



# Predicting social identification over time: The role of group and personality factors

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## ABSTRACT

Researchers have proposed a variety of factors that influence social identification, but no study has yet systematically investigated these influences over time. This study set out to establish what group and individual factors affect social identification over a period of one year. Three-hundred and twenty-seven high school students completed a questionnaire that measured social identification with the school, Big Five personality traits and group functioning factors on two occasions approximately one year apart. Factor analyses at both phases showed that there were three dimensions underlying group functioning: perceptions of academic support, group support, and leniency. Multiple regression analysis and structural equation modelling revealed that Conscientiousness and the perception of group support seemed to influence social identification over time. The study supported the view that both group functioning factors and individual differences are important determinants of social identification.

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## 1. Introduction

Social identity, or the degree to which an individual internalizes a particular group membership (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987), has emerged as a fundamental explanatory variable in social and organizational psychology (Haslam, 2004). Theory and research have indicated that how much a person identifies with a group can have a significant impact on many outcomes. For example, individuals with strong social identity are more likely to experience good physical and mental health outcomes (Haslam, Jetten, Postmes, & Haslam, 2009) and perform well (Worchel, Rothgerber, Day, Hart, & Butemeyer, 1998) compared to those with weaker social identity. Recent research has also shown that identification with a larger group such as school can have positive outcomes such as enhanced well-being in both staff and students (Bizumic, Reynolds, Turner, Bromhead, & Subasic, 2009).

### 1.1. The aim of the paper

Most research has focused on social identity as an explanatory concept. What is less widely studied is what leads to its creation and maintenance. More specifically, no research has systematically examined the role of individual and group factors in predicting social identification over time. A longitudinal study could help us better understand what individual and group factors may influence social identification over a period of time. Drawing on existing research, central group and individual factors are examined in a

study where identification was measured across two phases over a 12 month period.

#### 1.1.1. The role of group factors

Existing work on identification processes can be categorized broadly into two streams based on whether the focus is on intergroup or intragroup relations. Often in the intergroup domain the emphasis is on making a particular social identity salient for all group members through the introduction of a relevant comparison group (e.g., through competition). This tends to consensualize and clarify identity meaning. In the intragroup work social identification often is measured as an individual difference variable providing information about the psychological importance (on-going cognitive and emotional significance) of the group to the individual. It is also possible to assess the effects of both salience and strength of identification.

In organizational settings it is widely accepted that social or organizational identification is associated with positive outcomes such as productivity, effective communication, extra-role behaviour, and job satisfaction (Haslam, Eggins, & Reynolds, 2003). Often the emphasis is on the relationship between certain individual and intragroup factors and strength of identification. An important and overarching factor related to people's identification with the group is that individuals feel that the group is procedurally fair and treats its members with respect (Blader & Tyler, 2009; Tyler & Blader, 2003).

It is also the case that social identification is influenced by group socialization factors, which generally result from contact and symbolic interactions between members. Through such processes dimensions of similarity serve to inform group members

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about group characteristics, such as its values and shared beliefs (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Ellemers, de Gilder, & Haslam, 2004). These interactions may facilitate identification through reducing ambiguity in the situational definition. More specifically, they may clarify the individual's role and status in the group and the 'meaning' of the group (i.e., goals, norms, beliefs, practices) and aid in self-definition.

### 1.1.2. The role of individual differences

There is also evidence that individual differences play a role in social identification (cf., Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). For example, the individual's perception of group attributes may be influenced by the individual's unique values, beliefs, previous experiences, and behaviour. The literature suggests two approaches here. One implies that there are certain individual differences that predispose people to identify with social groups – regardless of the kind of the group – and an approach that argues that levels of social identification may be affected by the fit between the group's values and those of the individual group members.

There has been research showing that groups that consist of extraverted and agreeable personalities tend to be more cohesive (Barrick, Stewart, Neubert, & Mount, 1998; Halfhill, Nielsen, & Sundstrom, 2008). This might be because Agreeableness includes cooperativeness and unselfishness (John, 1990), which appear directly related to behaviour in groups. Similarly, Extraversion includes interpersonal qualities that may increase the quality of social relations within a group, such as talkativeness and sociability (John, 1990). Nevertheless, the exact effect of these traits on social identification remains to be tested.

It is also the case that individual differences may predispose people to identify with those groups that the individuals perceive to be similar to themselves (e.g., Dutton et al., 1994; Ellemers et al., 2004; Jansen & Kristof-Brown, 2006). Organizational psychologists call this phenomenon a person-organization fit, and we will call it a person-group fit. This approach would suggest, for example, that extraverted individuals are more likely to identify with more sociable groups than with those that are less sociable or that conscientious individuals are more likely to identify with organized than with those that might be disorganized. It might also be that the strength of the norms of such groups and their importance to the individual member could come to shape their personalities in important ways (Reynolds et al., 2010).

### 1.2. The aims of the current study

The present study set out to investigate the role of group factors and individual differences on social identification using a longitudinal design in order to better determine a plausible causality. We are aware of no other study that has examined such interrelationships. This research is part of a larger project that concerns implementing organizational changes in schools in order to build strong social identity. The study reported here uses a subset of measures to better understand what causes social identification over time.

To explore the role of group factors, we investigated students' perceptions of intragroup aspects of school functioning, such as whether the school cares about individuals, provides them with clear and consistent group norms and rules, treats everyone fairly, and provides them with academic knowledge. We expected that perceiving these factors in a school would convey that "we are all in this together" and increase school identification (i.e., belonging and connection to the group). We used the Five Factor Model (Costa & McCrae, 1992) as a comprehensive, and widely accepted, model of personality in order to comprehensively test the influence of major personality differences. Past theory and research have suggested that Agreeableness and Extraversion seem to be related

to more group commitment (e.g., Barrick et al., 1998; Halfhill et al., 2008), and based on the idea that individual characteristics may consistently predispose people to identify with groups, we expected that they may lead to higher social identification. On the other hand, this was contrasted with the person-group fit literature, which would suggest that given that schools are groups that value achievement, organization, and hard-work it might be expected that conscientious individuals are likely to identify with such groups.

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

Participants were 327 Australian high school students from grades 7–10 in two schools. They completed surveys during two phases, approximately one year apart. There were 177 female and 148 male students (2 failed to report their gender). The mean age in the first phase was 13.26 ( $SD = .93$ ).

### 2.2. Materials and procedures

Both phases of the survey included measures of school identification, intragroup factors, and personality. A measure of school identification (Phase 1:  $\alpha = .87$ ; Phase 2:  $\alpha = .90$ ) included four items widely used to measure social identification (Haslam, 2004). Example items are: "I feel a strong connection with this school" and "I identify with the school". We developed a measure of group factors consisting of 23 items that assessed the students' perceptions of group (school) functioning ( $\alpha = .91$  in both phases), as seen in the following items: "I feel teachers at this school encourage and motivate me to do better in my studies," and "I believe that there is too much freedom at this school" (Reversed). Participants indicated their level of agreement with statements on both measures on a scale from 1 (*Disagree strongly*) to 7 (*Agree strongly*). All students stayed in the same school; accordingly, there was no change in the target in-group for any participant.

We measured personality traits using 50 items from Goldberg's (1999) International Personality Item Pool. Ten items (including five reversed items) measured each of the five traits: Neuroticism (Phase 1:  $\alpha = .76$ ; Phase 2:  $\alpha = .81$ ), Extraversion (Phase 1:  $\alpha = .78$ ; Phase 2:  $\alpha = .82$ ), Openness to Experience (Phase 1:  $\alpha = .73$ ; Phase 2:  $\alpha = .74$ ), Conscientiousness (Phase 1:  $\alpha = .82$ ; Phase 2:  $\alpha = .82$ ), and Agreeableness (Phase 1:  $\alpha = .76$ ; Phase 2:  $\alpha = .74$ ). Participants used a 5-point scale, from 1 (*Disagree strongly*) to 5 (*Agree strongly*), to state their agreement with statements. Participants gave consent and voluntarily completed the questionnaires in class on two testing occasions.

## 3. Results

Expectation maximization (Schafer, 1997) was used to replace isolated missing values (2.60% of data) for all measures except the background variables.

### 3.1. Exploratory factor analysis

To establish the underlying dimensions of the group factors measure, we ran an exploratory factor analysis (EFA) on its 23 items at both Phase 1 and 2. The revised version of Velicer's minimum average partial test (MAP, Velicer, Eaton, & Fava, 2000) suggested three factors in both phases. The factors were extracted using the unweighted least squares (ULS) method with Oblimin rotation. This method appears particularly good to estimate Likert scale items data (see Forero, Maydeu-Olivares, & Gallardo-Pujol,

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