14 The social psychology of organizations

DICK DE GILDER AND NAOMI ELLEMERS

Introduction

Organizations pervade our lives in several ways. Most people work for 40 to 50 years as an employee or leader in different organizations, as an entrepreneur, or perhaps as a volunteer. Many students are already working in an organization, to pay for their studies and to cover living expenses. Even if you are not, being a student still means you spend time interacting with representatives from organizations, for instance at your university. Students depend on employees at the information desk and the security department; on people working at the IT department for access to the electronic learning environment and university library. They benefit from the work performed by those who clean the lecture theatre and definitely from those working at the coffee stand or canteen who can provide what students desperately need. And when university employees do not perform well, students are hindered too.

Obviously, there are many types of organizations. Textbook definitions clarify what they have in common: "An organization is a social arrangement for achieving controlled performance in pursuit of collective goals" (Huczynski and Buchanan, 2007; p. 6; see Figure 14.1). Organizations place people together in a building, provide them with tools, computers, or other resources, define their tasks, and prescribe the rules and procedures they have to follow. All this is intended to make individuals coordinate their efforts and achieve the organization's goals, be it building a car together, selling flowers, or offering health care. Thus, one of the primary challenges for organizations is to motivate people to work together as a team to benefit the organization. We will show how the application of insights from social psychology can help understand when and why people are motivated to work in teams and organizations. This approach reveals that – despite their individual characteristics – workers may behave quite differently depending on the relationship with their colleagues, the encouragement they receive from their leaders, or the policy communicated by the organization.

We will illustrate the added value of this approach by focusing on three recent contributions from social psychology that can help meet the challenge organizations face: to facilitate the ability of different individuals to work together towards joint goals. More specifically, we will: (1) address the origins and consequences of commitment to teams and organizations as an important factor in work motivation; (2) examine work conditions that facilitate innovation and change; and (3) identify the characteristics of successful diversity policies.
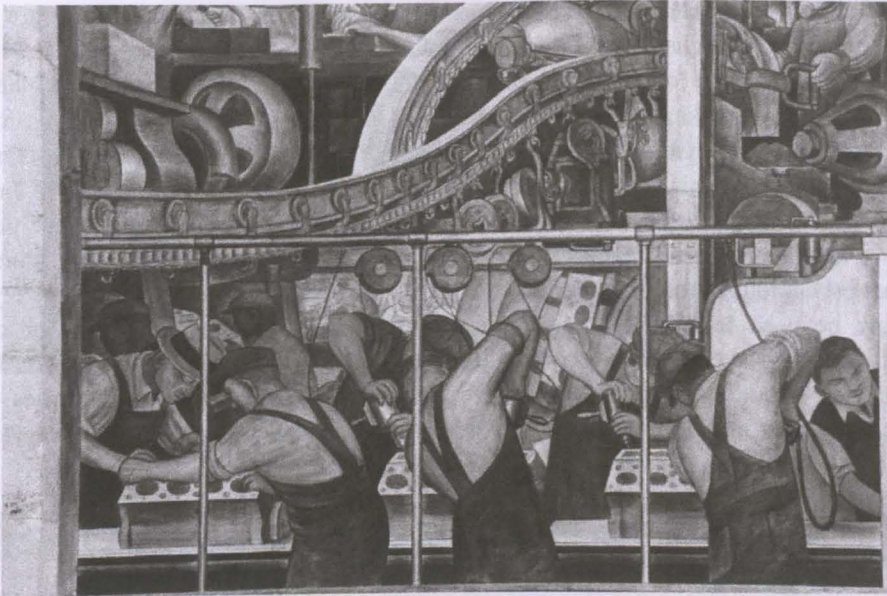
Figure 14.1 *An organization is a social arrangement for achieving controlled performance in pursuit of collective goals*
Diego Rivera, 1932 – Mural Ford Factories, Detroit

Social psychology of organizations

An organization is different from other social groups. First, an organization is explicitly started and devised, usually providing some kind of hierarchical structure, with appointed leaders, and specifying different tasks that need to be performed by people being appointed to them. An organization does not spontaneously emerge, like other social groups such as friendship groups. Second, in organizations, people are hired mainly for their abilities and expertise – not necessarily because they are well liked. They often stay in their job because they need the money, not necessarily because they enjoy the work they have to do. Employees are required to perform specific tasks based on the rules that are determined by the management of the organization, due to contractual obligations. They are compelled to work in line with relevant task requirements (e.g. safety rules), or by (employment) laws (e.g., regulating patient confidentiality or customer rights).

An important goal of management is to influence the behaviour of individual employees. Monitoring the task performance of its workers allows organizations to reward them (with praise, a salary increase, or career opportunities) for things that go well and punish them (by reprimanding, demoting, or firing them) when they perform badly. The social psychology of organizations, however, does not necessarily seek ways to influence people in organizations in this way. It primarily aims to *understand* human behaviour in organizations. This approach emphasizes the scientific basis of the social psychology of organizations, as being analytical in nature. The main goal is to answer questions

about why and how social processes occur and how these processes are affected by organizational change and deliberate interventions in organizations.

The knowledge of human behaviour thus acquired can be used for the benefit of individual workers, clients, investors and other stakeholders, as well as managers. Psychologists studying organizations are not accomplices of management. It is important to acknowledge this, as some organizations hire and pay psychologists to help them develop work conditions that limit the level of autonomy of individual workers, potentially to a level that is detrimental to their – perceived or objective – well-being. This implies that psychologists studying organizations need to be aware that the knowledge they acquire may be used in different ways, for different aims, and to the benefit or detriment of different stakeholders. Accordingly, psychologists who provide consultation to organizations should take into account the impact of their advice to all parties involved (see Chapter 1 for a broader discussion of ethical considerations).

A social identity perspective on organizations

The social psychology of organizations addresses organizations as groups of people working together. Work organizations are seen as social structures that allow people to move beyond their individual-level concerns and work together to achieve desired outcomes in ways they would not be able to achieve otherwise. The role of groups and group processes at work is best understood by taking into account processes associated with **self-categorization** and **social identification**, usually referred to as 'the social identity approach' (Ellemers and Haslam, 2011). This approach emphasizes the need that people have to develop a clear sense of who they are and where they belong (Tafjel, 1978; Turner, 1985). They do this, at least in part, by referring to different groups to which they belong, defined for instance by their ethnic or religious origin, their gender or sexual orientation, their professional training, or the team or organization in which they work.

The process of **social categorization** indicates the tendency to classify individuals and their distinctive features by organizing them into social groups. Through this process, people can distinguish between others around them by referring to them as representatives of specific social groups (see Figure 14.2). For instance, in a store, company uniforms offer an easy way to distinguish sales personnel from other customers. In this context, being able to decide whether someone can be relied on to provide information about specific products is more relevant than other possible categorizations (e.g., on the basis of their gender or ethnic background).

At any one time, people can be considered as members of different – sometimes overlapping – groups. At work, for instance, they can be approached as professionals, as parents, or as union representatives. To some extent, people can choose whether they want to emphasize each of these group memberships, depending on which they see as most relevant and self-defining at a particular time. This process is referred to as social identification. Thus, describing themselves in terms of specific group memberships allows people to communicate to others how they wish to be perceived and what can be expected from them in that particular situation. People do this when they exchange
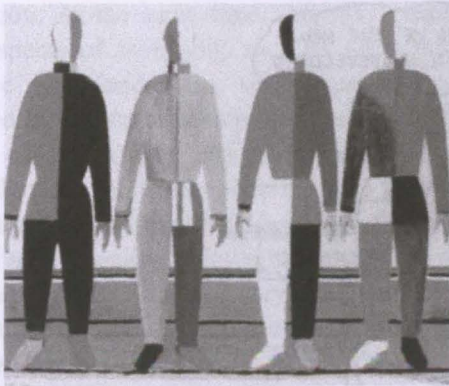
Figure 14.2 *In a sports team, distinctive personal features are less important. What matters is how individuals can contribute to achieving team goals* *Kazimir Malevich, 1928* – Sportsmen

business cards with their company name, or when they introduce themselves with their job title. This is an effective way to indicate who they are and what they stand for, without referring to their individual traits, preferences, or skills.

A basic assumption of the social identity perspective is that people strive to attain a **positive social identity**. An important way to reach this state is to try to become associated with groups or organizations that are positively valued and have a high social status.

The social status of a particular group and its members is established through a process of **social comparison** between groups. That is, the value of the characteristic behaviours, achievements, or outcomes of a specific group is established by comparing them to those of other groups. For instance, lists of businesses that meet certain performance criteria ('Fortune 500') are commonly used to define the standing and worth of these organizations. In fact, such organization-level (or team-level) comparisons can be a source of pride for individual employees, regardless of their personal merits or contributions to this success (Figure 14.3). The most well-known implication of this process is that people may rely on group affiliations as a way to maintain a positive sense of self or to improve the way others view them. For instance, it has been shown that the way employees think outsiders view their place of work strongly affects their level of identification with the organization (e.g., Smidts, Pruyn, and van Riel, 2001).

Through the process of self-categorization, individuals can use group memberships and **social identities** to define what are appropriate standards of behaviour for them, or whose opinions and judgements they pay attention to (Turner, 1991). Even within the same organization individuals may consider different guidelines as self-relevant, for instance depending on their professional role in the organization. This helps workers define their distinct function and contribution in relation to other individuals and constituencies in the organization. For instance, within a company, sales representatives may give priority to optimizing customer satisfaction, whereas legal representatives prioritize avoiding claims. Such processes help explain when and why employees are likely to behave in ways that match their role as

Figure 14.3 *Organizational-level (or team-level) comparisons can be a source of pride for individual employees, regardless of their personal merits or contributions to this success*

members of the organization – and cannot be easily understood from their individual-level preferences or character traits (see Haslam and Ellemers, 2011, for an overview).

Work motivation and commitment

Haslam (2004) provides an excellent overview of the range of group processes in organizations that may be understood by applying insights from social identity theory. Some of these will be discussed briefly at the end of this chapter, but here we address one of the central topics in organizational psychology in more detail: employee **motivation**, a key concern in organizations, as organizational performance depends to a large extent on the efforts of the employees and the quality of their work (Steers, Mowday, and Shapiro, 2004).

Motivation theories in **organizational psychology** were developed to understand when and why employees are inclined to contribute to the organization and its goals, and to comply with organizational rules (Ellemers, De Gilder, and Haslam, 2004). They aim to understand: (a) which conditions encourage employees to invest behavioural energy in their work (energize); (b) which activities they are likely to focus their efforts on (direction); and (c) what makes them continue their efforts over time (persistence). The characteristics of the task employees have to perform may energize employees to work well and to persist in doing so (Hackman and Oldham, 1976). For instance, most employees like jobs in which they have some leeway in deciding how to plan and organize their activities (autonomy), where they can engage in a range of different tasks (task variety), and where they need to develop and display different competencies (skill variety).

Individual characteristics play a role, too, as employees tend to direct their efforts towards tasks they expect to be good at or tasks that yield outcomes they personally value and find rewarding. For instance, workers who have the goal of increasing the number of clients in their portfolio will direct their efforts primarily to client

acquisition. At the same time, this may make them less inclined or able to invest in other aspects of their job, such as servicing existing clients. Reward systems may reinforce such tendencies, so that employees focus their efforts on goals that are rewarded by the organization, and persist in their efforts to keep attaining the rewards that are associated with task performance.

Clearly, such motivation theories have provided managers in organizations with some useful insights that may help influence the attitudes and behaviour of their employees through task design, employee selection, and reward structures. However, most of such efforts are characterized by a very individualistic approach: employees are seen as individual agents that can be motivated – or discouraged – by directives and rewards from management, by characteristics of the task, or by their own goals and values.

This individualistic approach does not do justice to the complexity of contemporary jobs and the social nature of work performance. In fact, only a very small proportion of people work at tasks in which they are completely independent, and do not need to socially interact with other employees. Self-employed entrepreneurs may be the exception, but even they have to work with clients or need to acquire external expertise or assistance from time to time. Since organizations are defined as social arrangements for achieving controlled performance in pursuit of collective goals, it is appropriate to consider the social nature of most work situations as a potentially relevant determinant of job attitudes and job behaviour.

Indeed, there is by now a large number of observations that reveal the importance of social relations and group processes for work motivation. A case in point is the research on **organizational commitment**. Although people can feel committed to their work for different reasons, the key attitude that has been found to explain differences in work motivation indicates their sense of emotional involvement with the organization and its members (Meyer and Allen, 1997) (Figure 14.4).

Organizational commitment has emerged as a relevant factor in work motivation, which relates to several behavioural consequences that are important for organizations. It is positively, albeit weakly, related to individual job performance (Riketta, 2002). Furthermore, employees who are committed to their organization – and who therefore tend to

Figure 14.4 *In larger or multinational organizations, employees are likely to self-categorize and identify in terms of lower level and more specific units*

perform relatively well – are less likely to leave the organization (Meyer *et al.*, 2002). Given these employees' efforts for the organization, as well as the costs involved with recruiting and socializing new employees, this is generally seen as a valuable asset by organizations. Finally, commitment is clearly related to **Organizational Citizenship Behaviour** or OCB (Meyer *et al.*, 2002). OCB (Organ, 1988) refers to all voluntary efforts that go above and beyond the call of duty, but are essential for the competitive success of the organization. OCB can include a large variety of discretionary activities, such as helping a colleague meet an important deadline, working overtime to service a big client, or volunteering to draw up a plan to accommodate changes in legislation relevant to the organization (Podsakoff and MacKenzie, 1997).

Research on organizational commitment and social identification developed independently, but both touch upon the importance of the affective involvement of the individual with the organization and its members (e.g., Ashforth and Mael, 1989).

What then is the added value of invoking a social identity approach to understand organizational commitment as a key factor in work motivation? Considering commitment at work as a form of social identification elucidates that such feelings of commitment do not necessarily concern the organization as a whole. Indeed, in particular in larger or multinational organizations, employees are likely to self-categorize and identify in terms of lower level and more specific units. For instance, they may define their role and understand their position in the larger organization as being part of a particular national branch, a professional division, or a specific project team. As a result, their sense of affective commitment may primarily focus on this lower level unit rather than the organization as a whole (Ellemers, De Gilder, and Van den Heuvel, 1998; see also Box 14.1). This is important because the goals or interests of the lower level unit do not necessarily align with broader organizational goals. For instance, professional standards of a legal unit may require running additional checks or waiting for formal approval before going ahead with a new procedure. This may impede the achievement of organization-level goals that require quick delivery of results, such as meeting client deadlines, or remaining ahead of the competition, and may lead to conflicts among departments within the organization.

Thus, even though at first sight an organization may not seem to qualify as a 'group' in the classical sense, people can have strong feelings of belonging, involvement, and pride towards (parts of) the organization they are working for, in a similar way that group members may identify with a group they belong to. Understanding motivation and work commitment in this way has clear added value, in a very practical sense. For instance, the realization that feelings of self-involvement and identification are key in helping people direct their efforts towards the achievement of common goals highlights the limitations of traditional management practices that rely on material reward structures (e.g., pay increase) as primary motivational tools.

Innovation and change in organizations

In today's business world, things change very rapidly. Alternative production methods become available, new ways of communicating are invented, customers have changing demands, and clients are faced with different problems. All these developments mean that organizations continually need to find new ways to deal with such changes. We refer to the

Box 14.1 Applying theories: the relevance of distinguishing team commitment and organizational commitment

"Nothing is as practical as a good theory" –

Kurt Lewin

Organizational commitment is related to job performance, but the relation is relatively weak (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990). Applying insights from *social identity theory* reveals why. Obviously, at some level employees are likely to recognize that they are part of the larger organization. However, the cognitive awareness that individual employees are part of the larger organization merely indicates *self-categorization*. This in itself does not necessarily evoke *social identification* – a sense of emotional self-involvement. Indeed, many organizations are quite large and abstract entities, consisting of multiple divisions (e.g., regional offices), teams (production, sales), and factions (office workers, technicians). This is why it is important to establish which of these potential identities individual employees find most self-relevant as a source of identity that provides the commitment and motivation to perform well. Social identity theory would predict that this is the identity that is most meaningful on a day-to-day basis, as it provides the relevant context and social interactions in which workers perform their tasks.

This theoretical analysis was applied to examine whether commitment would be more clearly related to work performance when it was focused on the organizational category that is the main focus of employees' social identification, namely their work team (Ellemers, De Gilder, and Van den Heuvel, 1998). A representative sample of Dutch workers revealed that it was possible to distinguish between the extent to which employees identified with and felt committed to their *work team*, and their commitment to the *organization*. However, they felt more committed to their team than to the organization as a whole. Team commitment made them more willing to sacrifice leisure time to help a colleague, and more likely to work overtime. Levels of organizational commitment did not predict these outcomes. A study among bank employees in Belgium replicated these findings and also showed that team commitment was related to performance ratings they received from their supervisors.

development and introduction of new products, ideas, or ways of working as ways of achieving **innovation** at work. The necessity for organizations to continually adapt to changing circumstances reveals the limitations of selecting individual workers for their specific knowledge or skills, as these may become outdated or obsolete over time. Instead, organizations might benefit from creating conditions at work that encourage individual development (e.g., offering specialized team roles) and facilitate the adaptation of existing practices for all employees in the organization (e.g., when introducing new computer applications). Indeed, for most organizations such 'social innovations' are more decisive for their economic success and long-term viability than the invention of new technologies.

We have argued above that the definition of a distinct and common identity may help individual workers to develop a sense of emotional involvement with their team or organization, and commit them to the achievement of joint goals. A commonly expressed

Figure 14.5 *Socialization programmes can make new employees more reluctant to share their fresh perspective by conveying what procedures, practices, and rules of conduct are considered standard, common, or acceptable in the organization*

concern is that the same features of the organization that can help workers join forces in this way might also reduce their openness for change and development. For instance, defining and protecting what is unique about the organization or team (e.g., its primary focus on the interest of clients) provides workers with a common identity that connects them and distinguishes them from other organizations or teams. However, the desire to retain such defining features over time as a way to provide continuity and stability to the organization and what it stands for may be an important cause for workers to resist change (e.g., when they are required to monitor the amount of time spent with each client).

To overcome or avoid such resistance, organizations tend to introduce 'fresh blood' from time to time. Thus, changing circumstances or requirements often prompt organizations to simply recruit new personnel (i.e., adding individuals with different skills, approaches, or work styles) to complement or replace existing workers. The underlying notion is that newcomers will shake up the organization, come up with novel ideas, ask different questions, and prompt others to reconsider whether their work habits still are effective. While it is certainly possible that this happens, it is by no means self-evident. For instance, as a matter of course, most organizations offer some kind of socialization programme for new workers, to familiarize them with the organization. This may help new workers get used to their new job and feel at home in the organization. At the same time, it also conveys what are considered standard procedures, common practices, and acceptable rules of conduct. This tends to make new workers more reluctant to offer a fresh perspective or to introduce novel ideas. Indeed, they run the risk of being seen as unable to understand the rationale underlying current practices or as failing to appreciate prior successes (Figure 14.5).

How then may organizations become more open to change without losing a sense of continuity? Is it possible to introduce newcomers and benefit from their ideas without undermining feelings of common identity or the commitment of other employees? The key

to answering these questions is to consider how the organization may incorporate openness to new ideas as a defining feature that is shared by its workers (Rink, Kane, Ellemers, and Van der Vegt, 2013). Applying a social identity approach to this problem suggests that innovation and change is facilitated when these are an integral part of the organization's common identity. Incorporating openness to change as a defining organizational feature is therefore likely to be more effective to foster innovation than simply recruiting new employees to replace existing workers. Developing an **organizational climate** that is conducive to change can balance the need for a common identity with the need for innovation and development.

Rink and Ellemers (2007; 2011) emphasize the importance of explicitly acknowledging the different *identities* of the workers, for instance in their disciplinary background, work skills and experiences, or organizational roles. The realization that they differ from each other in these ways – noting that this might make it more difficult for them to understand each other and value each other's ideas – increases the likelihood that new workers actually provide innovative suggestions instead of adapting to existing ways.

The chances of accommodating mutual differences – instead of ignoring them – can be optimized by the management. They can point out in advance that new co-workers have different information or expertise, and explicitly welcome them as offering a fresh perspective on existing practices. They may combine people with diverging contributions to optimize joint task performance, for instance, pairing the commercial attitude of a newcomer with the client experience of an 'old hand'. When the rationale for doing this is clear, people have no problem collaborating with others who introduce a different perspective. As long as such different views are expected and anticipated as beneficial for the task, they can be considered without causing interpersonal conflict. If differences and fresh insights are managed in this way, the diverse nature of the individuals working together (instead of the notion that workers should be similar to each other) can be seen as a characteristic feature of the team or organization and may even become a source of common identity and commitment.

Diversity at work

Once, organizations were mainly populated by white males, who worked full-time, were breadwinners for their family, and gave priority to their career. Nowadays, there is a much greater **diversity** among workers in organizations. The workforce contains people from different ethnic and cultural backgrounds, people with part-time employment, people who work for a variety of reasons, and combine their work roles with other important responsibilities or ambitions (see Figure 14.6; Figure 14.7; Figure 14.8). This increased diversity means that the variety of goals, ambitions, and motives among workers is greater than ever. Organizations that seek to enhance the motivation and performance of their workers need to cater for these diverging concerns, by offering different incentives, career paths, and growth opportunities, as one size no longer fits all (see Figure 14.8).

A social identity perspective helps understand that different groups of workers (e.g., men vs. women, ethnic minority vs. majority members) tend to compare their own work conditions and outcomes with those of others, as a way of evaluating their standing in the organization. That is, the willingness of the organization to accommodate the specific needs of different groups of workers implicitly conveys the perceived worth of these
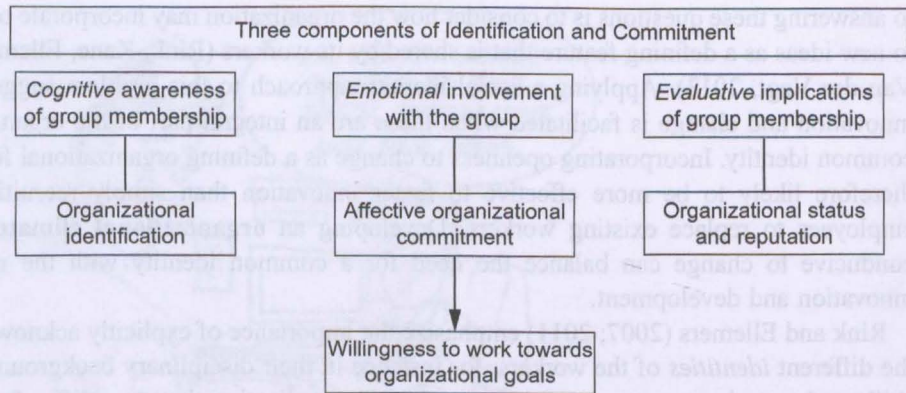
Three components of Identification and Commitment

Cognitive awareness of group membership	Emotional involvement with the group	Evaluative implications of group membership
Organizational identification	Affective organizational commitment	Organizational status and reputation

Willingness to work towards organizational goals

Figure 14.6 *Components of identification and commitment in organizations (based on Ouwerkerk, Ellemers, and De Gilder, 1999)*

☐ Europe ■ Africa ☐ Asia ☐ Americas

Figure 14.7 *With citizens originating from all parts of the world, the workforce is becoming increasingly diverse*

groups for the organization. For instance, the organization can communicate its desire to include and retain working parents by allowing part-time work or flexible work schedules. Likewise, organizations may attract and motivate specific groups of workers by seeking out their unique and characteristic contributions to the performance of the organization. The organization can do this by noting and rewarding increased customer satisfaction due to, for instance, the language ability or cultural knowledge of its employees. Conversely, to the extent that organizations are reluctant to address such specific needs and fail to acknowledge the unique contributions of different groups of workers, this signals to workers that they and their concerns are seen as unimportant or expendable – they can either adapt or leave (see also Box 14.2).

Thus, the basic desire people have to establish a positive social identity can explain some of the problems associated with an increasingly diverse workforce, and clarifies what can be done to resolve them. Importantly, each group of workers wants to be included and valued for what they have to offer – especially when they are different from most other employees. This was illustrated in a series of experiments, which examined the self-confidence and motivation of individual women who were asked to perform a gender-neutral task in a group of men. This research revealed that the mere fact that they were in a minority position made these women feel that their unique skills and contributions were unlikely to be valued. This in turn raised feelings of threat and lack of confidence that lowered their motivation to perform well (Derks, Van Laar, and Ellemers, 2007). However, when it was explicitly stated that their contributions were expected to be useful, or when

Figure 14.8 *Increased diversity implies that the variety of goals, ambitions, and motives among workers is greater than ever. Organizations that seek to enhance the motivation and performance of their workers need to cater for these diverging concerns by offering different incentives, career paths, and growth opportunities, as one size no longer fits all*

they were reminded of their value and worth in another way, no such loss of confidence and performance motivation was visible (see also Box 14.3).

A series of field studies revealed another interesting consequence of the desire to be valued as a minority group at work. These studies examined how Muslim women who choose to wear a headscarf respond to the way they are treated in work and educational settings. These settings differed in the extent to which the ethnic and religious identity of different groups of employees was acknowledged and respected by managers and co-workers. This was evident, for instance, in the willingness to accommodate specific dietary requirements (e.g., the provision of halal food in the canteen at work), or holiday preferences (e.g., the possibility to take leave during Ramadan, or for extended family visits abroad). The women who thought that their work conditions or the way they were treated at work ignored or devalued their minority identity were not very motivated to do well in their education or career. Additionally, they did not feel strongly committed to the organization or to the host society. By comparison – and paradoxically – those who felt their minority identity was accepted and respected at work were more willing to be understanding of and adapt to organizational requirements, for instance, to take off their headscarf (Van Laar, Derks, and Ellemers, 2013).

Of special interest in this context are members of groups that form a minority at work without this immediately being visible. Homosexual workers constitute such a group. In principle they have the choice either to hide or to reveal their sexual preferences when they are at work. Although many homosexuals believe that hiding their sexual identity will gain

Box 14.2 Applying methods: finding ways to deal with the dual identity as worker and parent

"If all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail"
Abraham Maslow, *The Psychology of Science,* 1966, p. 15

A large international banking corporation was surprised they had difficulty attracting, retaining, and promoting female workers, despite their family-friendly work conditions. To find out why this was the case, social psychological researchers used different methodologies to gain a more complete picture of the problem and possible solutions (Van Steenbergen and Ellemers, 2009).

The first phase consisted of *interviews* to identify relevant concerns of workers at this company. As anticipated, employees talked about the conflicts and stress they sometimes experience due to their dual identities as workers and parents. However, they also spoke about the benefits and added value of combining these different identities. This was a new concept, which was later referred to as work-family *facilitation*. Thus the free format used in the interviews allowed employees to reveal a phenomenon that was not yet known in the literature.

Subsequently, questionnaires were developed and validated to systematically assess employees' feelings of conflict and facilitation. This was done in *large scale surveys*, embedded in the company's annual employee satisfaction questionnaires. The large number of respondents made it possible to test the reliability of these questionnaires and to validate them by examining relations with other relevant constructs.

Once these measures had been developed and validated, they were used to make *cross-sectional* comparisons. The experience of conflict vs. facilitation was correlated with feelings of being supported in one's dual identity by others in the organization (e.g., supervisors, colleagues) and at home (e.g., family, partners). This revealed that support from others – and of one's supervisor in particular – helped employees perceive their dual identities as workers and parents as facilitating instead of conflicting with each other.

The next step was to conduct a *longitudinal* study, among a small sample of employees who participated in a work health programme. This revealed that differential experiences of conflict and facilitation at the beginning of the study influenced actual performance (e.g., sales records) and health indicators (Body Mass Index, fitness test) at a later stage, demonstrating the relevance of identity conflict vs. facilitation over time.

Finally, an *experimental intervention study* was done to test whether it might be possible to influence the experience of facilitation vs. conflict. Some employees read a text emphasizing the difficulties of combining work and family identities. Other employees read about the advantages of combining these two identities. Then they were asked to report about their own experiences. Merely reading a text that reminded them of the advantages of combining their dual identities caused employees to report more positive emotions and thoughts about their own lives, and enhanced their perceived ability to cope with the challenge of being a good worker as well as a good parent.

Box 14.3 Applying intervention strategies: changing expectations about working in cross-gender teams

Whether someone is a man or a woman is something we immediately note and find hard to ignore, even when it should be irrelevant. The mere fact that the other person belongs to the same or a different gender category raises the expectation that they will also be similar or different in their work style or work goals, even when there is no objective reason for holding such expectations.

Taking into account the pervasiveness of gender identities can help understand some of the difficulties people encounter when working together in cross-gender teams, and can be used to prevent the reluctance to work together with someone of the opposite gender. Because the aim is to prevent that people use their gender identity to derive task-relevant expectations, such interventions can be quite simple. Explicitly communicating ahead of time that task-relevant preferences are *not* related to gender, should prevent that people rely on implicit gender-based expectations about task goals.

A study was conducted to test the effectiveness of this type of intervention (Rink and Ellemers, 2006). Pairs of students had to team up to select an organization for a joint internship, based on information about the possibilities each organization offered to gain practical skills or to increase their theoretical knowledge. These pairs either consisted of same-gender teams (two men or two women) or cross-gender teams (one man and one woman).

In the control condition, no further information was provided. Here gender-based expectations clearly played a role. Individuals in same-gender teams assumed their partner would have the same internship goals that they had. This was the case regardless of whether they were men or women, and regardless of their own personal preferences to improve their practical skills or to increase their theoretical knowledge. They looked forward to the interaction, and thought it should be easy to work together. Those in cross-gender teams, however, assumed that their partner's task goals would be different from theirs. As a result, they were not very eager to work together with their teammate and anticipated that the interaction would be difficult.

In the intervention condition, the only difference was that individuals were informed ahead of time that their partner was likely to endorse similar task goals, despite the gender differences between them. This simple communication was enough to lift negative expectations about working together in cross-gender teams. With the intervention in place, individuals in cross-gender teams were just as happy to work together and anticipated a pleasant interaction as the same-gender teams in the control condition.

them acceptance and inclusion at work, research evidence suggests otherwise. Feeling compelled to hide a self-defining aspect of one's identity, for fear of being ridiculed or excluded, raises negative emotions, such as shame and guilt. In turn, these emotions and rumination about not being accepted and valued distract from work-related thoughts and reduces work satisfaction and organizational commitment. By contrast, workers who reveal their homosexual identity are happier at work and more motivated to perform well (Ellemers and Barreto, 2006).

Classical organizational issues and the social psychology of organizations

In this chapter, we only consider three important organizational issues in depth. There are many other important issues that are addressed in the field of the social psychology of organizations. The overarching theme of our approach is that it is worthwhile to take into account group memberships and group identities, as these affect employees' attitudes and behaviour. By doing so, classical organizational issues in organizational psychology can be better understood. Leadership issues are better understood when realizing that leaders and their followers mutually influence each other in a group context. Successful leaders are those who manage to represent (the identity of) the group and its members (Ellemers *et al.*, 2004). Communication in organizations – and the processing of communicative messages – also depends on group membership. For instance, those who identify strongly with their organizational unit may be less attentive to messages from other units, and less willing to share important information with representatives of other business units (for an overview, see Haslam, 2004).

In employee health, the positive role of social support in dealing with stress has been extensively documented, as well as in organizational settings. A social identity perspective may extend the understanding of this process, as it has been shown that people who identify strongly with an organization report lower stress levels, partly because they are better able to muster social support. It has further been proposed that social support, as a consequence of group identity, may lead to more collective instead of individual responses to stressors, as a group identity may help group members realize that the stressor is a shared problem rather than an individual one (van Dick and Haslam, 2012).

Applying social psychology in organizations

There are many approaches in the study of organizational processes. Research of organizational behaviour often combines different issues, or relies on models that try to incorporate a multitude of potentially relevant variables. The social psychology of organizations has a different approach, as it argues that complex realities often need to be disentangled into simple cause-and-effect sequences to be able to understand them. Building process models better clarifies a specific chain of events than compiling an exhaustive list of variables that are potentially relevant.

Furthermore, social psychologists explicitly address the *social* nature of work situations. Considering people who work together as a social group makes it possible to invoke insights on group processes and intergroup relations that complement standard individual-level approaches to organizational behaviour. We do not claim that a social identity analysis represents 'the best' approach to understanding the behaviour of people in organizations, but it significantly adds to existing models and contributes a fresh perspective to a range of issues.

A case in point is the way organizations tend to deal with undesirable employee behaviours, such as the mistakes people make in their work (e.g. medical errors). Standard solutions – usually in response to highly publicized 'accidents' – tend to sanction or fire

individual workers who made a mistake, and to take measures to ensure that this should 'never happen again'. Provision of information about correct procedures, the introduction of additional regulations and controls, and increased performance monitoring are used in this way. All these measures implicitly (or sometimes quite explicitly) convey that the management of the organization calls into question the level of professionalism or the work values of its employees. Paradoxically, however, such addition of rules, increasing checks and controls, or mandatory 'certification' as a way to enforce minimal standards often backfires as it creates an atmosphere of distrust and undermines the work satisfaction and organizational commitment that are key elements of employees' motivation to help the organization perform well.

Here, there is added value in applying insights from social psychology. Addressing these issues at a group level, and introducing a social identity perspective makes it possible to invent new and additional ways to improve the performance of the organization, without antagonizing individual workers or frustrating their willingness to do a good job. This begins with the acknowledgement that some of the problems identified originate at the level of the organization and what it stands for. It helps to consider deficiencies in the organizational structure or characteristics of the organizational culture that invite mistakes to be made. Faulty procedures, inadequate work conditions, conflicting demands, or 'perverse' incentives can all have this effect. Addressing such problems at the level of the organization requires courage from management, but also offers scope to develop more effective solutions while maintaining employee motivation and commitment.

Empirical research has revealed that organizations may be characterized by different types of 'error climates'. It turns out that treating errors as individual failures that have to be avoided at all times does not help *reduce* the number of errors made. At most, this causes employees to *cover up* and hide mistakes that are made. In the long run, organizations in which errors are considered inevitable, but are seen as a collective learning opportunity prove to be better off in terms of employee satisfaction and motivation, as well as in terms of business performance (Homsma, Van Dyck, De Gilder, Koopman, and Elfring, 2009).

Insights from social psychology are also relevant in situations in which workers take business decisions that jeopardize important societal commodities (such as public health, or economic stability). Here too, the individuals in question tend to be accused of showing unethical or irresponsible behaviour. Typically, individual-level solutions are provided to deal with such issues, by introducing integrity tests, or appointing a compliance officer – usually someone with legal rather than psychological training – to make sure all workers stick to organizational guidelines. An alternative way to address this is by examining how group-level norms and practices may elicit or reinforce undesirable behaviour. Indeed, analyses of recent events in the financial service sector suggest that it may be necessary to address the ethics climate in an organization, as a way to change the conduct of individual employees. Applying a social identity perspective to the behaviour of individuals in organizations thus reveals that there is much to be gained by increasing the understanding of the distinctive characteristics of the organization and what it stands for.

Applied social psychology in context

The examples in this chapter aim to illustrate the added value of applying social psychology in organizations. Other important aspects of organizations are studied in adjacent (sub)disciplines.

Several psychological issues are relevant for organizations, but are not necessarily social in nature. For instance, organizations spend a lot of time – and money – on selection procedures. Psychological tests are often used or specifically developed to measure individual knowledge and abilities that are relevant for the job at hand. Such tests are the domain of personality psychology rather than of social psychology. We have argued that social psychological processes are influential irrespective of differences in personality, but of course this does not mean that individual differences are irrelevant. In fact, taking into account the different skills, motivation, and approaches individuals can offer is an important factor in successful team composition. Thus, specifying relevant individual differences, and finding ways to reliably assess these, certainly is an area of interest to those interested in applying social psychological insights to organizations.

Task design also impacts the job attitudes and behaviour of individual workers. This includes the content of the job, the exact task that is being performed, and the amount of work that is required, but also the circumstances under which the task has to be performed. Some labour circumstances may have detrimental effects on work performance (outdated office equipment, unsafe procedures) as well as on employees' job attitudes. Both task design and labour circumstances touch upon occupational health issues. Working in an unfavourable work environment – with high workload stress, unfavourable labour circumstances, or discordant job demands – affects employee health. Thus, work psychological insights and theories on ergonomics, occupational health, and stress are all relevant and can be integrated with a social identity perspective (Jetten, Haslam, and Haslam, 2009).

The changing nature of work implies that most new jobs can be found in service industries. Additionally, we witness emerging networks of organizations across the globe. These changes have huge implications for the ways in which people communicate with each other. This is evident not only from shifts in media use, but also in the degree to which these media are used to regulate cooperation between individuals in organizations, or to interact with suppliers, technical support, or customers and clients. The implications of such changes for the way people's social identities develop, and how collaboration between them can be sustained, has been examined from a social identity perspective (Postmes, 2003). In this context, communication science is an important discipline that can help understand group processes within organizations.

Management science's relevance for the social psychology of organizations is self-evident. There is some evidence already that the organization's external reputation affects group processes within the organization (e.g., Smidts *et al.*, 2001), but the effects of other core topics in management science, such as organizational strategy and marketing, on group processes within organizations so far have received less attention than they deserve.

Conclusions

We introduced insights from social identity theory to complement analyses that approach workers as separate entities that need to be managed individually by selecting them on the basis of their competencies, enforcing rule compliance, or using material incentives. By doing so, we have tried to provide some insight in the role social psychologists may play in understanding group processes in organizations.

We have argued that people's behaviour at work may be better understood by considering the organization as providing them with a sense of who they are and where they belong. There is substantial evidence that when people derive a positive social identity from their membership of a team or organization, they internalize its goals, are motivated to perform well, remain loyal to the organization, and show OCB.

Organizations frequently have to deal with changes in their environment. In order to remain competitive, organizations need to innovate, and they are partly dependent on the creativity of – and cooperation between – employees to adapt their ways of working to changing demands. This proves to be an extremely difficult task that is not achieved by simply bringing together people with different perspectives. Explicitly acknowledging differences in the identities of group members helps them exchange their unique expertise.

Change in the workforce, such as an increased participation in the labour market by ethnic minorities, is another given for organizations, which they have to deal with. Being in a minority position is potentially threatening to one's social identity, However, again, by making it very explicit to minorities that they are expected to be valuable employees, may increase their self-confidence and motivation.

There are only a few things in life that people spend more time on than working – to their joy or sorrow – mostly in organizations. The success of these organizations largely depends on the performance of their members. This chapter demonstrates the relevance of the social psychology of organizations by addressing a limited number of topics in some depth. We hope these insights may help to optimize leadership and management of organizations, but also encourage people to seek out those work conditions that are most likely to make them happy, healthy, and productive workers.

Glossary

Diversity: the degree to which workers differ from each other in (work-relevant) background characteristics.

Innovation: the development and introduction of new products, ideas, or ways of working.

Motivation: the force that energizes people to take action, directs their efforts towards the achievement of specific goals, and sustains their efforts until they reach these goals.

Organization: an organization is a social arrangement for achieving controlled performance in pursuit of collective goals.

Organizational citizenship behaviour (OCB): all voluntary efforts that go above and beyond the call of duty, but are essential for the competitive success of the organization.

Organizational climate: the common tendency of people working in the organization to value specific achievements, behaviours, and choices.

Organizational commitment: a sense of emotional involvement with a group, such as one's work team or organization.

Organizational psychology: the scientific study of people's behaviour in work settings.

Positive social identity: a sense of positive self-worth and esteem that people can derive from their membership in social groups.

Self-categorization: the tendency of individuals to think of themselves as representing a social group.

Social categorization: the tendency to consider individuals and their distinctive features by organizing them into social groups.

Social comparison: the process of comparing features and achievements of individuals or groups as a way to assess their relative value.

Social identification: a relatively enduring state that reflects an individual's readiness to define him- or herself as a member of a particular social group.

Social identity: the aspects of one's self-view that derive from membership in a particular group.

Review questions

1. Explain why social psychology is relevant for organizations.
2. Describe two consequences of the search for a positive identity.
3. Indicate three aspects of behaviour that motivation theories aim to understand.
4. Describe the conditions under which a common identity can be established despite differences between workers.
5. Can you explain how an organization can communicate that it values the contributions of ethnic minority workers?

Further reading

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