



Toward a contingency framework of interpersonal influence in organizational identification diffusion[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Drawing from the social information processing approach, the authors develop a contingency framework that captures organizational identification (OI) diffusion through two key interpersonal influencers, supervisors and expert peers. In two multi-level studies in two countries, results consistently show that supervisors' and expert peers are important influencers of OI diffusion because their OI is positively related to frontline employees' OI. As the focal employee's organizational tenure increases, the lateral OI transmission from expert peers grows stronger while the downward OI transmission from supervisors grows weaker. Work-group OI diversity weakens both the downward and the lateral transmission. A time-lagged analysis further validates the temporal order of these processes. OI in turn predicts frontline employees' objective performance. The authors discuss theoretical and managerial implications.

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Introduction

Organizational identification (OI), the extent to which organizational members perceive oneness with the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989), is a potent predictor of employee job attitudes (Van Knippenberg & Van Schie, 2000), cooperative behavior (Dukerich, Golden, & Shortell, 2002; Richter, West, van Dick, & Dawson, 2006), knowledge transfer (Kane, Argote, & Levine, 2005), in-role performance (Riketta, 2005), organizational citizenship behavior (Bell & Menguc, 2002), voice (Tangirala & Ramanujam, 2008), and customer-related outcomes (e.g., customer-company identification, Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003). It is, therefore, not surprising that much of the literature has devoted increased attention in identifying antecedents to OI.

Early work on OI antecedents is primarily focused on organizational-level variables such as organizational prestige (e.g., Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994) and individual-level variables such as construed external image and individual traits (e.g., Hall, Schneider, & Nygren, 1970; Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). More recently, researchers have started to examine how

leadership influences followers' self-concept (e.g., Hogg, 2001; Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003; Lord & Brown, 2001; Tangirala, Green, & Ramanujam, 2007; Van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003; Van Knippenberg et al., 2004) and how organizational justice induces OI (e.g., Olkkonen & Lipponen, 2006; Walumbwa, Cropanzano, & Hartnell, 2009). This focus on interpersonal sources of OI resonates with Salancik & Pfeffer's (1978) social information processing (SIP) perspective, which posits that organizational members' attitudes, behavior, and beliefs are influenced by the social context and social referents. However, three research gaps remain largely unexplored.

First, little is known about the influence of peers in OI processes. In addition to supervisors, work-group peers are also important social influencers because they are more familiar and accessible to a focal employee than other actors (Morrison, 1993, p. 561; see also Salancik & Pfeffer, 1978). It is important to examine the influence of peers, especially expert peers, because with the increased use of work teams, groups, project teams, and cross-selling teams, social interactions among co-workers have become an integral part of organizational reality (e.g., Chiaburu & Harrison, 2008). Second, if peers are viable social influencers of OI in work groups, it is important to simultaneously examine the influence of both leaders and peers and identify conditions under which a focal employee will be more strongly influenced by a particular type of influencers. Prior research on newcomer information seeking (e.g., Ashford, 1986; Morrison, 1993) suggests that newcomers' choice of social information sources may change as their organizational tenure increases. It remains unclear whether this finding also extends to OI

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processes. Finally, because the SIP approach suggests that the social context plays an important role in the formation of OI and work-group diversity reflects a lack of shared beliefs that may dilute the impact of social influencers, it is important to examine the effect of work-group OI diversity on the impact of these influencers. However, little is known about the nature of the interaction between work-group OI diversity and the influence of leaders and peers in organizational members' OI formation.

The objectives of this paper are twofold, conceptual and empirical. Our first objective is to combine the SIP approach with the OI literature to develop a contingency model of OI diffusion that examines two research questions. First, we examine the role of two key influencers, supervisors and expert peers, in transmitting their OI to a focal employee. We propose that expert peers with their expert knowledge have a stronger potential to become a more salient social referent of organizational information than non-expert peers. For our purpose, we name the influence of the supervisor's OI on the focal employee's OI as a downward OI transmission, and that of expert peers' OI on the focal employee's OI a lateral OI transmission. Together, these two transmission processes form a meso phenomenon (House, Rousseau, & Thomas-Hunt, 1995; Klein & Kozlowski, 2000) that we collectively refer to as *OI diffusion*. In OI diffusion, supervisors and expert peers function as *influencers*, while a focal employee is the *target*. Second, we investigate factors that moderate these processes of OI diffusion. We focus on two contingencies. The first moderator, the focal employee's organizational tenure, represents the employee's knowledge of organizational reality and influences his or her probability of being affected by a particular influencer (Kelman, 1958; Morrison, 1993). The other moderator, work-group OI diversity, captures the differences among work-group members' psychological oneness with the organization. We propose that a high level of OI diversity creates contradicting information that drives the target to scrutinize the influencers' information more closely, thereby reducing the impact of these influencers.

Our second objective is to empirically test the OI diffusion framework, using two multi-level, multi-source samples. The German data set in Study 1, consisting of 438 managers and 1206 frontline employees of a large travel agency organization, is characterized by a high level of interpersonal interaction between agency managers and their employees. The availability of this data set across two time points also allows us to run time-lagged analyses to demonstrate the temporal order of the relationships. The United States sample in Study 2 consists of 285 managers and 1528 frontline employees. In contrast to Study 1, the surveyed US company is a geographically-dispersed firm that specializes in sanitation services. We further validate the importance of the OI diffusion framework by showing that OI has a strong and positive influence on employees' objective performance.

Our research contributes to the OI literature in several ways. First, we build on and extend research on interpersonal sources of OI – and more broadly, the social construction of OI – by proposing a formal conceptual framework of OI diffusion. Second, we simultaneously examine and provide empirical evidence for the role of two important influencers of OI diffusion, namely supervisors and expert peers. Their direct influence and contagious effects on employees are potent even after controlling for other antecedents of OI that the literature suggests. Third, we show that OI diffusion by interpersonal influence is fairly stable over time. Finally, we identify two boundary conditions of OI diffusion, namely the focal employee's organizational tenure and work-group OI diversity, which can weaken or strengthen the downward and lateral OI transmission. Although we did not test the underlying mechanisms of OI diffusion, we provide theoretical arguments for these mediating effects that set the stage for further theoretical development.

An understanding of OI diffusion via interpersonal influence is managerially important, because if there exists an alternative influencer of OI diffusion, supervisors should be aware of how that alternative may be beneficial for, or detrimental to, their influence on followers. Our results also provide an indirect answer to a fundamental question: if multiple organizational members could have an influence on the focal employee's identification with the organization, which source will be more influential and under which condition(s)? Finally, the identification of the boundary conditions inform managers of ways to not only accelerate the OI building efforts but also decelerate the potential negative influence of “bad” expert peers in work groups.

We organize the paper as follows. First, we briefly review the theoretical foundation of our research. Then, we present the conceptual framework and hypotheses. This is followed by the two empirical studies. We conclude the paper with a discussion of empirical findings, theoretical and managerial implications, and future research avenues.

OI diffusion: the SIP approach

Salancik and Pfeffer's (1978) SIP approach forms the backbone of our conceptual framework of OI diffusion. However, because the psychological processes are minimally described in the SIP approach (Zalesny & Ford, 1990), we draw from the literature on social influence (French & Raven, 1959; Kelman, 1958; Polansky, Lippitt, & Redl, 1950) to theoretically support the main effects and rely on the socialization literature (Comer, 1991; McDonald & Westphal, 2003; Morrison, 1993) and work-group diversity (Van Knippenberg, De Dreu, & Homan, 2004) to identify the boundary conditions. In this section, we briefly review how the literatures on OI, the SIP approach, and socialization dovetail each other.

The social information processing approach

The SIP approach

Salancik and Pfeffer (1978, p. 226) propose that “individuals, as adaptive organisms, adapt attitudes, behavior, and beliefs to their social context and to the reality of their own past and present behavior and situation. This premise leads inexorably to the conclusion that one can learn the most about individual behavior by studying the informational and social environment within which that behavior occurs and to which it adapts.” Specifically, Salancik and Pfeffer (1978, p. 229; see also Griffin, 1983, p. 186) argue that supervisors and coworkers can influence an employee's attitude and behavior *directly* by their overt statements about the work place and *indirectly* by cueing employees about what to expect in the work setting by noting certain aspects of the environment. Thus, information provided within the SIP model can be purely informational (e.g., organizational members' overt behavior) or normative (e.g., organizational norms and expectations). For information to be influential, the SIP model emphasizes that the information must be salient, relevant, and credible. In a critical review of this literature, Thomas and Griffin (1983) suggest that a focal employee may engage in a ‘bracketing’ activity to retain only a salient set of information rather than relying on an infinite set of cues. Based on the SIP approach, we propose that OI diffuses in organizations through employees' social information processing, and that certain social referents' information about the organization is more salient than other referents'.

How SIP occurs: direct influence and contagion

In their critical review of research using the SIP perspective, Zalesny and Ford (1990, p. 224) propose that a revised SIP model “must include greater explication of the mediating processes by

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