



Organizational identification and workplace behavior: More than meets the eye



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ABSTRACT

Organizational identification is a theoretically profound and practically important construct. It fundamentally transforms the relationship between employees and their work organizations, because highly identified employees integrate their organizational memberships with their sense of who they are. This transformation enhances highly identified employees' work performance and contributions to the organization. However, despite considerable research on the benefits of organizational identification for employee behavior, theorizing about this effect and its underlying mechanisms remains underdeveloped. In particular, there has not been sufficient theoretical development regarding the specific types of work behaviors that follow from organizational identification, the psychological mechanisms that underlie these behavioral consequences, or observers' evaluations of these behaviors and those enacting them. To address these issues, we present a framework of the behavioral consequences of organizational identification as well as observers' reactions to them. Our framework highlights two distinct motivational orientations that underlie organizational identification, one that reliably leads to conformist work behaviors and one that may lead to deviant work behaviors that violate the status quo to advance organizational interests. Moreover, our framework highlights that reactions to these behaviors will differ depending on the organization's emphasis on means versus ends. Overall, we emphasize that the benefits of organizational identification for work behavior are not as straightforward or as widely recognized as implied in prior research.

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Introduction

Employees who strongly identify with their work organizations are more motivated, more loyal to their organization, and better performers (Bartel, 2001; Blader & Tyler, 2009; Dukerich, Golden, & Shortell, 2002; Ellemers, de Gilder, & Haslam, 2004; Haslam & Ellemers, 2005; Lee et al., 2015; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Riketta, 2005; Van Knippenberg, 2000; Walumbwa, Avolio, & Zhu, 2008). And the benefits of *organizational identification* (i.e., the extent to which employees define themselves in terms of their work organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989)) do not stop there. Organizational identification also has a robust impact on a wide range of desirable employee behaviors, attitudes, and cognitions (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Haslam, 2004; He & Brown, 2013; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Lee et al., 2015; Riketta, 2005; Tyler & Blader, 2000, 2003). These findings have led scholars to embrace organizational identification as a “magic bullet” in the quest to enhance employee engagement and performance—even if, under some circumstances, this magic bullet involves some downsides (Ashforth, 2016; Dukerich, Kramer, & Parks, 1998; Galvin, Lange, & Ashforth, 2015).

However, although demonstrations of the beneficial outcomes of organizational identification are widespread and continue to proliferate, relatively less attention and effort have been devoted to understanding the specific underlying dynamics that link organizational identification to work behaviors (Ashforth, 2016; Ashforth et al., 2008). Although we know organizational identification is generally good for employee work behavior, we know far less about precisely why, how, or what it is specifically good for. For instance, prior research has not extensively considered the specific types of positive work behaviors—and respective underlying psychological mechanisms—associated with organizational identification. Rather, prior research has tended to conceptualize the behavioral consequences and underlying mechanism(s) of organizational identification in relatively general and vague terms—as if the positive work behaviors that result are a unitary construct and the underlying mechanisms are a straightforward and singular process. This inattention to underlying mechanisms and lack of theoretical precision poses a significant limitation, one that restricts our understanding of organizational identification and its practical value. For instance, the existence of distinct mechanisms raises the possibility that the impact and practical value of organizational identification will differ depending on a range of antecedents, moderating factors, and types of work behaviors under consideration.

These limitations can be illustrated by considering a hypothetical example involving two employees working at the same organization. The first employee is deeply beholden and loyal to organizational rules, norms, and traditions. His work behavior embodies that loyalty, and he can be invariably counted upon to carry out his prescribed role and to do precisely what is expected of him in the pursuit of organizational goals. By contrast, the second employee has an unwavering commitment to doing what she thinks is best for the organization, showing little deference to expectations or tradition and instead subscribing to the motto, “If it ain’t working, ditch it.” She eschews engaging in work behaviors simply because they are typical or expected, opting instead to pursue organizational goals by any means necessary. Does one of these employees identify more strongly with the organization than the other? Is it likely that they identify equally? If so, why is the behavioral manifestation of their identification so different, particularly given that they work at the same organization and thus are subject to the same norms, prototypes, organizational culture, expectations, and so on? Will one employee be valued more than the other? Will one of them be perceived as more identified and committed than the other?

Prior organizational identification research provides little guidance for answering these questions, for distinguishing between these employees, or for anticipating how others in their organization will evaluate and react to them. This lack of guidance is striking, because management research has a long and rich history of distinguishing between work behaviors that are consistent with the status quo and those that depart

from current norms (e.g., Brief & Motowidlo, 1986; Hornstein, 1986; Morrison & Phelps, 1999; Schein, 1990; Staw & Boettger, 1990; Van Dyne, Cummings, & Parks, 1995). Yet prior organizational identification research has not extensively acknowledged, theorized, or investigated this duality or the tensions it creates for situations in which normative behavior is regarded as suboptimal or dysfunctional. This oversight limits our understanding of the underlying dynamics and behavioral consequences of organizational identification, as well as our ability to advise organizations about when/why/how to reap the potential benefits of identification. Moreover, this oversight represents a missed opportunity for organizational scholars, who are especially well positioned to investigate these issues and thus to reciprocally inform and enhance social psychological theorizing on social identity as well as the broader range of work on collective self and identity. Indeed, organizational contexts, as compared to other social settings and social categories, involve a wider range of motives (e.g., economic, competence, and autonomy motives), stronger performance demands, more formalized compliance mechanisms, and less stable or certain membership. These inherent characteristics of organizational life can enrich research on the behavioral consequences of collective identification and, more generally, can deepen our understanding of the fundamental psychological dynamics of identification.

In addition, prior research has largely neglected to investigate how observers (i.e., supervisors, coworkers, etc.) assess or regard the work behaviors that follow from organizational identification, and has instead assumed observers will consistently value these behaviors. As a result, prior research not only lacks precision or clarity about the specific work behaviors that can be expected from highly identified employees, but also does not provide adequate guidance as to whether observers consistently recognize and value the work behaviors that follow from strong organizational identification. Yet these issues are critical for understanding the prescriptive value of organizational identification research. For instance, they influence whether organizational identification is equally valuable to—and likely to be valued by—organizations that seek conformity (e.g., the military) and those that seek creativity (e.g., technology firms). These questions also influence whether observers in these differing types of organizations are likely to recognize—and reward—the efforts of their strongly identified colleagues.

We analyze these issues and aim to extend prior research. Our analysis is based on the foundational premise, reflected throughout the research literature, that organizational identification involves a profound shift in how employees relate to their organization (Haslam, Postmes, & Ellemers, 2003) and in the nature of their organizationally relevant beliefs, attitudes, and behaviors (e.g., Blader & Tyler, 2009; Haslam, 2004; Lee et al., 2015; Riketta, 2005; Tyler & Blader, 2000, 2003). Indeed, the psychological integration of “me” and “we” is a real game changer in terms of the meaning and experience of organizational membership. We elaborate on this premise by conducting a more granular analysis of organizational identification and its behavioral implications. In doing so, we argue that prior research has not adequately grappled with whether, or how, identification can produce both types of employee behavior described in the hypothetical example above. It thus remains unclear (a) whether identification prompts work behaviors that conform to, or depart from, the status quo, and (b) when, and under what conditions, the various behavioral consequences of identification are rewarded or penalized. We hope our analysis brings greater attention and, ultimately, greater clarity to these issues by spurring further investigation of them.

Overview of our framework

On the one hand, we have strong reason to expect that strongly identified individuals will conform to typical organizational practices (Abrams, Ando, & Hinkle, 1998; Haslam & Ellemers, 2005; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Van Knippenberg, 2000). Indeed, this point is a key premise of social identity theory, the theoretical perspective that dominates most organizational identification research. This premise suggests that highly

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