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# Social Identity Theory and the Organization

**BLAKE E. ASHFORTH**
Concordia University
**FRED MAEL**
Wayne State University

*It is argued that (a) social identification is a perception of oneness with a group of persons; (b) social identification stems from the categorization of individuals, the distinctiveness and prestige of the group, the salience of outgroups, and the factors that traditionally are associated with group formation; and (c) social identification leads to activities that are congruent with the identity, support for institutions that embody the identity, stereotypical perceptions of self and others, and outcomes that traditionally are associated with group formation, and it reinforces the antecedents of identification. This perspective is applied to organizational socialization, role conflict, and intergroup relations.*

Organizational identification has long been recognized as a critical construct in the literature on organizational behavior, affecting both the satisfaction of the individual and the effectiveness of the organization (Brown, 1969; Hall, Schneider, & Nygren, 1970; Lee, 1971; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986; Patchen, 1970; Rotondi, 1975). However, as discussed below, theoretical and empirical work has often confused organizational identification with related constructs such as organizational commitment and internalization and with affect and behaviors, which are more appropriately seen as antecedents and/or consequences of identification.

Social identity theory (SIT) can restore some coherence to organizational identification, and it can suggest fruitful applications to organizational behavior. SIT offers a social-psychological perspective, developed principally by Henri Tajfel (1978, 1981; Tajfel & Turner, 1985) and John Turner (1975, 1982, 1984, 1985). Following a review of the literature on SIT, the antecedents and consequences of social identification in organizations are discussed. This perspective is then applied to three domains of organizational behavior: socialization, role conflict, and intergroup relations.

## Social Identity Theory

According to SIT, people tend to classify themselves and others into various social categories, such as organizational membership, religious affiliation, gender, and age cohort (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). As these examples suggest, people may be classified in various categories, and different individuals may utilize different categorization schemas. Categories are defined by prototypical characteristics abstracted from the members (Turner, 1985). Social classification serves two functions. First, it cognitively seg-

ments and orders the social environment, providing the individual with a systematic means of defining others. A person is assigned the prototypical characteristics of the category to which he or she is classified. As suggested by the literature on stereotypes, however, such assignments are not necessarily reliable (e.g., Hamilton, 1981).

Second, social classification enables the individual to locate or define *him- or herself* in the social environment. According to SIT, the self-concept is comprised of a *personal* identity encompassing idiosyncratic characteristics (e.g., bodily attributes, abilities, psychological traits, interests) and a *social* identity encompassing salient group classifications. Social *identification*, therefore, is the perception of oneness with or *belongingness* to some human aggregate. For example, a woman may define herself in terms of the group(s) with which she classifies herself (I am a Canadian; I am a woman). She perceives herself as an actual or symbolic member of the group(s), and she perceives the fate of the group(s) as her own. As such, social identification provides a partial answer to the question, Who am I? (Stryker & Serpe, 1982; Turner, 1982).

Note that the definition of *others and the self* are largely "relational and *comparative*" (Tajfel & Turner, 1985, p. 16); they define oneself relative to individuals *in other* categories. The category *of young* is meaningful only in relation to the category of *old*. It should be noted, however, that social identification is *not* an all-or-none phenomenon. Although many social categories are indeed categorical (e.g., Canadian, female, a member of XYZ Co.), the extent to which the individual identifies with each category is clearly a matter of degree. Further, such identities tend to be viewed positively inasmuch as the individual vests more of his or her self-conceptions in valued personas (Adler & Adler, 1987; Schneider, Hall, & Nygren, 1971). Thus, Jackall (1978) found that people working at menial jobs in a bank often distanced themselves from their implied identity (e.g., This is only a stopgap job; I'm trying to save enough to start my own business).

The major focus of both SIT and the present paper is to understand the implications of the second function of classification, that of social identification.

**Social Identification and Group Identification**

Social identification appears to derive from the venerable concept of *group identification* (Tolman, 1943). (Indeed, we will use social and group identification interchangeably.) The literature on group identification suggests four principles that are relevant to our discussion. First, identification is viewed as a perceptual cognitive construct that is not necessarily associated with any specific behaviors or affective states. To identify, an individual need not expend effort toward the group's goals; rather, an individual need only perceive him- or herself as psychologically intertwined with the fate of the group. Behavior and affect are viewed only as potential antecedents or consequences (Foote, 1951; Gould, 1975). As noted below, this conceptualization distinguishes identification from related concepts such as effort on behalf of the group (behavior) and loyalty (affect). However, our view does contrast with some literature on SIT, which includes affective and evaluative dimensions in the conceptualization of identity (e.g., Tajfel, 1978).

Second, social/group identification is seen as personally experiencing the successes *and* failures of the group (Foote, 1951; Tolman, 1943). Often, identification is *maintained* in situations involving great loss or suffering (Brown, 1986), missed potential benefits (Tajfel, 1982), task failure (Turner, 1981), and even expected failure (Gammons, 1986).

Third, although not clearly addressed in the literature, social identification is distinguishable from internalization (Hogg & Turner, 1987) (cf. Kelman, 1961; O'Reilly & Chatman, 1986). Whereas identification refers to self in terms of social categories (I am), internalization refers to

the incorporation of values, attitudes, and so forth within the self as guiding principles (I believe). Although certain values and attitudes typically are associated with members of a given social category, acceptance of the category as a definition of self does not necessarily mean acceptance of those values and attitudes. An individual may define herself in terms of the organization she works for, yet she can disagree with the prevailing values, strategy, system of authority, and so on (cf. "young Turks," Mintzberg, 1983, p. 210; "counterculture," Martin & Siehl, 1983, p. 52).

Finally, identification with a group is similar to identification with a person (e.g., one's father, football hero) or a reciprocal role relationship (e.g., husband-wife, doctor-patient) inasmuch as one partly defines oneself in terms of a social referent. To be sure, the various literatures reach this conclusion from different directions. Whereas identification with a group is argued to be predicated on the desire for self-definition, identification with an individual—referred to as "classical identification" (Kelman, 1961, p. 63)—is argued to be predicated on the desire to appease, emulate, or vicariously gain the qualities of the other (e.g., Bandura & Walters, 1963; Kets de Vries & Miller, 1984). Kelman (1961), for example, argued that in classical identification the individual "attempts to *be* like or actually to be the other person" (p. 63). Nevertheless, the element of self-definition suggests that these forms of identification are *complementary*. Indeed, we will suggest that organizations often seek to generalize identification with an individual to identification with the organization through the routinization of charisma.

**Social Identification and the Organization**

The individual's organization may provide one answer to the question, Who am I? Hence, we argue that organizational identification is a specific form of social identification. This search for identity calls to mind a family of existential motives often alluded to in the literature on organizational behavior, including searches for meaning, connectedness, empowerment, and immortality (e.g., Denhardt, 1987; Fox, 1980; Katz & Kahn, 1978). To the extent the organization, as a social category, is seen to embody or even reify characteristics perceived to be prototypical of its members, it may well fulfill such motives for the individual. At the very least, SIT maintains that the individual identifies with social categories partly to enhance self-esteem (Hogg & Turner, 1985; Tajfel, 1978). This is understandable in view of the relational and comparative nature of social identities. Through social identification and comparison, the individual is argued to vicariously partake in the successes and status of the group: Indeed, positive and negative intergroup comparisons have been found to affect a member's self-esteem accordingly (Oakes & Turner, 1980; Wagner, Lampen, & Syllwasschy, 1986).

The individual's social identity may be derived not only from the organization, but also from his or her work group, department, union, lunch group, age cohort, fast-track group, and so on. Albert and Whetten (1985) distinguished between holographic organizations in which individuals across subunits share a common identity (or identities) and ideographic organizations in which individuals display subunit-specific identities. General examples of the former include Ouchi's (1981) Theory Z organization in which "management styles are blended together and diffused evenly throughout the entire organization" (Albert & Whetten, 1985, p. 271) and Mintzberg's (1983) missionary organization in which members strongly subscribe to a common set of values and beliefs. Given the comparative rarity of such organizations, however, the notion of a single or blended organizational identification is problematic in most complex organizations. Thus, as discussed below, the organizationally situated social identity may, in fact, be comprised of more or less disparate and loosely coupled identities. This parallels work in various social domains which indicates that in-

dividuals often retain multiple identities (Allen, Wilder, & Atkinson, 1983; Hoetler, 1985; Thoits, 1983).

Unfortunately, despite the longevity of the social/group identification construct, little research has been conducted on identification with organizations, as defined here. Conventional research on organizational identification has not distinguished identification from internalization or cognition from behavior and affect. For example, Hall et al. (1970) defined organizational identification as "the process by which the goals of the organization and those of the individual become increasingly integrated and congruent" (pp. 176–177), and Patchen (1970) defined it as shared characteristics, loyalty, and solidarity. The lone exception is a study by O'Reilly and Chatman (1986) that distinguished among compliance, identification, and internalization. However, following Kelman's (1961) lead, they defined identification as "involvement based on a desire for affiliation" (p. 493), rather than as perceived oneness with the organization.

A particular problem in this area is the frequent confusion between *organizational identification* and *organizational commitment*. Some theorists equate identification with commitment, while others view the former as a component of the latter (see Wiener, 1982). The authors of the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire (OCQ) (Mowday, Steers, & Porter, 1979, p. 226)—the most frequently used measure of commitment during the last decade (Reichers, 1985)—defined organizational commitment as "the relative strength of an individual's identification with and involvement in a particular organization." In their view, commitment is characterized by a person's (a) belief in and acceptance of the organization's goals and values, (b) willingness to exert effort on behalf of the organization, and (c) desire to maintain membership. This formulation includes internalization, behavioral intentions, and affect, but *not* identification as presently defined. Further, although identification is defined as organization-specific, internalization and commitment may not be. An organization's goals and values may be shared by other organizations. Commitment scales consistently feature generalized usage of the terms *goals* and *values*, as in the OCQ item, "I find that my values and the organization's values are similar" (Mowday et al., 1979, p. 228). Respondents are not asked to limit responses to values that are specific to their organization, if indeed they could. Thus, an individual can score high on commitment not because he or she perceives a shared destiny with the organization but because the organization is a convenient vehicle for personal career goals. If another organization proved more convenient, such an individual could transfer to it without sacrificing his or her goals. For the individual who identified with the organization, however, leaving the organization necessarily involves some psychic loss (e.g., Levinson, 1970).

This argument is supported by Mael's (1988) study of employed business and psychology students. He constructed a 6-item measure of organizational identification based on the present formulation (e.g., "This organization's successes are my successes," p. 52), and subjected it and the 15-item OCQ to confirmatory factor analysis. The two-factor model produced a $\chi^2/df$ ratio of 2.03:1 (i.e., 328.13/188) and an adjusted goodness-of-fit index of .825; the single-factor model produced a ratio of 2.46:1 (i.e., 465.14/189) and an index of .780. The superior fit of the two-factor model suggests that the identification and commitment constructs are indeed differentiable.

In summary, the SIT conception of organizational identification as shared identity is new to the organizational behavior literature. To date, the perception of identification has been confused with internalization of organizational goals and values, and with behavior and affect. This is most clearly evident in research on organizational commitment. Unfortunately, this confusion has impeded application of the rich findings of SIT to organizations.

## Antecedents and Consequences of Social Identification in Organizations

### Antecedents

SIT is contradictory to conventional views of group relations because according to it *in-group favoritism tends to occur even in the absence of strong leadership or member interdependence, interaction, or cohesion.* Laboratory studies utilizing SIT's minimal group paradigm have demonstrated that simply assigning an individual to a group is sufficient to generate in-group favoritism (Brewer, 1979; Tajfel, 1982). Favoritism is not dependent on prior perceptions of interpersonal similarity or liking, and it occurs even when there is no interaction within or between groups, when group membership is anonymous, and when there is no link between self-interest and group responses (Turner, 1984). Even explicitly *random* assignment of individuals to groups has led to discrimination against out-groups and increased intragroup cooperation and cohesion (e.g., Billig & Tajfel, 1973; Locksley, Ortiz, & Hepburn, 1980).

This led Turner (1984, p. 530) to propose the existence of a "psychological group," which he defined as "a collection of people who share the same social identification or define themselves in terms of the same social category membership." A member of a psychological group does not need to interact with or like other members, or be liked and accepted by them. It is his or her perception of being, say, a loyal patriot or sports fan that is the basis for incorporation of that status into his or her social identity. The individual seems to reify or credit the group with a psychological reality apart from his or her relationships with its members (Turner, 1984).

The SIT literature suggests several factors of direct relevance to organizations which most likely increase the tendency to identify with groups. The first is the *distinctiveness* of the group's values and practices in relation to those of comparable groups (Oakes & Turner, 198[illegible] Tolman, 1943). Distinctiveness serves to sepa[illegible] rate "figure from ground," differentiating the group from others and providing a unique iden[illegible] tity. Mael (1988) sampled the alumni of a reli[illegible] gious college and found a positive association between the perceived distinctiveness of the col[illegible] lege's values and practices and identification with the college. Distinctiveness partly explains the missionary zeal often displayed by members of organizations that are new and innovative (e.g., Perkins, Nieva, & Lawler, 1983) or organi[illegible] zations that pursue unique goals (e.g., Hall et al.'s 1970 study of the U.S. Forest Service).

*Within* the organization, distinctiveness in group values and practices needs to be qualified by the clarity and impermeability of group domains or boundaries. For example, although it is likely that the values and practices of two functionally based subunits are more differentiated than those of two market-based subunits, suggesting distinctiveness, the former are more likely to be sequentially or reciprocally interdependent and physically contiguous, suggesting a blurring of distinctiveness. This indeterminate distinctiveness may account for the mixed support for SIT in several field studies (Brown, Condor, Mathews, Wade, & Williams, 1986; Brown & Williams, 1984; Oaker & Brown, 1986; Skevington, 1981).

Interestingly, even *negatively* valued distinctions have been associated with identification. Negatively regarded groups often utilize such defense mechanisms as recasting a negative distinction into a positive one (Black is beautiful), minimizing or bolstering a negative distinction (We're not popular because we avoid playing politics), or changing the out-group with which the in-group is compared (Lemaine, Kastersztein, & Personnaz, 1978; Skevington, 1981; Wagner et al., 1986) (cf. *social creativity*, Tajfel & Turner, 1985). And the stronger the threat to the group, the stronger the defensive bias (van Knippenberg, 1984). Such machinations might partly explain a person's often fierce identifica-

tion with countercultures (e.g., Martin & Siehl, 1983) or disaffected groups in organizations (e.g., Jackall, 1978).

A second and related factor that increases identification is the *prestige* of the group (Chatman, Bell, & Staw, 1986; March & Simon, 1958). This is based on the earlier argument that, through intergroup comparison, social identification affects self-esteem. Mael (1988) found that perceived organizational prestige was related to organizational identification among samples of working university students and religious college alumni. Individuals often cognitively (if not publicly) identify themselves with a winner. This accounts in part for the bandwagon effect often witnessed in organizations, where popular support for an individual or idea suddenly gains momentum and escalates, thus creating a rising star. Desires for positive identifications effectively create champions, converting "the slightest sign of plurality into an overwhelming majority" (Schelling, 1957, p. 32).

Third, identification is likely to be associated with the *salience of the out-group(s)* (Allen et al., 1983; Turner, 1981). Awareness of out-groups reinforces awareness of one's in-group. Wilder (cited in Wilder, 1981) categorized one set of subjects into two groups (in-group/out-group condition), allegedly on the basis of preference for certain paintings, and a second set into one group (in-group–only condition). Subjects assumed greater homogeneity in the in-group when an out-group was present (in-group/out-group condition) than when no specific out-group was salient (in-group–only condition). Awareness of the out-group underscored the existence of a boundary and caused subjects to assume in-group homogeneity. Similarly, Kanter (1977) found that the presence of females in a male-dominated sales force induced the males to exaggerate perceived masculine traits and differences between the sexes.

The well-known effects of intergroup competition on in-group identification (e.g., Friedkin & Simpson, 1985) are a special case of this principle. During competition, group lines are drawn more sharply, values and norms are underscored, and we/they differences are accentuated (Brown & Ross, 1982; van Knippenberg, 1984) (cf. *cognitive differentiation hypothesis*, Dion, 1979). Skevington (1980), for example, found that when high-status nurses (where status was based on training) were led to believe they would be merged with low-status nurses, they increased their in-group favoritism, emphasizing their distinctiveness and superiority over the low-status group.

Finally, the set of factors traditionally associated with group formation (interpersonal interaction, similarity, liking, proximity, shared goals or threat, common history, and so forth) may affect the extent to which individuals identify with a group, although SIT suggests that they are *not necessary* for identification to occur. It should be noted, however, that although these factors facilitate group formation, they also may *directly* cue the psychological grouping of individuals since they can be used as bases for categorization (Hogg & Turner, 1985; Turner, 1984).

In complex organizations, the pervasiveness of this set of antecedents—the categorization of individuals, group distinctiveness and prestige, out-group salience, and group formation factors—suggests that group identification is likely to be prevalent. Also, although the SIT literature indicates that categorization is sufficient for identification to occur, the pervasiveness of formal and informal groups in organizations suggests that categorization is seldom the only factor in identification. Thus, the consequences of identification suggested by SIT, discussed below, may well be *intensified* in organizations.

### Consequences

The SIT literature suggests three general consequences of relevance to organizations. First, individuals tend to choose activities congruent with salient aspects of their identities, and they support the institutions embodying those identities. Stryker and Serpe (1982) found that individ-

uals for whom a religious role was salient reported spending more time in that role and deriving satisfaction from it, and Mael (1988) found that the identification of alumni with their alma mater predicted their donating to that institution, their recruiting of offspring and others, their attendance at functions, and their satisfaction with the alma mater. Thus, it is likely that identification with an organization enhances support for and commitment to it.

A second and related consequence is that social identification affects the outcomes conventionally associated with group formation, including intragroup cohesion, cooperation, and altruism, and positive evaluations of the group (Turner, 1982, 1984). It is also reasonable to expect that identification would be associated with loyalty to, and pride in, the group and its activities. However, it should be noted that, given our discussion of psychological groups, this affinity need not be interpersonal or based on interaction. Dion (1973) demonstrated that one may like other group members, despite their negative personal attributes, simply by virtue of the common membership (cf. *personal vs. social attraction*, Hogg & Turner, 1985). In short, "one may like people as group members at the same time as one dislikes them as individual persons" (Turner, 1984, p. 525).

Identification also may engender internalization of, and adherence to, group values and norms and homogeneity in attitudes and behavior. Just as the social classification of others engenders stereotypical perceptions of them, so too does the classification of oneself and subsequent identification engender the attribution of prototypical characteristics to oneself (Turner, 1984, 1985). This self-stereotyping amounts to depersonalization of the self (i.e., the individual is seen to *exemplify* the group), and it increases the perceived similarity with other group members and the likelihood of conformity to group norms.

Finally, it is likely that social identification will reinforce the very antecedents of identification, including the distinctiveness of the group's values and practices, group prestige, salience and competition with out-groups, and the traditional causes of group formation. As the individual comes to identify with the group, the values and practices of the in-group become more salient and perceived as unique and distinctive (e.g., Tajfel, 1969).

Perhaps the greatest contribution that SIT makes to the literature on organizational behavior is the recognition that a psychological group is far more than an extension of interpersonal relationships (Turner, 1985): Identification with a collectivity can arise even in the absence of interpersonal cohesion, similarity, or interaction and yet have a powerful impact on affect and behavior. As discussed below, in crediting a collectivity with a psychological reality beyond its membership, social identification enables the individual to conceive of, and feel loyal to, an organization or corporate culture. Indeed, Turner (1982) claimed that "social identity is the cognitive mechanism which makes group behaviour possible" (p. 21).

## Applying Social Identity Theory to Organizations

The explanatory utility of SIT to organizations can be illustrated by applications to organizational socialization, role conflict, and intergroup relations.

### Organizational Socialization

According to the literature on organizational socialization, organizational newcomers are highly concerned with building a *situational definition* (Katz, 1980). Newcomers, it is argued, are unsure of their roles and apprehensive about their status. Consequently, in order to understand the organization and act within it, they must learn its policies and logistics, the general role expectations and behavioral norms, the power and status structures, and so forth (Ashforth, 1985).

However, organizational newcomers also

are often concerned with building a *self-definition*, of which the social identity (or identities) is likely to comprise a large part. For many years, writers in the personological tradition of personality theory have noted the link between socialization and the self-concept, suggesting that the emergence of situational and self-definitions are intertwined (see Hogan, 1976). A developing sense of *who* one is complements a sense of *where* one is and *what* is expected. In complex organizations, the prevalence of social categories suggests that social identities are likely to represent a significant component of individuals' organizationally situated self-definitions, and, indeed, many studies document this idea (see Fisher, 1986; Mortimer & Simmons, 1978; and Van Maanen, 1976, for examples).

*Developing Social Identifications.* Although the SIT literature is relatively mute about *how* social identification occurs, the literature on organizational socialization suggests that situational definitions and self-definitions both emerge through *symbolic interactions* (Ashforth, 1985; Coe, 1965; Reichers, 1987). Symbolic interactionism holds that meaning is not a given but evolves from the verbal and nonverbal interactions of individuals. For our purposes, interaction is defined broadly to include any symbolic transmission, from product advertisements to orientation sessions. (As the SIT literature reviewed above makes clear, interaction need not be interpersonal—though in organizations, of course, it often is.) Through symbolic interactions the newcomer begins to resolve ambiguity, to impose an informational framework or schema on organizational experience.

With regard to *self-definitions* in particular, Van Maanen (1979) argued that conceptions of the self are learned by interpreting the responses of others in situated social interactions. Drawing on the works of Charles Horton Cooley, George Herbert Mead, and Herbert Blumer, among others, he maintained that through interactions individuals learned to ascribe socially constructed labels such as ambitious, engineer, and upwardly mobile to themselves and others. An example was provided by Becker and Carper (1956). They interviewed graduate students in physiology, most of whom initially viewed physiology as a stopgap pending acceptance into medical school. Becker and Carper found, however, that through immersion in the social milieu many students gradually assumed the identity of physiologists. Frequent interaction and social comparison with fellow students, observation of professors, and tutelage and reinforcement by professors slowly shaped students' interests, skills, self-conceptions, and their understanding of the *paradigms*, values, norms, and occupational choices in the field.

This perspective on social identification in organizations suggests at least three implications. First, consistent with our earlier discussion, it suggests that the often-noted effect of organizational socialization on the internalization of organizational values and beliefs is comprised in part of an *indirect* effect via identification; that is, socialization effects identification, which in turn effects internalization. As noted, through self-stereotyping the individual typically adopts those characteristics perceived as prototypical of the groups with which he or she identifies. Albert and Whetten (1985) argued that an organization has an identity to the extent there is a shared understanding of the central, distinctive, and enduring character or essence of the organization among its members. This identity may be reflected in shared values and beliefs, a mission, the structures and processes, organizational climate, and so on. The more salient, stable, and internally consistent the character of an organization (or in organizational terms, the stronger the culture), the greater this internalization (Ashforth, 1985).

However, socialization also has a *direct* effect on internalization, as suggested by the argument that one may internalize an organization's culture without necessarily identifying with the organization, and vice versa. The relative importance of the direct (socialization → internalization) and indirect (socialization → identification → internalization) effects most likely vary

across organizations, subunits, and roles. Van Maanen (1978) distinguished between investiture processes that ratify the newcomer's incoming identity and divestiture processes that supplant the incoming identity with a new organizationally situated identity. Total and quasi-total institutions such as prisons, military and religious organizations, professional schools, and organizational clans provide prime examples of divestiture. In order to reconstruct the newcomer's social identity, such organizations often remove symbols of newcomer's previous identities; restrict or isolate newcomers from external contact; disparage newcomer's status, knowledge, and ability; impose new identification symbols; rigidly prescribe and proscribe behavior and punish infractions; and reward assumption of the new identity (Fisher, 1986; Goffman, 1961; Van Maanen, 1976, 1978). In such cases internalization of organizational values depends largely on the extent of identification with the organization, subunit, or role. Indeed, the more the organization's identity, goals, values, and individual role requirements deviate from the societal mainstream, the greater the need for organizationally situated identification.

A second implication of the social identification perspective stems from the notion of *reification*. The existing organizational behavior literature does not adequately explain how an individual can identify with, or feel loyal and committed to, an organization per se. The implicit assumption is that regard for individuals simply generalizes to the group, that interpersonal relationships somehow are cognitively aggregated to create an individual-organization relationship (Turner, 1984). We reverse this logic and argue that identification with a group can arise quite separately from interpersonal interaction and cohesion. In perceiving the social category as psychologically real—as embodying characteristics thought prototypical of its members—the individual can identify with the category per se (I am a Marine). Thus, identification provides a mechanism whereby an individual can continue to believe in the integrity of his or her organizatio despite wrongdoing by senior management o can feel loyal to his or her department despite complete changeover of personnel.

Third, the social identification perspective also helps to explain the growing interest in symbolic management (Pfeffer, 1981) and charismatic or transformational leadership (Bass, 1985). To the extent that social identification is recognized by managers to relate to such critical variables as organizational commitment and satisfaction, managers have a vested interest in managing symbolic interactions. Although the coherence of a group's or organization's identity is problematic, we believe that symbolic management is designed to impart this identity, or at least management's representation of it. Through the manipulation of symbols such as traditions, myths, metaphors, rituals, sagas, heroes, and physical setting, management can make the individual's membership salient and can provide compelling images of what the group or organization represents (Pondy, Frost, Morgan, & Dandridge, 1983).

Interestingly, Martin, Feldman, Hatch, and Sitkin (1983) noted that organizational cultures "carry a claim to uniqueness—that one institution is unlike any other" (p. 438). We contend that it is precisely because identification is *group-specific* that organizations make such claims. It is tacitly understood by managers that a positive and distinctive organizational identity attracts the recognition, support, and loyalty of not only organizational members but other key constitutents (e.g., shareholders, customers, job seekers), and it is this search for a distinctive identity that induces organizations to focus so intensely on advertising, names and logos, jargon, leaders and mascots, and so forth.

This link between symbolism and identification sheds light on the widespread interest in charismatic leaders. Because charismatic leaders are particularly adept at manipulating symbols (Bass, 1985), they are likely to engender social and/or classical identification, that is, iden-

ification with the organization, the leader, or both. Where the identification is classical, it may be generalized to the organization through the routinization of charisma (Gerth & Mills, 1946). Trice and Beyer (1986) contrasted the development of two social movement organizations founded by charismatic individuals: Alcoholics Anonymous (AA) and the National Council on Alcoholism (NCA). The charisma of the AA's founder was routinized through an administrative structure, rites and ceremonies, oral and written tradition, and so forth, whereas the charisma of the NCA's founder was poorly routinized. The result, concluded Trice and Beyer, is that the NCA has experienced greater difficulty maintaining the support of its members and donors.

*Identification and the Subunit.* It should be noted, however, that the newcomer's emerging situational definitions and self-definitions are apt to be largely *subunit-specific*. First, task interdependencies and interpersonal proximity are greater in the individual's immediate work group, suggesting a greater need for, and ease of, interaction. Second, given that people prefer to compare their emerging beliefs with similar others (cf. social comparison theory, Festinger, 1954) and that interpersonal and task differentiation are greater between, than within, subunits (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967), it is likely that the newcomer will look first to his or her workgroup peers. Third, given interdependence, proximity, and similarity, the subunit may be viewed by members as a psychological group, thus facilitating social influence. According to Turner (1985; Hogg & Turner, 1987), the self-stereotyping occasioned by psychological grouping causes one to *expect* attitudinal and perceptual agreement with group members, such that disagreement triggers doubt and, in turn, attitudinal/perceptual change. Thus, the newcomer's perceptions gravitate toward those of the group. Finally, given the importance of the situational definition to job performance and the centrality of the social identity to the self-concept, it is likely that a normative structure will emerge to regulate and maintain these conceptions. This is consistent with Sampson's (1978) proposition that people attempt to manage their lives in order to establish a sense of continuity in their identity (identity mastery). The upshot is that immediate groups often are more salient "than a more abstract, complex, secondary organization" (Brown, 1969, p. 353).

Organizational socialization, then, can be seen under the SIT perspective as an attempt to symbolically manage newcomers' self-, if not situational, definitions by defining the organization or subunit in terms of distinctive and enduring central properties. Identification with the organization provides (a) a mechanism whereby the individual can reify the organization and feel loyal and committed to it per se (i.e., apart from its members) and (b) an indirect path through which socialization may increase the internalization of organizational values and beliefs.

### Role Conflict

Given the number of groups to which an individual might belong, his or her social identity is likely to consist of an amalgam of identities, identities that could impose inconsistent demands upon that person. Further, these demands also may conflict with those of the individual's personal identity (Cheek & Briggs, 1982; Leary, Wheeler, & Jenkins, 1986). Note that it is not the identities per se that conflict, but the values, beliefs, norms, and demands inherent in the identities.

In organizations, conflicts between workgroup, departmental, divisional, and organizational roles are somewhat constrained by the nested character of these roles; that is, each hierarchical level encompasses the former such that the roles are connected in a means-end chain (March & Simon, 1958). Accordingly, the values and behavioral prescriptions inherent in the organizational role tend to be a more ab-

stract and generalized version of those inherent in the workgroup role. Nevertheless, even nested identities can be somewhat at odds with one another (Rotondi, 1975; Turner, 1985; Van Maanen, 1976). In the course of assuming a given identity (e.g., department), the group becomes more salient and both intragroup differences and intergroup similarities are cognitively minimized, thus rendering both lower order (e.g., workgroup) and higher order (e.g., organization) identifications less likely. Also, given the association between identification and internalization, a lack of congruence between the goals or expectations of nested groups may impede joint identification. Not surprisingly, then, Brown (1969) found that task interdependencies and the cohesion of the individual's functional unit were negatively related to organizational identification or internalization.

We speculate that the inherent conflict between organizationally situated identities typically is *not* resolved by integrating the disparate identities. First, given the breadth of possible identities, integration would most likely prove cognitively taxing. Second, given the often unique and context-specific demands of an identity, integration would be likely to compromise the utility of each identity to its particular setting. Instead, it is maintained that conflict between identities tends to be cognitively resolved by ordering, separating, or buffering the identities. Suggestions of such processes abound. First, the individual might define him- or herself in terms of his or her most salient social identity (I am a salesman) or personal attribute (I want to get ahead); he or she also might develop a hierarchy of prepotency so that conflicts are resolved by deferring to the most subjectively important or valued identity (Stryker & Serpe, 1982; Thoits, 1983). Adler and Adler (1987) described how varsity basketball players resolved the conflict between their athletic and academic roles by defining themselves as athletes first and students second and by reducing their involvement in academics accordingly. Second, the individual might defer to the identity that experiences the greatest environmental press and might minimize, deny, or rationalize the conflict (If I hadn't bribed the official, I would have lost the contract). This is akin to Janis and Mann's (1977) notion of *defensive avoidance*. Third, the individual might cognitively decouple the identities so that conflicts simply are not perceived (cf. *value separation*, Steinbruner, 1974). Laurent (1978) discussed how managers often are reluctant to inform subordinates about critical matters, yet as subordinates, they complain about the failure of their own managers to inform them. Finally, the individual might comply *sequentially* with conflicting identities so that the inconsistencies need not be resolved for any given action (cf. *sequential attention*, Cyert & March, 1963). An example is provided by Morton Thiokol, the manufacturer of the faulty solid rocket booster that led to the 1986 crash of the space shuttle *Challenger*. A senior engineer of the company helped reverse a decision not to launch the *Challenger* when he was asked to "take off his engineering hat and put on his management hat" (Presidential Commission, cited in Vaughan, 1986, p. 23).

Related to this idea, Thoits (1983) suggested that the benefits of holding multiple roles (role accumulation), including resource accumulation, justification for failure to meet certain role expectations, and support against role failure or loss, are more likely to accrue if identities remain segregated: "The actor's resources will be valuable to others who do not share those resources themselves, the legitimacy of excuses cannot be checked, and the consequences of role failure or loss can be contained more within one sphere of activities" (p. 184).

To the extent this argument is valid, it suggests that one's identity is an amalgam of loosely coupled identities and that "the popular notion of the self-concept as a unified, consistent, or perceptually 'whole' psychological structure is possibly ill-conceived" (Gergen, 1968, p. 306). This is consistent with evidence from SIT that partic-

ular social identities are cued or activated by relevant settings (Turner, 1982, 1985) (cf. *situational identity*, Goffman, 1959; *subidentity*, Hall, 1971; *hard* vs. *soft* identity, Van Maanen, 1976). Most individuals slide fairly easily from one identity to another. Conflict is perceived only when the disparities are *made salient* (Greene, 1978). Thus, in SIT role conflict is endemic to social functioning, but for the most part remains latent: Only when individuals are forced to *simultaneously* don different hats does their facility for cognitively managing conflict break down.

The argument also suggests that when an individual compartmentalizes identities, he or she may fail to integrate the values, attitudes, norms, and lessons inherent in the various identities. This in turn suggests the likelihood of (a) double-standards and apparent hypocrisy (illustrated by Laurent's, 1978, observation) and (b) selective forgetting. For example, in assuming the identity of foreman, one may eventually forget the values that were appropriate to the prior identity of worker that now *contradict* the demands of the new identity (e.g., Lieberman, 1956); that is, one unlearns tendencies that interfere with the ability to embrace the new, valued identity. Perhaps, then, wisdom is little more than the ability to *remember* the lessons of previous identities, and integrity is the ability to *integrate* and *abide by* them.

**Intergroup Relations**

For pedagogical purposes, we assume an ideographic organization, that is, one comprised of subunits in which members of each share a social identity specific to their subunit. This assumption allows us to speak of a shared subunit or group identity, even though in complex organizations the *degree and foci* of consensus remains problematic.

Given this assumption, SIT suggests that *much intergroup conflict stems from the very fact that groups exist*, thus providing a fairly pessimistic view of intergroup harmony (Tajfel, 1982). More specifically, in SIT it is argued that (a) given the relational and comparative nature of social identifications, social identities are maintained primarily by intergroup comparisons and (b) given the desire to enhance self-esteem, groups seek positive differences between themselves and reference groups (Tajfel, 1978, 1981; Smith, 1983). Experimental and field research do suggest that groups are willing to sacrifice large monetary gains that do not establish a positive difference between groups for smaller gains that do (Brewer & Silver, 1978; Brown, 1978; Turner, Brown, & Tajfel, 1979), that in-group members adopt more extreme positions after comparison with an out-group than with fellow in-group members (Reid, 1983), and that members prefer and selectively recall information that suggests *intergroup* differences rather than similarities (Wilder, cited in Wilder, 1981; Wilder & Allen, 1978). This suggests that groups have a vested interest in perceiving or even provoking greater differentiation than exists and disparaging the reference group on this basis (cf. *social* vs. *instrumental competition*, Turner, 1975). Further, this tendency is exacerbated by contingencies that make the in-group per se salient (Turner, 1981; Wilder, 1981), such as a threat to the group's domain or resources (Brown & Ross, 1982; Brown et al., 1986) or, in Tajfel's (1978) terms, where the group's identity is insecure.

The tendency toward subunit identification in organizations, discussed above, suggests that subunits tend to be the primary locus of intergroup conflict. This tendency is exacerbated by competition between subunits for scarce resources and by reward and communication systems that typically focus on subunit functioning and performance (Friedkin & Simpson, 1985; March & Simon, 1958). As noted, however, field research regarding the relationship between subunit differentiation and identification has been inconclusive because it has confounded the basis of subunit formation (functional vs. *market*) and extent of interdependence (pooled,

sequential, reciprocal). Further, Brown and Williams (1984) suggested that individuals who regard their group identity as synonymous with their organizational identity are unlikely to view other groups negatively. Just as a strong group identity unifies group members, so too should a strong organizational identity unify organizational members. This is consistent with experimental research (Kramer & Brewer, 1984) and the earlier discussion of holographic organizations.

However, where the organizational identity is *not* strong and groups are clearly differentiated and bounded, the tendency toward biased intergroup comparisons suggests several effects.

*Effects of Biased Intergroup Comparisons.* First, the in-group may develop negative stereotypes of the out-group and deindividuate and depersonalize its members (Horwitz & Rabbie, 1982; Wilder, 1981). Hewstone, Jaspars, and Lalljee (1982) studied British schoolboys from private and state secondary schools because of the history of conflict between the two systems. They found that the groups differed in their perceptions of themselves and each other, and that out-group perceptions were generally negative. What's more, these perceptions included self-serving (or group-serving) implicit theories of why the groups differed and attribution biases that rationalized the successes and failures of each group (cf. *social attribution*, Deschamps, 1983).

This suggests a second effect of in-group bias: It *justifies* maintaining social distance and subordinating the out-group (Smith, 1983; Sunar, 1978). The in-group is seen as deserving its successes and not its failures, while the opposite obtains for the out-group. Thus, Perrow (1970) found that members of functional subunits across 12 industrial firms were less likely to criticize the performance of their own unit and more likely to advocate that their unit receive additional power than were members from any other subunit in their particular organization. Similarly, Bates and White (1961) sampled board members, administrators, doctors, and nurses from 13 hospitals and found that each group believed it should have more authority than the other groups were willing to allow, and Brown et al. (1986) found that members of five departments in an industrial organization tended to rate their own department as contributing the most to the company.

Third, given symbolic interactionism, the desire for positive group differentiation, and the stereotyping of self, in-group, and out-group, emerging biases may soon become a contagion (Turner, 1984) that can be easily mobilized against the out-group. In-group members often come to share pejorative perceptions of the out-group and experience the real or imagined slights against other members as their own. Thus, major conflicts often cause an organization to polarize into rival camps, where, if an individual is not on one side, he or she is believed to be on the other side (Mintzberg, 1983). In the above study of hospitals, Bates and White (1961) found that where two groups disagreed on which should have greater authority over a particular issue, respondents from each group rated the amount of authority their own group should have higher than for issues which were *not* in dispute, and gave the *lowest* rating to the group with which they disagreed. The initial disagreement had polarized each group's perception of the situation.

Finally, such competition exacerbates the above tendencies because it threatens the group and its identity. Thus, as Horwitz and Rabbie (1982) noted, "Both experimental and naturalistic observations suggest that hostility erupts more readily between [groups] than between individuals" (p. 269). In-group and out-group relations may be marked by competition and hostility *even in the absence of "objective" sources of conflict* (e.g., scarce resources). Indeed, Turner (1978) found the more comparable the out-group, the *greater* the in-group bias. Hence, organizational subunits may claim to be positively differentiated precisely because they

are not. This contrasts sharply with the conventional view that group conflict reflects competition over rewards external to the intergroup situation (cf. *realistic group conflict theory*, Campbell, 1965; Tajfel & Turner, 1985).

*Qualifications to Intergroup Comparisons.* The dynamics of intergroup comparison, however, need to be qualified by the relative *status* of the groups. The identity of a low-status group is implicitly threatened by a high-status group, hence the defensive biases in *differentiation* noted earlier. A high-status group, however, is less likely to feel threatened and, thus, less in need of positive affirmation (Tajfel, 1982; van Knippenberg, 1984). Accordingly, while a low-status group (such as a *noncritical staff function* or cadre of middle managers) may go to great lengths to differentiate itself from a high-status comparison group (such as a critical line function or senior management), the latter may be relatively unconcerned about such comparisons and form no strong impression about the low-status group. This indifference of the high-status group is, perhaps, the greatest threat to the identity of the low-status group because the latter's identity *remains socially unvalidated*.

Although the previous discussion suggests that subunits engage endlessly in invidious comparisons, three streams of research on SIT suggest otherwise. First, just as individuals select similar others for social comparison, groups also restrict their comparisons to similar, proximal, or salient out-groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Thus, the purchasing department may be relatively unconcerned with the machinations of, say, the shipping or human resources departments.

Second, van Knippenberg (1984) maintained that individuals are capable of making social comparisons on *multiple* dimensions, and that mutual appreciation is possible where individuals are superior on complementary or different dimensions. The individuals validate each other's relative superiority. Analogously, a field experiment by Mummendey and Schreiber (1984) involving political parties found that in-group favoritism was strong on dimensions regarded as important to the in-group, but that out-group favoritism existed on dimensions regarded as *unimportant* to the in-group but important to the out-group. It is quite conceivable that differentiated subunits would acknowledge one another's differential expertise *without* necessarily compromising positive differentiation.

Finally, research on experimental and ethnic groups indicates that groups are less likely to evidence ethnocentrism and defensive biases if differences in the distribution of scarce resources or the outcomes of social comparisons are viewed by the subordinate group as *legitimate* or *institutionalized* (Caddick, 1982; Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Indeed, in such cases the group may internalize the wider social evaluation of themselves as inferior and less deserving. By accident or design, systems of authority and expertise in organizations (Mintzberg, 1983) often serve precisely this legitimating function, suggesting some stability in intergroup relations.

In summary, SIT argues that in the absence of a strong organizational identity, the desire for favorable intergroup comparisons generates much conflict between differentiated and clearly bounded subunits. This is especially so if a group's status is low or insecure. However, this conflict may be mitigated to the extent that groups compare themselves on different dimensions or view the outcomes of comparisons as legitimate or institutionalized.

## Implications for Research

Given the paucity of research on SIT in organizations, a research agenda might focus on three objectives. First, in view of the frequent confusion of organizational identification with such related constructs as commitment, loyalty, and internalization, the discriminability of identification should be established. Mael's (1988) confirmatory factor analysis of the Organizational Commitment Questionnaire and his new

measure of organizational identification offer a promising start. However, given the argument that individuals often have *multiple* (and conflicting) identities within the organization, research should focus on salient subgroups as well as the organization per se. Indeed, insofar as identification facilitates commitment and the like, researchers should consider investigating commitment itself at the subgroup level. Recent work on *dual* and *multiple* commitments is instructive in this regard (e.g., Reichers, 1986).

A second focus of research might be the proposed antecedents and consequences of social identification. Although experimental and cross-sectional field research have substantiated the social-psychological premises of SIT, the dynamics of identification have not been established. Accordingly, longitudinal field research that focuses on a variety of newly created subunits or organizations or on organizational newcomers is strongly recommended. Such a design would help to explore (a) how the antecedents interact to influence identification, (b) what antecedents (if any) are necessary or sufficient, (c) the sequencing and timing of effects, and (d) if threshold conditions exist.

Finally, although the applications of SIT to organizational behavior were not intended to be exhaustive, they do suggest several specific avenues for field research. For one, the role of organizational socialization can be assessed by structured observation of the interplay among symbolic interactions, symbolic management, and the emergence of social identities. Of particular interest are the posited effects that identification has on a person's internalization of organizational values and on his or her reification of the organization. Also important are the mechanisms by which identification with leaders becomes generalized to the organization. For another, the disjointed resolution of role conflicts can be evaluated by verbal protocol analysis of conflict-laden decisions made over time. Of interest here are the factors associated with selecting a means of resolution, the possibility of stable styles of resolution, the effects of different means, and, more generally, the degree to which various identities are cognitively integrated, the relative salience and priority of various identities across organizations, subunits, hierarchical levels, and individuals, and the interaction among role change, identity change, and selective forgetting. Finally, the roles that social identification and comparison processes have in intergroup conflict can be gauged by analyzing relevant within- and between-group interactions. Research is particularly scarce on the factors that affect the perception of group insecurity (and, hence, the desire for positive differentiation), the selection of reference groups, the dimensions for intergroup comparison, and the perceived legitimacy and institutionalization of the organizational status quo. From an organizational development perspective, research should focus on the fairly unique means, suggested by SIT, of reducing dysfunctional intergroup conflict, such as enhancing the salience and value of the organizational identity, increasing group security or at least legitimating necessary intergroup differences, and individuating out-group members.

## Conclusion

According to social identity theory, the individual defines him- or herself partly in terms of salient group memberships. Identification is the perception of oneness with or belongingness to a group, involving direct or vicarious experience of its successes and failures. Group identification and favoritism tend to occur even in the absence of strong leadership or member interdependency, interaction, or cohesion. Identification is associated with groups that are distinctive, prestigious, and in competition with, or at least aware of, other groups, although it can be fostered by even random assignment to a group. Identification can persist tenaciously even when group affiliation is personally painful, other members are personally disliked, and

group failure is likely. The concept of identification, however, describes only the cognition of oneness, *not* the behaviors and affect that may serve as antecedents or consequences of the cognition. Identification induces the individual to engage in, and derive satisfaction from, activities congruent with the identity, to view him- or herself as an exemplar of the group, and to reinforce factors conventionally associated with group formation (e.g., cohesion, interaction). This perspective, applied to several domains of organizational behavior, suggests that:

1. Organizational socialization can be understood in part as an attempt to symbolically manage the newcomer's desire for an identity by defining the organization or subunit in terms of distinctive and enduring central characteristics. Identification enables the newcomer to reify the organization and feel loyal and committed to it per se, and facilitates the internalization of organizational values and beliefs.
2. Individuals have multiple, loosely coupled identities, and inherent conflicts between their demands are typically not resolved by cognitively integrating the identities, but by ordering, separating, or buffering them. This compartmentalization of identities suggests the possibility of double standards, apparent hypocrisy, and selective forgetting.
3. In ideographic organizations, the desire for a salutary social identity predisposes organizational subunits to intergroup conflict on characteristics that are mutually compared. Thus, intergroup conflict may arise even in the absence of such objective causes as scarce resources.

In summary, the concept of identification has been neglected in organizational research. The reformulated conception of identification as perceived oneness with a group, suggested by social identity theory, offers a fresh perspective on a number of critical organizational issues, only a few of which have been explored here.

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*Blake Ashforth (Ph.D., University of Toronto) is Assistant Professor of Management at Concordia University. Correspondence regarding this article may be sent to him at the Department of Management, Faculty of Commerce and Administration, Concordia University, 1455 de Maisonneuve Blvd. W., Montreal, Quebec, Canada H3G 1M8.*

*Fred Mael is a doctoral candidate in Industrial Psychology at Wayne State University, Detroit.*

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