occupational identities, hierarchical identities, and gender identities), national identity seemed to be especially central to the lives and daily routines of Isrocom's members, and the entry files that concerned it were among the richest and longest. Focusing upon this issue, in the second stage of analysis the identified themes were used to generate hypothetical interpretive frames (Agar 1996) concerning the meanings of national identity and their interrelations with social processes observed in the field. Finally, the hypothetical interpretive frames were validated, refuted, or modified through repeated rescanning of the entry files in search of examples, counter-examples, evidence, and exceptions.

Findings

The analysis of ethnographic data yielded evidence that national identity was symbolically recruited by Isrocom's members for two major, intermingled struggles. These were, first, the struggle for local separateness, for the continual demarcation of the locals from their merger partners; and, second, the struggle for global status, for the establishment of a sense of the organizational superiority of the locals in relation to the merger partners. Both of these struggles, it should be noted, were complex and in many ways innately incomplete, leaving room for an intricate set of counter-processes that are beyond the scope of this article. Yet, as claimed, in both of them national identity was socially constructed to serve as a symbolic resource. The next

two subsections will map out the meanings that were thus attributed to it in the context of these struggles.

The Struggle for Local Separateness: National Identity as a Boundary

Sociological and anthropological research indicates that rising pressures for intergroup mixtures and homogenization inspire a struggle for local perseverance (for example, Cohen 1982, 1986). Such a struggle has indeed been widely documented as one of the most widespread characteristics of mergers and acquisitions (for example, Olie 1994; Larsson and Finkelstein 1999). Within Isrocom, too, the claim to global organizational unity implied by the very act of the merger gave rise to ongoing attempts on the part of its members to sustain the original, local organizational boundary that defined them as a distinct collective. Merged work processes thus became sites within and through which members expressed their detachment from the merger partners — their sustained sense of a locally bounded membership. National identity was mobilized for this task, appropriated into the organizational realm as a means of conjuring up a sense of a 'natural', objective, unalterable boundary that overshadowed any formal, organizational definition of unity. In other words, national identity was revealed as a potent and widely used symbol that secured the local organizational boundary in the face of globalization.

The boundary-spanning enactment of national identity took on divergent shapes that sprung from minute details of everyday work-life. Broadly, these may be grouped into two major categories: the labeling of the merger partners as 'Americans' and the display of elements of Israeli culture.

The Labeling of the Merger Partners as 'Americans'

The most simple and widespread labeling practice in Isrocom was the mere reference to members from Amerotech as 'the Americans'. Such references seemed to 'tight-couple' the organizational and national identities of colleagues from abroad, demarcating specific work partners by turning them into specimens of a wide, general national type. Illustrative of this is a very mundane and casual event. On her way to observe a conference call of a joint marketing team (three from Isrocom and five from Amerotech), the first author stopped by the office of Merav, a team member who had told her about the call and helped her gain access to it. This is what happened:

When it was time for the call to begin, Merav was still in the midst of work: she was typing on her laptop and talking on the phone simultaneously.... When she finally looked up and saw me, she whispered 'Hi', and added, 'Is it four already? Damn.' Getting up, she told the person on the phone, 'I'm really sorry. I have a conference call with the Americans now. I have no patience for this now, but I've got to go.' (Field notes)

Merav's utterance, 'the Americans', seemed to overlay the structural definition that teamed her up with members from Amerotech with the national boundaries that set her apart from them. It also implied that whoever was on the phone (and the ethnographer) was a member who belonged to her

non-American side, and was someone that by virtue of this belonging was allowed a view of her 'real' feelings toward the impending team event.

The labeling of the merger partners as 'the Americans' sometimes took more sophisticated and less direct forms. Consider a conversation between two engineers, Rutti and Yossi. Discussing the previous visits of some of Amerotech's engineers to Israel, Rutti was trying to recall who among those they had met had by now left the company. This is the conversation that consequently unfolded between her and Yossi:

Yossi: 'There were all the Jimmys [plural of Jimmy] ... who came here around January or February.'
Rutti: 'When was Harold here with Rick?'
Yossi: 'The Harolds are still with us. They haven't left yet.' [Rutti laughs.]
Rutti: 'What was the name of the bald one?'
Yossi: 'Mike is a good name.'
Rutti: 'No, no...'
Yossi: 'It doesn't matter, why does it matter?' (Field notes)

By thus turning his colleagues' personal names into general, impersonal labels, Yossi seemed to imply that these names were meaningless in all respects but that of being typical American names. Invalidating any organizational, structural, and occupational definitions of unity, he expressed detachment from these colleagues. He gave rise to a sense of boundary through the generalization of specific others into a wide national type.

Another less direct way of labeling the merger partners as Americans and thus expressing detachment from them was through humorous imitation. Especially prominent was the imitation of the American accent. As an illustration, consider a special event: the first merger-day celebration that was sponsored by management for all of Isrocom's members. Conducted in the corporate dining room, the celebration was organized as a pseudo-wedding ceremony: there was a rich and impressively decorated breakfast buffet; personal merger tokens in the form of shiny pens resting on black velvet; two hostesses dressed in long gowns greeting those entering with excited cries of 'Mazal Tov' (Congratulations); and a video film of the two merger sites that was shown again and again to the sound of romantic pop songs. Alongside these animated metaphors of unity, however, members of the audience were busy expressing detachment from the notion of organizational newlyweds:

A young engineer at the table makes a small parody of the American handshake by fiercely tilting his friend's hand, saying in English, 'Very nice to meet you.' ... I ask a secretary who sits next to me what she is thinking about all this. She grins. With a cynical imitation of an American accent she says, 'Oh ... it is a great opportunity!' (Field notes)

The event of a corporate 'wedding' was thus recreated by the two participants at the table. Through imitation of their merger colleagues' Americanness, so to speak, they seemed to mobilize the issue of national identity as a means of reasserting the organizational boundaries that had been challenged by the formal, pseudo-marital union.

In day-to-day interactions in Isrocom, national identity served not only as a symbolic means for demarcating the locals from 'the Americans', but also

for expressing detachment from things 'American'. Illustrative of this is a conversation that was witnessed at a marketing training event. One of the lecturers was a member from Amerotech, and he spoke of the issue of pricing: the process by which a price is determined for a customer order. As it turned out, while in Isrocom the marketing people did pricing themselves, in Amerotech there were pricing experts who were specifically employed for this task. Referring to Tina, one of these experts, a participant named Gur talked to a few others of the possibility that she would also do pricing for Isrocom's products:

Gur: 'Let's get a hold of Tina, let's let her do our pricing for us. I like the idea ... a team like that.'
A manager: 'She won't do pricing; she will do analysis.'
A colleague: 'She may know how to write from left to right [in contrast to English, Hebrew is written from right to left], but any little thing that you will ask her to do, anything just a bit unusual — she will not know how to do it. Just forget about it.'
Gur (nodding in agreement):   'In short, she'll do it in an American way.' (Field notes)

Thus, by labeling the work process that was introduced as 'American', Gur expressed detachment from it, posing it as something that is not, nor could be, his.

In sum, Isrocom's members pointed out their merger partners' American-ness, so to speak, in a variety of different, creative, and spontaneous ways. This labeling seemed to have had the effect of overruling global definitions of work situations with a sense of a pre-existing, dominant, national boundary. The American national identity of the merger partners was thus used to delineate them from the locals. As will be illustrated next, the display of cultural elements associated with the Israeli identity seemed to have had a similar effect.

The Display of Cultural Elements Associated with the Israeli Identity

Members conjured up a sense of national boundary not only through the labeling of the merger partners as Americans, but also through the display of cultural elements associated with their own national identity, the Israeli identity. Management, it should be mentioned, tried to monitor the expression of such cultural elements through what appears to be a widespread practice: cross-cultural workshops. Held by a consultant, in these workshops members were requested to hold their Israeliness back in global interactions — to act more 'American' so as to avoid creating misunderstandings that might offend or anger their merger partners. Though members did indeed report being careful in this respect, there were occasions in which cultural elements associated with the Israeli identity were, nevertheless, displayed. The most prominent of these was the Hebrew language. In joint interactions, Hebrew symbolized boundaries and, moreover, turned them into a social fact by creating exclusion, by practically sealing off social interactions from the comprehension and participation of American colleagues. Consider the following excerpt from a conference call:

Ariella and Nadav are teleconferencing with teammates from Amerotech. Ariella says in English: 'When do you think the brochure will be ready?' Liz from Amerotech answers: 'Probably next week.' Ariella shakes her head in a sign of dissatisfaction, but says in English: 'OK. Thank you.' Turning to Nadav she says in Hebrew: 'What else can I say to this?' Nadav nods in agreement. There is silence on the American side. (Field notes)

As Ariella's short remark illustrates, members' utilization of Hebrew as a means for conveying censored attitudes or opinions marked both their acknowledgement of the interactional presence of American others and their partial rejection of the status of these Americans *as* others, as interaction partners. In other words, by talking Hebrew members defined social boundaries through the restriction of social dynamics to the bounded terrain of those of their mother tongue. Nevertheless, it should be noted that linguistic exclusion was often incomplete. Apart from information that tone and timing can convey, the Hebrew language is thoroughly riddled with English names and terms, especially when technical matters are discussed. Apparently, a lot could be understood even by a foreigner. On a number of occasions in the field, a Hebrew remark was thus responded to by an English reply.

The Hebrew language did not only constitute a powerful, albeit penetrable, means of exclusion, but also served as a justification for it. Though most Israelis speak English, there seems to be something unquestionably legitimate about a mother tongue. So legitimate that within the studied context exclusion was sometimes rendered excusable even by those who were its outcasts. As an illustration, consider an interaction between three members: Shlomo, a senior Israeli manager; Nick, his American counterpart; and Yona, a secretary:

Shlomo and Nick are waiting for a meeting to begin. Yona asks Shlomo about a work matter, and he answers her in heavy-accented English. Yona replies in Hebrew.

Shlomo: 'You have to speak English because Nick is here.'
Nick: 'Oh, it's OK, it's OK.'

Yona laughs an uncomfortable laugh. She turns to Shlomo. They complete the conversation in Hebrew. (Field notes)

By demanding that Yona speak English 'because Nick is here', Shlomo paid his dues to his managerial colleague, but also explicated the effort that the foreigner's presence entailed for him and his secretary as Israelis. In a sense, he illustrated how the national boundary between them weighs down on his own demand, deeming it 'unnatural' if not wholly implausible. Endorsing this implicit message, Nick excused the Hebrew talk, consenting to his own linguistic exclusion. Thus, the boundaries that separated Nick from Shlomo and Yona were further rooted through the seemingly legitimate restriction of the social dynamics that were accessible to him.

In sum, Isrocom's members utilized national identity to conjure up a sense of local distinction and thus distinguish themselves from Amerotech members despite the global merger. Whether pointing out the merger partners' Americanness or their own Israeliness, they deployed national identity as a seemingly 'natural', objective, and pre-existing boundary that renders members from the two sides unalterably different. This struggle for local

separateness, for sustaining the original sense of organizational boundaries, was accompanied by members' attempts to define themselves not only as distinct and different, but also as better than their merger partners. It is to this struggle that we now turn.

The Struggle for Global Status: National Identity as Organizational Merit

'We know very well', writes Ernesto Laclau (1995: 99–100), 'that the relations between groups are constituted as relations of power — that is, that each group is not only different from the others but constitutes in many cases such difference on the basis of exclusion and subordination of other groups.' Researchers of mergers and acquisitions have, indeed, often reported the development of 'condescending attitudes' of the 'us' against the 'them' (see Larsson and Finkelstein 1999: 6). Isrocom's case offers evidence that national identity plays a central role as a widely utilized, flexible, and powerful symbolic resource that is used in the constitution of difference through subordination. Two of the most common ways it was enacted were as a form of a stereotype and as a collective marginality.

National Identity as a Stereotype

Often, national identity was referred to by Isrocom's members as a form of self-inflicted stereotype: a generalization 'that reduces people to a few, simple, essential characteristics which are represented as fixed by Nature' (Hall 1997: 257). As far as the Israeli identity was concerned, these essential character-izations had one underlying theme in common: they were claimed to imbue Isrocom's members with an ability to disregard various 'obstacles' that limited the Americans' dedication and involvement with the organization. In other words, it was members' perception that within an organizational context the Israeli identity implies an unconstrained commitment which, through contrasts to the American identity, marks their own greater fit to organiza-tional goals and ideals, and privileges them in this respect. Thus, for example, an engineer speaks of the Israeli identity as a sort of pre-existing, workaholic personality template that stamps onto its members a temporal commitment that is unbounded in comparison to that of the Americans:

'Most people [here] have 10 to 20 extra work hours a week. Managers have 30 to 40 extra hours a month. There are also people who work 260 hours a month. They work differently ... only 9:00 to 6:00. This is the Americans, this is their work style. In Israel we are crazy when it comes to work...'

Note in particular the pervasive rhetoric ('crazy when it comes to work') that is used, expressing the proclaimed Israeli temporal boundlessness with regard to work, through the lack of limits and control over the organizational self.

   The claim that Isrocom's members were supposedly more dedicated and involved than their merger partners concerned other issues besides temporal discipline. There were other so-called American characteristics that were claimed to limit the merger partners' dedication to the organization, rendering them less worthy organizational members in contrast to the typically Israeli,

and thus limitless and obstacle-free, dedication of the locals. Consider, for example, the issue of hierarchical boundaries. It was members' claim that Israelis are characteristically informal and that this informality is the origin of a form of hierarchical courage, of an ability to disregard hierarchical constraints when they hold one back or set a limit to one's contribution to the organization. Americanness, in contrast, was enacted as a tendency to sanctify formalities, leading workers to silence what they believe is best for the company in face of authority and thus turn hierarchical distinctions into a buffer that stands between them and the organizational good. Illustrative of this perception is a comment by an engineer who used religious terminology to declare that:

'[Americans] are very submissive to authority. The word of the boss is the word of God.... Our perception is that what the manager says is important and that it has to be seriously considered, but if he does not seem reasonable or if we think that he is wrong then it is legitimate to come out and say that it isn't right, or that it doesn't seem right.... That's the Israeli character. It doesn't exist as much in their character.'

Another element that was claimed to mark the locals' superior organizational value concerned role boundaries. According to Isrocom's members, the Israeli identity imbues members with a tendency to take unlimited responsibilities upon themselves. At work, they claimed, Israelis seek to do and know things that are far beyond the limits of their roles. Americans, in contrast, were repeatedly portrayed as workers who limit their involvement to the bounded zone of their formally defined accountability. For example, asserting himself as an ideal-type representative in this regard, one engineer said:

'The typical American is more bounded ... here everything is flexible, fluid schedules, contacts, everything. If something isn't working I will get there and I will take care of it and over there everything is more rigid.'

Another often discussed characteristic that was claimed to originate from the Israeli identity was a boundaryless goal orientation. While the American identity was framed as imbuing members with a mental obstacle in the form of a tendency to stick to and elaborate on formal planning and work procedures, Israelis were claimed to be committed directly to the goal rather than to the details of the process. Illustrative of this is the remark of an engineer who said:

'We work here like we worked in the army. We have a goal and we have to accomplish it, the quicker the better.... It is an Israeli characteristic. All of us together for a very clear, marked-off goal. For Americans the process is important, how things will be managed, ordered. The goal is clear but they don't fight for it. They approach it, but they do not charge toward it.'

Note in this citation the utilization of military terminology. Several years of army service are mandatory in Israel, and the fact that the majority of Israelis dedicate several years of their lives to it seems to turn the army into a potent symbol of Israeliness in general, and its acclaimed social virtue and collective morality in particular. Phrases such as 'all of us together for the goal', 'fighting for the goal', 'charging forward', all widely used military jargon,

are local symbols of dedication, collective commitment, and a willingness for self-sacrifice. Though undergoing some changes in terms of its role and place in Israeli society, the military and military terminology still seem to signify both things Israeli and things of a morally valued character (see Lomsky-Feder and Ben-Ari (1999) for a discussion of the role and meaning of the military in Israeli society).

Two other involvement-limiting obstacles that local members often referred to were cultural rigidities and personal interests. With regard to the former, it was their claim that the Israeli identity implies a direct, perhaps even aggressively direct, but uncensored, authentic, and unmediated character, one that exhibits no gaps between 'true' and expressed perspectives about the world outside. Americans, in contrast, were claimed to subscribe to cultural rules of expression that limit their involvement with the outside and their inclination to express directly work-related views. Furthermore, the Israeli directness was contrasted not only to the Americans' censoring rules of expression, but also to their alleged tendency to don a polished social mask that manifests niceties but conceals true attitudes, intent, and criticism. Illustrative of a contrast that concerns Americans' professedly concealed attitudes is the comment of an industrial engineer who said:

'I think that [the Americans] are very, very nice. But with Americans niceness involves many question marks because there is a lot of hypocrisy in it.... The hypocritical thing is that they always say, "Everything is OK, everything is OK" ... that's the general atmosphere even when things are not OK. And that's different from us. In our case when something is not OK it will be immediately observable upon us.'

With regard to personal interests, it was asserted that the Israeli identity leads to a lack of a personal-interest orientation at work. This trait was contrasted to various proclaimed interests of Americans: personal indulgences such as business-class flights and fancy travel services, leisure time, and high ranks and titles. Interestingly, another element that was referred to this way was personal safety in the global scene. An example of this is the claim of a senior HR manager, who said:

'There are differences ... like their unwillingness to travel to places that are so-called more dangerous.... Places that are dangerous because of internal wars or personal safety problems. They are much more spoiled than we are.... Exposure to dangers of this kind is less frightening for Israelis. It is very natural for Israelis.'

Thus, paradoxically, local dangers were seen as leading to global courage, creating workers who 'naturally' disregard personal hazards during their engagement in global organizational missions.

In sum, Isrocom's members enacted national identity as a cluster of traits imbued in Israelis and Americans through their distinctive backgrounds. Though Isrocom's members were not in any way a homogenous group (the ethnic, religious, and class diversity characteristic of Israeli society was generally prevalent here too), they referred to their national identity as assimilating a common character. Unmediated, direct, and highly dedicated, it was claimed to contrast with the supposedly constrained character of Americans.

Nonetheless, while in practically all of the interviews the Israeli cluster of traits was claimed to be the origin of organizational merit, it should be noted that in approximately 15 percent of them it was also referred to as the origin of some unattractive traits. Interestingly, however, this unattractiveness did not challenge the sense of organizational worth because, for the most part, it did not concern organizational faults, namely, lack of dedication or commitment to the organization and its goals. Rather, it usually concerned issues of interpersonal relationships: members' behavior toward others. For example, an industrial engineer said:

'I think that we are a little too pushy. We overrun them a little too much ... it doesn't grant us the love and respect of the Americans ... there are times during meetings in which I simply squirm in my chair, in which I feel uncomfortable. I am Israeli born, a *tzabar* [native Israeli], but it still bothers me — our attitude and all that.'

Similarly, referring to the 'The Achievers' Club' (an organizational practice that was imported from Amerotech in which members nominate 'excellent' co-workers for a small 'club' that offers special status and bonuses) an engineer talks of Israelis' proclaimed tendency to *lo lefargen*, to refrain from offering supportive, envyless compliments:

'The Achievers' Club program — I guess that we don't know how exactly to digest it. It is very un-Israeli. I think it is something that should be done, but I also think that more should be done to promote it.... There was a low response rate [but] it has to be given a chance. The problem is Israeliness. It is something that should be worked at, I mean it is very un-Israeli to *lefargen* [to offer supportive compliments], but still...'

Thus, in some relatively rare, but nonetheless significant cases, members asserted their Israeli identity as a stereotypical cluster of traits that leads to organizational merit, but also to interpersonal faults. While generally mobilized to serve the struggle for global status, members' views of this identity remained, to some extent, ambivalent.

With regard to the claim to organizational merit, it should be noted that in the context of a merger with Americans, the Israelis' perception of themselves as 'purer' manifestations of organizational ideals was somewhat paradoxical: in Israel, the ideals of the corporate world are to a large extent perceived as American. Homi Bhabha's claim that 'The "other" is never outside or beyond us' (1990: 4) thus seems especially true here. While Isrocom's members redirected the meanings of such American ideals, wresting them from the merger partners and turning them to their advantage, in so doing they were also acknowledging the superiority of an ethos that was as American as their contesting, organizational others. This, however, did not seem problematic for them. On the contrary, to a large extent members celebrated the proclaimed superiority of Americans in relation to some external, wider scheme of social hierarchy. This attitude will be discussed next.

National Identity as Collective Marginality

For Isrocom's members, their own national identity, the Israeli identity, entailed an additional meaning besides a distinct character. Repeatedly, this identity was referred to as connoting an inferior social status defined in

relation to some wider, global social hierarchy: the hierarchy which renders America and things American as superior and powerful ideals (see Ben-Ari (1996) for other documented evidence of the existence of a mental scheme of global social hierarchy). Drawing parallels between the merger situation (a generally unique constellation in which Israelis were on the acquiring side) and opposite hypothetical cases involving Israel and other countries, members expressed recognition of the general subordination of Israel and Israelis in this regard. As an illustration, consider the following remark of a senior manager:

'When I explain to my subordinates over here what is the meaning of the fact that we took over the business, I say, "Imagine that a company from [a developing country] would have taken over Com. Imagine that they would have come here to Tel-Aviv to tell us what to do..." I think that it is not a bad example. If a company from [that country] would have taken over Isrocom in Tel-Aviv, it would have been the same.'

Nevertheless, members' acknowledgement of the greater social prestige and standing of Americans did not seem to undermine their sense of organizational worth. On the contrary, this acknowledgement supplemented the fact of their Israeliness with dramatic ambience, making their collective organizational attributes and accomplishments look somewhat more impressive and heroic. Since it was Israelis who were on the acquiring side, they had defeated the undefeatable, conquered the conquerors, and there seemed to be a little relish of the poetic justice involved in their constructions of themselves, their American partners, and the merger situation that had brought them together. Accordingly, rather than evading the issue of the general social superiority of Americans, members emphasized it, perceiving it as an aggrandizement of their organizational value and achievements. Illustrative of the emphasis placed upon Americans' general sense of supremacy is the claim of a marketing manager:

'The American culture is a culture of winners. [They think] "We are the Americans, we are the leaders, we are the leaders of the world." ... I think that in general we Israelis have much less of a problem working for an American company. We grow up inspired by American society. All the commercials in Israel, "Sleep with Flannel blanket and feel America", NBA basketball, everything that is broadcast here implies that "American" is good.... This is the message here. That's why there is no problem for an Israeli company to be owned by an American company ... but people in the States [think]: Where the hell is Israel anyway? What is it? Who is an Israeli? What are his credentials?'

By dramatizing the claimed sense of American superiority, members ascribed to their merger partners the shock of realization that they had been overcome by those who had been rendered inferior but proven superior. This shock was usually linked to two major factors: Americans' acclaimed ignorance of Israel and condescending attitude to Israelis. Illustrative of the first factor is the claim of a manager that:

'It is a foreign company that took over an American company ... a foreign company, not an English-speaking company, completely different. They were never exposed to Israeli culture.... Some people over there didn't even know how to spell "Israel".'

Illustrative of the second factor, the perception of condescension, are the words of an engineering manager who said:

'They're probably thinking, "Ok, so you guys know English, but when exactly did you get off the trees?" ... [But] we made it clear to them that without the merger they would have collapsed.'

In sum, members not only accepted, but seemed to celebrate the notion of a general inferiority of the Israeli identity in relation to the American identity, implying that this inferiority bestows further virtue upon their organizational achievements. For them, it appears, the general superiority of the American identity on the outside bolstered the status of non-Americans on the inside, their accomplishments made ever more impressive by the fact that they had beaten Americans on their own turf.

Conclusions and Implications

This article set out to illustrate and explore some of the ways that national identity is socially constructed in the face of organizational globalization. Drawing upon ethnographic data collected in an Israeli high-tech corporation undergoing a merger with an American competitor, it challenges widespread theoretical assumptions by revealing some of the diverse and creative ways that this identity was symbolically mobilized by members for social struggles of resistance that were triggered by globalization. The story of Isrocom, it has been argued, suggests that a large part of the globalized organizational reality cannot be theoretically captured by viewing national identity as an objective, cognitive essence (for example, Hofstede 1981, 1991; Bacharach et al. 1996). Most critically, it indicates that national identity assumes a potent role in the symbolic production of difference in this context, rather than in the psychological generation of it.

More specifically, the analysis of ethnographic data collected in Isrocom yielded three major meanings associated with national identity in this specific context. First, national identity revealed itself as a boundary-spanning symbol recruited in day-to-day interactions as a means for expressing detachment from the merger partners. Second, national identity was often referred to as a collective character type, a personality template that manifests itself in the work context through organizationally valued or (to a lesser extent) unvalued traits. Lastly, it implied an externally dictated social status of marginality defined in relation to some wider, non-organizational, global hierarchy. National identity, in sum, both signified a strong sense of similarity among Isrocom's members, of sameness defined in psychological and social terms, and served as a marker of distinction that was used to differentiate them from their merger partners.

National identity, it was further argued, took on these three meanings as part of two struggles that seemed to be inspired by the merger: the struggle for local separateness and the struggle for global status. Since it seems plausible to assume that struggles for separateness and status would be

prevalent in any organization that is undergoing a merger, the uniqueness of a *global* merger lies in the struggles' means more than their ends; it lies in the fact that in a global context members have an especially powerful and compelling symbolic resource both for conveying boundaries and expressing communality within them — their national identity. Moreover, according to researchers of globalization, this resource is not only powerful, but also highly available. An accessible part of globalization's 'general mode of discourse about the world as a whole *and* its variety' (Robertson 1992: 135), it constitutes the central and standard terminology for issues of identity (Ben-Ari 1996).

The finding that within Isrocom national identity was tailored by members to serve social goals problematizes cross-cultural writings. Most critically, the conviction of cross-cultural writers that, for example, Israelis are less individualistic than Americans (see Hofstede 1981, 1991) must be tackled with the possibility that many Israelis simply like to see themselves that way; in everyday life and probably also in supposedly objective research questionnaires, people themselves reproduce this assumption as a positive stereotype, continually recreating it rather than being passively determined by it. The element of social construction, in short, must be taken into consideration and with it the realization that national difference may be socially essentialized no less than it is a cognitive essence.

The element of social construction does not only problematize cross-cultural writings, but also the practices that are based upon them. These practices take diverse shapes and forms, including documentary programs which expose people to new cultures through written materials, 'sensitivity training' which is designed to increase people's awareness of their own culture, and field exercises in which cross-cultural interactions are simulated and discussed (in this regard, see Earley 1987). On the whole, these cross-cultural training programs are claimed to have a positive impact on skill development, adjustment, and performance (for a review, see Black and Mendenhall 1990). The findings of this study, however, point to another possible effect which has not been taken into consideration. Since these programs are generally based upon comparisons of supposedly objective, stable, and resolute attributes of national cultures, they might serve to sanction and endorse the stereotypical notion of national identity and its utilization as a marker of distinction between the 'us' and the 'them'. Those seeking to manage an alleged fact of difference may help preserve and even sanction the symbolic production of a *sense* of difference.

It should, nevertheless, be noted that within Isrocom the essentialization of difference was one of form, not substance. It was shown that in their struggle for global status, members embraced organizational values and ideals as an integral part of the Israeli manifestation of organizational membership. They claimed to themselves, by virtue of their Israeliness, the merits of organizational instrumentality: time discipline, personal dedication, work diligence, efficiency, and goal commitment. In other words, the Israeli identity was morally praised for its acclaimed fit to the goals of the organization; its distinguishing local qualities deriving value from profit or efficiency

maximization and other global ideals. That seemingly unalterable boundary that was constructed as delineating members of the two merger partners from each other thus appears to have been based more on what they had in common than on what they did not (see Barth 1969): the stereotypified characteristics may have been contrastingly different, but the world of meaning that had rendered them a contrast and made them comparable was one.

Accordingly, the findings of this study also problematize an existing assumption that speaks of the mutual exclusiveness of global-organizational and national identities. Namely, it is the claim of Kenichi Ohmae, author of *The Borderless World* (1990), that organizational globalization is both dependent upon and a means of loosening pre-existing national identities. This view, it may be added, is supported by anthropologist Ulf Hannerz, who claims that corporations undergoing globalization 'may entail a kind and a degree of tuning out, a weakened personal involvement with the nation and national culture, a shift from the disposition to take it for granted; possibly a critical distance to it' (1996: 89). Thus, in this view, these corporations are claimed to hold the potential for becoming a dominant transnational source of identity, a source of locally indifferent, global attachments. The behavior of Isrocom's members, however, does not coincide with this view. While strongly embracing their national identity in this field, repeatedly talking of and exhibiting their belonging to it, this embracement did not seem to shade their organizational attachment. On the contrary, in their eyes, it was their national identity that had made them (for the most part) better organizational members, that had strengthened their commitment and dedication to the globalized organization, its goals and interests. For members, then, national and global identities did not constitute a zero-sum game. They perceived themselves to be more 'of' the globalized organization because of, not despite, their local belonging, their distinct nationality.

The simultaneous embracement of global and national identities did seem, however, to entail a price. As claimed, within Isrocom the specific superiority of the local organizational 'us' was conditioned upon the acceptance of the general subordination of the Israeli 'us', upon the affirmation of a scheme of global hierarchy which renders it inferior and marginalized. As members of Isrocom paradoxically claimed that their Israeliness had made them the 'true' Americans, so to speak, of the organization, they surrendered the external status of their national identity for the sake of internal status. This exchange implied that, at least within Isrocom, the Israeli identity amounted to much less than the 'imagined community' that Anderson (1983) talked about. At most, it was an imagined homogeneity; a theory of common traits which sacrifices global status for the claim that its mimicked Americanness surpasses its origin.

Notably, this finding challenges the existing convictions of theorists of social-psychology. Generally, many of these theorists view self-esteem as a basic motive for identity constructions (for example, Rosenberg 1975), focusing primarily on the self-esteem dimension of the self concept (Gecas 1982: 10), and arguing that even those congregated at the very bottom of the social order generate identities that provide them with a measure of self-worth

(Snow and Anderson 1987). To some degree, the findings reported here are consistent with this thesis: though there were cases of condemning attitudes, of self-critical judgements formed along the contours of proclaimed Israeli faults, members usually did speak of themselves in ways that aggrandized their organizational value. Yet interestingly, the aggrandizement of value derived meaning from the acceptance of a subordinate national status. To put it differently, the self-attribution of superior value inside the organization was related to the surrendering of national status on the outside, to the acceptance of its general inferiority. Thus, it seems that one identity may be used to bolster the worth of another, though its own worth or status may in some ways be sacrificed in the process.

Furthermore, the possibility that within corporations undergoing globalization, organizational and national identities are constituted through relations of mutual inclusion rather than mutual exclusion and that they undergo transformations in the process has other implications. Namely, it implies that at a time in which social complexity is intensified, organizations cannot be viewed as immune to the 'disjunctured flows' (Appadurai 1990), cultural 'movements' and 'interpenetrations' (Lavie and Swedenburg 1996: 3, 8) that accompany globalization in other contexts. Here too identities can no longer be viewed as the stable essences of the past. Much more fine-tuned and variegated images should be adopted in order to capture this evolving complexity.

Since this is an exploratory case study, more research is clearly in order. As a means of realizing more fully the agency of members in constructing their identities and the relations between this agency and the social processes unfolding in the context of organizational globalization, there is a need to complement this study with studies of other times and places. More specifically, since processes of organizational globalization are generally long-term business adventures, there is clearly a need to study the meanings attributed to national identity in later, more advanced stages than the one explored here. Furthermore, there also seems to be a need to examine national identity at other organizational sites, especially those located in other countries. In examining the symbolic meanings of national identities such studies may help organizational theorists further the understanding of the many undeciphered social complexities involved in contemporary processes of organizational globalization. This study, we hope, is a case in point.

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