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Take it to the top: Imagined interactions with leaders elevates organizational identification

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ABSTRACT

Organizational identification is an important predictor of workplace behavior. The more strongly an individual identifies with their employing organization, the more motivated they will be to behave in ways that promote its success. In this paper we develop a new approach to fostering organizational identification based on principles of mental simulation. Across seven experiments we demonstrate that imagining positive contact with an organizational leader increases identification with the organization they represent. Experiments 1A, 1B, 2A, 2B, 3A and 3B replicated the basic effect against progressively varied control conditions, utilizing both scenario and field experiments. Experiment 4 demonstrated that as a consequence of heightened organizational identification following the imagined contact task, participants reported greater intentions to engage in organizational citizenship behaviors. We conclude by discussing the potential application of this technique as a simple and effective way for organizations to foster employees' motivation and performance.

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Organizational identification describes the perception of oneness with or belongingness to, one's employing organization. This construct is an important predictor of workplace behavior. The more strongly an individual identifies with their organization, the more likely they are to behave in ways that help it to be successful. While the benefits of organizational identification are now well established, most of this research has been correlational in nature. There is little research focusing on how to actually *foster* organizational identification. In this paper we develop a new technique based on established principles of mental simulation. Mental simulation has previously been used to help people achieve greater performance in sport, better health and exercise outcomes, improved academic achievement, and even to reduce prejudice towards ethnic minority groups. Here, we introduce a new application of these techniques to the organizational domain. We show that simulating positive interactions with organizational leaders can successfully improve identification with the organization they represent.

Organizational identification

The groups we belong to form an important part of our self-definition. According to social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986) people define themselves not only in terms of their idiosyncratic traits (e.g. I am athletic), but also in terms of their group memberships (I am British). This group-based definition of the self forms an individual's *social identity*. It refers to

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“that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his membership of a social group (or groups) together with the value and emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1978, p. 63). While the social identity approach was originally developed to understand prejudice and intergroup conflict, more recently it has provided a novel approach to understanding behavior in organizational contexts. To varying degrees, organizations are important groups with which individuals can identify. *Organizational identification* describes the extent to which being a member of an organizational group contributes to an individual's self-definition (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). The more a person identifies with the organization, the more he or she applies the attributes and characteristics of the group to the self, and the more outcomes of the group are experienced as outcomes for the self (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987).

The link between the self and the group (in this case, organizations) is important because, through social identification, the group's standing reflects on the self (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). Because people desire a positive self-image, they will be motivated to behave in ways that promote or maintain the status of the group. Research demonstrates that the more strongly an employee identifies with their organization the more likely they are to behave in ways that will help the group to succeed (for meta-analytic results see, Lee, Park, & Koo, 2015; Riketta, 2005). Principle amongst these outcomes are: increased willingness to engage in organizational citizenship behaviors (van Dick, Grojean, Christ, & Wieseke, 2006) increased compliance with organizational rules (Tyler & Blader, 2001), and increased loyalty to the organization (lower turnover intentions, Abrams, Ando, & Hinkle, 1998; van Knippenberg, 2000).

Traditional social exchange theories hold that peoples' behavior in groups is shaped by judgments about past, current and future material rewards derived from group membership (Kelley & Thibaut, 1978; Thibaut & Kelley, 1959). However, more recently, research suggests that social identification may actually be a stronger driver of cooperative workplace behaviors than material rewards (Tyler, 2010; Tyler & Blader, 2000, 2001). According to the social identity approach, the key function served by a group is not the provision of desired resources, but to provide members with information that aids in their efforts to develop and maintain a positive self-concept. People cooperate with organizations in pursuit of feeling good about themselves *as people*, not only for material rewards (Tyler & Blader, 2000). The results of several comparative studies now suggest that cooperation with organizations is predicted by material rewards to some extent, but these resource-based influences are small in magnitude compared to the influence of identity-based judgments (Tyler, 1999; Tyler & Blader, 2000, 2001). Facilitating desired behaviors by organizational members involves more than just giving them a raise, or a company car then, but requires an examination of factors that shape organizational identification (Tyler, 2010).

The social identity approach to leadership

According to the social identity theory of leadership, leaders represent an embodiment of the group identity. The leader can be considered the prototype, or the most stereotypical member of the group. The leader is the best exemplar of the group's characteristics and thus best represents the group, and in a sense, *is* the group (Hogg & Abrams, 1988). This prototypically is central to their ability to lead. Leaders are said to derive influence from the implicit perception that she or he represents the values and norms of the group and thus can be trusted to have the group's best interest at heart (Hogg, 2001; Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003).

Given their position as a group exemplar, leadership practices may also have an important influence on how followers identify with the group; and in organizations, this means organization identification (Lord & Brown, 2003; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003; van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004). Research on identity management strategies notes that leaders need not only 'be one of us' but also 'embed a sense of us' (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011; Steffens et al., 2014). By developing and directing a shared sense of 'us' leaders are able to mobilize individuals' otherwise idiosyncratic motivations and harness the power of their coordinated energies. This idea can be traced back to classic theories of charismatic and transformational leadership. It was argued that leadership cannot be reduced to the actions of a single individual, but instead represents a process through which the leader shifts the way followers envision themselves, and in doing so, encourages them to work on behalf of the group (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). Several empirical investigations now demonstrate that leadership behavior can influence identification amongst followers. (e.g. De Cremer & van Knippenberg, 2002, 2005; Huang, 2013; Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003; Schuh et al., 2012; Walumbwa, Avolio, & Zhu, 2008).

The ability for leaders to engender social identification amongst members is also demonstrated by work on procedural justice. Models of procedural justice suggest that leaders can gain acceptance and encourage people to identify with the organization they represent when they exercise their authority in ways that followers experience as fair (as elucidated in the group value model, Lind & Tyler, 1988; the relational model of authority, Tyler & Lind, 1992; and the group engagement model, Tyler & Blader, 2000, 2003). These theoretical models are supported by empirical observations of a positive association between leaders' procedural fairness and members' organizational identification (e.g. Blader & Tyler, 2009; De Cremer, Tyler, & den Ouden, 2005; De Cremer & van Knippenberg, 2002; Tyler & Blader, 2000). A particularly influential aspect of procedural justice (sometimes treated as its own construct Bies & Moag, 1986; Tyler & Bies, 1990) relates to the quality of social interaction with organizational authorities (De Cremer & Tyler, 2005; Tyler & Blader, 2003). So-called 'Interactional Justice' focuses not on the quality of decision-making per se but the quality of interpersonal treatment, and whether they are treated politely and with dignity. Positive social interaction with the group's representative authority is said to communicate to the individual that they are valued group member and, as such, can use the group as a reference point to define themselves. Conversely, poor interpersonal treatment signals marginality and exclusion from the group, inhibiting the process of merging the group into the self (Tyler, DeGoey, & Smith, 1996). In the

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