

Long-term Dynamics of Employee Identification with an Organizational Unit

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Abstract

This study presents the first framework for understanding the long-term dynamics of employee identification with an organizational unit. Similar research generally adopts cross-sectional quantitative methods that insufficiently explain the long-term dynamics of identification. Following studies that find stronger identification with lower-level groups than with an entire organization, we examine the case of a marine hull unit of a Japanese property-casualty insurer. We suggest that employees initially identify with the unit because of “occupational ability recognition” and “affective recognition”. We identify that these factors are necessary and sufficient conditions for identification with the unit. When they are absent, dis-identification occurs. If identification based on these factors is maintained, “value preferences” become dimensions of identification. Members prefer the unit values of interesting work, professional utility, and career attainment. When employees are dissatisfied with the unit’s values, ambivalent identification occurs. Ultimately, mature employees may express a “value proposition orientation”. They identify with the unit by consciously relating their value proposition and the unit.

Keywords: organizational identification, unit, long-term dynamics, case study

1. Introduction

Studies of organizational identification discuss relations between members’ self-concepts and organizations. A body of growing research examines identification with entire organizations and with constituent teams, work groups, units, and departments. We define employee identification as incorporating an organization’s or unit’s values into a self-definition.

In daily life, units rather than organizations are the reality for employees. Actually, extensive research documents a strong identification with units than with organizations (Millward & Postmes, 2010; Olkkonen & Lipponen, 2006; Riketta & Nienaber, 2007; Ullrich, Wieseke, Christ, Schulze, & Van Dick, 2007; Van Knippenberg & Van Schie, 2000).

Many employees spend years in a business unit, and their relationship with it attains great personal meaning. Ashforth (1998) said that “identity is a perpetual work” (p.213). Feelings of identification change throughout a career as “(o)ur lives are lived in constantly changing roles and situations embedded in the course of human development and social change” (Demo, 1992, p.306). Yet the long-term dynamics of identification with organizations and their constituent units have been insufficiently discussed because previous studies adopt a cross-sectional quantitative approach toward its localized and static aspects (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Demo, 1992). They perhaps do so because recent studies of organizational identification are grounded in social identity theory, which assumes people operate with motives for self-enhancement (Takao, 2013). Researchers have focused on organizations with positive external images when documenting the antecedents of identification (Note1). In such situations, members are unlikely to envision difficulties that prompt them to reconsider their identification.

This research is a case study of one unit within Tokio Marine & Nichido Fire Insurance (Tokio Marine), a Japanese property-casualty insurer. It is the first to examine the long-term dynamics of employee identification and to construct a framework explaining how identification occurs, changes, and diversifies over time. Although employees of this unit formerly were seen as the company’s elite, its prestige has declined since the 1980s. By

dis-identification in such situations. However, we find that employees' identification with the unit is not necessarily weak and that many factors are contributors. By examining this case, we uncover causal paths and factors overlooked by the existing theory. In addition, the unit's operating environment has been unstable, and employees have encountered repeated incidents that potentially influence their identification.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition of Organizational Identification

Mael and Ashforth (1992) defined organizational identification by its cognitive dimensions as "a perceived oneness with an organization and the experience of the organization's successes and failures as one's own." Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail (1994) defined it as "the degree to which a member defines himself or herself by the same attributes that he or she believes define the organization." Pratt (1998) indicated that "an individual's belief about his or her organization becomes self-referential or self-defining." However, Harquail (1998) and Pratt (1998) noted the importance of the affective dimension, and Dutton and Dukerich (1991) and Pratt (2000) found that identification is accompanied by emotions.

Since Tajfel's (1978) pioneering work, social identity has been defined as "the value and emotional significance attached to that membership." That is, it includes value dimensions and affective dimensions. Ashforth et al. (2008) set self-definition, importance to themselves, and effect at the core of identification. Values, goals, beliefs, stereotypic traits, knowledge, skills, and ability are assumed to be fluid and to influence identification in varying degrees. Building on these discussions, we regard identification "as an important part of the self-concept of the subject to be recognized within the dimensions of affect and value."

2.2 Disidentification, Ambivalent Identification, and Neutral Identification

Identification is a positive relation between an organization and an employee (Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004), but disidentification is an overt cognitive separation of one's self-definition from the organization. Ambivalent identification is simultaneous identification and disidentification. Neutral identification describes the situation wherein members' self-perceptions involve neither identification nor disidentification (Elsbach, 1999; Kreiner & Ashforth, 2004).

2.3 Antecedents

Extensive research has been based on social identity theory (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994; Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Pratt (1998, pp.181–191) sorted out the following antecedents of identification based on social identity theory.

Membership is a distinction between an in-group and an out-group. When an organization enjoys an attractive image, membership enhances self-esteem. Based on the theory of self-categorization that Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell (1987) developed from social identity theory, identification is more likely when other organizations are salient than the own organization is alone salient. People are less likely to identify with an organization when its employees are heterogeneous and when its employees and those of other organizations are homogeneous.

However, Fuller, Hester, Barnett, Frey, Relyea, and Beu (2006) noted that employees identify with organizations based on perceptions of internal respect, not merely external prestige. Olkkonen and Lipponen (2006) found a significant correlation between interactional justice and identification with work units, whereas distributive justice and procedural justice correlate to identification with an entire organization. They also noted an indirect relation between organizational socialization and organizational identification. People incorporate elements of the organization's identity into their self-definitions through socialization and organizational identification proceeds (Ashforth & Mael, 1989).

2.4 Occurrence of Identification

Although research into the antecedents of identification accumulates, identification itself has been considered a static event rather than a dynamic process (Pratt, 2000; Ashforth et al., 2008). Pratt (2000) is among the few to address the process of identification in his study of Amway distributors. The study referenced Weick's (1995) sense-making approach and proposed that identification is a progression of sense-breaking → seekership → sense-giving → encapsulated sense-making → positive identification. Pratt (2000) is inspired by Lewin's (1958) change model and used Lewin's term "unfreezing" in referring to "sense-breaking."

2.5 Lacking Discussion in the Existing Literature

Ashforth (1998) proposed a process model illuminated by Lewin's model, but we doubt that the long-term dynamics of identification can be examined sufficiently by repeatedly connecting the elements in process models.

Although Ashforth (1998) and Pratt (2000) modeled the short-term processes and the localized elements of identification, their models do not explain the long-term dynamics of organizational identification.

To overcome the limits of research confined to the static aspects of identification, we examine a case study of a marine hull insurance unit and propose a theoretical framework to explain how employee identification occurs and changes over time.

3. Method

We adopted the qualitative research design that Strauss and Corbin (1998) and Yin (2003) advocated to examine insufficiently explained phenomena.

3.1 Case Selection

We study a most-likely case. Explorations grounded in theory are more likely to yield results consistent with that theory, whereas a most-likely case will yield results unbounded by theory. Investigating a most-likely case uncovers causal pathways and variables overlooked by established theory (Eckstein, 1975; George & Bennett, 2005).

We examined Tokio Marine's marine hull insurance unit because it had been significant and powerful within the company. Its employees had been seen as the company's elite, but that perception and the unit's prestige dimmed as the unit's premium income shrank. Theories of organizational identification grounded in social identity lead us to expect that employees exhibit low identification or dis-identification with the unit because of its declining prestige. We found instead that employees identify for multiple reasons. In addition, the unit's operating environment had been historically unstable, and its employees have had numerous opportunities to alter their identification. Thus, the marine hull unit seemed ideal for capturing the dynamics of identification.

3.2 Data Collection

We collected data through semi-structured interviews, semi-overt participant observation, and archival data. Multiple sourcing enabled us to triangulate data sources for robust interpretations of findings (Eisenhardt, 1989; Yin, 2003; Pratt, 2000).

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 21 unit employees from March 2012 to December 2012. The highest-ranking interviewee was the division manager and the lowest-ranking were untitled. As is customary in Japan, all employees had been with the company since leaving university. The oldest interviewee joined the company in 1977 and the youngest in 2012. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes.

We conducted semi-overt participant observation from March 2012 to December 2012. We observed employees while working alongside them during their daily tasks. Observation by semi-overt participant has two advantages: subjects trusted us as colleagues, and as researchers, we could ask questions that would have seemed strange coming from colleagues (Pratt, 2000).

We accessed archival data from corporate histories, internal conference documents, and internal bulletins to establish the unit's environmental context.

3.3 Data Analysis

We took a theory-building approach by iterating back and forth between the data and emerging theoretical frames (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We constantly compared data and emerging theory, working incrementally toward an empirically valid theory that fits the data.

4. Analysis and Findings

4.1 Case Overview

Tokio Marine was founded in 1879 as Japan's first marine insurer. Initially an insurer of marine cargo, it soon began underwriting marine hulls, and that was Tokio Marine's primary business until World War II, when the Imperial military commandeered and depleted Japan's merchant fleet.

After the war, Tokio Marine resumed operations, mainly providing fire insurance. Japan's marine insurance business expanded during the high-growth 1950s and 1960s, and non-marine insurance grew exponentially with household car ownership. After the 1973 oil crisis, growth led by capital investment retreated. Because Tokio Marine had emphasized corporate underwriting, especially marine insurance, receding growth in Japan's corporate sector eroded the company's performance.

Therefore, the company's three-year medium-term management plan in FY1977 emphasized the household sector. This plan sought to change both the organization's structure and the employees' mindsets. According to

corporate history, employees regarded corporate business units more highly than household business units. To change this perception, the company transferred many managers from corporate business units to regional household business. Until then, employees of the marine hull unit had regarded themselves as the elite.

The non-marine insurance business grew after the 1977 management plan, but the marine hull insurance business stagnated, especially after the 1985 Plaza Accord, as the yen appreciated against the dollar. Japanese shipping fell into recession, and merchant fleets declined in size. The marine hull insurance unit lost prestige and became seen companywide as a cadre of specialists.

When Japan liberalized the marine hull insurance business in 1997, fierce price competition ensued among domestic and foreign insurers. In FY2000, premiums of Tokio Marine's marine hull insurance fell 40% from FY1996 and 60% from their peak in FY1984. During FY2005 and FY2006, the unit lost money and faced severe intra-company criticism.

At the time of our research, the unit had a sales department in Tokyo, a sales department with four offices in Western Japan, and an underwriting department in Tokyo. There were several vice presidents in the unit but no active corporate officers were from the unit.

4.2 Entry Phase and Identification

Tokio Marine assigns new employees to business units after a few months of training. Until the early 1980s, the marine hull insurance unit was popular among new employees, who were attracted by its image as "cool work," "elite," and "easy to promote." Fewer new employees sought assignments there after the 1980s as the unit's prestige declined.

New employees generally become salespeople serving small and medium-sized coastal ship owners, marine construction companies with barges, and tugboats. Their offices often are at ports and even aboard vessels, not in Manhattan-style business districts. New employees are unfamiliar with customer relations practices. They make mistakes and routinely are scolded by their bosses, senior coworkers, and customers. If they had positive perceptions of the unit before, such perceptions vanished after being assigned there. Once acclimated to their work, however, they are accepted by bosses and seniors and recognized for their contributions. Most come to regard the unit as personally important, and it becomes significant to their self-definition.

This route to identification is similar among mid-career employees who transfer to the unit. Transferred employees have enough work experience to know that the unit's image is less important than their performance. Like new employees, they come to regard the unit as personally important after they grow accustomed to their jobs and earn their colleagues' acceptance. If transferred employees move to other sections, they acknowledge that "I am accepted as a member of the unit" and their identification with the unit strengthens. However, their identification with the unit is hampered by lack of recognition. Some transferred employees do not feel at ease with the unit and, thus, dis-identify with the unit.

Emotional factors influence new and transferred employees' identification with the unit. Employees interact at work and over drinks and golf. Newcomers form ties through these exchanges and come to regard coworkers as companions. The unit becomes "a place of my own," and new employees identify with it. They usually are unaware of those ties, but they become apparent when the environment destabilizes. After initially being transferred, for example, employees feel alienated when coworkers are cordial and outgoing with each other. They realize they lack collegial ties with coworkers and may erect psychological barriers against unit identification. Dis-identification occurs in such cases. In addition, as noted in Subsection "Effect from Relationship with Outside the Unit," ties with others were missing in the regional branch out of the marine hull unit where they worked alone. These employees recalled their ties to previous colleagues, and their sense of identification with the marine hull unit was reinforced.

4.3 Value Preference and Identification

After being recognized for their performance and forming ties with colleagues, employees incorporate the unit's values into their self-concepts. Their identification with the unit strengthens, and factors of identification multiply. Employees' value preferences are one such factor, and employee identification can become ambivalent if the unit does not meet their values. In short, value preferences strengthen or attenuate identification with the unit.

Most surveyed employees indicated that the unit meets the value they place on interesting work. Japanese property-casualty insurance is generally underwritten by agencies, but insurers write most marine hull insurance directly, giving salespersons contact with client shippers and shipbuilders. Learning about the industry and its issues, including international maritime law and the risks of terrorism and piracy, satisfies their intellectual curiosity.

Since the unit had produced many corporate officers, employees who joined the company before the 1980s saw it as a fast track to promotion. However, no unit employee has been appointed as a corporate officer since 1991, and respondents who valued career ascendancy wanted to transfer to units they believe offer promotion potential. Even so, the unit had four vice presidents in 2012, and some respondents believed that promotion to vice presidency is a sufficient career achievement. Even if employees focus on prospects for promotion, personal aspirations determine whether they find the unit attractive.

Moreover, some employees take pride in belonging to the unit. They relish its image as an international business involving foreign particulars and cross-border transactions. Some respondents mentioned that they are proud that a distinguished pre-war manager had come from the unit.

Although these value preferences are antecedents to identification, respondents differed about which values they preferred, and their values changed over time.

Some employees were frustrated that the unit did not meet the value they placed on interesting work and welcomed a transfer to a more interesting employment. Some were unsatisfied with the unit's image and welcomed transfers to units with more allure. These respondents nonetheless maintained their identification with the marine hull unit as a "homeland" and "safe haven," where they formed ties and earned recognition. That is, their identification with the unit was ambivalent.

Even those respondents who felt that another unit would offer interesting work and a desirable unit image maintained their identification with the marine hull unit. Despite their dissatisfaction, they most valued recognition for their performance and feared that a new unit would not provide it. On the other hand, dis-satisfied employees who are confident about acclimatizing to new duties and being accepted remained receptive to a transfer.

In sum, value preferences reinforce employee identification or ambivalent identification. The important determinants are forming ties and being recognized for performance.

4.4 Value Proposition and Identification

Some respondents who had worked for the unit for many years—primarily senior managers—identified with it because it allowed them to mentor their juniors and propose significant value to society. Although little time remained in their careers, they expressed such feelings as "I want to leave a good thing" and "I want to find significance in what I have done." The unit featured large in their self-identity as a place where they could transmit experience, skills, and beliefs to their juniors and provide values brought about by their experience to society. These respondents reported, "I want to improve the department."

Those respondents who relate their value positions with the unit maintain their identification state regarding receiving performance recognition and forming collegial ties.

Numerous respondents did not relate their value propositions with the unit. Even in such cases, no negative effect appeared with respect to identification or ambivalent identification based on other factors.

4.5 Effect from Relationship with Outside the Unit

We have discussed the dynamics of identification in respect to intra-unit factors, but external relationships also affect identification with the unit.

When the unit lost money in FY2005 and FY2006, several respondents heard criticism from outsiders that "the marine hull insurance unit has no *raison d'être*" as a "petty unit," whose employees were "useless narrow specialists." Some worked alone in the regional non-marine insurance branch, where they received no performance recognition nor formed ties among non-marine branch employees, but they were welcomed at the marine hull unit conferences and regarded the marine hull unit as "homeland." Although criticism from outsiders reinforced the unit's negative image, the unit contributed to their self-concept and that reinforced their identification with it. These employees were indignant over criticism and realized more keenly the unit's importance to their self-concept.

Not all respondents suffered these insults, but they affected the unit identification of those who had. Conversely, some respondents received affirmation from people outside the unit via comments such as "Jobs in the marine hull insurance unit look cool." These affirmations bolstered their identification with the unit.

5. Discussion

5.1 Theoretical Framework for Long-term Aspects of Identification

We examined the marine hull insurance unit of Tokio Marine as a case that illustrates the long-term dynamics of

employee identification. We now consider the supporting theoretical framework indicated in Figure 1.

Although some new employees sought assignment to the unit because of its image, what was important for them in the early stage was having their performance recognized by colleagues and they themselves perceive this. We call such inter-subjective recognition “*occupational ability recognition*.” When employees form collegial ties and they themselves perceive this, we call such inter-subjective recognition “*affective recognition*.” Both are satisfied as employees acclimate to their work, are recognized for performance, and form collegial ties. Their initial identification with the unit occurs at that point.

In contrast, employees whose occupational ability recognition and affective recognition were not satisfied entered a state of dis-identification. Therefore, occupational ability recognition and affective recognition are necessary for positive identification with unit. As necessary conditions, they are antecedents for employees’ initial identification with a unit.

Employees whose occupational ability recognition and affective recognition are satisfied and who identify with the unit adopt its values. The unit’s value preferences become their own and are tied to the motive of self-enhancement. Value preference joins occupational ability recognition and affective recognition as antecedents of identification. Three types of values are objects of value preference: “*interest value*” derived from doing interesting work, “*utility value*” derived from the prospects for career advancement, and “*attainment value*” derived from associating with a unit that has a desirable image. These three constructs appear in the study by Eccles, Adler, Futterman, Goff, Kaczala, Meece, & Midgley (1983) and are redefined for business organizations. How and which values are preferred depends on the employee. Even if employees have reservations about the unit meeting their significant values, disidentification does not occur. However, ambivalent identification occurs as long as occupational ability recognition and affective recognition sustain employees’ identification with the unit. Thus occupational ability recognition and affective recognition are necessary and sufficient conditions for identification. Although value preferences reinforce identification or render it ambivalent, it is neither necessary nor sufficient for identification but merely a contributing factor.

We refer to employees who wish to develop their juniors and provide significant value to society as having a “*value proposition orientation*.” Only some employees identify with a unit because they have a value proposition orientation. Unlike occupational ability recognition, affective recognition, and value preference, a value proposition orientation arises at the end of a career. Employees need greater maturity before deriving value from transmitting their experience, skills, and beliefs to others and providing significant value brought about by enough experience. Unit identification based on a value proposition orientation depends on whether the employee consciously regards belonging to the unit as indispensable for satisfying that orientation. Although a value proposition orientation can reinforce identification and multiply the factors of identification, disidentification and ambivalent identification arise without it. A value proposition orientation is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for identification but only a contributing factor.

| Antecedents | Timing | | Importance for Identification | When not satisfied | Influencing Relationship with the outside |
|-----------------------------------|----------|---------|------------------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------|
| | Entrants | Matured | | | |
| Occupational Ability Recognition | → | | Necessary and Sufficient Condition | Disidentification | Labeling |
| Affective Recognition | → | | Necessary and Sufficient Condition | Disidentification | Labeling |
| Value Preference | → | | Contributing Factor | Ambivalent Identification | Insult and Criticism to a Unit (or Positive Evaluation) |
| Interest Value | | | | | |
| Utility Value Attainment Value | | | | | |
| Value Proposition Orientation | → | | Contributing Factor | none | — |

Figure 1. Typological Framework of Identification with an Organizational Unit

In sum, factors that determine identification with a unit become more diverse as antecedent factors multiply or ambivalence arises. First, identification based on occupational ability recognition and affective recognition, both of which are necessary and sufficient for identification, occurs during the initial stage of associating with a unit. If these antecedents are lacking, dis-identification occurs. If identification based on these necessary and sufficient antecedents is maintained, dimensions of identification multiply according to value preferences, a contributing factor to identification. If a unit does not satisfy employees' values, ambivalent identification occurs. If identification based on the contributing factor of a value proposition orientation subsequently occurs, the dimensions of identification multiply. These aspects of identification are not fixed permanently. They change as the unit's environment changes.

5.2 Relationships with Outsiders Affect Identification

Our framework also encompasses the influence of negative relationships with persons outside the unit.

The first influence is labeling. When societies deem people "deviants" and exclude them, those so labeled seek other deviants as congeners. If society continually rejects them, they amplify their deviant behavior and furnish their identity as deviants (Becker, 1963). Employees spurned for their membership in a unit are in the situation of deviants. Labeling infringes occupational ability recognition and affective recognition and reinforces unit identification because it bestows recognition on its members.

Second is the influence of insults and criticism. Positive appraisals from persons outside the unit enhance identification with it by enhancing attainment value, as noted in the literature of social identity theory. However, insults and criticism do not exert a linear negative influence on unit identification. Employees of Tokio Marine's marine hull unit were indignant over criticism of their unit while simultaneously being aware of its negative perception. Their response shows that interest values and/or attainment values had become incorporated into their self-concepts, and criticism reinforced their identification with the unit.

To sum up, negative external relationships exert complex influences on identification. Although not all respondents experienced labeling, insults and criticism, we should acknowledge that their influence is multifaceted.

5.3 Subsumption of Antecedent Factors in Existing Research

We now compare our theoretical framework and the antecedents of organizational identification in existing research.

Recent organizational identification research grounded in identity theory assumes people are motivated by self-enhancement (Takao, 2013). Our framework subsumes that assumption within value preferences. Antecedents related to interaction with coworkers (e.g., interactional justice and organizational socialization) are subsumed under occupational ability recognition and affective recognition. Ours is the first study to address the relation between a value proposition orientation and identification.

Existing research has examined antecedents of identification serially, and statically. Our theoretical framework positions them as elements in the long-term dynamic of identification and explains how and when they influence it.

6. Conclusion

6.1 Theoretical Contribution

This study makes three theoretical contributions to the literature. First, it presents a framework based on a case study to explain the long-term dynamics of identification with an organizational unit. As previous research treats aspects of identification as local and static, this is the first study to offer a long-term theoretical typological framework. The framework shows that occupational ability recognition and affective recognition are essential, necessary, and sufficient antecedents to identifying with a unit initially. Insofar as occupational ability recognition and affective recognition are satisfied, identification with a unit persists. Thereafter, value preferences multiply the dimensions of identification, reinforce identification, or render identification ambivalent. Ultimately, a value proposition orientation reinforces identification and multiplies the dimensions of identification as contributing factors.

Second, this study exposes the influence of negative input from persons outside the unit. Most research examines relations between an organization or group and its members or interactions among members. This study shows the complex influence of interactions between members and outsiders.

Third, this study positions several antecedents of identification in one theoretical framework that explains the long-term dynamics of identification with a unit. Previous studies treated these antecedents of identification respectively, locally, and statically.

6.2 Practical Implication

The study's practical contribution is in proposing a viewpoint that simultaneously maintains employees' unit identification in changing environments and forms adaptive business units when operating environments change. First, members' identification with a unit can be maintained in changing environments through continuous occupational recognition and affective recognition. However, the persistence of shared values does not necessarily engender or sustain identification among all employees and may impede adaptation in changing environments. Managers can create business units that meet environmental change by fostering diversity in values and strengthening a value proposition orientation among all employees, not merely senior employees who developed it as they mature.

6.3 Limitation

This research derives from a single case study and hasty generalization should be avoided. However, we presented a typological framework that hypothesizes about multiple aspects of identification rather than generalizing about patterns of identification. Second, this study examines a unit, not an organization, and the long-term dynamics of identification with organizations might differ from identification with units. We noted the importance of interaction with coworkers for identification with a unit. Perhaps such interactions characterize identification with lower-level groups, following Olkkonen and Lipponen (2006), who note a correlation between interactional justice and identification with work groups. Future organization-level research would enhance knowledge about the long-term dynamics of identification and refine insights by comparing organizational and unit identification.

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Notes

Note1. As an exception, Ashforth, Kreiner, Clark, and Fugate (2007) studied the relation between “dirty work” and identification.