Social identity and engagement: An exploratory study at university

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A B S T R A C T

Within the framework of research on students' active performance in their study habits, the aim of this study is to analyze a model predicting the effect of social identity and personal initiative on engagement in university students. We conducted a cross-sectional study on 266 students from different Spanish universities. The resulting data were analyzed using SPSS Macro MEDIATE. Evidence was found for the proposed model. Only group-identity predicted personal initiative and engagement. Analysis revealed the mediating role of proactive behavior on engagement in university students. It is concluded that the university management may intervene, from an organizational-culture approach, promoting guidelines to reinforce students' sense of belonging by enhancing initiative and autonomous problem solving in learning behaviors.

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La identidad social y el compromiso: estudio exploratorio en la universidad

R E S U M E N

Dentro del marco de investigación sobre desempeño activo de estudiantes, el objetivo de este trabajo es analizar un modelo predictor del efecto de identidad social e iniciativa personal en el compromiso de estudiantes universitarios. Se llevó a cabo un estudio transversal con 266 alumnos de diversas universidades españolas. Los datos se analizaron con la Macro MEDIATE de SPSS. Se encontraron pruebas para el modelo propuesto. Sólo la identidad grupal predecía la iniciativa personal y el engagement. El análisis mostró el papel mediador de la iniciativa personal en el engagement de estudiantes universitarios. Entre las conclusiones se destaca la posibilidad de promover desde la Universidad el sentido de pertenencia para generar iniciativa personal y la solución autónoma de problemas en los comportamientos de aprendizaje.

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It is a common goal of higher education institutions to achieve successful academic performance of their students. Doing more than expected, suggesting new working objectives, and actively studying to achieve a degree are some examples of desirable behaviors in the new framework of higher education focusing on the achievement of professional skills and requiring a great deal of autonomous work from students. In recent years, attention has been focused on *engagement*, a significant predictor of academic performance. Engagement is defined as a positive, work-related state of mind characterized by vigor, dedication, and absorption at work (Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003). Apart from work setting, surveys on engagement have also been conducted to measure students' academic performance. Results reveal that engagement in studying allows students a better management of difficulties encountered in the daily academic life (Salanova, Martínez, Bresó, Llorens, & Grau, 2005). Subsequent research has found that personal resources are among the aspects contributing to engagement (Xanthopoulou, Bakker, Demerouti, & Schaufeli, 2007). Personal resources are positive self-evaluations linked to resiliency and referred to individuals'

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sense of their ability to control and impact upon their environment (Hobfoll, Johnson, Ennis, & Jackson, 2003). Proactive behavior has been identified as one of the resources contributing to an active performance (Lisbona & Freser, 2012; Salanova & Schaufeli, 2008). Furthermore, engagement is the positive pole of two underlying processes and is characterized by high energy levels at work and a strong identification with the organization (González-Romá, Schaufeli, Bakker, & Lloret, 2006).

The Social Identity Theory (SIT) suggested by Tajfel (1978) and its application to the organizational context proposed by Mael and Ashforth (1992) can explain this identification process. From the SIT approach, Social Identity is defined as the perceived sense of belonging to a group category, whereas in the business context Organizational Identification is considered as the perception of the individual as a member of an organization and the experience of the organization's success and failure as one's own (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Therefore, organizational identification explains the relationship between an individual and the organization as a cognitive link binding the definition of the organization with the definition of self (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). Accordingly, in broad sense we can speak of identification with the work group when an individual becomes a member of a profession or a group (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Literature shows that both identification types are compatible (Foreman & Whetten, 2002). The individual may hold multiple identities or nested identities coexisting in harmony. The individual may also get on well with his or her colleagues and feel at ease with the values of the organization (Foreman & Whetten, 2002). Nevertheless, not all identities are equally valued; therefore, there is a hierarchical organization based on category salience with varying relative weights. For instance, it has been pointed that, for a given individual, the identification with the organization may decrease while the identification with the group rises (Cappelli, 2000). SIT establishes that individuals are self-categorized as members of a group category with a positive valence. However, a critical review of SIT (see Scandroglio, López, & San José, 2008) described that group processes should be studied starting with a viewpoint that places greater emphasis on the complex character of a dialogic social reality. In this sense, these authors note that recent research indicates that the processes of self-definition and hetero-definition are dynamic and changing, combining a number of formal and motivational elements and resulting from the interaction between characteristics of the environment and a set of a subject's resources, articulated in a multidimensional space that combines different criteria of inclusiveness and differentiation.

To put it differently, the classification within an organization or group entails feelings of self-esteem and recognition that have an impact on the behaviors of individuals, and interaction with the context and the motivational aspects will also have a role in this self-categorization. In this line, it has been observed in an organizational context that identification with the group predicts its members' attitudes and behaviors (Van Dick & Wagner, 2002). It has also been pointed out that identification with the group explains a higher variance with respect to job satisfaction, participation in group activities, commitment, and personal-initiative in organizational contexts (Lisbona, Morales, & Palací, 2006; Snape, Redman, & Chan, 2000; Van Dick & Wagner, 2002; Van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher, & Christ, 2005; van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000; Veenstra & Haslam, 2000). In contrast, identification with the organization is positively related to trust, motivation, performance, and citizenship behaviors (Abrams, Ando, & Hikle, 1998; Bhattacharya, Rao, & Glynn, 1995; Haslam, 2001). Hence, evidence suggests that identification with the organization and with the group converge in extra-role or citizenship behaviors at the workplace that go beyond the requirements of the job. These behaviors have a strong proactive component, understood as a stable trend to effect changes in order to preserve the life of the group (Crant, 2000).

Within this approach to proactive behavior, Personal Initiative is defined as a self-starting response and proactive behavior in the pursuit of an active participation in performance (Frese & Fay, 2001). This self-starting behavior has demonstrated to be a predictor of engagement in different organizational settings (Lisbona & Frese, 2012). Accordingly, employees with strong personal-initiative tend to seek solutions to problems, to act regardless of what others do, etc. The model of personal-initiative proposed by Frese and Fay (2001) identifies two types of causes determining personal-initiative: distal and proximal causes. Distal causes, on the one hand, (i.e., environmental support, knowledge and skills, and personality) predict personal-initiative indirectly through proximal causes; social identity may be included in this group. On the other hand, proximal causes are orientations promoting personal-initiative by allowing people to believe that they can show personal-initiative in a particular context (i.e., self-efficacy, change orientation) (Frese & Fay, 2001). Hence, according to this classification and starting from the assumptions of the SIT, we would expect that students with high identification with the organization and with the group will develop self-starting behaviors in their approach to study work, and this will predict engagement as it provides them with a positive value of identification with the group.

Therefore, the objective of this study is to analyze a predictive model of social identity on engagement with the mediation of personal-initiative in university students.

The hypotheses of the study are the following:

Hypothesis 1. Organizational- and group-identification predict students' personal-initiative.

Hypotheses 2. Personal-initiative mediates the relationship between social identity and engagement in students.

Method

Participants

The present study was conducted with a sample of 266 participants from three universities: Universidad Miguel Hernández of Elche (49.2 percent), Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia (UNED) (39.1 percent), and Universidad de Alicante (9.4 percent). Most participants were studying Psychology, Occupational Therapy, and Advertising and Public Relations (84.8 percent). The average age of participants was 28.42 years ($SD = 9.84$); 71.8 percent were females; and 63.3 percent were first- and second-year students. UNED students' profile is different from traditional university students, since they are students who combine studies with a full-time job, thereby needing more years to complete their studies; furthermore, a lot of UNED's students are workers that decided to start studying in the adulthood.

Variables and Instruments

Social identity. It was measured with a social identification scale developed *ad hoc* for this study, considering the review of the major social and organizational identification scales conducted by Haslam (2001) and the recommendations of van Knippenberg and van Schie (2000) and Grice, Jones, and Paulsen (2002). The organizational-identification scale and the group-identification scale included, respectively, six items; an example of item is "I feel personally insulted when someone criticize my university" and "I present myself as a student of a degree". We used a 1-to-5-point Likert-type scale for the responses (from *I totally disagree* to *I totally agree*). The KMO test shows satisfactory results (KMO = .77, $\chi^2 = 1282.3$, $df = 91$, $p = .00$); two factors explain 39% of variance. Cronbach's alpha is .82