Organizational Identification

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For organizational communication scholars, identification provides a key to understanding organizing practices, the individual–organization relationship, and the construction of selves. “Organizational identification” refers to the creation, maintenance, and modification of linkages between individuals and organizations, whereas “identity” refers to the conception of the self that defines the person’s position in the social order (Cheney 1983a; Scott et al. 1998). Identification scholarship builds on a conception of personal identity in which we create selves, as well as distinctions from others, in social settings comprised by a variety of social groups. Identification, then, is the process by which an identity is constructed, but the linkages actors form are simultaneously guided by their pre-existing personal and social identities.

Conceptions of these individual–organization “linkages” mark an important distinction between three versions of identification theorizing. A first view emphasizes cognitive processes, drawing on social identity theory and its claims that individuals seek to attain distinctiveness for their mental representations of ingroups and competing groups. In this perspective, identification is the perception of belongingness to a group, and it occurs when one integrates beliefs, attitudes, and emotions regarding an organization into one’s own identity (Pratt 1998).

The majority of organizational communication research on identification falls into a second perspective, one that foregrounds communicative practice in understanding individual–organization linkages. This approach draws on the dramatism of Kenneth Burke (1950), symbolic interactionism, and structuration theory to assert that one’s personal identity is made up of the myriad identifications with groups comprising social life and that identities tend to be “grouped” such that some identifications logically occur together (Scott et al. 1998; Kuhn 2006). Identification here is fundamentally communicative because the individual–organization linkages are manifest both in organizational activity and in the messages proffered by organizations.

A third approach sees identification as subject to organizational discourses, both within and beyond a given organization, which place us in “subject positions” that regulate thought and action. Usually drawing from poststructuralist theorizing, this third view provides an alternative communicative conception of identification that emphasizes the active power of discourse in comprising individuals’ identities (Organizational Discourse; Identities and Discourse).

Running across these perspectives is the assumption that individuals identify with organizations because doing so is necessary in the construction of a personal identity. Burke, for instance, argued that contemporary social life creates new divisions between people, and that individuals secure a sense of self against these divisions through attachments with various social groups. We identify with organizations because we recognize some congruence between our personal identities (or perhaps our desired selves) and the identities projected by organizations. In other words, organizations – and particularly
workplaces – are attractive resources for identification because individuals can derive several benefits through identification, including satisfying desires for affiliation with others, alleviating feelings of uncertainty or vulnerability, raising aspirations about performance, developing a positive self-image, and providing a sense of purpose.

Organizations benefit from member identification as well. Highly identified workers display more motivation, satisfaction, and pro-social behaviors; they are superior performers who are less likely to leave (Cheney 1983b; Elsbach 1999). More generally, highly identified members place the concerns of the organization above their own self-interest, so coordination with, and control of, these members tends to be relatively simple. Drawing on the work of Herbert Simon, scholars see organizational efforts to induce identification as part of a strategy to exert unobtrusive control over members (Tomkins & Cheney 1985; → Control and Authority in Organizations).

Public relations messages, socialization tactics, characterizations of competitors, and contact with charismatic leaders lead members to internalize decision premises in ways that guide their action toward the organizational interest, and away from personal interests, in the absence of overt commands. Thus, identification is generally encouraged by organizations, but high levels of identification can be damaging for both individuals and organizations if it generates unquestioning conformity, decreased creativity, and a lack of personal autonomy (Mael & Ashforth 2001). Moreover, some organizations, such as agencies for temporary workers, may actually seek to discourage identification because the attachments it creates are not beneficial for organizational action (Gossett 2002).

The presence of a multiplicity of identity resources complicates the outcomes for individuals and organizations. The most commonly studied identity resources are the work group, the organization, and the occupation, and scholars often examine the compatibilities or conflicts between these identifications in situated activity (e.g., Scott 1997; Glynn 2000). This research shows that differences in professional practices, the nature of the (often tacit) employment contract, communication structures, and organizational strategies lead some identity resources to have a stronger influence on identification than others. Recent work also suggests that identifications may shift over time in response to important organizational events or as actors perceive changes in the nature of the identity resources (e.g., Kuhn & Nelson 2002; Larson & Pepper 2003).

SEE ALSO: → Control and Authority in Organizations → Corporate and Organizational Identity → Identities and Discourse → Organizational Communication → Organizational Discourse → Organizational Image → Organizational Culture → Social Identity Theory → Structuration Theory → Symbolic Interaction

References and Suggested Readings


