A Critique of the Social Identity Approach to Work Motivation

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is prompted by a recent turn to social identity as a basis of conceptualizing the motivation to work (see especially Ellemers, Gilder and Haslam, 2004; also, Haslam, Powell and Turner, 2000; Hogg and Terry, 2000; van Knippenberg, 2000). Social identity theory in the work context seeks to unearth the conditions under which the achievement of collective goals would provide people comparable impetus to perform as achievement of individual goals. The answers the theory provides are based on what is known about human motives that fuel inter-group bias. The salience that accrues from in-group distinctiveness could be exploited as a motivator to galvanize work teams. Given that motivation theories have traditionally taken the individual self as the basis of analysis consistent with Western epistemology, the social identity approach bears features of a paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1996) in the way human behavior at work is conceived.

It is not coincidental that social identity as work motivation theory is offered at a period in economic history where globally firms are resorting to teams as the primary means of structuring the labor process. High performing teams are felt to give companies competitive edge. Thus a team is fundamentally a social technology, the mutual commitment and accountability of members being a contingent in the service of achieving performance goals. Katzenbach and Smith (1993) speak here of the imperative of "a relentless focus on performance" p.117. Understanding the factors that make teams better performance units has been a focus of much literature (e.g. Edmondson, 1999; Marks, Mathieu and Zaccaro, 2001). The accumulated knowledge yielded by such inquiry can be of assistance to managers who wish to optimize the benefits of team technology. How to motivate people in team environments is a natural preoccupation amid this more general search for variables that explain team efficiency. Social identity theory explains the mindset of people in teams in ways that can be exploited for profit making.

Team culture calls for a new kind of collective commitment to management’s goals that has as opportunity cost the traditional collective commitment of workers to union priorities (see Pulignano, 2002). But as the commitment of workers is being sought by management, and as workers in turn agree to give up job identities by participating in flexibility-enhancing processes such as cross-training and job rotation—processes that make them interchangeable—employers for their own part are retreating from the psychological contract that would be emblematic of their own commitment to worker well being. Jobs are becoming less secure in the new global economy (see Cappelli, Bassi, Katz, Knoke, Osterman, and Useem, 1997 for evidence from U.S. high performance work places).

Working is arguably an existential need. The motivation question is intriguing because it probes beyond this existential threshold, seeking to explain what then inspires people to focus their cognitive and creative resources in work settings. There are no easy answers to this because of individual differences among people; because the value structures of societies change over time as do the value preferences of people; and because different cultures may
address this question quite differently. But there has been criticism that existing conceptions of work motivation do not look beyond western culture for inspiration (e.g. Erez and Earley, 1993; Triandis, 2002), even though work in collectivist cultures is transacted differently than in individualist ones. The claims here are now being heeded (e.g. Latham and Pinder, 2005) to view national cultures as context for work motivation discourse. The social identity approach is therefore timely on this count, bringing culture into focus in the realm of work motivation.

But its timeliness notwithstanding, social identity as motivation theory is problematic, in that it would appear to be in support of management’s quest in post-bureaucratic organizations to tighten control over workers and over the labor process, by appropriating collective energies traditionally devoted to resistance (e.g. Edwards, 1979) via trade unionism, and channeling such energies in the service of capital. A contention in this article is that social identity theory, when applied to work motivation, is another case of Michael Foucault’s power/knowledge nexus, the social sciences supporting a desire of management by offering theory and empiricism, without due consideration of effects on the well-being of workers.

This article suggests that social identity advocates appear to take the contemporary work scene as given, but that critical reflection upon new global work forms will show troubling untoward effects on significant percentages of workers—effects such as a growing pool of contingent workers (Magdoff and Magdoff, 2004) and the phenomenon of the working poor (Mosisa, 2003). These structural and destabilizing features of the new global economy are also de-motivators, to which the attention of managers should be drawn.

RETREAT FROM WORK CENTRALITY

It is fruitful in a discussion of work motivation to begin with the basic proposition that work is a dimension of self concept, and that on this account people would prefer their jobs to be challenging than not. But most of the jobs in economies are not challenging, and this may be a prime reason why work motivation remains an unsettled aspect of management science. If work cannot on its own account be intrinsically motivating, then other external means have to be employed to provide people incentive to perform. Historically in the West, this task is made easier by the transmittal in cultural heritage of the value of work for its own sake. Max Weber located this supposed commanding impulse to work within the Protestant ethic (Weber, 1996), attributing to it a central role in the development of capitalism. Here contemporary social scientists speak of work centrality—the relative importance of work in one’s life at a given time (Harpaz, Honig, and Costsier, 2002). Studies on the meaning of work in industrialized countries have provided support for the contention that work is an anchoring aspect of life, second only to family, and holding higher importance than religion, leisure, or community (Harding and Hikspoors, 1995; Harpaz, 1999).

But the ground upon which work centrality has been anchored in Western culture might now be shifting. People are beginning to question whether this reification of work per se is not misplaced. This new questioning might reflect the lessening hold of religion on culture, making it easier for people to de-couple work from their core value structures. For example, White (1997) argues against the transmittal of work centrality in British education as cultural heritage, contending that there are other more important basic sources of meaningful living to which the curriculum and society must turn. Further, he points out that many jobs in the economy are dreary, and that even though many of these are needed for progress, the society should at least strive to reduce their number.

In countries studied, work centrality as a value held by adult workers has been found to be asymmetrically distributed among them, consistent with the uneven distribution of challenging jobs. Workers who have challenging occupations assign work centrality a higher value in their lives than those who perform routine or repetitive work (Meaning of Work International Research Team, 1987). Further, studies based on workers in Israel and the United States have shown significant decline among them in the importance of work centrality as a value, contrasted at the same time by significant increases in the importance they assign to economic work goals, family, and leisure (England, 1991; Harpaz, 1999). The increasing importance of economic work goals among workers in both countries has been attributed to new insecurities in the workplace.
Contending now for the space traditionally occupied by work centrality in people’s lives is work/life balance (see Friedman, Christensen, DeGroot, 1998 for U.S. companies that are exemplary on this count). People want to have wholesome lives beyond work. The retreat from work centrality could also be a reaction to the decreasing cognitive content of jobs, a consequence of increasing use of technology in workplaces. Hecht (2001) uses the case of the American insurance industry to show that even white collar jobs are being simplified or made obsolete by new information technologies. Workers are at their most creative when they hold jobs that are complex, challenging, and autonomous (Oldham and Cummings, 1996). But such jobs are not the norm in the global economy, despite the rhetoric of “knowledge work”.

New theories of work motivation must take into account the de-motivating pressures on workers engendered by factors such as the uncertainty of tenure, loss of autonomy, and unrewarding work. These pressures are resulting in the retreat in long standing industrialized countries from the work centrality ideal—an ideal that arguably provides the cultural foundation upon which worker motivation is situated.

**SOCIAL IDENTITY**

Social identity is one of the recent theories of inter-group bias (see Hewstone, Rubin and Willis, 2002). It refers to the desire of individuals to strive to maintain some perceived superior distinctiveness conferred by membership within an in-group—distinctiveness that enables the in-group to compare more favorably with out groups. The salience that attends membership in the in-group must be sufficiently strong that the person is willing under the conditions of group membership to subsume the individual self in deference to the social self. Central to the theory is the idea that the self is an elastic entity, the product not just of personality (internal factors), but of contextual or situational (external) factors as well. Thus an individual is confronted with choices in day to day life as to which identity he/she might assume, and such evaluation is cognitively regulated (see especially Tajfel and Turner, 1979; also Abrams and Hogg; 2004; Turner, 1982; 1987; Turner and Onorato, 1999).

In setting forth the theory, Tajfel and Turner (1979) explained that through social categorization, groups become able to provide identification to their members, these identifications being comparative, classifying individuals as different from or better than counterparts in other groups. According to Turner (1982) group identification can in some situations become the sole basis of one’s self image. Social identity formation then, is a deliberative mechanism that underpins group behavior (Turner and Onorato, 1999). The decision to assume group identity is made on the basis of trust, which has behavioral consequences, since it requires relinquishing control of power to the other ((Tanis and Postmes, 2005). In a social transaction shared identity compensates for loss of individuality on the expectation that the other will reciprocate. What the individual gets in return for relinquishing individuality is a type of empowerment, where group identity counterbalances the threat of the power of dominant forces (Drury, Cocking, Baele, Hanson and Rapley, 2005).

**Social categorization**

Social categorization has emerged from initial formulations as a higher order elaboration of social identity. Turner (1987) set forth that social categorization theory explains how individuals are able at all to congeal as a group. Here perception of intra-class similarities and inter-class differences come into play. Turner (1999) described self-categorization as a context-dependent process, premised on comparative relations. One can be categorized in a particular way in one context and re-categorized in the next.

Self categorization has been viewed as a matter of fit, the salience of group membership being enhanced by the degree of perceived fit on some dimension between individual and group values. Fit interacts with social identification to yield social identity salience (Oakes, Turner and Haslam, 1991). The perception of fit can be the basis of stereotypic consensus (Haslam, 1997).
The emergence of such consensus is an active process arising from group life. People agree with others who identify with the in-group.

Self categorization distinguishes between the personal self and the social self. It responds to (internal) personality dictates, as well as to (external) dictates of context. As conditions cause the one to become salient, the other retreats. Thus there is argument for the "changeability of the self" (Onorato and Turner, 2004). Identities take on meaning through social interaction. Since one may shift from being a unique individual to being a member of a group, the conditions that cause an individual to give the social self precedence over the individual self is seen as a fruitful line of inquiry—a key upon which work motivation under collective work arrangements can turn (e.g. Ellemers, Spears and Doosje, 2002).

Social identity and organizational behavior

What are the organizational implications of social identity? An early model that addressed identity issues in the context of work was that offered by Sussmann and Vechio (1982) who offered *identity-related* dispositions as an antecedent of behavioral intentions which relate in turn to overt behavior. Such dispositions include social attachment to the organization, such attachment being akin to organizational commitment. Another landmark here is the contribution of Ashforth and Mael (1989) who in connecting social identity with organizational science noted that such identity may be derived from affinity with the organization as an entity, but also at micro-levels such as the work group or department. More recently, Haslam, Powell and Turner (2000) asserted that critical organizational outcomes can accrue by viewing the workplace as the vehicle for satisfying social needs.

Some of these theoretical formulations are providing the basis for research in which forms and levels of organizational identification are examined. In one study van Knippenberg and van Schie (2000) found the work group identification of subjects to be stronger than organizational identification. In another in which the subjects were doctors who were loosely tied to a health care system, Dukerich, Golden and Shortell (2002) found that the attractiveness of their organization’s external image, as well as attractiveness of perceived organizational identity, led to stronger organizational identity among them, and willingness to engage in cooperative behavior.

Social identity and work motivation

Social identity theory in the realm of work motivation draws much inspiration from human behavior in so-called collectivist cultures. In such cultures, people are accustomed to working toward group rather than individual goals. Can lessons from them transfer to so-called individualist cultures? The social identity approach to work motivation suggests that indeed such transfer is possible. This is an assumption that will be contested in the course of this article.

Shamir (1991) is among those who proposed the need for a shift in work motivation theorizing away from individual needs, toward a new paradigm more responsive to culture. There was need for a collective theory that can explain “individual sacrifices for collective concerns and can account for the role of values and moral obligations in energizing and directing work behaviour” p.410. Work would have meaning depending upon the salience of job-related identities, and job aspects that increased self worth and self concept. Formulations in line with Shamir’s ideas are evident in Ilgen and Sheppard (2001) who set forth a model of work motivation in teams that included team and individual level constructs, and their relation to task-related and interpersonal-related dimensions. In like vein, Kleinbeck, Wegge, and Schmidt (2001) propose a model of motivation and group performance, that draws on German experience of team-work. They hypothesize that group performance is determined by factors such as the *motivating potentials* of group tasks, motives of group members, and processes (such as feedback) that facilitate the translation of group goals into action and performance. Perhaps the most far reaching case for social identity as the basis of work motivation has been that offered by Ellemers, De Gilder and Haslam (2004) who argue that workers are not driven by personal considerations only and that in today’s team oriented workplace it has become difficult to define
individual work performance. They contend further that the same motivational impulses that apply to the individual self may apply to the collective self when the attainment of group goals and outcomes at work is salient.

IDENTITY AND CULTURE

Social identity as a basis of work motivation is easily argued in cultures where collective processes in social relations are the norm. Teamwork in the Japanese workplace fits naturally into the Japanese way of life. However, when teamwork is introduced elsewhere on the globe where norms of individualism prevail, cultural fit becomes an issue. Cooperation in the workplace may be affected by cultural predisposition (Chen, Chen and Meindl, 1998). Reflection on a UK case is illustrative. Wilkinson and Ackers (1995) report a case study of a Japanese implant in Britain, where culture became an issue, but where there was compromise. Implanted Japanese values subsequently yielded to British values. This was so on two points in particular; where the Japanese approach was group oriented, the British approach was individual. Where promotion via the Japanese approach was seniority based, that in the British plant remained merit-based. In some instances, the Japanese approach was diluted, as in representation by a single union. The authors observed that “Japanese ideas and culture in the form of management practice have been both transferred and transformed Wilkinson and Ackers (1995: 869). They cautioned that Japanization does not have to be idealized—that it could be seen as a work in progress, involving negotiation across cultures.

Team processes are not neutral technologies. What the Japanese case shows with respect to Japanese transplants into Britain is that when transplanted, Japanese work methods come with expectations that could constitute dilemmas for workers whose cultural tradition is individualist. These expectations may be acceded to (as in Oliver and Wilkinson, 1988), or they may be negotiated (as in Wilkinson and Ackers, 1995).

Collectivism/Individualism

Employed with due consideration to its limitations, collectivism/individualism can be a useful framework for situating a discussion of social identity. Storey and Bacon (1993) show these concepts to be of unsettled meaning, and that in the new economy such distinction may not suffice, since “initiatives can simultaneously involve greater collectivism in work organization and greater individualism in industrial relations” p.672. For example, employers may introduce team processes on the shop floor while preferring individuation as their industrial relations approach. This insight is especially important in light of the contentions that are being aired here. Collectivism in the form of teamwork may detract from collectivism as form of worker resistance.

Beyond industrial relations, Individualism/collectivism is also a way of describing social relations across cultures and geographic regions, and is relevant here in the extent that teamwork in production is a Japanese import. In its cultural aspects two approaches to the collectivism/individualism framework are evident, one where individualism and collectivism are viewed as polar opposites (e.g. Hofstede (2001), and another where they are viewed as independent entities (especially Triandis, 1995; Trafimow et al). Hofstede identified collectivism/individualism as a dimension on which national cultures might differ. Thus, there are shame cultures and guilt cultures. Collectivist cultures are shame cultures, requiring greater emotional dependence of their members. Generally more developed countries are said to be more individualist, examples being the United States, Australia, Britain, and Canada. Triandis (1995) contends that under collectivism, personal and communal goals are aligned: under individualism they are not. Individualism and collectivism are also influenced by tightness or looseness of cultures. Tight cultures (e.g. Japan) have precise rules for action and behavior and sanctions and criticism for deviations. Loose cultures (such as he United States) do not.

Collectivism-Individualism and Work

Hofstede (2001) makes the critical point that “More collectivist societies call for greater emotional dependence of members on their organizations…in a society in equilibrium, the organizations
should in return assume a broad responsibility for their members” p.212. People are expected to be loyal to their organizations, which in turn must be loyal to them, through measures such as lifetime employment. There is silence in the social identity literature on this crucial point. What do employees get in return from their organizations for giving up individual identities and assuming group ones?

Earley (1993) has applied the collectivism/individualism framework to research across cultural settings. A study (Earley, 1993) with subjects drawn from the United States, Israel and China, found that individualists showed higher rates of performance when working alone than in a group setting, and that in-group members showed higher performance over out-groups, when in the in-group condition. Collectivists had lower performance when working alone or in an out group than when in an in-group. They gained satisfaction and feelings of accomplishment from group outcomes, and viewed themselves as most capable in the in-group context. Being in an in-group enhanced self efficacy.

Measurement considerations aside, experiments that have employed the collectivism/individualism provide disturbing insight into the distorting effects of this dualism when employed under experimental conditions. McAuliffe, Jetten, Hornsey and Hogg (2003) examined how group norms, individualist or collectivist, would affect the evaluations of group members. They found that people made evaluations in accordance with contrived norms. Where the contrivance was in the form of a prescribed collectivist norm, members privileged collectivist over individualist behavior. Likewise, where the prescribed norm was individualist, such behavior was more highly favored. These findings speak to the ill-effects of categorization. They show that labels can lead to in-authentic behavior, where people act in ways they believe are expected, rather than true to their convictions. Wood, Pool, Leck and Purvis (1996) showed that when a positively valued social group that was relevant to one’s self definition held a view, there was pressure to conform and to align. The finding was that majority group members shifted their views, when they found out that their held views were consistent with that articulated by minority group members. The shifts were due to “normative pressures to align with valued majorities” p.1181. Again, categorization led to inauthentic behavior. To be accepted by the in-group, people were willing to walk away from their own beliefs.

One of the unwitting consequences of privileging collective ideology is that individualism is thereby devalued. But as Bandura points out, the relationship between these concepts need not be oppositional. The social and the individual are not competing selves. What is portrayed in dualistic terms may well be explainable by a more parsimonious unitary logic. To arrive at such logic we must be prepared to look away from how work is organized, toward the intrinsic worth of jobs. If the quality of jobs is good, workers will be motivated to work at them whether individually or in teams. If contrarily, the quality of jobs is bad, altering the work form will not improve the situation. The moral of this story is that there may be no need to devise new work motivation theory for team conditions—that extant theory may apply under such conditions as well.

CLASS AND POWER AND THE NEW WORKPLACE

Arguably, work motivation may be viewed from two basic stances, that of workers, or their employers, thus, it is essentially a political construct. On one hand, consistent with Foucault’s (1980) power/knowledge nexus, it could be conceived as a resort to positivism—the social sciences providing explanation of human behavior that helps in their manipulation toward the end of profit-making. On the other, it could be viewed as a means of providing the kind of environment and challenge that would inspire people to be at their most creative (e.g. Ford, 1996; Oldham, and Cummings, 1996). Thus the lens through which work motivation theory is viewed could lead to conceptions ranging in orientation from humanistic to instrumental. Where employers must pragmatically connect work motivation to the bottom line, workers may have a very different agenda at work, revolving around agency or personal artistry. These different agendas need not be conflicting. Social exchange theory (Gouldner, 1960) contends that this could be a two-way street—since people tend to return kindnesses meted out to them. Thus firms that are humanistic in orientation could expect workers to return the favor by being good organizational citizens.

Teamwork constitutes a new point of tension in the labor process, because by nature it requires workers to forego autonomy and craft-consciousness, and to accept flexibility-enhancing
regimes. Team-based mechanisms such as cross-functional training and job rotation make workers interchangeable, thus normalizing their identities. This is a new post-bureaucratic round of adjustment in the labor process, that further consolidates management control at the point of production, workers becoming ever more expendable. Pollert (1996) has chronicled in a case study of the failed introduction of teamwork in a British plant, that workers had become alienated from the production system, because it offered them “unskilled repetitive jobs” p. 205. There was tension “between the needs of wider productive units in the collective labour process and the narrow needs of the team; between a management culture dominated by accountancy controls and the investment needed in equipment, training and pay, all of which contributes toward employee motivation...” p205.

Barker (1993) shows how teams become a form of “concertive control” in workplaces, team members imposing regimes of normative rules and stifling surveillance that became more rigid than the bureaucratic forms of control they replaced. Team members created an “omnipresent tutelary eye of the norm,” with the team members themselves as the eye, that continually observed their actions, ready either to reward or, more importantly, punish” p.3. Drawing on a body of empirical literature on team approaches at work, Sewell (1998) provides a model of chimerical control that takes a jaundiced look at new team approaches. Each axis of control has its own mode of surveillance. The vertical axis relies on panoptic surveillance via electronic monitoring of work, the high degree of transparency inducing obedience. The system is rational and personal. Information about individual performance reveals high and low performers and becomes the basis of sanction and reward. The horizontal axis relies on surveillance through peer group scrutiny. Low performers are exposed to the scrutiny of the team. High performers are identified and become the basis for normalizing team activities.

Teams present a new source of class tension in the labor process since they constitute an appropriation by management of labor’s most powerful source of resistance—the power of the collective. Their introduction invariably weakens unions (Pulignano, 2002).

**Power Considerations**

The new workplace can be examined not just in terms of class relations, but from the standpoint of power arrangements, power here being employed in keeping with the conceptions of Michael Foucault, surveillance, through electronic monitoring and through teamwork, being its most efficient form. In *Discipline and Punish* Foucault contended that as early factories became more complex, ways had to be found to impose discipline in workplaces—to ensure the exercise of “continuous power”. Accordingly, “The perfect disciplinary apparatus would make it possible for a single gaze to see everything constantly” p.173. This led to the need for specialized supervisory personnel “constantly present and distinct from the workers” p.174. In these circumstances “Surveillance thus becomes a decisive economic operator both as an internal part of the production machinery and as a specific mechanism in the disciplinary power” p.174. Through constant surveillance, power becomes invisible, exercised through hierarchical observation, and the normalization of judgment. (Foucault, 1995). In *Power/Knowledge* Foucault (1980) counseled that the study of power could be more beneficially conducted by refraining from examining motives. More than considering power as the domination of one class by another, we should view it as something which "circulates", never residing in anyone’s hands. Individuals are “inert and consenting” objects of power. “The individual which power has constituted is at the same time its vehicle” (p.98). Supervision is redundant in work environments where self-managed teams are the modus of operations. Team members become the eyes and ears of management.

I have been contending that issues of class and power pervade the new workplace, and that any new theory of work motivation that looks away from these contextual issues, invites the critique that it is in the service of capital. Social identity theory as work motivation theory completely avoids class tensions that are inherent in new work systems, and disciplinary systems of power that have added unhealthy and alienating degrees of transparency to work settings.

**CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH.**
Throughout this article contentions have been raised regarding the social identity approach to work motivation on the basis of its pro-capitalist leanings, and because advocates uncritically accept the status quo of new restructured workplaces, where, along with the efficiencies, come untoward consequences for workers such as surveillance, forfeiture of craft identity, routine work, contingent labor, uncertain job tenure and diminished union representation. Whether social identity theory is suited as work motivation logic in democratic societies where individual expression of view is the iconic exhibit has been questioned here.

There are implications arising out of the arguments of this article for lines of research that test the efficacy of social identity theory as a basis of work motivation. A first is that work motivation theory intending to reflect social relations in new restructured work places might have more legitimacy if it emerges out of phenomenological understanding of what work is like for workers in these environments. Related to this is the need for more research on the efficacy of teams, and on the impact of the introduction of team-based, collective work culture on employee outcomes such as job satisfaction, career commitment, and organizational citizenship behavior. There is also a suggestion that research is needed on the nature of social relations in unionized workplaces where team-work is introduced, especially to test the hypothesis that unions are weakened by such work restructuring.

Implicit in these closing sentiments and the critique that has characterized this article is the view that theory intended for deployment in new restructured workplaces should derive from research based in such workplaces. Social identity as motivation theory suffers because it is completely disconnected from workplace practice. It offers mainly an objectified conception of what is likely to occur when workers who are accustomed to autonomous work, are called upon to work collaboratively. Such a view may never quite capture the true nature of change in these work places—the messy business of social relations at work, with the strong under-currents of class and power, as employers continue their perennial quest to exercise ever more increments of control over labor.

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