

# Social identity perspective for negotiation



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Critically discuss how the social identity perspective can help negotiation in organisations'

There are many ways in which the social identity perspective can help the process of negotiation in organisations. When agents – people who work for an organisation – consider themselves to be insiders in the organisation group they tend to work harder. Creating an environment in which workers feel they are a central part of the organisation is thus desirable and achievable; there are potential methods organisations can use to achieve this.

Social identity perspective concerns how individuals identify themselves as part of various groups and means that an individual tends to have a bias towards other members of the same group as them as opposed a member of a different groups. In this essay I shall start by analysing the key theories concerning social identity perspective before providing a broader critical analysis.

Social identity theory. Social identity theory concerns how individuals identity themselves as being part of a certain group, and why they do this. Social identity theory states that people tend to classify themselves concerning certain categories(Hau Siu Chow, 2004). For example these categories can concern race or gender – or potentially in some cases they might concern a work organsiation. Rubin (2002) states that a “ successful inter-group bias creates or protects relatively high in-group status, thereby providing a positive social identity for in-group members and satisfying their need for positive self-esteem.”

Dual concern model of negotiation. This model of negotiation emphasises concern for others.

Individual difference approach. This approach concerns people's individual behavior, and how one individual's behavior may differ from that of another. People can potentially differ from one another in many aspects of their personality, for example in levels of self-esteem.

Motivational Approach. Concerns the various ways that individuals can be motivated to act in a certain way concerning social identity perspective. One way of motivating your staff is to provide them with challenging work. The more challenging a task is then the more motivated staff will be to go and achieve a successful outcome in that given task (Chalofsky, 2003).

Goal-setting theory. Goal-setting theory assesses the impact which goals may have on individual performance. This theory states that if an organisation sets easily attainable goals then this will tend to correlate with lower performance by the individual. This is also the case if these goals are vague or not easily recognisable. More specific goals tend to result in a higher level of performance and greater effectiveness from the individual. A narrowing of the attention of the individual is helpful in achieving this end. Goal-setting theory works on the belief that specific goals tend to encourage workers to work with persistence in the face of setbacks. Goal-setting is a classic motivational tool.

Expectancy theory. Expectancy theory concerns the processes an individual goes through when making choices. Individuals tend to believe that putting in more effort will result in better job performance. This theory states that

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systems should tie awards closely to performance. Neff (2002) states that “ Motivation depends on how much an individual wants something (the strength of the valence) relative to other things, and the perceived effort-reward probability (expectancy) that they will get it.”

Control theory. This theory concerns the attempts by human beings to control what they perceive as being the otherness of their surroundings, and is also known as choice theory. The effectiveness of social forces and systems is seen as being very important. Deviant behavior occurs when external forces on behavior are weak. In order for an individual to be influenced positively they need strong social bonds. Strong bonds with society make deviance by the individual a more costly choice and hence a choice which they will be less likely to make.

Feedback theory. This theory concerns feedback and how feedback can help to motivate individuals in an organisation. If the organisation works effectively as one then feedback can be very important in helping to forge a good collective identity. If an individual is encouraged to give feedback then it can be beneficial to both them and the individual.

Self-categorisation theory. This theory, which is also known as the social identity theory, states that we often put others and ourselves into categories. We compare our own ‘ in-group’ as being more favorable than an ‘ out-group’ (Rubin, 2002). What then occurs is an inter-personal inter-group continuum. An individual’s self-conception is developed and acts on numerous levels of inclusiveness. When comparing yourself to other groups you begin to see yourself as part of a group rather than an individual.

Empirical studies. Empirical studies are used in psychology for when ends are based on evidence and not just one theory.

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In the modern workplace awareness of social identity perspective can be incredibly useful. Various different in-groups may exist within one organisation. An increasingly important focus for organisations is the demography of their workforce. For example if there are members of several different social identity groups, then it is sensible for an organisation to, for example, have a demographically diverse committee membership. Diverse membership of this committee can help to achieve good negotiation. If one racial or gender group within an organisation feels that they are being marginalised in the decision-making process then this could potentially have a very negative impact on the organisation and how it functions as a whole. A situation where groups feel marginalised has the effect of reinforcing hierarchies within the organisation (Hau Siu Chow, 2002).

Many, such as Theresa Neff, feel that hierarchies need to be deemphasised in an organisation. In a hierarchical workforce those at the bottom are more likely to identify themselves as being opposed to those at the top (Neff, 2002). One way organisations try to get around this problem is by the re-labelling of job titles so that more menial or secretarial roles are given more aspirational job-titles. Organisations also now often rely more on workers to make decisions, and this helps to create a more efficiently motivated workforce (Chalofsky, 2003). This is against a backdrop in which social identity theory has become central to the way that organisations operate

(Scott, 2007), as more attention is paid by organisations to organisational psychology.

In the social identity perspective members of an 'in-group' tend to look more favourably on themselves than they do on members of an out-group (Rubin & Hazel, 2002). A group's commitment is vital to its central identity, and it is important that a group feel they have a central cause to work for within their organisation (Ellemars, Spears & Doosje, 2002). It is helpful if an organisation creates an example which means that the workforce feel they are working to a central plan. These types of psychology have its roots in the crowd psychology of Gustave Le Bon. An example of crowd psychology in action can be seen in the behaviour often seen in a football crowd where the group identity and the collective will of the crowd becomes stronger than mere individual will.

On an organisational level it is clearly important that the collective will of members of the organisation are taken into account. There is strong evidence that customer satisfaction has a direct correlation to the work satisfaction of an organisation which is serving them. In this way it is certainly beneficial to take into account the various aspects of social identity perspective. An example of a successful company with high levels of customer satisfaction is South West Airlines (SWA) which operates in America. In south West Airlines all employees are treated as part of the family, and SWA also bring a proactive approach to Union negotiations (Neff, 2002). There are several ways of helping to motivate staff for the potential of negotiation in organisations (Chalofsky, 2003).

When motivating an organisation goal-setting theory clearly has its advantages which are attractive. In order to commit to a goal as a worker you need to understand that what the significance of that goal is. Thus a strong organisational identity can help give a worker an idea of what these goals are. It is worth noting that the goals of a manager do not always align with the goals of an organisation as a whole, therefore producing a strong organisational identity can prevent these problems. One way in which organisational identification can be encouraged is through using techniques such as dress codes (Scott, 2007); this effectively helps to create an in group bias (Rubin & Hazel, 2002). Communication also needs to be encouraged within an organisation, to help those at the bottom share an identity with those at the top (Scott, 2007).

Social Identity theory has its problems though. When you look at expectancy theory, control theory and self-categorisation theory a central part of the motivation for the workforce is coercion. This coercion is manifested in the setting of targets, which is also encouraged by goal-setting theory. Setting targets is very much a coercive approach to motivation in an organisation, as it means that an individual is a failure if they do not reach that target. There is increased evidence that this is not the most effective way of working. Chalofsky (2003) argues that a central concern for workers is that they should have the opportunity to learn as they work. If opportunities for learning are involved this helps to create a happier work environment, and Chalofsky argues that the three intrinsic elements of work life are self, work and balance. The best way to motivate people in the long term is to provide them with challenging work (Neff, 2002); however the carrot can also be put

to good use along with the stick. Expectancy theory seems to suggest that a subtler approach by an organisation is desirable. As there are many different reasons why an individual may want to achieve a certain end, then an individual difference approach may be more valuable to negotiations within an organisation.

Whilst control theory on the one hand argues that individuals are naturally timid of their environment, it also appears to suggest that the solution is to put forward coercive methods to prevent an individual acting in a 'deviant' manner. The likes of Chalofsky do not go along with this theory, and believe that setting targets could be a waste of time. Enron is a good modern day example of where coercive methods of motivation have been used through the setting of specific targets. Whilst such targets can help to focus and motivate an individual, it can be damaging if they are competing in such a manner where failure is not at all desirable. This can turn out to be catastrophic for the organisation, as was the case for Enron. Individual difference theory appears to be a more sensible approach; however this seems to de-emphasise the collective social identity.

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In conclusion, applying the theory of social identity perspective can be highly beneficial in helping negotiation in organisations. If you create an atmosphere within your organisation in which workers are happy working as a whole then the organisation can become a fully-functioning in-group. However an important point which needs to be emphasised is that social identity is not always naturally occurring. There are several ways in which an



organisation can encourage divisiveness through social identity. If members of different racial or gender groups feel that there is not enough cooperation by members of other groups then this can damage an organisation. Similarly an ostentatiously hierarchical organisation can create an 'in-group' / 'out-group' divide between those on the top of the tree and those at the bottom. Whilst motivational approach emphasises the desirability of setting clearly defined targets, this too can create an in-group / out-group system which can negatively effect an organisation. Individuals tend to be motivated in different ways, and therefore it is helpful in an organisation to foster inclusiveness.

By creating a collective identity within an organisation social identity perspective can be of strong use to organisations in a negotiation scenario.

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