Identity patterns in diverse workgroups

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Chapter 5
Summary and discussion

Members from diverse workgroups face the challenge to work effectively together. The benefits associated with diversity of bringing in different perspectives on problem solving tasks may be overshadowed by a lack of cohesion and by subgroup forming due to the clashing of different identities within the team. Eventually, this can result in lowered team identification and work group members refraining from working together cooperatively and being less satisfied with the team (see also Van Knippenberg, 2004; Riordan & Shore, 1997; O'Reilly et al., 1989). The chapters presented in this dissertation aimed to provide a theoretical and empirical basis on how to overcome these negative outcomes of diversity and may provide organizations with guidelines to manage potential barriers in diverse work teams. I showed that differences in identity orientation fulfil an important role in how individuals think, feel and (intent to) behave in a diverse group context. More specifically, the present findings suggest that when diverse work group members frame the social context in terms of interpersonal relationships (i.e. relational identity orientation), social integration problems associated with diversity, such as a lack of identification, cooperation difficulties, and reduced subjective well-being in the team, are less of an issue.

In this final chapter, I will first summarize the main empirical findings presented in Chapters 2, 3 and 4. On the basis of these findings, an overview of the theoretical contributions will be given. In addition, some limitations and guidelines for future research on diversity issues in teams will be outlined. Finally, practical contributions will be discussed.

Summary of the main findings

The present dissertation builds upon Brewer and Gardner’s extended model of the self (1996), in which three different self foci are distinguished - i.e. a self-concept that differentiates the self from others (personal identity orientation), a self concept that reflects connectedness to other individuals (relational identity orientation) or a self concept that reflects connectedness to significant social groups (collective identity orientation). The central proposition of this thesis is that a relational identity orientation can buffer potentially negative effects of diversity on social integration outcomes. Because identity orientations may reflect both states triggered by the context and stable personality based tendencies, I focused on identity orientations in diverse work groups from both a situational and an individual differences perspective.
In Chapter 2, I described the development and validation of an individual difference measure of identity orientation - the Identity Orientation Scale (IOS). Up till now, attempts to construct scales that distinguish between individual differences in personal, relational, and collective identity orientations have not yielded clear results with regard to reasonable independent operationalizations of the three different self foci. The two studies reported in Chapter 2 showed that there was moderate to strong support for the internal structure and validity of our measure. More specifically, the three subscales of the IOS appeared to be internally reliable and moderately stable over time. In addition, the different self foci seemed to tap into distinctive constructs, as the three identity orientations showed different patterns of correlations with related psychological constructs. First, our measure of personal identity orientation was most strongly correlated with dimensions reflecting independence of the self such as the Big Five factor Autonomy and Singelis’ (1994) construct of independent self construal. Second, the relational identity orientation measure was most strongly related to dimensions reflecting a focus on interrelatedness and interpersonal care, such as relational interdependent self construal, communal orientation and the interpersonal traits of the Big five factors Agreeableness and Extraversion. Finally, our measure of collective identity orientation seems to capture an orientation towards collectives as indicated by strong relations with (the identity dimension of) collective self esteem and with the indicator of collectivism and collective interdependent self.

In Chapter 3, the link between identity orientation and social integration outcomes in diverse workgroups was outlined and empirically tested in three experiments. The central aim was to examine whether a relational identity orientation can promote prosocial tendencies towards members of other subgroups within the same workgroup. Relational identity orientation was measured as an individual difference variable, as well as a situational factor by means of priming. In addition, the interplay between personality and situation in predicting prosocial tendencies towards fellow workgroup members was studied. The results of three studies supported a priori predictions that an individual’s focus on relationships, i.e. a relational identity orientation, rather than on larger, more impersonal collectives or social categories, i.e. a collective identity orientation or an individuated self view, i.e. personal identity orientation (Brewer & Gardner, 1996) promotes prosocial behavior towards workgroup members from a different social group. More specifically, the first study showed that high trait relationally oriented individuals, as measured by our IOS scale, were more willing to cooperate with a fellow team member from a different subgroup compared to low trait relationally oriented individuals. Consistently, the second study showed that the
induction of a relational identity orientation by means of priming leads to a higher willingness to help such “outgroup” members compared to the induction of a personal identity orientation or collective identity orientation. In other words, when people conceive themselves primarily in terms of their relationships with others, they are more willing to help fellow workgroup members from different social subgroups than when they perceive themselves as unique individuals or as group members. The third study replicated the findings of both studies and additionally showed that the strongest tendency to cooperate with outgroup members occurs when high trait relationally oriented individuals were primed with a relational identity orientation. In other words, if the situation prescribes a relational identity orientation perspective, particularly those individuals high in trait relational identity orientation will be sensitive to this contextual need and as a result will be less hesitant to cooperate with team members from a different social group. These series of studies suggest that a focus on interpersonal bonds, either as a relatively stable trait or induced by the context, may be the key to break down barriers between subgroups within diverse work teams.

Finally, Chapter 4 provides insight into the role of a relational identity orientation as an alternative to contemporary strategies to reduce negative social integration outcomes in diverse work groups, due to group members’ strong identification with self relevant dimensions such as gender, ethnicity and age. Interventions aimed at reducing negative effects of this subgroup forming mostly focused on shifting the focus from subgroup identities to an overarching team identity or a combination of both a team and subgroup identity (dual identity). Conversely, the central aim of this chapter was to examine whether a relational identity orientation could preserve well-being in diverse work groups, under conditions of a strong subgroup identity salience. In addition, we aimed for an actual interaction setting to test our proposition with regard to the moderating effect of a relational identity orientation on diversity outcomes. We therefore conducted a field experiment, in which male and female participants worked together on a task and either a gender identity, superordinate team identity or dual identity was made salient. The results showed that well-being was higher for diverse work groups in which the team identity was made salient compared to diverse work groups in which a subgroup identity was made salient. In addition, high trait relationally oriented individuals appeared to be more satisfied in a diverse work group than low relationally oriented individuals. More importantly, this effect appeared to be the strongest under conditions of a strong subgroup gender identity. Thus, a relational
identity orientation seems to buffer the lower experienced well-being associated with a strong subgroup identity.

Together, these empirical chapters reveal that (1) both individual differences in relational identity orientation and relational identity orientation induced by the situation can prevent potential negative social integration outcomes in terms of prosocial tendencies and well-being, (2) stressing the importance of a relational identity orientation seems to be a viable alternative to contemporary strategies in reducing negative effects of diversity. In the following section I will consider the theoretical implications of these findings.

Theoretical implications and contributions

In the following paragraphs I will give an overview of the theoretical implications of the present dissertation. Based on the findings reported in the three chapters, these contributions are organized around the conceptualization of identity orientation and how it influences subsequent perceptions, intentions and behavior. Furthermore, relational identity orientation as a construct is compared to other, more attitudinal constructs that also predict positive social integration outcomes in a diverse work context. Finally, the relationship between personality based and situationally induced identity orientation and its interaction is outlined.

Identity orientation and diversity outcomes

As stated in the previous section, the present dissertation was built upon the extended model of the self by Brewer and Gardner (1996). Traditional approaches to research on the self and identities have distinguished between the personal self and the social self (e.g. Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Markus & Kitayama, 1991; Singelis, 1994). In line with Brewer and Gardner's proposition that the social self can be subdivided in a relational and a collective component, the series of studies presented in this thesis clearly showed that it seems feasible to make a distinction between these aspects of the social self. This can be inferred from the empirical distinction from both concepts in Chapter 2, in which we showed a clear distinct correlation pattern for each identity orientation with related (personality) constructs. Collectively oriented individuals seem to be more focused on framing the social situation in terms of group memberships in which other individuals are depersonalized and regarded as exemplars of social groups, as indicated for example by high correlations with collective self esteem and collective interdependent self. Additional evidence for this was found in the second study of Chapter 3, which showed that the induction of a collective identity was strongly associated
with categorizing similar and dissimilar fellow work group members as typical exemplars of their social group. In contrast, relationally oriented individuals seem to be more focused on framing the social situation in terms of connectedness with other individuals irrespective of their group membership. This does not necessarily imply that group memberships are denied, but that (dissimilar) others are approached as individuals rather than as members of a social category. The finding that the induction of a relational identity orientation elicits less categorizing tendencies compared to a collective identity orientation strengthens this notion. Overall, an important strength of the present dissertation seems its contribution to the establishment of the theoretical notions with regard to the extended model of the self by empirically showing that the different self foci are distinct and lead to different outcomes in a diverse work group context.

It must be noted that although a relational identity orientation is strongly advocated in this thesis, this does not imply that this orientation may be the most effective identity orientation in every social situation. In this regard, we found some evidence that a collective identity orientation was more strongly associated with prosocial behavior towards members of one’s own subgroup than a relational identity orientation. This may imply that when the focus is on one’s own ingroup, collective identities may proven to be very effective to strengthen positive outcomes for a work group in which the ingroup identity coincides with the overall team identity, such as groups which are relatively homogenous with regard to group members’ characteristics, features, norms and values. This reasoning seems in line with theoretical notions and empirical evidence showing a positive relationship between strong group identification and positive group outcomes (e.g. Hogg & Terry, 2000; 2001; Haslam, Powell, & Turner, 2000). One could therefore argue that the composition of the group determines whether a focus on either a relational or a collective identity orientation is more effective. Relational identities may be more suitable in heterogeneous groups whereas collective identities may suit homogenous groups better.

Relational identity orientation and attitudes towards diversity
An important finding of the present dissertation was that a relational identity orientation predicted positive social integration outcomes in a diverse workgroup context. How do the results with regard to this relationship compare to previous research that established positive links between relevant constructs and diversity outcomes? Previous studies have found that constructs that encompass attitudinal components, such as appreciation and attitude towards diversity (Harquail & Cox, 1991; Nakui, Paulus & Van der Zee, 2008), openmindedness (Van...
der Zee & Van Oudenhoven, 2000; 2001; Arthur & Bennett, 1995), and general (negative) prejudice such as right wing authoritarianism (Adorno et al., 1950) are linked to diversity outcomes. In this regard, and in line with the present findings for the relational identity orientation, positive diversity attitudes, openmindedness, and low prejudice have been found to lead to positive perceptions and interactions in a diverse work context (see Van der Zee et al., 2004; Van der Zee, Paulus & Vos, 2008; Straus, Connerley & Ammermann, 2003). Although a relational identity orientation seems associated with the same positive outcomes, I believe that that this construct is fundamentally different than these attitudinal constructs.

Relationally oriented individuals are primarily focused on establishing relations with others regardless of their own opinion and evaluation of diversity. Thus positive interactions in a diverse context are fostered by a positive stance towards interaction and engaging interpersonal relations with others (see also Cross et al. 2002). Eventually, positive interactions in a diverse work context may lead to more appreciation of diversity for these individuals. For example, Peter likes to get to know others. He does not have a pronounced opinion on others who are dissimilar to him. Avoiding interactions with dissimilar others contravenes his focus on interpersonal relations and thus he interacts with everyone, regardless of their background. Eventually, his positive experiences with dissimilar others in turn shaped his positive attitudes towards them.

In contrast, attitudes towards diversity, openmindedness and prejudice all encompass an evaluative component of others. Consequently, positive interactions in a diverse context are fostered by a positive stance towards diversity. For high scorers on these constructs reactions to diverse workgroups are driven by low prejudiced attitudes rather than a fundamental interest in establishing interpersonal bonds with others. In sum, although effects of a relational identity orientation seem to share the same diversity outcomes with attitudinal constructs, the underlying process which leads to these outcomes seems fundamentally different.

Interaction of trait and state identity orientation

An important contribution of this dissertation, in comparison with earlier diversity research, lies in uncovering the interplay between a personality based identity orientation and a situationally induced identity orientation in the prediction of social integration outcomes. I presented two different models on how both personality and situation may interact with each other. First, the ‘sensitivity’ model (Van der Zee & Perugini, 2006; Van Heck, 1997; Bargh, 1986), outlined in Chapter 3, predicts that individuals with specific personalities tend to frame
situations in terms of their characteristic motives which will make them more sensitive to
cues that are consistent with those frames. This sensitivity to cues in the context will make
certain behavioral alternatives become more salient whereas others become less salient. In
support of this model, the present findings revealed that the strongest tendency to cooperate
with diverse workgroup members occurred when high trait relational oriented individuals
were primed with a relational identity orientation. Alternatively, the ‘buffer’ model (see Van
Heck, 1997) predicts that a trait identity orientation may buffer tendencies evoked by
identities induced by the situation. Results reported in Chapter 4, support this model. The
induction of a subgroup identity can be regarded as a collective identity prime that obstructs
positive responses to different subgroups. High trait relationally oriented individuals were
capable of maintaining high levels of well-being despite induced subgroup identification.
Taken together, these findings suggest that both models seem viable in predicting how trait
and situationally induced identity orientation interact with each other in explaining how
individuals experience a diverse workgroup context. This is in line with the idea that
personality and context may interact with each other in various ways (see also Friedman et al.
1993; Van Heck, 1997).

Directions for future research

In the present dissertation, I investigated the benefits of a relational identity orientation in
diverse workgroups. I have replicated the main findings in different studies, using different
experimental methods. Although the main aim of experimental studies is not to obtain
external validity, reports of experimental research tend to elicit questions whether results can
be generalized to a real life context. This seems particularly relevant to the scenario studies
described in Chapter 3. Although the scenario sketches reflected situations that are connected
to real life experiences of the participants, the situations were hypothetical and their
responses reflected intentions rather than behaviors. This leaves open the question whether
the results can be generalized to behavior in diverse workgroups with real interactants.
However, the “real” interactive task chosen in the experiment in Chapter 4 addressed
problems dealt with by temporary teams in a work context (Thompson & Coovert, 2003) and
participants seemed engaged in their task during the process it, thus supporting sufficient
psychological realism (e.g. Berkowitz & Donnerstein, 1982). Nevertheless, the results need to
be replicated in research among teams in actual organizations. In this regard a recent field
study among 809 employees from a large international banking company yielded promising
outcomes with regard to differential effects of the personal, relational and collective identity orientation (Vos, Van der Zee & Van Voorst-Vader, 2009). This study showed that a relational identity orientation among bank employees was more strongly related to trust and organizational commitment as compared to a personal or collective identity orientation. Although this study was not situated in a diverse work context, it seems to support my idea that a relational identity orientation may strengthen trust in fellow organizational members and in turn elicit stronger cooperation tendencies and higher well-being.

The series of studies presented in this thesis clearly suggest that identity orientations have an impact on social integration outcomes. Next, it is important to understand what the underlying processes are by which an identity orientation shapes prosocial behavior and well-being. Chapter 3 provided some insight in the potential role of categorization tendencies as a mediating variable that could explain why a relational identity orientation leads to more outgroup helping compared to a collective identity orientation. Relationally induced individuals appeared to be less inclined to categorize others compared to collectively induced individuals. Furthermore, the extent to which participants categorize outgroup members as prototypical exemplars of their group correlated negatively with the willingness to help the target in need. In addition, other constructs may explain this underlying mechanism as well. For example, Cross (2000) showed that a relational identity orientation was positively related to empathetic concern for others. Such feelings of empathy often trigger a goal of improving the welfare of others in need (Batson, 1991). In other words, relationally oriented individuals may be more likely to experience feelings of empathy when they are confronted by someone in need, which in turn makes them more willing to help them. Future studies may further elaborate on the mechanisms by which an identity orientation shapes positive social integration outcomes.

In the present dissertation, the focus was on social category diversity. We showed that a relational identity orientation elicits positive outcomes for different social category dimensions – i.e. gender, nationality and sorority membership. However, the focus of the present research was not diversity based on acquired, less visible individual attributes, such as functional expertise, skills or educational background. Teams based on differences in expertise have the potential to be more creative and innovative than more homogenous teams (Horwitz & Horwitz, 2007; Ling, 1990; Nakui & Paulus, 2007). Nevertheless, for such a team to flourish, team members should recognize they are interdependent with regard to combining everyone’s expertise for task fulfilling. In future studies it may seem interesting to further address effects of a relational identity orientation in cognitively diverse work groups.
As relationally oriented individuals perceive themselves to be more connected to other individuals and display an interest in “get to know” others, they may be more likely to detect other team members’ skills and expertise. They may also be more likely to perceive that they need others to accomplish a task. Thus, the focus on interdependency, which lies at the core of a relational identity orientation, may cause individuals to see themselves more complementary with fellow team members.

Practical implications and contributions

Despite its limitations, the present research may have important implications for how practitioners may effectively manage work teams in which members from different backgrounds have to work together. I will discuss potential benefits of relational identities from a contextual approach in terms of guidelines for interventions in diverse work teams. In addition, I will consider how organizations can capitalize on individual differences in identity orientation to improve the benefits of diversity.

Many interventions in an organizational context are aimed to promote collective identities in order to achieve a feeling of oneness among employees. For example, team building sessions are implemented to reduce fragmentation and procure a strong sense of unity within teams, departments or the organization as a whole. Although creating this feeling of oneness has appeared to be successful in enhancing (team) performance (e.g. Gundlach et al., 2006) and organizational commitment (e.g. Ouwerkerk, Ellemers & de Gilder, 1999), some scholars have argued that the building of superordinate identities through recategorization may be difficult to attain, since they can be very context dependent, require strong unifying goals, and may not be appropriate for large groups (see Brewer, 1991, Brewer & Brown, 1998). The series of studies in this dissertation suggest promotion of a relational identity orientation as a viable alternative to contemporary strategies in reducing tensions in diverse work groups. The question remains how this can be achieved. Chapter 3 showed that a relational identity orientation is quite easily activated by letting individuals think about and express themselves in terms of their relatedness with others. This priming method is fairly abstract in the sense that it activates a social construct without providing a context. I expect that the activation of a relational identity orientation which is directly linked to the social context in which individuals are working will be better internalized in the self among employees, and therefore may guide thoughts, feelings and behavior more strongly. In this regard, organizations, and more specifically managers, could promote a relational identity
orientation by emphasizing dyadic task structures, in which employees have different and interdependent roles, and rewarding dyadic performance, such as mentoring of others (see also Brickson, 2000). The advantage of creating such structures is that they do not enhance the significance of demographic group boundaries. Furthermore, the promotion of a relational identity orientation does not require group members to abandon their subgroup identities. They are simply stimulated to frame a social interaction context in terms of connectedness between individuals rather than regarding them as exemplars of their group.

Individuals differ in the way they react to diversity. Previous research has shown positive links between personality traits, such as social initiative, emotional stability and attitudes towards diversity, and effective functioning in a diverse work context (e.g., Van der Zee & Van der Gang, 2007; Luijters & Van der Zee, 2006; Van der Zee, Paulus, Vos & Parthasarathy, 2009). The series of studies presented in this dissertation showed that individual differences in relational identity orientation are an important predictor of procuring social integration outcomes in diverse workgroups. Particularly high trait relationally oriented individuals were more willing to cooperate with fellow team members and were more satisfied in their group and thus seem to be able to work more adequately in a diverse work team. The IOS as an assessment device of an individual’s relational identity orientation may thus be useful as a diagnostic tool in the context of recruitment and selection of employees who are required to operate in a diverse work context.

Conclusion

As organizations increasingly operate in a multinational and multicultural context, understanding how diversity in the composition of organizational groups affects outcomes is of main importance. It has become a challenge for organization to grasp the complexity of bringing together a diverse set of people into work groups and harvest the potential advantages of a heterogeneous workforce. This dissertation shows the importance of identity orientations in predicting social integration outcomes in diverse work groups. More specifically, this dissertation outlines that a strong orientation on interpersonal bonds can procure well-being and prosocial behavior towards fellow team members. In addition, this thesis provides further insights and guidelines on how to manage diversity by emphasizing on relational identities in diverse work groups.