8.3: Identity and the Organization Member

Learning Objectives

- Distinguish between organizational identity and identification.
- Recognize how management strives to guide employees' socialization into the organization so employees strongly identify with the organization.
- Understand the processes by which organization members come to identify with the organization and incorporate that affinity into their self-identities.
- Grasp the postmodern and critical concern that managerial interests can use organizational identity and identification to sustain their control.

While organizational identity may be developed by an organization, organizational identification may be developed by its members. In introducing their concept of organizational identification Blake Ashforth and Fred Mael started with social identity theory—which holds that one’s self-concept combines a “personal identity” based on individual traits with a “social identity” based on group classifications—and originated the concept of organizational identification by defining it as a specific form of social identification or perception of oneness with a group. Ashforth and Mael defined it as “a specific form of social identification,” where identification is “the perception of oneness with or belongingness to a group, involving direct or vicarious experience of its successes and failures.” As noted above, you may have felt such identification with a sports team, a club, a house of worship, your alma mater, your place of work, or any number of organizations to which you have belonged. In a moment we will look at the psychological components that Ashforth and Mael ascribed to organizational identification. But first, let us review the issue from the corporate side rather than the individual side.
From the Organizational Perspective


According to Frederic Jablin’s framework, this is the first phase of organizational socialization in which, prior to formal entry, your environmental influences (e.g., family, media, peers, education, previous organizational experiences) and the employer’s recruiting process begins your socialization and aligns you with the organization’s identity. This second phase of organizational socialization spans the period from your initial employment offer, to your start on the job, to your full assimilation into the organization. and assimilation, and organizational disengagement. During the third and final phase of organizational socialization you are separated from the organization; the manner of your disengagement is governed by the manner of your exit: whether by retirement, taking another job, or being discharged. and exit. These are illustrated in Figure 8.6 "Organizational Socialization" below.

**Figure 8.6 Organizational Socialization**

In the first phase, anticipatory socialization, you envision a specific job or career; this vision, according to Jablin, is likely influenced by family, media, peers, education, and any previous organizational experiences you have had. Along with environmental influences, noted Michael Kramer, the process of anticipatory socialization also takes in process of being recruited and hired by a specific organization. Hiring, of course, leads to organizational entry and assimilation, the next phase of socialization. Jablin broke this phase down into three segments. During preentry, when you have been offered a job but not yet begun, messages from your employer and the formation of initial impressions (on both sides) continue your organizational socialization. When you have been offered a job but not formally begun, you receive messages from the employer and initial impressions—both by and about you—are formed. Then during formal entry, during the period of your initial formal entry into an organization, socialization continues as managers and coworkers help you “get on board” and as you try to make sense of how you fit in. the organization strives to acclimate you to its ways, while you try to make sense of how you fit in—until you experience the metamorphosis. In the last segment of the entry phase of organizational socialization, you experience the metamorphosis of full assimilation as an established member of the organization. If assimilation as an established member. Finally, the phase of organizational disengagement and exit occurs as you leave your employment. Through the first two phases in which you are recruited and hired, and then initiated and assimilated, organizations use many methods to “get you on board” and foster strong identification: new employee orientation programs, training programs, mentoring programs, information giving, and more.

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From the perspective of organization leaders, the goal of the socialization is to produce employees who adopt—as we learned in Chapter 7 "Leader and Follower Behaviors & Perspectives"—a desirable followership style. The concept of different leadership styles has prompted the complementary concept of different followership styles; the literature on management generally presupposes that strong organizational identification is a component of the followership style that effective managerial leadership should produce. Ira Chaleff described the ideal follower as one who supports the leader and offers corrective feedback when needed. Chaleff, I. (2003). *The courageous follower* (2nd ed.). San Francisco, CA: Barrett-Koehler.


A common thread that runs through all of these typologies is the assumption that followers should identify strongly enough with an organization to perform their duties with motivation and commit their independent thought and judgment to the service and benefit of the group.

### From an Individual Perspective

Fostering organizational identification is seen by leaders as an essential management function. But for individuals, the implications are more complex. As we noted at the outset of the chapter, people in modern societies derive much of their self-identities from the organizations with which they affiliate. Evaluating the implications must start with a better understanding of organizational identity as a psychological phenomenon. Since much of the research follows Ashforth and Mael’s construct of organizational identity, then that is where we will begin. Ashforth & Mael, *Social identity theory*, op cit.

Table 8.2 "Theoretical Developments: Hatch & Schultz" above illustrates how Ashforth and Mael applied to organizations the social identity theory of Tajfel and Turner—who, in turn, had built on the work of Cooley and Mead. Ashforth and Mael surveyed the extant literature and found that the term *organizational identification* was sometimes used interchangeably with such terms as *commitment* and *internalization*. Guided by social identity theory, they defined *identification* as a cognitive construct (or mental picture of one’s self as intertwined with a group) as opposed to a set of behaviors or emotions; further, identification attaches the self to a social categories (“I am”), while internalization attaches the self to guiding principles (“I believe”). As a “cognitive construct that is not necessarily associated with any specific behaviors or affective states” since “an individual need only perceive him- or herself as psychologically intertwined with the fate of the group” and he or she “personally experienced the successes and failures.” Ibid, pg. 21. In other words, your identification with a social group (such as an organization) is a mental picture rather than a set of actions or feelings. Further, identification can be distinguished from *internalization*: “Whereas identification refers to self in terms of social categories (I am), internalization refers to the incorporation of values, attitudes, and so forth within the self as guiding principles (I believe).” Ibid, pgs. 21–22. Table 8.4 "Distinguishing Organizational Identification" below puts these ideas into perspective by suggesting how an employee of the (hypothetical) Better Burgers franchise might express affinity with her organization.
Table 8.4 Distinguishing Organizational Identification

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Phenomenon</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Explanation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Identification</td>
<td>“I’m Better!”</td>
<td>The employee cognitively constructs a mental picture of her social self as intertwined with Better Burgers.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Behavior</td>
<td>“I’m loyal”</td>
<td>The employee takes the action of being committed to her association with Better Burgers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotion</td>
<td>“I’m love my job”</td>
<td>The employee enjoys feelings of satisfaction through her association with Better Burgers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internalization</td>
<td>“I’m a burgerista”</td>
<td>The employee takes as her guiding principle the value that Better Burgers places on creativity and quality</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Ashforth and Mael argue that social identification can drive your actions and feelings, or vice versa. But when organizational identification is understood as a specific form of social identification—and when identification is seen as a cognitive construction or mental picture of the self, rather than a set of behaviors of feelings—then social identity theory suggests five factors can push employees and managers to identify with their organizations:

- The distinctiveness of the organization, so that membership confers a unique self-identity.
- The prestige of the organization, so that membership boosts self-esteem.
- An awareness of out-groups (i.e., other organizations), so that awareness of the in-group (i.e., one’s own organization) is reinforced.
- Competition with other organizations, so that distinctions are more clearly delineated.
- Groups formation factors that may include physical proximity, interpersonal relations, attractiveness, similarity, shared background, and common threats or aspirations.

Think again of the fast food chains we have used as an example throughout this chapter. If you were employed by one of these chains then (ideally, from management’s point of view) you might identify with the chain as your own self-identity becomes intertwined with its distinctiveness (“Our burgers are uniquely best!”) and prestige (“We’re the leading national chain!”) and with its contrasts to other chains (“The other chains want to be like us” and “The competitions won’t beat us because their burgers aren’t as good!”). In addition, your organizational identification might be enhanced if your restaurant is in your own neighborhood, if get along well with your manager and coworkers, and if your fellow employees are nice people who have similar personalities, background, dreams, and challenges.

For your manager—and more broadly, for the fast food chain’s corporate leadership—a prime goal is to “produce” employees with the organizational identification described above. Of course, if you like where you work and feel a sense of belonging and purpose, then your organizational identification will tend to boost your job satisfaction. But it also follows that an organization’s attempts to “manage” your identity is tied to corporate leadership’s desire for control and predictability. Phillip Tompkins and George Cheney have called this concertive control. In Tompkins and Cheney’s theory of organizational control, management gains concertive control when employees internalize approved attitudes and behaviors and discipline themselves. Drawing on structuration theory (see Chapter 4 "Modern Theories of Organizational Communication"), they proposed that and identity-identification duality. Using structuration theory as a framework, Phillip Tompkins and George Cheney argued that members’ identification with an organization’s identity furnishes a medium for members to act socially within the organization; in so doing, they reproduce the system so that
member identification and organizational identity also become outcomes of their action—hence, an identity-identification duality. operates within organizations. Tompkins, P. K. & Cheney, G. (1985). Communication and unobtrusive control in contemporary organizations. In R. D. McPhee & P. K. Tompkins (Eds.), Organizational communication: Traditional themes and new directions (pp. 179–210). Newbury Park, CA: Sage; see also Scott, C. R., Corman, S. A., & Cheney, G. (1998). The development of a structurational theory of identification in the organization. Communication Theory, 8, 298–336. The more you are linked with other organization members that share the same premises, the more you will all cultivate like identities for yourselves and, in turn, be self-actualized by relationships with likeminded coworkers. Thus, identity and identification are both mediums and outcomes of social action. Tompkins and Cheney theorized that organizations deploy communication to control their members in five ways starting with simple control. In Tompkins and Cheney’s theory of organizational control, the direct and open use of power by management is called simple control. through direct and open use of power, technical control. In Tompkins and Cheney’s theory of organizational control, management’s selection of the communication tools employees are expected to employ is called technical control. that selects the communication tools members are expected to employ, and bureaucratic control. In Tompkins and Cheney’s theory of organizational control, management’s determination of formal policies and procedures employees must follow is called bureaucratic control. that determines formal policies and procedures members must follow. Then through cultural control. In Tompkins and Cheney’s theory of organizational control, management’s attempts to inculcate common values and practices around which members form their interests and relationships is called cultural control. organizations seek to inculcate common values and practices around which members form their interests and relationships, while through concertive control organizations induce members to discipline themselves as approved attitudes and behaviors come to seem natural and normal. As members accept these unwritten rules they in turn reinforce and reproduce them—individually and through interactions with other members—until these expectations become the very goals which motivate members and form their sense of obligation.

Tompkins and Cheney also drew on rhetorical theory (see Chapter 4 "Modern Theories of Organizational Communication"), citing Kenneth Burke’s concept of identification as a process in which consubstantiation. Rhetorical scholar Kenneth Burke (whom Tompkins and Cheney reference in their theory of organizational control) contended that persuasion cannot occur without identification; the basis for one person to persuade another is consubstantiation or a sharing of substances that causes a listener to identify with a speaker., or a sharing of substances, causes persons to identify with one another and makes persuasion possible. Burke, K. (1969). A rhetoric of motives. Berkeley: University of California Press. Identification with an organization occurs as members imbibe its premises, shape their own identities by these premises, and ultimately reason by them. They likewise drew on Aristotle’s concept of the enthymeme. Aristotelian rhetorical theory (which Tompkins and Cheney reference in their theory of organizational control) holds that argument syllogistically from major premise, to minor premise, to conclusion; a skillful speaker who knows the mind of an audience can omit a well-known premise, which the audience mentally supplies and thus is drawn along to the speaker’s conclusion. Aristotle (2007). On rhetoric: A theory of civic discourse (2nd ed.) (G. A. Kennedy, Trans.). New York: Oxford University Press. Reasoning in organizations occurs syllogistically—often from a major premise, to a minor premise, to a conclusion. Enthymemic argument occurs when a premise is widely shared by an audience. A speaker merely omits that premise from the argument and thus impels the audience to fill in the missing premise and be drawn along to the speaker’s conclusion. So for example, when management and workers share the premise that profits are good for everyone, managers need only urge employees to practice “customer service excellence” and employees will supply the missing premise that “satisfied customers are repeat customers” and so be drawn along to the conclusion that making a profit is an imperative. When such identification occurs, the organization has gained concertive control over its members.
From Postmodern and Critical Perspectives

Writing in the 1970s, French philosopher Michel Foucault described a fundamental change from premodern to modern societies. In the old era of kings, discipline was achieved through direct and physical punishments such as public beheadings of people who offended the order of the realm. In the present era of bureaucracies, however, discipline is achieved not through direct and physical means but through indirect and intangible means, such that people come to discipline themselves. Foucault gave the analogy of a state prison, which is an invention of modern society. Inmates are aware of the faceless, all-seeing (or “panoptic”) guard tower above them. Knowing they are not watched every moment but could be at any moment, they discipline themselves.

Foucault, M. (1977). Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison (A. Sheridan, Trans.). New York: Vintage. (Original work published 1975) In a modern organization the method of surveillance may not be visual means such as cameras; bureaucracies have methods of reporting and accounting that keep tabs on people. Foucault became interested in the development of the concept of “self” throughout Western history and concluded that the “self” has become one of four “technologies” that operate in the modern world. These include:

1. technologies of productionFour “technologies” or modes for getting things done, theorized Michel Foucault, operate in the modern world; technologies of production permit us to manipulate the physical world., which permit us to produce, transform, or manipulate things;
2. technologies of sign systemsFour “technologies” or modes for getting things done, theorized Michel Foucault, operate in the modern world; technologies of sign systems permit us to communicate., which permits us to use signs, meanings, symbols, symbols, or signification;
3. technologies of powerFour “technologies” or modes for getting things done, theorized Michel Foucault, operate in the modern world; technologies of power submit individuals to domination and determine their conduct., which, which determine the conduct of individuals and submit them to certain ends or domination, an objectivizing of the subject;
4. technologies of the selfFour “technologies” or modes for getting things done, theorized Michel Foucault, operate in the modern world; technologies of the self permit individuals to modify their bodies, thoughts, conduct, and ways of being to attain desired ends., which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality. . . . each one of them is associated with a certain type of domination. Each implies certain modes of training and modification of individuals, not only in the obvious sense of acquiring certain skills but also in the sense of acquiring certain attitudes.


In Foucault’s formulation, “technologies” is not meant in the popular sense of machines but, rather, simply as ways of getting things done. Thus, modern society has ways of manipulating the physical world, of communicating, of hierarchizing human relationships (since a completely egalitarian society is an impossibility), and of modifying the self (since living with other people makes the unmodified self an impossibility). Each way of getting things done implies submission to the larger historical and cultural discourses that are the dominant discourses in a given society. Numerous scholars in organization studies have applied Foucault’s ideas to organizational settings. For example, see Burrell, G. (1988). Modernism, post modernism, and organizational analysis 2: The contribution of Michel Foucault. Organization Studies, 9, 221–235; McKinlay, A., & Starkey, K. (1998). Foucault, management, and organization theory. London: Sage. Thus, as Mike Savage demonstrated in his study of a major nineteenth-century railroad, employees readily disciplined themselves in return for pay increases and a career ladder that offered upward mobility. Savage, M., (1998). Discipline, surveillance, and the “career”: Employment on the Great Western Railway, 1833–1914. In A. McKinlay & K.
Starkey (Eds.), *Foucault, management, and organization theory* (pp. 65–92). London: Sage. Foucault himself examined the implications of his thesis and argued that individuals, when confronted with pressures by dominant discourses to modify their selves, could respond ethnically by asking four questions:

1. **Ethical substance**: Which part of myself or my behavior is influenced or concerned with moral conduct? What do I do because I want to be ethical?

2. **Mode of subjection**: How am I being told to act morally? Who is asking? To whose values am I being subjected?

3. **Ethical work**: How must I change myself or my actions in order to become ethical in this situation?

4. **Ethical goal**: Do I agree with this definition of morality? Do I consent to becoming this character in this situation? To what am I aspiring to when I behave ethically?


While Foucault’s ideas provide a framework for many scholars to explore questions of the self in organizational settings, Matts Alvesson and Hugh Willmott took their own critical look starting with the literature—reviewed above—on organizational identity and identification. They argued that management engages in identity regulation. Matt Alvesson and Hugh Willmott argue that, as means of organizational control, managerial interests engage in identity regulation through discursive practices that shape the processes of employees’ identity formation and thus “produce” the “appropriate” employee as a form of organizational control in order to “produce” the “appropriate” individuals that management desires. Alvesson & Willmott, *Identity regulation*, op cit. Identity regulation, believed Alvesson and Willmott, is accomplished as management promulgates a discourse that defines identity and thus shapes processes of identity formation and change. This managerial discourse addresses four targets and is conducted in nine modes, as shown in Table 8.5 below.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Mode</th>
<th>Example</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Employee</td>
<td>Defining the person directly</td>
<td>“A male middle manager” may do his “managing” by following directives from above but then hides his subordinate position by projecting masculine values</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Defining a person by defining others</td>
<td>A group of salesmen are constructed as “real men” because management believes women lack a “killer instinct” and thus does not hire them</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Providing a specific vocabulary of motives</td>
<td>A manager tells new employees the company pays fair wages and does not “bid” for recruits, implying they should be motivated intrinsically and not by pay</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Action orientations</td>
<td>Explicating morals and values</td>
<td>The organization espouses certain values and heroes, so that employees cannot resist without losing their dignity and being made to feel unworthy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Knowledge and skills</td>
<td>The organization conducts management training that prompts managers to identify with the company as a whole and not with a department or specialty</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social relations</td>
<td>Group categorization and affiliation</td>
<td>Giving employees emotional gratification as “team members” counters any tendency for employees to think of themselves as individuals</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
A “team player” ethos causes employees to rein in their own traits (brilliance, ability, aggressiveness, personal values, etc) so others do not feel threatened. Management talks about the uncertainty, competition and changes that globalization is bringing, thus implying that employees must be adaptable and enterprising.

Thus, identity regulation “encompasses the more or less intentional effects of social practices upon processes of identity construction and reconstruction” and includes “induction, training, and promotion procedures [that] are developed in ways that have implications for the shaping and direction of identity.” Ibid, pg. 625. These practices are intended to influence what Alvesson and Willmott call the identity work. All employees engage in identity work, theorized Alvesson and Willmott, as they interpret organizational discourses in light of their own central life interest, desires for coherence and distinctiveness, need for direction and self-affirming social values, and emerging self-awareness. that all members do to ascertain the nature of the organization and their parts in it. This identity work explores six aspects of self-identity: central life interest, coherence, distinctiveness, direction, positive value, and self-awareness. In particular:

- A person’s central life interest is bound up in the questions of “Who am I?” and “What are we?”
- The desire for coherence is felt as a need to tell one’s life story as a narrative with a discernible sequence rather than a fragmented jumble of random events
- The desire for distinctiveness is akin to the need, discussed earlier in the chapter, to set boundaries that distinguish “me” from others
- Direction provides a (if often vague) basis of what is appropriate, desired, and valued on which a person can decide what is reasonable
- A set of positive social values lend self-esteem to a person’s identity
- A person gains a self-identity, in part, when he or she has acquired a self-awareness of that identity.

Thus, identity work is the process by which “people are continuously engaged in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening, or revising the constructions that are productive of a precarious sense of coherence and distinctiveness.” Ibid, pg. 626. Having defined the three concepts of identity regulation, identity work and self-identity, Alvesson and Willmott saw them working in a dynamic relation as shown in Figure 8.7 "Identity Regulation, Identity Work, Self-Identity" below. Their conclusion: identity is “an important yet still insufficiently explored dimension of organizational control,” and one whose importance will increase in a post-bureaucratic world of loosely networked organizations where control must be accomplished by managing the "insides" of employees. Ibid, pg. 620.
Key Takeaways

- Organizational identity is the collective identity that an organization may form; organizational identification is developed by individual members as they identify with the organization. The concept of organizational identification originated with Blake Ashford and Fred Mael. In applying social identity theory—which holds that one’s self-concept combines a “personal identity” based on individual traits with a “social identity” based on group classifications—they defined organizational identification as a form of social identification as members perceive oneness or belonging with the organization.

- A key management objective is to foster strong organizational identification among employees. This occurs through conscious efforts to socialize employees into the values and practices of the organization so that they “get on board” and feel an affinity with the organization’s identity. Frederic Jablin described how this socialization occurs in three phases: anticipatory socialization, organizational entry and assimilation, and organizational disengagement and exit. During the first two phases especially, management strives to encourage organizational identification through such means as recruiting and hiring communications, new employee orientation programs, training programs, and mentoring programs.

- While management strives to encourage organizational identification, these efforts are not the whole story of how employees come to identity with an organization. Taking their cue from social identity theory, Ashforth and Mael observed that feelings of oneness and belonging are fostered as the organization is seen as distinctive and prestigious, and as comparisons to and competitions with other organizations delineate differences between “us” versus “them.” However, Phillip Tompkins and George Cheney drew on structuration theory to posit an identity-identification duality. Identification is not only a means for organizations to engage in social actions; identification is also an outcome of those actions. The more employees who identify with an organization act together with other coworkers, the more they identify with the organization. Over time, believed Tompkins and Cheney, increasing identification leads to concertive control as members so identify with an organization that they discipline themselves to conform to managerially approved values.

- French philosopher Michel Foucault described how premodern societies enforced discipline through direct physical means, whereas modern societies enforce discipline through the possibility of indirect surveillance that compels people to discipline themselves. Matts Alvesson and Hugh Willmott, working from the literature on organizational identification, posited that identity regulation affords management a means of control through “producing” the “appropriate” employee. All organization members must do identity work to form an organizational self-identity. Identity regulation occurs as management engages is discourses that attempt to shape employees’ identity work. These management discourses may strive to define the appropriate employee, appropriate actions, appropriate relations, and appropriate rules and contexts for organizational life.

Exercises

1. In the exercises for Section 8.1 “Identity and the Organization” above, you were asked to think of an organization to which you have belonged—perhaps a sports team on which you played, a club that you joined, a company where you worked, a church or mosque or synagogue where you have worshipped, or the college you now attend. In section 8.1 we asked you to explore that organization’s identity; now we ask you think about your own identification with that organization. Describe how the organization guided your socialization, first through the anticipatory socialization phase prior to your actual joining, and then through the phase of your formal entry and assimilation. What methods did the organization use in encouraging you to strongly identify with that organization?

2. Thinking of the same organization you analyzed in Exercise 1, switch your gaze from the ways it tried to socialize you and instead consider your own responses. Following Ashforth and Meal’s framework: Did the organization’s distinctiveness make you, as a member, feel unique? Did its prestige boost your self-esteem? As you became aware of other similar organizations, did the comparisons highlight what was different about your organization? Did that make you feel more a part of the “in” group? Was this feeling heightened by any actual or perceived competition with the other organizations? And as Tompkins and Cheney suggested, did your organizational identification increase as you spent more time with other members who also identified with the organization? Did you ultimately conform to the organization’s values and practices, without being told, because you felt they were your own?
3. Finally, consider again the organization you analyzed in Exercises 1 and 2. Now refer to Table 8.5 "Identity Regulation: Alvesson & Willmott" above which lists the targets and discourses that organization leaders and managers can use to engage in identity regulation. The left column lists discursive targets, the second lists discursive modes, and the third lists examples given by Alvesson and Willmott. Make a chart of your own and, in the third column, list your own examples of how the organization to which you belonged may have engaged in identity regulation. After listing your examples, jot down some thoughts on how these discourses may have shaped your identity work and influenced your self-identity in the organization.