Interactions between work and identities: Thriving, withering, or redefining the self? ☆

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ABSTRACT

Interactions between work and identities are an important topic as a result of their influence on both employees' well-being and organizational performance. However, there is a lack of theorizing that comprehensively charts the processes and outcomes of work and identity interactions. In this paper, we formulate an integrated conceptual model of interactions between work and identities, employee reactions to them, and subsequent outcomes. In our model, we bring together well-known and under-examined aspects of work and identity interactions. The model explains how such varied outcomes as employee thriving and withering, and both subjugated and empowered identities derive from encounters between work and identities. The model makes it possible to assess the possible benefits and side-effects of human resource management practices that seek to align work with the worker, and supports human resource managers in distinguishing the positive potential in situations where employees find their work misaligning with their identities.

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1. Introduction

In the act of working, the agency of an employee encounters the social world and its expectations (Ybema et al., 2009). These encounters influence both parties. By working, employees make their mark on the social and material world and, in work, employees are exposed to and change under the influence of work's socio-cultural conditions. In this co-evolution, employees' appraisal of work's relation to their identities is a crucial step. Employees tacitly and explicitly assess whether their work aligns with their identities, and an appraised misalignment between the two has negative psychological consequences, such as devaluation of one's identity (Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006) and the emergence of negative emotions (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Correspondingly, an appraised alignment between work and identity yields positive outcomes. When the two are appraised to align, employees experience their work as being meaningful (Ménard & Brunet, 2011; Pratt & Ashforth, 2003; Scroggins, 2008) and promoting their eudaimonic well-being (Kernis & Goldman, 2006). Indeed, employees shape their identities in such a way that these align better with work situations (Ibarra, 1999; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Pratt et al., 2006).

Because of the influence they exert on meaningfulness and well-being, we argue that further understanding is needed of the processes through which work and identities interact and shape one another. Further understanding of the various possible individual and organizational outcomes of such processes would also be valuable. To our knowledge, no integrated models depicting the possible processes and outcomes that result from work and identity integrations have been presented in literature. In this paper, we formulate an integrated conceptual model of interactions between work and identities, employee reactions to them, and subsequent outcomes. In our model, we bring together both well-known and under-examined aspects of work and

identity interactions. The second contribution of our paper is, therefore, that we distinguish several under-examined areas of work and identity integration, theorize on them, and include them into a model considering a rich array of eventualities from work and identity interactions.

1.1. Under-examined aspects of work and identity interactions

Even though studies connecting work and identities have appeared both in the poststructuralist (e.g., Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Kuhn, 2006; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003) and psychological (e.g., Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010; Pratt et al., 2006) streams of organizational studies, we recognize that further theorizing in the field is still required. Most importantly, we find that some topics concerning interactions between work and identities have gained much attention, while several less-examined yet important areas remain. First, when it comes to the types of interactions between work and identities, more attention has been paid to misalignments between work and identities than to their alignments (e.g., Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010; Pratt et al., 2006; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). However, not only misalignments but also alignments influence employees' cognitions and emotions, motivate their behaviors, and influence work performance.

Second, individuals adjust to appraised misalignments between work and identities by developing one or both of them (Nicholson, 1984). Studies have arguably focused more on identity-related reactions. Important perspectives have included sense-breaking and -making processes in the construction of identity narratives (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Pratt et al., 2006) and the struggle between organizational identity regulation and individuals' identity work (i.e., individuals engaging in "*forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, or revising*" their identities; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003, p. 1165). Extant studies have explained how identities are narrated (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010), customized (Pratt et al., 2006), reconstructed (Chreim, Williams, & Hinings, 2007), or shaped through dramaturgical performances (Down & Reveley, 2009) to fit their social contexts. The idea of employees developing their work to align it better with their identities has remained on the margins of studies. For instance, the empirical observations of Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003) indicate that employees emphasize those roles and tasks that they experience as aligning with their deeper self-narratives and struggle to avoid those that do not. However, the authors theorize on these endeavors in terms of identity work. Similarly, Pratt et al. (2006) focus on identity customization and only briefly mention that, along with increasing autonomy, employees may craft their jobs to align them with their identities.

Moreover, the interest has been in the identity formation processes rather than in theorizing of the outcomes of these processes (cf. Kärreman & Alvesson, 2001). We find that well-being outcomes from (mis)alignments between work and identities offer an especially fruitful yet under-theorized area. This is the case especially now when the interest in positive phenomena in psychology (Seligman, 2005) and organizational scholarship (Cameron, Dutton, & Quinn, 2003) is growing and having implications for also human resource management scholarship. Positive theories, such as thriving, offer new starting points for the consideration of well-being at work (Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005). Furthermore, since interactions between work and identities influence individuals' identities, behaviors, and well-being at work, they are likely to influence social interactions and collective performance as well. Outcomes on extra-individual levels could be studied further.

Where the outcomes from the interactions between work and identities have been studied, symmetric views have tended to dominate. In other words, individuals experience positively situations in which their work and identities align, and it is argued that these positive experiences have positive outcomes. Contradictions between work and identities are experienced negatively and lead to negative consequences. However, Lindebaum, Jordan, and Dasborough (2012) encourage scholars to consider *asymmetric* relations between constructs. It is conceivable that alignments between work and identities may have negative outcomes, while misalignments may result in something positive. Moreover, Pierce and Aguinis (2013) demonstrated that many work-related phenomena follow a curvilinear rather than a linear pattern. Antecedents that are generally considered desirable have negative outcomes after context-specific inflection points. Pierce and Aguinis called this the Too-Much-of-a-Good-Thing (TMGT) effect. Some asymmetric outcomes from interactions between work and identities may result from the TMGT effect.

1.2. Contributions and outline of the paper

Having identified these less-examined aspects of interactions between work and identities, our aim is to offer some novel theorizing on them. In addition, we integrate the well-known aspects of the interactions with our novel conceptual insights and formulate a conceptual model depicting interactions between work and identities. The model explains how employees experience both alignments and misalignments between their work and identities and how they react to these (mis)alignments. In addition to considering how identities become maintained or transformed because of the (mis)alignments, we consider how employees craft their work (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001) as a response to them. Given that individuals have these two choices when reacting to (mis)alignments, the question of which strategy they choose in a particular situation becomes pertinent. In our model, we tackle that question. In addition, our model systematically charts both symmetric and asymmetric individual and organizational outcomes resulting from employees' experiences of and reactions to work and identity (mis)alignments.

The article is structured as follows. We first examine the literature that links work and identities, and we explain the definition of work identity that we adopt in this paper. Next we present and discuss a model that covers experiences, reactions, and outcomes stemming from both aligned and misaligned interactions between employees' work situations and preferred work identities. Finally, we discuss the contributions of our model to the extant theories and its research implications and relevance to practice.