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The Cognitive and Affective Components of Organizational Identification

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ABSTRACT
Extant literature has linked organizational identification (OID) to many vital organizational constructs and outcomes, such as job satisfaction, job involvement, work engagement, organizational affective commitment, organizational-based self-esteem, cooperation, creativity, extra-role and organizational citizenship behavior, work effort, intention to stay, decreased turnover intentions, and job performance. However, despite the identified benefits of organizational identification, a growing body of research has noted its dark side. For example, OID has been linked to identity lies, negative emotions, and unethical pro-organizational behavior. At the same time, there is limited research examining the separate influences of the cognitive and affective components of organizational identification on these various phenomena. This paper addresses concerns about the definition and measurement of organizational identification, a valuable endeavor given current understandings of OID relationships, and suggests the cognitive and affective components of OID be measured in future research.

Keywords
Organizational Identification, Cognitive Organizational Identification, Affective Organizational Identification, Organizational Commitment

1 INTRODUCTION

The concept of identification can be traced backed to Sigmund Freud (Bronfenbrenner, 1960; Foote, 1951; Tolman, 1943) but has varied over the years. Bronfenbrenner (1960) notes that Freud's description of identification varied with his writings but that it was based on "an emotional tie with an object" (p. 16). Using neo-Freudian terms, Tolman (1943) describes identification as a psychological process consisting of three separate but related processes, one of which is adherence to a group (in addition to imitation of an envied other and acceptance of an impersonal cause). Foote (1951) suggests identities provide stability but that they are situational and depend on one's circumstances, including the categorization of self and others (see also Edwards, 2005). Turner (1984) describes how categorization and cognitive identification with a social group can govern the attitudes and behaviors of members when social identification becomes salient in a particular situation. Ashforth and Mael (1989) define social identification as "the perception of oneness with or belongingness to some human aggregate" and note social identification likely derives from the concept of group identification (p. 21). Furthermore, they suggest individuals who identify with a group need only to do so psychologically without regard to affective or behavioral displays (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Similarly, Mael and Tetrick (1992) define "identification with a psychological group" (IDPG) as a perceptual state of oneness with a group or organization in which "common qualities and faults, successes and failures, and common destinies" are shared (p. 813; also, see Turner, 1984). In essence, identification describes the degree to which the individual has embedded the relevant identity (Ashforth et al., 2008).

Because individuals can identify as members of an organization, organizational identification can be considered a specific type of social identification (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Gautam et al., 2004). As a form of social identification, OID has roots in social identity theory (Tajfel, 1982/2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and self-categorization theory (Turner, 1984, 1985/2010) and is therefore different from other types of social identifications, such as relational identifications, professional or occupational identifications, and work unit or work team identifications (He & Brown, 2013; van Dick et al., 2008; van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000; van Vuuren et al., 2010). Following the work of others (e.g., Hogg & Terry, 2000; Turner, 1982/2010), this paper considers organizations as groups in terms of identification. Organizational identification could be considered "one of the most important group affiliations a person has" given the time individuals spend at work and the economic benefits derived from it (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000, p. 555). Furthermore, OID "is seen as a key psychological state reflecting the underlying link or bond that exists between the employee and the organization and, therefore, potentially capable of explaining and predicting many important attitudes and behaviours in the workplace" (Edwards, 2005, p. 207).

Indeed, extant literature has linked OID to many vital organizational constructs and outcomes, such as job satisfaction (Lee et al., 2015; van Dick et al., 2008; van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000), job involvement (Lee et al., 2015; van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000), work engagement (Ma et al., 2022; van Dick et al., 2020), organizational affective commitment (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Lee et al., 2015), organizational-based self-esteem (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000), cooperation (Bartel, 2001; Dukerich et al., 2002; Tyler & Blader, 2001), creativity (Ma et al., 2022), extra-role and organizational citizenship behavior (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Dukerich et al., 2002; Lee et al., 2015; Tyler & Blader, 2001; van Dick et al., 2006, 2020), work effort (Bartel, 2001), intention to stay (Ma et al., 2022), decreased turnover intentions (Conroy et al., 2016; van Dick, Wagner, et al., 2004), and job performance (Ma et al., 2022). However, despite the identified benefits of organizational identification, a growing body of research has noted its dark side (Conroy et al., 2017; Dukerich et al., 1998; Irshad & Bashir, 2020; Naseer et al., 2020). For example, OID has been linked to identity lies (Leavitt & Sluss, 2015), negative emotions (van Dick et al., 2006) and unethical pro-organizational behavior (Umphress et al., 2010). Perhaps because of these relationships, a healthy number of scholars have studied organizational identification. As a result, however, many definitions of OID have been proposed (Johnson et al., 2012).

2 DEFINING ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTIFICATION

There appears to be agreement among scholars that organizational identification is based on the social identity approach and that it involves some type of connection between the individual and the organization. Consensus regarding the exact nature of that connection, however, has been elusive (Edwards, 2005; Johnson et al., 2012; Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Riketta, 2005). The greatest area of disagreement appears to concern the inclusion of an affective component in the definition of social identification. Tajfel (1978) includes an affective component—"emotional significance"—in his seminal definition of social identity (p. 63). However, Ashforth and Mael (1989) use a less extensive definition of organizational identification that omits an affective dimension, describing it as "a perceptual cognitive construct that is not necessarily associated with any specific behaviors or affective states" (p. 21) (see also Johnson et al., 2012; Riketta, 2005). Other scholars followed suit and defined organizational identification as a cognitive construct (e.g., Dutton et al, 1994). This has resulted in scholars making different assumptions about which dimensions of organizational identification are actually being measured, not acknowledging there may be different components, or, perhaps unwittingly, not accounting for the nuanced differences incorporated in their definitions (e.g., see He & Brown, 2013; Johson et al., 2012; and Pratt, 1998).

These definitional differences have also likely made it more difficult to explain what organizational identification is not. Perhaps the construct that organizational identification is most frequently compared to, and confused with (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Edwards, 2005, p. 218; Gautam et al., 2004; Johnson et al., 2012; Mael & Tetrick, 1992), is organizational commitment. Meyer and Allen (1991) describe organizational commitment as consisting of three components: affective, normative and continuance. Moreover, affective commitment encompasses "the employee's emotional attachment to, identification with, and involvement in the organization" (Meyer & Allen, 1991, p. 67). While the constructs are similar, studies have found that organizational identification is indeed distinct from affective organizational commitment (Mael & Tetrick, 1992; van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006). For example, Mael and Tetrick (1992, p. 814) describe identification with a psychological group "as a feeling of oneness with a defined aggregate of persons, involving the perceived experience of its successes and failures" and found that IDPG was distinct from organizational commitment as measured by the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (Mowday et al., 1979). Similarly, van Knippenberg and Sleebos (2006) found that affective commitment "is more exchange-based than identification, because identification is self-referential whereas commitment is not" (p. 579).

Evidence of a lack of consensus among scholars as to the meaning of organizational identification can be found in the dozens of different measures (Johnson et al., 2012) that purport to tap the construct. However, some only assess cognitive dimensions (e.g., Bartel, 2001; Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Edwards & Peccei, 2007), some assess both cognitive and affective dimensions (e.g., Gautam et al., 2004; Harris & Cameron, 2005; Smidts et al., 2001; van Leeuwen et al., 2003), and some assess neither dimension (i.e., the measures relate to other constructs) (see Johnson et al., 2012 for an extensive review). Although the vast majority of items only assess cognitive dimensions, any definitional discrepancies are of concern because without agreement on the dimensions of organizational identification, its use as a global construct from which conclusions can be drawn is limited (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Johnson et al., 2012).

3 MEASURING ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTIFICATION

Measures of organizational identification have varied over the past several decades but two measures are most commonly used (van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006). Cheney (1983) developed the Organizational Identification Questionnaire (OIQ) in 1982 as part of his master's thesis related to decision making. Cheney (1983) notes the OIQ is based on Patchen's (1970) three components of organizational identification (membership, loyalty and similarity) and that some items on the OIQ were derived from other researchers, including some taken "directly from existing commitment instruments" (Gautam et al., 2004, p. 304). The entanglement of concepts has spawned criticism of the OIQ for lacking validity as a measure of organizational identification and for findings that the OIQ is essentially a measure of organizational commitment (Miller et al., 2000; Sass & Canary, 1991).

Following the development of the social identity approach, Mael developed an organizational identification scale for his doctoral dissertation (1988, as cited in Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Mael and Tetrick, 1992). Based on research by Mael and colleagues (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Mael & Tetrick, 1992), the “Mael scale” (Mael & Ashforth, 1992) has become one of the most commonly used measures of organizational identification (Johnson et al., 2012; Riketta, 2005, p. 368). Riketta (2005) argues that the Mael scale is the “best” (p. 374) and “most representative” (p. 368) organizational identification measure. An example of an item from this 6-item scale includes “This organization’s successes are my successes” (Mael & Ashforth, 1992, see p. 122).

Ashforth and Mael (1989) admit that their definition of identification (i.e., “the perception of oneness with or belongingness to some human aggregate”) omits “affective and evaluative dimensions” (p. 21) despite using the word “feel” in three of six items measuring OID (e.g., see Johnson et al., 2012; Mael & Tetrick, 1992; and Pratt, 1998). As such, their definition conflicts with that of Tajfel’s (1978), who specifically notes that social identification consists, in part, of the “value and emotional significance attached to” group membership (p. 63). Bergami and Bagozzi (2000) question the purity of the Mael scale as a measure of identification, noting that three of the scale’s items correspond with emotional responses and two other items may relate to causes of identification. Van Dick (2001) echoes the same concerns, albeit for slightly different reasons, suggesting that four of the items relate to the evaluative component and the remaining two items relate to the affective component of OID (see also Edwards, 2005). Similarly, Ashmore et al. (2004) note the scale has both cognitive and affective components.

Both the OIQ and the Mael scale have been criticized for shortcomings and thus others have presented alternative measures. Bartel (2001) and Bergami and Bagozzi (2000) both employ a two-item measure of cognitive organizational identification that consists of a graphical item (Venn diagram) and a more traditional verbal item. Shamir and Kark (2004) use a similar graphical item absent one indicator. Although the graphical items are shorter in length than the verbal Mael scale, reported results are mixed (Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Moksness, 2014; Shamir & Kark, 2004).

4 COGNITIVE AND AFFECTIVE ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTIFICATION

Noting that individuals may identify with an organization for different reasons, Johnson et al. (2012) developed two measures, one for assessing cognitive identification and one for assessing affective identification. The authors used these measures in two studies in a university setting (Johnson et al., 2012). An example item from the cognitive organizational identification (COID) measure is “My self-identity is based in part on my membership in the university” (Johnson et al., 2012, p. 1148) and an example item from the affective organizational identification (AOID) measure is “I feel happy to be a student in the university” (Johnson et al., 2012, p. 1148). The authors found that the two measures were distinct and, furthermore, AOID was the stronger predictor of job and organizational satisfaction (Johnson et al., 2012).

Kubik (2017) used the COID and AOID measures developed by Johnson et al. (2012) and reported that more than half of participants in three studies had “substantial deviations in their organizational identification dimensions” (p. 128) and that COID and AOID had different relationships with the outcome variables in the study, collaborative handling of complaints and service sabotage. Furthermore, Kubik (2017) noted that findings based on the Mael scale (Mael & Ashforth, 1992) would have led to different conclusions.

5 CONCLUSION

These findings suggest that studies that employed measures such as the OIQ (Cheney, 1983) and the Mael scale (Mael & Ashforth, 1992), if replicated using the COID and AOID measures from Johnson et al. (2012), could produce results that would support new interpretations of construct relationships. Furthermore, the relationships between OID and other important workplace constructs could be better understood if scholars distinctly measured COID and AOID in future studies.

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