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A review of social identity theory with implications for training and development

Russell F. Korte
University of Minnesota, St Paul, Minnesota, USA

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to review social identity theory and its implications for learning in organizations.

Design/methodology/approach – This article is a conceptual paper based on a multidisciplinary review of the literature on social identity theory. This article explains the theoretical concepts, constructs, and findings of an identity-based view of learning in organizations. The article describes the theoretical foundations of social identity theory and its elaboration as self-categorization theory, along with some of the limitations of the theory. Important implications for workplace learning are presented.

Findings – Although multiple factors influence how people work, social identity theory portends to be a unifying theory of organizational behavior because what and how people think as members of social groups influences subsequent behavior and attitudes in social systems. This influence has important implications for workplace learning..

Practical implications – The social identities in organizations serve as important drivers of performance. How people think as members of groups affects the outcomes of learning interventions. Therefore, social identity is a key input to or driver of learning and performance in organizations.

Originality/value – Training and development have focused primarily on the individual and occasionally the organizational levels with little attention to the identity-based dynamics of group behavior in organizational settings. This paper offers insights from social identity theory for training and development.

Keywords Training, Group dynamics, Organizational performance

Paper type General review

Introduction

While various disciplines acknowledge the potential of multiple influences on behavior, the human sciences generally anchor behavior within the individual. From this perspective, the individual is the arbiter of his or her own behavior and the primary source of the expertise that drives organizational performance (Swanson and Holton, 2001).

The field of Human Resource Development (HRD) places individuals at the center of organizational performance and claims that organizations get things done through people and depend on human expertise to perform (Swanson, 1996). While the degree of importance of individuals to organizations is variable and debatable (Collin, 1996), the importance of the individual to the organization, manifested in the form of satisfaction, loyalty, and commitment, is often assumed to affect performance (Alvesson, 2000; Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Stets and Burke, 2000; Stryker and Serpe, 1994).

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Mowday and Sutton (1993), in their review of workplace issues regarding individual and group behavior in organizations over the past few decades, identify emerging interest in cognitive and affective influences on behavior in the context of the organization. Specifically, they identified factors at the organization, group, and individual levels. Generally, people do the work of organizations in group settings (Hodgkinson, 2003; Hogg and Terry, 2000). Thus, the way groups operate affects organizational performance.

This article first reviews the theoretical underpinnings of social identity and its explication as found in social identity theory. Included in this explanation is the complementary theory of social categorization, which developed to elaborate the process of forming a social identity. Following this is a discussion of the implications of social identity for training and development.

The simple question of why people do the things they do is quite complex. One way to examine this question may be in the assumption that individuals do what they do because of who they believe they are – their identity. Furthermore, individuals are comprised of multiple selves or identities (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Fiske and Taylor, 1991; Hogg *et al.*, 1995; James, 1891; Jenkins, 2004; Miner, 2002). Recognition of the pluralistic nature of the self appeared early in the field of psychology. Late in the 19th century, James (1891) identified four categorizes of the self: material, social, spiritual, and pure ego. He further fractured the social self into as many selves as there are groups with which the individual interacts. This concept of multiple identities at multiple levels endures, and theories of identity continue to describe selves that are personally, contextually, and socially derived (Hogg *et al.*, 1995; Jenkins, 2004; Turner, 1981).

Organizations, by definition, are social entities generally comprised of various interacting groups (Hodgkinson, 2003; Hogg and Terry, 2000). People primarily get work done through groups in organizations. Within this collection of groups known as an organization, individuals develop and sustain multiple, socially-derived identities.

Social groups exist at multiple levels (societal, cultural, industrial, organizational, functional, and professional) and are an important subject in the study of social and work behavior (Hogg and Terry, 2000). For most identity theorists, groups exhibit isomorphic characteristics of identity across different levels, although the strength of a specific identity is relative to the individual, the group, and the context (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Turner, *et al.*, 1987).

Scholarly purpose and structure of this investigation

This article argues that social identity is a moderating factor influencing individual behavior in groups and therefore is a critical factor influencing learning in organizations. If we assume that an important strategic purpose of HRD in organizations is to foster and facilitate learning (Gilley and Maycunich, 2000; Yorks, 2005), then it is critical to understand the influence of social identity as an important factor on learning in organizational settings. This investigation begins with a brief description of social identity followed by a rationale arguing for the significance of social identity theory in the context of learning organizational settings. The article concludes with a discussion of the implications of social identity theory for training and development professionals.

Conceptualization of social identity

Psychology defines identity as a cognitive construct of the self – fundamentally relational and self-referential, that answers the questions who am I. The typical psychological concept of the self as a collection of personality traits primarily focuses on the individual. In organizational studies, this singular focus on the individual has been frequently at odds with the observed behavior of individuals in groups. Hence, the concept of the social self emerged and was elaborated to explain observed differences in behavior between the individual as a person (personal identity) and the individual as a member of a group (social identity) (Abrams and Hogg, 1990; Turner and Onorato, 1999).

The link between the individual and the group starts with the idea of the self as a bounded cognitive schema – a sort of implicit identity. This cognitive schema is a structure of complex, rich, affectively charged, interrelated concepts about the self. This schema contains core concepts and peripheral concepts of the self. Core concepts allow an individual to maintain an enduring personality, and peripheral concepts allow an individual to adapt to various situations. The core concepts of the self constrain the individual by selectively interpreting and processing information, thereby preserving a more enduring personal identity. The core concept of the self "embodies personal history, relates the individual to social situations, shapes cognition, and anchors a range of goals, motives, and needs" (Turner and Onorato, 1999, pp. 15-16). Surrounding the core are peripheral concepts of the self that are more fluid allowing the individual to adapt to various social situations and adopt various roles and group identities – these are one's social identities.

Social psychology developed broad notion of groups as interrelated entities ranging in size from interpersonal dyads to multiple groups in larger collectives. Based on the context of the situation, dyads can give way to larger groups, which can coalesce into organizations, causing the organization to become the salient group in relation to other organizations. Organizations may also collect into a distinct industry group among other industries, and so on. Generally, the relevant group for a particular social identity depends on the salience of that group in any situation. Therefore, one may variously perceive his or her membership as part of a workgroup, organization, profession, industry, nation, society, race, or human being. Social psychologists believe that how people think about themselves and others depends on the focal group level and heavily influences their behavior and performance (Kanfer, 1990; Fiske and Taylor, 1991; Hogg and Terry, 2000; Pratt, 2003).

Social identity theory

Social identity theory is a theory of group membership and behavior (Hogg *et al.*, 1995). As a sub-theory of social cognition, social identity theory developed with the purpose of understanding how individuals make sense of themselves and other people in the social environment. As described above, individuals derive a portion of their identities from their memberships and interactions within and among groups (Hogg and Terry, 2000).

Fiske and Taylor (1991) describe two components of social cognition; one is the elements of cognition (e.g., causal attributions, schemas, and self-identities) and the other is the processes of cognition (attention, memory, and inference). Recognizing

these dual components of cognition, Henri Tajfel (1982) articulated the elements of a theory of social identity in the 1970s. Later, Turner (1981) elaborated on the elements by articulating the processes of social identity development with a theory of self-categorization (Hogg and Terry, 2000). Social identity theory and self-categorization theory are complementary theories explaining social identity – what it is (the elements) and how it develops (the processes). Individuals develop a social identity (the element) through a process of self-categorization.

Social identity is a concept with enduring (core) and (peripheral) components evolving in a reciprocating process between the individual and the group. Jenkins (2004) described social identity as an ongoing process of interaction between the individual and the focal group (ingroup), and between the individual and other groups (outgroups). In his view, it is a process – not an entity or label. This processual nature helps explain the complex and dynamic nature of identity in social interactions. The resulting identity, in effect, depends on the situation and the relative strengths of internal and external categorizations at the time. The emphasis on process recognizes the relational, dynamic, contextual, and constructed nature of social identity.

Self-categorization assumes that individuals vary in their opportunity to join a group as a function of their readiness and fit, as well as the group's accessibility (Turner and Onorato, 1999). Of course, individuals cannot join just any group. Groups are open to some and closed to others. In the process of categorization, individuals evaluate the accessibility of a group for them and, in turn, are assessed by the group for readiness and fit. One's history, personality, status, and opportunity constrain the choice of groups available. Through the process of self-categorization, the individual constructs the meaning of this social identity, along with adopting the norms (appropriate behavior) guiding performance in this particular group.

Through self-categorization and group membership, individuals develop a social identity, which serves as a social-cognitive schema (norms, values, and beliefs) for their group-related behavior. In adopting the identity of the group, the individual identity of the person recedes to the background, and the identity as a member of the group comes to the foreground. This change to a group-based identity includes a corresponding change in motives, expectations, affective connotations, background knowledge, beliefs, norms, and values (Turner and Onorato, 1999). Under the influence of social identity, individuals may display motives and behavior that conflict with their personal identities (Ashforth and Mael, 1989). As group members, individuals may take or advocate more extreme positions than they might personally. Essentially, groups ascribe an identity, along with its behavioral norms, values, and beliefs, to their members, as well as to other groups.

Researchers observed individuals readily altering their personal behavior to adopt group norms and values, while striving for consensus within the group (Turner and Onorato, 1999). This transition from individual identity to group identity is one of the key insights of social identity theory for understanding the distinct behavior and interrelations of groups. This transition from a personal identity to a social identity tends to depersonalize the individual in favor of becoming a group member. Depersonalization does not insinuate a negative connotation in the sense of dehumanization. It is a neutral description of the tendency of the individual to downplay personal attributes in favor of acquiring group attributes. Socialization of

the individual into a group provides the individual with the values and emotional attributes of group membership (Hogg and Terry, 2000). It is not a loss of personal identity but rather the acquisition of an additional identity. The power of social identity varies, but research has found that it is generally more powerful than individual identity (Hogg and McGarty, 1990). Hence, the general tendency of people to go along with the group to which they identify, especially when the group is salient.

The attributes that describe the ideal identity of the group become the prototype or parameters of the group. A key referent for the social self is the group's prototype. Social identity theory states that individuals come to identify with a group (social identity) based on the prototype of the group – although the interaction of the individual and the group is reciprocal, causing the individual, more or less, to conform to the group's prototype, and at the same time the group, more or less, to conform to its members. It is a dynamic, reciprocal, and evolving process.

Individuals identify with a group for a sense of pride, involvement, stability, and meaning (Hogg and Grieve, 1999). In some cases, social identity functions as a driver of competition among groups. From this perspective, group behavior is concerned with the struggle between groups for power, status, superiority, and material advantage (Abrams and Hogg, 1990).

Discrimination and stereotyping among groups

The strength of a social identity varies according to the situation – the stronger the similarities within the group and the differences between groups, the stronger the identity of the group. When social identity is more salient than personal identity, people perceive themselves less as individuals and more as members (representatives) of the group – effectively stereotyping themselves toward the prototype of the group. Along with the tendency to stereotype and depersonalize oneself as a member of the ingroup is the tendency to stereotype and dehumanize others as members of outgroups.

Enhancing self-esteem is one of the basic tenets of social identity theory. Research has found that the bias for one's group (favoritism) and the denigration of others in outgroups (discrimination) is pervasive, implicit, and easily triggered (Tajfel, 1982; Turner *et al.*, 1987).

In the struggle for power, dominant groups strive to maintain the status quo while minority groups seek positive identification on attributes differing from the dominant group. According to social identity theory, the desire for certainty and positive self-evaluation are primary motivations for the tendency of a group to exaggerate the similarities among its members (ingroup) and to exaggerate its differences from other groups (outgroups) (Abrams and Hogg, 1990; Hogg and Grieve, 1999). Ingroup members often stereotype outgroups in negative or derogatory ways intended to enhance the status of ingroup members. Stereotyping, prejudice, and conflict are important consequences of social identity and self-categorization (Tajfel, 1982, Turner *et al.*, 1987).

Research on group identification found that groups vary in their tendencies to enhance perceptions of similarity and difference, causing the relative strengths of groups and the degree to which individuals identify with the group to vary. In addition, studies found that people generally develop some sense of a social identity for a group, and simply assigning people to groups with minimal interaction or experience is

enough to elicit ingroup favoritism (Hogg *et al.*, 1995). Social identity helps individuals lighten their cognitive load by reducing uncertainty through categorization or stereotyping. On the downside, this perception of stability fosters rigidity, conflict, and prejudice.

In addition, boundaries among groups vary in their permeability. Some groups readily allow members from another group to enter, while other groups resist outsiders. This is most noticeable in an organization's power and status hierarchy. Low-status group members may see opportunity to advance into high-status groups, or if advancement is not possible or desirable, they may amplify differences and discriminate in an effort to promote self-esteem. Discrimination may be reciprocal, with high-status groups amplifying their differences from low-status groups. In contests of power, low-status groups may push for change while high-status groups may support the status quo.

Groups also discriminate internally. In an effort to preserve the group, members will nurture their similarities and stifle differences (Turner *et al.*, 1987) A "black sheep" in the group often is more disliked than similar individuals in outgroups because, as black sheep, they are an immediate threat to ingroup identity. The pressure to conform to the group is an essential dynamic of group preservation. The well-known concept of groupthink has been documented repeatedly in group decision making (Janis, 1982). Categorization partitions the world into comprehensible units by accentuating ingroup similarities and outgroup differences. The ubiquity of categorization in society and the dependence of individuals on groups to function continually reinforce the importance of group membership and its consequences.

Limitations of social identity theory

There is widespread debate about the concept of identity. The three most common controversies involve the concept of identity: what is it, where is it located, and why is it important?

First, the quest to define identity stems from confusion and crossover with other related concepts in different disciplines. In many ways, it is an issue of semantics. Anthropologists discuss identity as an artifact of culture, sociologists define identity as the set of social roles, and psychologists define identity as a set of norms (Stets and Burke, 2000; Hogg *et al.*, 1995). Despite differences in the construct, overall similarities point to the presence of an important concept for understanding behavior in the social environment. Theorists do not dispute the reality of the concept as much as the details of its construction.

A second controversy, of where identity exists, has disciplinary biases. The key question revolves around the reification of group-level phenomena. It is common in discussions of social identity to jump back and forth between the individual and the group levels of analysis. Some theorists locate social identity in the individual, and others construct a supraindividual entity of the group debating the transferability between levels of individual and group phenomena (Jenkins, 2004; Tajfel, 1981). Wenger (1998) discounts this debate as unproductive claiming that the interaction between the individual and the group is the important point.

Another controversy is the theory's disconnection between explanation and prediction. Social identity theory makes coherent but dubious explanations of past

individual behavior in social settings from which it is difficult to predict future behavior (Hogg and McGarty, 1990). This difficulty in predicting human behavior is not exclusively the weakness of social identity theory, but a characteristic of the social sciences in general.

Identity has become a popular lens to view organizational phenomena. The versatility of the concept as a lens to examine social phenomena is both its strength and weakness. One disadvantage is that researchers, theorists, scholars, and practitioners extend the concept beyond its relevance and explanatory power. Using these terms and concepts too broadly only confuses the quest to understand identity and risks marginalizing an important concept with contradictory explanations (Pratt, 2003). There seems to be little debate about the existence of a socially influenced identity. Realizing that there is still more work needed to understand the concept of social identity, the following section highlights important contributions this theory makes to the practice of training and development in organizations.

Discussion and implications for training and development

The field of training and development in Human Resource Development has undergone tremendous changes and expansions in vision. Training is no longer about only instructing individuals to do their jobs efficiently and effectively. Training and development have expanded to embrace non-training solutions aimed at improving performance at the individual, process, and organizational levels (Rummler and Brache, 1995; Swanson, 1996). However, there is an important gap at the group level. Groups are not only instrumental in executing organizational functions and processes, they are influential at enabling and constraining the motivations and commitments of individual members. Most training and development interventions underestimate or overlook the important effects of group membership.

Social identity theory explicates one view of a source of individual action in social settings – such as workgroups and organizations. By adopting the beliefs, values, and norms of the group, individuals perceive and react to organizational situations from this group-based perspective. The importance of social identity theory for training in organizations stems from the insights about individual behavior in groups and the group dynamics that affect individual learning and performance in organizations.

The construct of social identity focuses on the behavior of individuals in groups. Given the prevalence of social and functional groups in organizations (Hodgkinson, 2003), it seems imperative for training professionals to attend to group-based behavior directly, rather than as an aggregation of multiple individual behaviors.

Training and development are the primary interventions of formal organizational learning. Learning in organizational settings is under the influence of group dynamics and social processes. Social identity theory attempts to explain the relations between the individuals and groups within which individuals work and learn.

The next section discusses two specific examples of workplace learning in which social identity can be seen to play an important role; socialization and strategic training. Following that is a discussion of the role of social identity in the concepts of readiness and motivation to learn, which are important factors in all training interventions.

Socialization

A special kind of training, often called socialization, directly contributes to the development of a group identity in an individual. During socialization into an organization, the selected individual frequently enters a workgroup, which becomes the salient group for identity formation. Lave and Wenger (1991), as well as Van Maanen and Schein (1979) describe a part of the process of socialization as the movement from the periphery to the center of the community or organization. This movement by necessity includes the learning and development of an identity as a member of the group – a social identity.

The literature on socialization defines this process as learning, but focuses primarily on the learning of work tasks and roles (Ostroff and Kozlowski, 1992). In addition, it is hoped that newcomers will learn and internalize the organization's values, along with the tasks and roles of the job. The primary responsibility for learning to fit into the organization generally belongs to the individual and often occurs informally through trial and error (Bauer *et al.*, 1998).

Many organizations believe that allowing the newcomer to learn to fit into the organization by trial and error or informally is inefficient and for the most part ineffective. Yet attempts to enhance the process by relying on traditional teaching methods do little to remedy the situation. Teaching the organization's mission and values along with policies and procedures has been found to be of little value to newcomers (Bauer *et al.*, 1998).

Rather than relying on traditional means to communicate the organization's identity and hope that the newcomer internalizes deeply-held beliefs, norms, and values like so many other job tasks, socialization may be more effective if this part of the process was developed through a mentor to address the conditions of self-categorization and social identity – specifically, issues of accessibility, readiness, and fit as defined, evaluated, and enacted by the group and the newcomer. To be effective, these issues should address the underlying assumptions, beliefs, values, and norms that are generally unwritten and learned informally. Of course, this requires the existing group to be cognizant, articulate, and critically reflective of the prototypical identity of the group.

The construction of one's social identity as a result of the socializing experiences afforded by the workgroup to new members is an important source of knowledge and meaning for newcomers. Becoming more systematic and formal about this process would leave less room for misinterpretation and miscalculation as newcomers move into the group and the organization.

Another important issue for organizations is the potential for creativity and innovation from new members to the organization. Graen (1986) describes the socialization process as a role making process with opportunity for the newcomer to negotiate changes to his or her contributions to the workgroup. The process of individuation, whereby the group learns new knowledge from the experience of new individuals receives little attention in organizational socialization literature (Miller, 2003). This lack of attention may be due in part to the tendency of training and socialization to follow a one-way communication stream assuming the importance of the dominant viewpoint over the newcomers viewpoint. Challenging this dominant practice in training can enhance opportunities for the organization to be more accommodating of diverse individuals and experiences.

While socialization is viewed formally as a learning process in which the newcomer learns the values and responsibilities of his or her role in the organization. The more important learning process occurs during the socialization into the workgroup. Research on identity and socialization indicate that in many cases people distinguish between the organization and the workgroup (Moreland *et al.*, 2001; van Knippenberg and van Schie, 2000). Trainers involved with the socialization of newcomers often delegate the training of newcomers into the workgroup to the informal tutelage of group members. This is another potential source of disjunction between the organization and the new group member if the social identity of the group members differs from the identity of the organization or dominant group.

Socialization is not only about learning to fit in through the acquisition of knowledge and skills about job roles, but also about the construction of a group identity within the context of the organization. This is an important learning process in which training can provide the knowledge and skills to enhance the performance of the organization, as well as foster a participative and accommodating attitude in the workgroups throughout the organization helping the newcomer experience a successful beginning.

Strategic training and development

Strategic learning via training and development generally focuses on the alignment of group efforts and goals with those of the organization (Yorks, 2005). However, attempting to teach idiographic groups to align in complex organizations is terribly inefficient and ineffective without addressing the frame of reference stemming from the identities of the groups.

Many modern organizations are collections of loosely-coupled groups reinterpreting and recontextualizing the organization's strategic mission at their various local levels (Ashforth and Mael, 1989) and to fit their various perspectives. This is readily apparent when investigating the needs and priorities of different functional groups. Important assumptions underpinning this reinterpreting lie in the identity of the group, as well as the context within which the group works. Making sense of the work of the group is a learning process grounded in the identity of the group (Weick, 1995) and must be addressed in any training and development effort charged with realigning the strategic thinking and practices of a group to the organizational mission.

Wenger (1998) described the interdependence of learning and identity in communities of practice. When something is learned the individual's knowledge or skill set is changed. Consequently the individual is not the same as before. Considering not only what was learned (epistemological learning) but how the individual changed is what Wortham (2004) described as ontological learning.

The trend in organizational learning is toward competency-based systems of knowledge and skills (Solomon, 2001). Solomon reminds us that competencies are not neutral or objective categories. And it is important that training professionals critically address the underlying assumptions, beliefs, values, and norms of the competency framework in the organization. The tendency of training interventions to reflect the narrow cultural viewpoint of the dominant group in the organization often underestimates the tensions caused by conflicting identities among other groups in the organization. The obvious tensions arise from the contests among strong identities

based on professional and functional identities. Tensions also arise from more subtle differences in status and power in organizations. In such cases, it may be helpful for training professionals to adopt an ontological viewpoint (Wortham, 2004) and recognize the influence of a group's identity toward the learning of new knowledge, skills, and practices. This awareness can benefit from an expansion of narrow perspectives if management is prodded to learn from other non-management groups.

Another purpose of strategic training efforts is to align various group strategies with the dominant group – the top management team. Training efforts aimed at individual development of knowledge and skills may encounter resistance from or generate conflict among diverse socially-constituted identities. Training interventions that attempt to improve performance by aligning a group's goals with the organization's goals must address issues of identity – especially if the focal group is socially distant from the management group specifying the organizational goals. Decontextualized and abstracted goals of organizations often do not address adequately the views and goals of the local communities of practice and groups in which individuals work.

5 described several examples of workplace learning in which the individuals' social identities mediated the way in which they enacted and learned their practice. For example, in their review of a study of coal miners, they described the sociocultural identity of the miners' work as masculine, competitive, and risk-taking. This social identity clashed with upper management's efforts to improve safety in the mines through training and policy making.

In their discussion of the interaction between identity and learning, Billett and Somerville do not distinguish between personal identity and social identity. However, for the purposes of training and development in the workplace, it seems useful to distinguish between the two because groups are such a dominant condition of work in most organizations. Moreover, as discussed above, it is known that individuals will act differently in group situations than they would individually.

Making sense of experiences on the job is a form of continuous learning and is moderated by one's identity, as well as the situational conditions of the experience (Billett and Somerville, 2004). In a sense, identity is an historical record of one's learning. One's personal identity encapsulates individual beliefs, norms, and values one holds and one's social identity accommodates the group's beliefs, norms, and values to which the individual belongs.

Readiness and motivation to learn

Many training scholars view the concept of readiness and motivation to learn as an individual characteristic required for learning (Goldstein and Ford, 2002; Knowles *et al.*, 1998). The concept of readiness to learn usually focuses on the present capability of the individual learner to acquire and process information and create knowledge.

The insight offered by the concept of social identity raises this focus to the group level. If the individual identifies with the group in the organizational setting and the group is not ready to change or learn it is difficult to see how the individual can be expected to change. As described above, organizations generally are a mix of loosely-coupled groups with their own interpretations and mental models of the world. The transmittal of knowledge from one group's perspective to another without a

concomitant recognition of potential differences in beliefs, norms, and values is likely to be unproductive.

In addition to attending to the level of readiness of individuals, trainers should also attend to the readiness of the group to learn. While this may sound like common sense, addressing the disposition and identity of the group involves a higher level of power and politics including the status and practices of the function, profession, and occupation that have a legacy beyond the organization or the individual. It also requires a deeper awareness of the implicit assumptions, beliefs, values, and norms of the group.The underlying characteristics of the group generally are unwritten and rarely articulated in a coherent manner making it difficult to assess and address these characteristics.

Also, a key factor in achieving positive results from training and development programs is the level of motivation of learners. Of the many factors found to affect motivation (e.g., anxiety, locus of control, self-efficacy) most of the literature focuses on individual characteristics. As with readiness to learn, the primary focus on the individual tends to overlook the social psychology of the group's influence on motivation.

In a study by Parker (cited in Haslam, 2004), individuals were randomly assigned to hierarchical groups in two different organizational structures. One organization was described as progressive with opportunity for advancement and the other organization was positioned as conservative with little opportunity for advancement. While controlling for individual differences through randomized assignment, Parker found significant differences in the need to achieve (a proxy for motivation) corresponding with the individuals' assigned group and organizational culture. It seemed that membership in a group and organization moderated individual motivation to achieve.

In another study, van Dick *et al.* (2004) found that individuals distinguished among types of groups (workgroup, organization, profession) identifying with different groups at different times depending on salient criteria. They suggest that attending to individual differences to promote group or organizational performance may be counter-productive. The better strategy is to align the objectives of the intervention with the level at which development is desired (e.g., a focus on group learning for group improvement, individual identity for individual development, or professional identity for career development).

Discussion and conclusion

Learning, by definition, involves change, and change is often constrained by identity (Dutton and Dukerich, 1996). Recognition of identity-related constraints beyond the individual level and understanding how to work with identity-based motivations are crucial to the continuous learning and adaptation of individuals in organizational settings. The identity of the group has tremendous influence on members' interests and motivations to develop beyond the norms of the group. For example, the norms of a group may include defenses against the reasoning and influence of another group in the organization. The members of a group may resist efforts to instill new practices or the interpretations and meanings made by other groups.

While much of the literature on training and development focuses on individual needs and organizational outcomes (Goldstein and Ford, 2002; Noe, 2006; Salas and

Cannon-Bowers, 2001), social identity based on group membership is a potent factor often overlooked in the literature on training and development. A top-down or bottom-up orientation of training and development tends to ignore the powerful effects of the middle, i.e. the influence of the individual's workgroup via a social identity.

Social identity is one lens through which individuals view their jobs, responsibilities, organizations, and even the dynamics of work (e.g., causal attributions). Therefore, social identity becomes an important lens through which people perceive new information, attribute cause, make meaning, and choose to undertake new learning. Without addressing the identity factors stemming from group membership, the success of typical training efforts may fail to realize their promise of improving individual and organizational performance.

The problems and gaps in understanding workplace learning and performance related to social identity clearly make the case for more work in theory development and research. The difficulty of including social identity in training interventions may be that it is poorly understood, relatively new, and too ambiguous for problem-solving (Brubaker and Cooper, 2000). It was not the intent of this paper to resolve all these issues, but to identify an emerging body of knowledge that may have great insight for training and development. If nothing else, the recognition of formidable group barriers to effective and efficient organizational learning may help training professionals better address and attend to these factors.

Improving organizational performance must incorporate a deep understanding of psychological, sociological, and organizational factors. The social psychological lens has much less influence on training and development than the dominant lens of individual psychology (Swanson and Holton, 2001). Working at the individual level has two major disadvantages for fostering organizational change: First, it is painfully slow under conditions of rapid and constant change; second, it overlooks the power of influential groups. Fostering change at the group level may prove to be more productive than individually oriented interventions. The empirical evidence supporting the influential power of social identity on the behavior of group members makes social identity an important factor in interventions at the group level.

The theory of social identity offers the opportunity to enrich the understanding of major influences on the interventions undertaken by training professionals to affect learning in organizations. Interventions directed at the organizational or individual levels, without attention to the important level at which individuals engage with the organization (i.e. at the group level), may be a contributing factor to the high failure rate of training interventions. The strength of social identity as a concept comes from its deep meaning to individuals living and working in groups within organizations, and from its focus on the source of that meaning beyond the individual..

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About the author

Russell F. Korte is a doctoral candidate in Human Resource Development, Adult Education, and Strategic Management and Organization at the University of Minnesota. His research interests are in workplace learning, organizational behavior, management, strategy, and performance. Korte is also president of R. Korte & Company, Inc., a strategic training and performance improvement agency serving small to large businesses. He can be contacted at: rfkorte@earthlink.net