

# Social identity in the workplace sociology essay



**ASSIGN  
BUSTER**

Organisational research has used 'social identity' to explain organisational commitment, motivation, satisfaction, employee interaction and so on (Ashforth & Mael, 1996). Identity influences individual behaviour at work (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). The process whereby an individual attaches to a team involves cognitive, emotional and behavioural alignment (Tajfel, 1987). Social Group(s) and team(s), values and norms or attitudes may shaped an employee's social identity. Therefore, an analysis of social identification could provide an insights into employees' collective attitudes, thus intergroup relations.

Teamwork has become more prevalent in the workplace because of its contribution to organisational success (Cohen, 1997). Marolt (2002) notes that teamwork leads to higher quality of products, higher productivity, more frequent business processes and improves interpersonal relationships. Earlier research focused on physical factors that emphasises on productivity however a shift from productivity to human resources has occurred.

Management has intensified its enquiries more into the 'how' and 'why' of human behaviour. Indeed, since the work of Elton Mayo, T. N. Whitehead and W. J. Dickson in the 1930s, the significance of both the psychological and sociological factors which influence the members' motivation and behaviour in groups was identified (Miklavcic Sumanski et al., 2007).

The focus has shifted from the traditional approaches to managing people based around bureaucratic power structures, money-based incentives and Taylorist-style work organisation to human relations. The role of individual, motivated workers and fostering the involvement of the employees to the

organisations are of significant importance. Recently, there has been growing interest in organisational identity which centers on how employees derive their sense of self from organisations and how this self-definition generates behaviour that increases group effectiveness (Reade, 2001; Hogg & Terry, 2000; Benkhoff, 1997).

In response to the challenge of globalisation and the increased need for rapid response to meet customer expectations, organisations are modifying their conventional structures in teams in preference to those described as 'virtual' (Herzog 2001). Employees are distributed across time, space, and organisational boundaries, work together with links strengthened by the webs of information and communication technologies (ICTs) (DeSanctis & Poole 1997; Lipnack & Stamps 1997). In contrast to the benefits enjoyed, one of the challenges that organisations have faced in supporting virtual teamwork is to develop and strengthen the ties that bind the dispersed employees (DeSanctis & Monge 1999; Wiesenfeld et al 1999). In addition, conflict is found to be inevitable in distributed teams and is hard to isolate and manage (Hinds & Bailey, 2003; Mannix, et al., 2002). Studies of virtual teams have reported significant conflict among team members as the members encounter difficulties in coming to terms with different perspectives, unshared information and tensions resulting from distance and diversity (see Armstrong & Cole, 2002; Cramton, 2001).

When a shared identity is prominent in teams, there tend to be higher degrees of loyalty, trust and cohesion of team members in promoting the interest of the group as a whole (Brewer & Miller, 1996). In virtual teams, identification is important as it promotes a sense of togetherness (Raghuram

<https://assignbuster.com/social-identity-in-the-workplace-sociology-essay/>

1996), thus identifying the antecedents and consequences of the identification process is necessary for the management of virtual teamwork (Wiesenfeld et al, 2001).

This thesis seeks insights into the formation of identity and intergroup relations in virtual teams. The purpose of the current study is to use social identity perspective as a lens to analyse the psychological process and the motivational aspect of social identification, relating these to the social and virtual team context and investigating the impact of employee' identification on their intergroup and conflict-handling behaviour.

Over the years, there has been an increasing awareness of the need for a further understanding of group processes, especially with contributions from social psychology (e. g. Haslam, 2001; Wegge, 2000; van Dick, 2001; van Knippenberg & van Schie, 2000). Social psychology has long been studying how people interact in and between social groups (Batt & Doellgast, 2004). Thus, the analysis of the current work is grounded in the social psychological domain. The social identity perspective in social psychology has its conceptual origins in Henri Tajfel's Social Identity Theory (SIT) where social identity, categorisation and comparison are the core concepts of the theory (Tajfel, 1972, Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The empirical work was carried out in four organisations in different industrial sectors operating virtual teams. In total, seven multicultural virtual teams were examined.

This chapter provides an overview of the theoretical and empirical terrain that informs the study and is organised as follows: First, the development and evolution of small groups and teams in workplace is briefly presented, to

inform the readers on how teamwork has been at the heart of the wave of efforts to improve productivity, job quality and the working condition of employees. Next, the different perspectives of studies in teamwork and organisational behaviour (i. e. sociology, psychology and social psychology) are reviewed in order to draw out the common themes and weaknesses, with the aim of justifying the relevance of the chosen perspective for the current study. Third, the theoretical underpinnings of social identity and its explication as found in social identity theory are outlined. Included in this discussion is the complementary theory of social categorisation, which was developed to elaborate the cognitive process of forming a social identity. It is important to stress at this stage that the social identity theory's focus in groups and its concept of how an employee's social self emerges in the group provide key insights in employees' collective behaviour and the interrelations in the virtual teams. Finally, the philosophical foundation, methodology and methods chosen for the current study are briefly presented, followed by the organisation of the thesis.

## **1. 2 An overview of team working**

Teams are replacing individuals as the basic unit of work organisations. Teamwork has been adopted widely in manufacturing – e. g. in the automotive industry (Kuipers et al, 2004) as well as in other areas of business (e. g. within clerical areas) (Kinnie et al., 1998). In general, work teams are found both in manufacturing and service settings – e. g. clothing manufacturing teams (see Batt & Appelbaum, 1995) and audit teams (see Gupta et al., 1994). Traditionally, work teams are under the scrutiny and control of supervisors whereby work processes, resources and decisions are

informed by them. More recently, self-managed, autonomous, empowered work teams are gaining favour because of their benefit gained in cost reduction, enhanced productivity, product quality and its work environment where members are involved in decision making (Cohen & Bailey, 1997).

Although teamworking became more important and attractive as a management technique in the twentieth century, much of the interest in teams and teamwork can be traced back to the fashion for reorganising production processes into semi-autonomous work groups in the 1970s and 1980s (Thompson & McHugh, 2002), or even a number of earlier distinct traditions of which include the socio-technical, the ' Humanisation of Work', the employee involvement trajectory (Batt & Doellgast, 2004).

The benefit of group working on morale (reduced boredom) and productivity (increased output) was identified by researchers at the Industrial Fatigue Research Board (IFBR) in the UK via the Hawthorne studies of 1924, followed by the work of consultants at the Tavistock Institute of Human Relations in London in the 1950s. In the Tavistock research, the social, psychological and organisational advantages of autonomous group working were identified. From then on, the concept of team working was adopted as a management technique and the notion of autonomous group working was eagerly embraced by the Quality of Working Life (QWL) movement during the 1960s and 1970s. The focus had been on morale, and the implications of boredom for job satisfaction, productivity, absenteeism and labour turnover (Mueller, et al, 2000).

In the 1980s, the use of team working was broadened as fundamental to the competitive advantage of reducing boredom and absenteeism, particularly in relation to the quality of product and customer service, problem solving and so on (Buchanan, 1994). This led to the introduction of Quality Circle (QC) and the subsequent prevalence of self-managing teams. In the late 1980s, the 'high performance work team' (HPWT) was adopted to promote greater levels of involvement, commitment and skill development for the employees. At that time, team working was a popular management technique and the concept of flexible, empowerment teamwork was rediscovered.

As Procter and Mueller (2000) note, the utilisation of work team was still very much in manufacturing industry, particularly in the automotive sector until the mid-1980s. In the late 1980s, such application expanded further to service industries and the public sector – e. g. the telecommunication sector, insurance sector, the software industry and so on. In the 1990s, the use of management teams is expanding in response to the turbulence and complexity of the global business environment. As organisations seek to expand globally, there is great demand in providing rapid respond to meet customer expectation and to cope with the dynamic business environments. Hence, organisations are modifying their conventional structures in teams (Herzog, 2001).

With the development of ICTs, the workforce dynamic and working patterns are changing and the use of virtual teams became increasingly important. The creative use of new ICT capabilities has broken traditional spatial boundaries and allowed organisations to experiment with new working practices and business models (Robbins, 2003).

### **1. 3 Different perspectives in studying teamwork and organisational behaviour**

The current work seeks insights into intergroup relations in virtual teams, in particular the employees' attachment to teams and their collective behaviour. In a nutshell, this research lies in the field of organisational behaviour, whereby it investigates the impact of individual, group and structure on behaviour within the organisations. There are various academic disciplines which are constituted to research people behaviour in organisations. The predominant disciplines are psychology, sociology, social psychology, anthropology and political science (Robbins, 2005). Although the current research is based on the concepts of social psychology, it is worthwhile discussing how other disciplines influence research on employee behaviour and teamwork. The discussion will be based on three influential traditions (i. e. psychology, sociology and social psychology) as suggested by Thompson and McHugh (2002) and Batt and Doellgast (2004) whose influence are deemed of relevance to the current study.

Different disciplines interpret and study teamwork differently. Marks (2005), Batt and Doellgast (2004), note that the study of work teams has mainly emerged from either the more positive psychological/managerial tradition or from the more critical, frequently sociologically influenced scholars. They note that the former concerns the internal characteristics of teams that lead to better performance (i. e. the focus is on productivity and employees' well being); whereas the latter interprets teams as regulating mechanisms and believes that team working is a way of controlling employees.



In the study of people behaviour in organisations, psychology's contributions have been mainly at the individual or micro level of analysis while sociology has contributed to the understanding of macro concepts such as group processes and organisation (Robbins, 2005: 12). Social psychology, on the other hand, assimilates concepts from both psychology and sociology, whereby it focuses on the influence of people on one another. The next section briefly discusses the influence of the macro-level i. e. the sociological stance on the study of teams, followed by the micro-level, i. e. the psychological as well as the social psychological perspective.

### **1. 3. 1 The sociological approach and Influence of the Labour process and post modernism**

This sub-section describes the sociological approach to teams and how the assessment of teamwork is influenced by two critical traditions – the labour process and post-modernism. Sociologists focus on the evolution of society, or the forms, institutions and functions of human groups (Rush, 1989). As Batt and Doellgast (2004) point out, the labour process theory has significantly impacted on the sociological view of teams – teamwork is part of management's strategies to control employees' efforts and output while concerning the dynamic of conflict, coercion and consent within organisations.

The Labour process analysis (LPA) was first presented by Marx to understand the relationship between the creative power of human labour and the capitalist mode of production. His purpose was to show how labour power is shaped, organised and controlled to generate humanly valuable outputs.

Marx identified three components of the Labour process – the purposeful

activity of men (directed to work), the object for which work is performed (in the form of natural or raw material), and the instruments of that work (most often tools or more complex technology). During the labour process, the human and technical aspects interpenetrate (Thompson, 1983: 39). Marx (1976) stresses 'Men not only affects a change of form in the materials of nature, he also realises his own purpose in those materials' (p. 284). In other words, man's conscious and the way he can produce his own sustenance distinguishes him from the animal species.

Marx argues that when the system of production is capitalist, alienation occurs. When the minority of people own the means of production, the workers lose their control over the product, thus they can be separated from their product and the production activity. When the production is for profit through the commodity market, the workers sell their labour in exchange for wages. The exchange of market economy and commodities also turns every productive group into competitors, thus reducing the social relations amongst people to economic exchangers of commodity. As a result, capitalism dampens the quality of workers in terms of producing their own means of existence and of actualising their capacity at work (Thompson & Mchugh, 2002).

Marx's labour process analysis (LPA) was subsequently used to understand work in organisations, and the employees' responses to it. Indeed, much of the sociological research on work in organisations was influenced by the LPA, mainly after the publication of Braverman's work - 'Labour and Monopoly Capital' in 1974 (Thompson & Smith, 2009). In Braverman's work, critiques of the capitalist labour process were reviewed. Braverman explored how the

<https://assignbuster.com/social-identity-in-the-workplace-sociology-essay/>

application of modern management techniques, in combination with mechanism and automation, secured the real subordination and deskilling of work in the organisation. He argued that the capitalist mode of production requires efficient means of separating the control of workers (the conception) from their work (the execution). Braverman focused on Taylorism's 'degradation of work' and he concluded that the 'separation of conception from execution' had led to a tighter control imposed on the workers and power remained in the hand of those at the top of the organisation's hierarchy (Bolton, 2005). In general, the influence of Braverman Labour process relates to the development of job design, managerial control strategies, workers' resentment at work and the impact of class struggle within the production process (Giddens, 1982; Salaman, 1982; Thompson, 1983).

Braverman's discussion has its limitations. Giddens (1982) notes that Braverman's labour process neglects the reactions of workers – the knowledgeable and capable agents to the technical division of labour and Taylorism (p. 40). Building on Braverman's work, studies conducted by Edwards (1979) and Friedman (1977) revealed the changing forms of management control. Edwards (1979) proposes 'welfare capitalism' whereby social and other benefits can be provided in the workplace, whereas Friedman (1977) identifies 'responsible autonomy' as a way of generating a level of participation from the workforce. Undeniably, mounting dissatisfaction with Braverman's analysis of management has led to a number of theoretical reformulations and empirical case studies in process and methods of controlling the labour process.

In addition, the use of teamworking (e. g. semi-autonomous work groups) was broadened as fundamental to competitive advantage in organisations in the 1980s. At that time, there was an emergence of new ideas of which included the post-Fordism and flexible specialisation (Thompson & Smith, 2009). A whole body of organisational research started to look at organisational practices and developed a framework which focus on the labour process, management strategies of control and resistance at work, with the acknowledgement of the organisational actors (e. g. employees) as active agents (Bolton, 2005). In the 1990s, with globalisation and the rapid adoption of the information of communication technologies (ICTs), organisations tend to promote greater levels of involvement, commitment and skill development for the employees. Team working (e. g. virtual team practices) appeared to be a widespread management technique to implement flexibility and empowerment in the workplace. Clearly, there is a move from command and control to collaborative trust and a high commitment to work relations.

At the same time, post-modernism also influenced most of the research in social science (Carter, 2008). Post-modernist perspectives have developed through Foucault-influenced scholars of organisations and new management practices (e. g. Barker, 1993; Townley, 1993; Sewell, 1998). For example, Barker's (1993) study of the self-managed teams in an electronic plant demonstrated that there is a shift of the locus of control to the workers. Workers in self-managed teams develop a system of value-based normative rules that control their actions more powerfully and completely than the former system (p. 408). Sewell (1998) was interested in the systems of

managerial control in monitoring the activities of employees (e. g. computer-based control, closed-circuit television cameras, call centres) and he concluded that teams are often complementary to hierarchical forms of control. Townley (1993), on the other hand, applied the work of Foucault to the tenet of HRM. She explored the interplay between power and knowledge and her analysis indicates that techniques such as recruitment and selection techniques are important among organised populations and have impacts on the subjectivity of people. Her study sought insights into how employees come to make sense of the 'selves' and the ways they interact with others (Cater et al, 2002).

What seems to be in common theme in these studies is the emphasis on subjectivity and identity. Much work has subsequently been carried out to analyse subjectivity by means of understanding the contradictions and ambiguities of management-labour relations. For example, Knights and Willmott (1989) highlight the means through (re)constructing subjectivities and identities in work relation, and examining how often face resistance. Consistent with this, Ackroyd and Thompson's (1999) argue that employees are aware of management intentions and often retain the resources to resist and misbehave at work. Evidently, the reproduction of everyday life and the basis of control have shifted from the material to the symbolic – people not only struggle with their interests but also their work identities (Thompson & Smith, 2001; 2009).

Overall, the labour process and post-modern streams of scholarship have contributed important insights into the relationship between modern forms of working patterns (i. e. teamwork) and traditional forms of managerial

control at work. While sociologists focus on the evolution of society, or the forms, institutions and functions of groups; psychologists concern with the study of mind and the interaction of the mind with an individual's behaviour (Rush, 1989).

### **1. 3. 2 The psychological and social psychological perspective**

Haslam (2004) notes that the psychological functioning associated with human behaviour was first identified by Wundt in Leipzig in 1879. Later on, two of his students, J. McKeen Cattell and Hugo Munsterberg took the interest further to study individual differences in order to analyse organisational behaviour. In line with Taylorism, Munsterberg (1913) argued that analysing the requirement of any job, along with identifying the key psychological components associated with productivity and individual aptitude are necessary. He then pointed out that identifying motivational principles that would facilitate worker participation in the process of scientific management is essential. In brief, his investigation of the effect of specific personality and environmental variables on job performance highlighted firstly, the highly subjective nature of workers' reaction to their work despite their experience in work that is extremely dull; and secondly, the role of group membership in determining work satisfaction. He then concluded that groups can make positive psychological contributions to workplace environment (Munsterberg, 1913: 234).

Although Munsterberg's work has influenced the major development of the psychological approach in the analysis of organisational behaviour, his work focuses mainly the individual differences and neglects the social dimension of organisational life (Haslam, 2004). Later, Mayo and his colleagues

<https://assignbuster.com/social-identity-in-the-workplace-sociology-essay/>

acknowledged that organisational life transforms individual differences into group similarities. Yet, their work informed little about the psychological processes and people's psychological make-up. In the 1960s, there was growing interest in the cognitive processes whereby such work analyse the mental processes that might account for particular patterns of organisational behaviour (Haslam, 2004: 6-12).

Work in the social psychological and organisational behaviour tradition in teams concerns the internal characteristics of group that lead to performance (Batt and Doellgast, 2004). Rush (1989) notes that what distinguishes a social psychologist from a sociologist is that the former is primarily 'interested in studying the behaviour of an individual and he relates to, or is affected by, the groups in which he lives and functions', while the latter is more focused 'the group as a whole and one group's relationships with another' (p. 39). In other words, social psychologists are not concerned with biological, developmental or personality factors (Marks, 2005) but provide an analysis of the psychological process that explains how employees' membership in teams and their social relations contribute to their organisational life (Haslam, 2004).

Social psychology is an appropriate approach for the current work in examining social identity and intergroup relations. Henri Tajfel and John Turner's Social Identity Theory (SIT) is adopted as the theoretical framework for the research, as this theory highlights the awareness of the reality of the group and its contribution to employees' social cognition and behaviour.

## **1. 4 The Social Identity Theory (SIT)**

SIT (Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and its offshoot, Social Categorisation Theory (SCT) (Turner, 1986) were developed with the attempt to understand the psychological basis of intergroup conflict and ingroup bias. The core assumption of SIT is that individuals categorise and define themselves in terms of a group membership. Having defined themselves in terms of social categorisation, individuals seek to enhance their self-conception by positively differentiating their ingroup from a comparative outgroup (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Haslam, 2004). In other words, social categorisation requires the establishment of a distinct social identity and group members may develop conflicting relationships with out-group members in order to enhance the positivity of their social identity (Tajfel, 1972; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). The disruptive dynamics of social categorisation as the basis for intergroup conflict implies that SIT and SCT are relevant theoretical foundations to analyse the identification process and its impact on conflict in virtual teams.

As Haslam (2004) describes, the psychological contribution of social identity is to create and define individual's place in society. When an employee defines himself with a group or team they belong, ingroup bias may occur. SIT suggests that the mere act of individuals categorising themselves as group members is sufficient to cause them to confirm or establish ingroup favouritism. However, the importance of a particular category to a person's self-conception (or category salience) varies according to the context (Abrahams & Hogg, 1988). The conception of SIT has also been detailed



further to predict how group status, stability, permeability and legitimacy influence social identity (Tajfel, 1974, 1979; Hogg & Abrams, 1988).

In the continuing development, SCT has contributed in the understanding of the cognitive aspect of SIT. Turner (1978) argued that 'switching on' the social identity means that individuals have to go through the process of depersonalisation of self-perception – a process of self-stereotyping whereby the self is perceived as categorically interchangeable with other ingroup members. It causes a cognitive redefinition of the self (and others) with a particular social category. In brief, the 'social collectivity becomes self' (Turner, 1999). When employees categorise themselves as members of a group, similarities in the group and differences between the ingroup and outgroup become the drivers of identification.

Organisational identification, which means the psychological attachment between an individual and his/her work organization, has received increasing interest, primarily because of its effect on behaviour associated with enhanced organisational performance (Reade, 2001; Benkhoff, 1997).

Organisational identification can manifest at different levels in an organisation – the organisational, departmental and team level (Rink & Ellemers, 2007). Identification processes, particularly the self-categorisation process are seen as an important mediator between the organisational context and organisational behaviour (Turner & Haslam, 2001). When individuals perceive their group identity positive and important to their self-conception, they tend to be motivated to conform to the group norm and engage in the group goals rather than their personal goals. As a result,

virtual team identity can be viewed as a psychological as well as a social reality (Haslam, 2003).

Clearly, the identification process in virtual teams occurs at the interface of structure and agency, whereby both the organisational context and structures; and the cognition and pre-conception of employees influence the emergence of their social selves. The way that employees perceive the outgroup is associated with their social experiences, reflecting perhaps nationality, gender, classed, workgroup which given meaning within the group. However, the decision of whether or not to identify with the team lies in the employees' assessment within their personal impressions, feelings and experiences. Because social identity has impact on behaviour, social identity is not only a cognitive categorisation process that take place in the employee's mind, but a product that results from the process (e. g. Postmes et al, 2005). In other words, social identity directs the employees' perceptions, beliefs and intentions, and allows what is in their mind to be translated into the collective activities (e. g. intergroup behaviour).

In the past, different scholars have used varied philosophical perspectives to interpret organisational identity and behaviour. Among the scholars are the positivists, interpretivists and critical scholars (Alvesson et al., 2008; Saunders, et al., 2003). Instead of using the positivist and interpretivist lens to understand the formation of identity and its impact on conflict in virtual teams, the critical realistic perspective developed by Bhaskar (1979, 1989, 1993, 1994 & 1998) is adopted for the current study. This is because the Critical Realists' world view and its epistemological position captured within the structure-agency framework is able to explain how an agent (e. g. the <https://assignbuster.com/social-identity-in-the-workplace-sociology-essay/>

employee, their perceptions and motivations) interacts with the enabling and constraining effects of social structures during the identification processes. Through this perspective, an understanding of the interplay between the subjective world of agents and the objective and independent world of social structures can be sought (Archer, 1995, 2002).

A qualitative approach is adopted throughout the research because of its strength in describing and explaining ' human experience as it appears in people's lives (Polkinghorne, 2005, p. 137). There is an effort to understand, appreciate, and expose the processes and mechanisms that people use to give meaning to their own and other's behaviour (Patton, 1984). With the case study method, the researcher is able to study different aspects of the processes and mechanisms, and examine them in relation to each other within the social and organisational context (Gummession, 2000). In general, an understanding of the contemporary phenomena within the real-life context can be sought (Yin, 1994).

## **1. 5 The outline of the thesis**

The structure of this thesis is organised into eight interconnected sections. Following an introduction to the thesis in Chapter One which contextualised the current study and introduces the reader to its key theoretical and empirical concerns, Chapter Two presented the literature reviews in teams and team working. The aim of this chapter is to review the nature, history and evolution of teams as well as the utilisation of team-based working, specifically virtual teamwork in the workplace. The chapter then moves on to look at a set of challenges, particularly the negative social consequences resulting from the virtual settings. Included in the discussion is the impact of

<https://assignbuster.com/social-identity-in-the-workplace-sociology-essay/>

distance, the ICTs and the diversity of virtual teams on employee identification as well as on conflict in teams. In light of these reviews, a key research aim and corresponding research objectives for the subsequent development of the thesis can be established.

Chapter Three moves on to discuss the established social identity theory which serves as an explanatory tool for the current study. The chapter discusses the theoretical conceptions and contributions of Tajfel and Turner's (1979) Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Social Categorisation Theory (SCT) in the understanding of the psychological underpinning and motivational aspect of identification in groups and intergroup relations. Much of the discussion considers the assumptions of SIT and SCT in various intergroup phenomena, particularly in areas of intergroup favouritism, inequality of group status, stereotypical and intra-group homogeneity, and changing intergroup attitudes through contact. The chapters also address some of the critiques and limitations of SIT and SCT.

Building upon the theoretical challenge in the previous chapters, Chapter Four develops a theoretical framework which seeks to explore the identification processes as well as their impact on conflict