

Why does organizational identification relate to reduced employee burnout?

The mediating influence of social support and collective efficacy

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Abstract

Although prior studies have consistently shown that organizational identification can reduce employees' stress and burnout, little is known about the mediating processes that underlie this relationship. Against this backdrop and building on recent theoretical work on the social identity model of stress, the present research tests a two-step mediation model for the organizational identification-burnout link. Specifically, it is hypothesized that employees who strongly identify with their organization are particularly likely to receive social support from their colleagues. This, in turn, should promote a sense of collective efficacy and, as a consequence, negatively relate to burnout. Data from a study with 192 Italian high school teachers supported the hypotheses.

Keywords: Social identity model of stress, organizational identification, burnout, social support, collective efficacy

Why Does Organizational Identification Relate to Reduced Employee Burnout?

The Mediating Influence of Social Support and Collective Efficacy

Recent years have witnessed an increasing interest for social identity processes of stress and health. Indeed, several studies have shown that people's identification with a social group, such as their organization or their work team, relates negatively with their stress and burnout (e.g., Bizumic, Reynolds, Turner, Bromhead, & Subasic, 2009; Haslam, O'Brien, Jetten, Vormedal, & Penna, 2005). For instance, Haslam et al. (2005) found that customer service employees but also bomb disposal technicians with strong organizational identification reported lower stress levels than their less strongly identified colleagues. Relatedly, an experimental study by Wegge, Schuh, and van Dick (2012) showed that organizational identification reduced call center agents' stress level in challenging situations. These findings support a central tenet of the social identity model of stress (Haslam, 2004), which describes a strong sense of membership with a group as a powerful resource against burnout (Jetten, Haslam, & Haslam, 2012). With the existing evidence supporting the social identity propositions, it seems to be an important next step to understand *why* this link emerges. However, to date, the mediating processes behind the social identification–burnout relationship have received little empirical attention.

The purpose of the present study is to address this important gap. We base our analysis on recent theoretical work by van Dick and Haslam (2012) who argued that two different albeit related variables should play central roles for the social identification–burnout link, namely *social support* and *collective efficacy*. Specifically, van Dick and Haslam (2012) proposed that “just as social support can mediate the direct relationship between identification and well-being (and stress), so too the development of a collective response to stress can mediate the relationship between support and well-being” (p. 17).

According to this perspective, group members who strongly identify with their group (e.g., with their organization) are particularly likely to experience social support from other members of this group (e.g., from their colleagues). This is because people generally seek to foster the viability and success of groups to which they belong (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Thus, strongly identified group members should be attractive targets for support because they often display strong efforts for their group and are motivated to act in the collective's best interest due to their strong sense of group belongingness (Levine, Prosser, Evans, & Reicher, 2005).

Accordingly, helping a strongly identified group member provides a way to foster the functioning and success of the group, which, ultimately, will positively reflect on the person who helped. Following the same logic, less identified group members should be less attractive targets for social support. They tend to focus on their own interests and show relatively little motivation to serve the collective as their bond with the group and their sense of belongingness is relatively weak. Consequently, they should be less likely to experience social support from other group members.

Another reason for why organizational identification may be related to social support is that highly identified employees are more likely to interpret offered support "in the spirit in which it is intended" (Haslam et al., 2005, p. 366; see also Haslam, 2004; Levine et al., 2005). Indeed, prior research suggests that social support is not always perceived positively but can also be interpreted as detrimental, for instance, as a means to signal the recipient's inferiority (e.g., Nadler, Fisher, & Streufert, 1974). However, a shared social identity facilitates a shared understanding for what kind of help is appropriate as well as mutual trust and respect (Haslam, 2004). It provides the sender and receiver of support with a common interpretative framework and is thus likely to foster an effective exchange of support.

Receiving support from others has a positive impact on people's ability and confidence to deal with future challenges (Underwood, 2000). Specifically, experiencing social support increases people's expectations of being able to deal successfully with challenges and stressors as they can rely on and mobilize collective actions (Skaalvik & Skaalvik, 2007; Wegge, van Dick, Fisher, Wecking, & Moltzen, 2006). In other words, social support should foster a sense of collective efficacy to overcome potential stressors. Previous research suggests that collective efficacy has a strong buffering effect on stress. For example, the transactional stress model describes people's expectations to cope with potential stressors as a key factor to reduce the negative impact of stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). Prior research has provided consistent support for this perspective (Le Blanc & Schaufeli, 2008).

Prior research has provided initial support for the relationship between organizational identification, social support, and burnout. In a mainly qualitative study, Haslam and Reicher (2006) found that members of a social group with a lacking shared identity failed to organize effective collective action to external challenges. Being forced to deal with stressors on their own, group members experienced powerlessness and burnout. Relatedly, in a sample of bomb disposal experts and bar staff Haslam et al. (2005) found that social support partially mediated the relationship between employees' organizational identification and work stress. Yet, by examining the integrated proposition that it is not only social support but also its subsequent effect on employees' collective efficacy that reduces burnout, the present study provides two important extensions to these previous studies. First, finding support for the proposed two-step mediation of social support and collective efficacy would lend further credence to the tenet of the social identity model of stress that stress and health are not only issues at the individual level (the traditional perspective in stress research) but also require a thorough understanding of the

collective processes involved. Second, support for van Dick and Haslam's (2012) integrated proposition would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the processes that underlie the link between organizational identification and improved health. This is important as the effect of many organizational phenomena, including organizational identification, are transmitted by more than one intervening step (Taylor, MacKinnon, & Tein, 2008; see also Schuh et al., 2012). However, although it is a central ambition of organizational research to understand mediating processes, that is *why* organizational phenomena occur, studies that examine sequential mediation are surprisingly rare.

In summary, we hypothesize that people who strongly identify with a social group (e.g., with their organization) are particularly likely to experience social support from others (Hypothesis 1). Social support will relate positively to a sense of collective efficacy (Hypothesis 2) which, in turn, will negatively relate to burnout (Hypothesis 3). Finally, organizational identification indirectly and negatively relates to burnout through the mediating influence of social support and, in turn, collective efficacy (Hypothesis 4). Figure 1 summarizes the hypothesized model.

Method

Participants

We examined our hypotheses in a sample of high school teachers in Italy. After a first communication with the principal of each school, teachers were then personally contacted by the first author of this paper in their schools and asked for their consent to participate. They were informed about the aims of this study and were guaranteed on confidentiality of their responses. A total of 192 (52.03% response rate) teachers (71.4% female) participated in the survey. Participants' average age was 47.01 years ($SD = 8.90$).

Measures

Organizational identification. We measured organizational identification with the six-item Mael and Ashforth scale (1992) in the Italian version of Bergami and Bagozzi (2000). Responses were given on a five-point scale, ranging from “totally disagree” (1) to “totally agree” (5). Sample item: “I rather say ‘we’ than ‘they’ when talking about my school”; $M = 3.18$; $SD = .91$; $\alpha = .84$).

Social support. Social support was measured with the four-item scale by Edwards, Webster, Van Laar, and Easton (2008; for the Italian validation, see Toderi et al., 2013). Responses were given on a five-point scale, ranging from “never” (1) to “always” (5). Sample item: “I get the help and support I need from colleagues”; $M = 3.45$; $SD = .79$; $\alpha = .88$.

Collective efficacy. We measured collective efficacy with the seven-item scale by Skaalvik and Skaalvik (2007). Responses were given on a five-point scale, ranging from “never” (1) to “always” (5). Sample item: “Teachers at this school succeeded in teaching math and language skills even to low ability students”; $M = 3.20$; $SD = .66$; $\alpha = .84$.

Burnout. We measured the three core dimensions of burnout, i.e. emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment (Maslach, Jackson, & Schwab, 1996). We measured emotional exhaustion with the nine items of the MBI-ES (Maslach, Jackson, & Schwab, 1996; Italian version: Sirigatti & Stefanile, 1993). Sample item: “I feel emotionally drained from my work”; $M = 2.14$; $SD = 1.42$; $\alpha = .92$. Cynicism was measured with the five-item scale of the original MBI-GS (Schaufeli, Leiter, Maslach, & Jackson, 1996; Italian version: Borgogni, Galati, Petitta, & Centro Formazione Schweitzer, 2005). Sample item: “I have become less interested in my work since I started this job”; $M = 1.48$; $SD = 1.29$; $\alpha = .79$. We measured reduced personal accomplishment with the eight-item efficacy scale from the MBI-ES but with

all items phrased negatively (for a similar use of the negatively rephrased items, see Simbula & Guglielmi, 2010). Sample item: “I can't easily create a relaxed atmosphere with my students”; $M = 1.69$; $SD = 1.09$; $\alpha = .84$. For all items, responses were given on a seven-point scale, ranging from “0” (never) to “6” (always).

Control variables. We controlled for several variables that may affect the proposed relationships but that were not of direct theoretical interest. First, we controlled for respondents' age and gender because both variables have been found to affect employee burnout (e.g., Ng & Feldman, 2010). Second, we controlled for respondents' job satisfaction because highly satisfied employees are likely to experience lower levels of strain and burnout (Alarcon, 2011). Employees answered to the question: “All things considered, how satisfied are you with your current job?” (response options: 1 = *very little* to 5 = *very much*).

Data analyses

Before testing our hypotheses, we examined the factorial structure of our measures. The proposed six-factor model, treating organizational identification, social support, collective efficacy, emotional exhaustion, cynicism, and reduced personal accomplishment as separate factors, showed an acceptable fit with the data ($CFI = .95$; $RMSEA = .08$). Moreover, the six-factor model fit the data significantly better than all possible alternative models (best fitting alternative model: $CFI = .94$; $RMSEA = .09$). To test our hypotheses, we conducted hierarchical multiple regression analyses using the Process macro by Hayes (2012). We estimated three independent models, one for each of the three burnout indicators. To analyze indirect effects, we calculated 95% confidence intervals (CIs) based on bias-corrected bootstrap analyses with 10,000 repetitions.

Results

Correlations among variables were in line with our expectations. Organizational identification significantly and negatively correlated with emotional exhaustion ($r = -.15, p < .05$), cynicism ($r = -.24, p < .01$), and reduced personal accomplishment ($r = -.14, p < .05$). Moreover, organizational identification correlated positively with social support ($r = .37, p < .001$) and social support correlated negatively with emotional exhaustion ($r = -.28, p < .001$), cynicism ($r = -.28, p < .001$) and reduced personal accomplishment ($r = -.20, p < .01$). Both organizational identification and social support correlated with collective efficacy ($r = .37, p < .001$ and $r = .43, p < .001$, respectively), and collective efficacy correlated negatively with emotional exhaustion ($r = -.27, p < .001$), cynicism ($r = -.33, p < .001$) and reduced personal accomplishment ($r = -.29, p < .001$; all correlations and descriptive statistics are available from the first author).

Table 1 presents the detailed results of our hypotheses tests; unstandardized coefficients are reported. As shown in the upper part of the table, we first computed the model for the first mediator (M1) social support. In support of Hypothesis 1, organizational identification was significantly related to social support ($b = .18, p < .01$). We then computed the model for the second mediator (M2) collective efficacy. Consistent with Hypothesis 2, social support related positively to collective efficacy ($b = .24, p < .001$). Finally, and in line with Hypothesis 3, collective efficacy was negatively related to emotional exhaustion ($b = -.47, p < .01$). We then computed the indirect effects and related bootstrap analyses. As can be seen in the lower part of the Table 1 and in support of Hypothesis 4, the sequential indirect effect of organizational identification on emotional exhaustion via both mediators (support and collective efficacy) was significant ($b = -.021, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.059, -.004]$).

The results for cynicism are essentially the same. Most importantly and in line with Hypothesis 3, collective efficacy (M2) was negatively related to cynicism ($b = -.53, p < .001$). Again, we computed indirect effects and CIs. As can be seen in lower part of Table 1, the sequential indirect effect of organizational identification on cynicism via both mediators (support and collective efficacy) was significant ($b = -.023, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.057, -.008]$). This result again supports Hypothesis 4.

Finally, also for reduced personal accomplishment findings confirm our hypotheses. In line with Hypothesis 3, collective efficacy (M2) was negatively related to reduced personal accomplishment ($b = -.46, p < .001$). Again, we computed indirect effects and CIs. As can be seen in lower part of Table 1, the sequential indirect effect of organizational identification on reduced personal accomplishment via both mediators (support and collective efficacy) was significant ($b = -.020, 95\% \text{ CI } [-.051, -.007]$). This result again supports Hypothesis 4.

In line with prior research (e.g., Haslam et al., 2005) and following the recommendation by Becker (2005), we conducted our analyses also without any controls. This approach can enhance the confidence in empirical findings as it excludes the controls as a potential explanation. The pattern of our results remained essentially unchanged. Moreover, excluding the control variables led to an increase in the size of the proposed indirect effects.

We also tested the hypothesized model against several alternative models: 1) A model that links collective efficacy with burnout via the mediating steps of organizational identification and social support, 2) a model that links collective efficacy with burnout via the mediating steps of social support and organizational identification, 3) a model that links social support with burnout via the mediating steps of collective efficacy and organizational identification, and 4) a model that links social support with burnout via the mediating steps of organizational

identification and collective efficacy. Results showed that Models 1, 2, and 3 did not fit the data. In Models 1 and 2, there were no significant total indirect effects of collective efficacy on any of the three indicators of burnout (total indirect effects ranged from $-.05$ to 0 ; all $p > .05$). In Model 3, organizational identification did not predict any of the three burnout indicators when entered into the regression together with social support and collective efficacy (unstandardized regression weights ranged from $-.05$ to $.10$; all $p > .05$). Although model 4 fit the data, for all three indicators of burnout the sequential indirect effect from social support to burnout transmitted through organizational identification and collective efficacy was consistently smaller than the sequential indirect effect of the proposed model (i.e., the indirect effect of organizational identification on burnout transmitted through social support and collective efficacy; indirect effect on emotional exhaustion: hypothesized model = $-.021$, alternative model = $-.016$; indirect effect on cynicism: hypothesized model = $-.023$, alternative model = $-.018$; indirect effect reduced personal accomplishment: hypothesized model = $-.020$, alternative model = $-.016$). Taken together, these results indicate that the hypothesized model had the best fit with the data.

Discussion

Starting from the integrative proposition by van Dick and Haslam (2012), we tested the hypothesis that organizational identification relates to reduced levels of burnout through two consecutive mediating steps—via enhanced social support and, in turn, increased collective efficacy. Results of our study provide support for this notion. This finding offers an important contribution to a more comprehensive understanding of the organizational identification-burnout relationship, which has been consistently found in prior research. Specifically, the present results lend support to a central notion of the social identity model of stress that social support and cooperation based on shared identity “can reduce individuals’ sense that the challenges of work

life must be confronted alone and also give them a practical, embodied sense of the group as a positive force” (van Dick & Haslam, 2012; p. 17). In turn, this increased sense of collective efficacy seems to represent an important resource to deal with stressors and, consequently, can reduce burnout. Taken together, these findings provide a novel view on the organizational identification-burnout link and suggest that it is important to take a process-oriented perspective involving multiple mediating steps to adequately understand social identity dynamics of stress.

The present study, like every research, is not without limitations. Given that this study is the first that examines the sequential mediation model proposed by the social identity model of stress, we would like to encourage future research to constructively replicate and extend the present study. These studies may *inter alia* address the following points: First, although teachers are particularly prone to burnout, and thus a teacher sample is well suited to examine the organizational identity-burnout relationship, future research may reexamine the proposed model in other occupational groups. Second, given the cross-sectional nature of our study, it would be desirable to complement the present study by a longitudinal design to address potential problems of common-method variance and to verify the true direction of hypothesized links. Finally, future research may look into possible non-linear effect as the link between identification and burnout may be curvilinear as shown by Avanzi et al. (2012) for identification and general well-being – possibly mediated by too high a sense of collective efficacy.

Despite these limitations, the fact that the present findings build on the social identity model of stress and are consistent with recent theoretical developments in this realm support our confidence in the results. Considering the present findings together with the accumulating support for the social identity perspective on stress and health, we believe that understanding

social identity phenomena can provide important insights to advance our understanding of stress and health and thus be a fruitful addition to the stress literature.

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Table 1

Direct and Indirect Effects of Organizational Identification on Burnout

	SS (M1) $R^2 = .22^{***}$		CE (M2) $R^2 = .17^{***}$		EE (Y1) $R^2 = .36^{***}$		CY (Y2) $R^2 = .39^{***}$		RPA (Y3) $R^2 = .31^{***}$	
	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)	<i>b</i>	(<i>SE</i>)
Gender ^a	.09	(.12)	-.01	(.10)	.32	(.20)	-.09	(.18)	-.07	(.16)
Age	.00	(.01)	-.00	(.00)	.01	(.01)	.01	(.01)	.01	(.01)
Job satisfaction	.29 ^{***}	(.06)	.02	(.05)	-.67 ^{***}	(.11)	-.65 ^{***}	(.09)	-.48 ^{***}	(.08)
Organizational identification (X)	.18 ^{**}	(.06)	.13 [*]	(.05)	.10	(.11)	-.05	(.10)	.03	(.09)
Social support (M1)			.24 ^{***}	(.06)	-.23 [†]	(.13)	-.07	(.12)	-.02	(.11)
Teachers collective efficacy (M2)					-.47 ^{**}	(.15)	-.53 ^{***}	(.13)	-.46 ^{***}	(.12)
	Probing indirect effects				EE		CY		RPA	
					<i>Point estimate (95% CI)</i>		<i>Point estimate (95% CI)</i>		<i>Point estimate (95% CI)</i>	
Organizational identification → Social support → Emotional exhaustion / Cynicism / Reduced personal accomplishment					-.042 (-.123, .003)		-.013 (-.084, .029)		-.004 (-.057, .033)	
Organizational identification → Collective efficacy → Emotional exhaustion / Cynicism / Reduced personal accomplishment					-.062 (-.163, -.009)		-.070 (-.162, -.015)		-.061 (-.142, -.007)	
Organizational identification → Social support → Collective efficacy → Emotional exhaustion / Cynicism / Reduced personal accomplishment					-.021 (-.059, -.004)		-.023 (-.057, -.008)		-.020 (-.051, -.007)	
Total indirect effects of organizational identification on Emotional exhaustion / Cynicism / Reduced personal accomplishment					-.125 (-.252, -.052)		-.107 (-.208, -.034)		-.086 (-.167, -.025)	

Notes. $N = 192$ (listwise). ^a0 = male, 1 = female; † $p < .10$; * $p < .05$; ** $p < .001$; *** $p < .001$. X = independent variable, M1 = first mediator, M2 = second mediator, Y1-Y3 = dependent variables. SS = Social Support; CE = Collective efficacy; EE = Emotional

exhaustion; CY = Cynicism; RPA = Reduced personal accomplishment. Confidence intervals (CIs) of indirect effects based on 10,000 bias corrected bootstrap samples. Unstandardized coefficients are reported

Figure 1

Theoretical Model Linking Organizational Identification and Burnout

Note. Solid lines represent the links in the hypothesized model. Dashed lines represent additional paths involved in sequential mediation (Taylor et al., 2007).