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## **Identity Negotiation at Work**

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## Abstract

Upon initiating relationships, people engage in a process of *identity negotiation* through which they establish their respective identities. Once established, people's identities define their mutual expectations, obligations, and indeed, the very nature of their relationships. This chapter presents a rudimentary theory of identity negotiation, with emphasis on how such negotiations unfold in the workplace. We first discuss the nature and history of identity negotiation, noting similarities and differences between identity negotiation and related constructs. Next we describe the successive phases of the identity negotiation process and identify the principles that ideally govern how that process operates in work contexts. We then discuss how identity negotiation processes may be leveraged for organizational change and how the state of identity congruence may contribute to innovation. We conclude by noting questions that remain for future research on identity negotiation.

### **Identity Negotiation at Work**

People can be amazingly flexible in the identities that they assume. The same woman, for example, may be warm with her children, chilly with her employees, and a mixture of both with her in-laws. This can create a problem for social actors who are trying to predict what their interaction partners are going to do next. We suggest that people solve this problem through *identity negotiation*: the processes whereby relationship partners reach agreements regarding “who is who.” By enabling people to establish mutual expectations of one another, these processes transform disconnected individuals into collaborators who have mutual obligations, common goals, and often, some degree of commitment to one another. Identity negotiation processes thus provide the “interpersonal glue” that bonds people to one another and to their organizations.

Given the vital role that identity negotiation processes play in organizational life, it is surprising that they have received scant attention from scholars who study organizational behavior. Continued neglect of these processes could become increasingly costly in the future, as several emerging trends – including increases in globalization, diversification of the labor force, telecommuting, and worker mobility – will likely pose challenges to identity negotiation processes. The resulting difficulties may be compounded by increased reliance on emotionally impoverished modes of communication such as e-mail, instant messages, and text messages. Together, these developments may compromise identity negotiation processes and foster misunderstanding and conflict in the workplace. Those organizations that are equipped with a thorough understanding of identity negotiation processes will not only be prepared to overcome these challenges, they will recognize how to structure the workplace so as to foster identity

congruence and reap the benefits associated with such congruence. As a result, their employees will be happier and more productive, lending the organization a competitive advantage.

In this chapter, we focus on how the identity negotiation process unfolds in the workplace. We begin with a brief discussion of the nature and history of identity negotiation, noting similarities and differences between identity negotiation and related constructs in the sociological and organizational behavior literatures. We then elucidate the unique phases of the identity negotiation process, and discuss the principles that ideally govern how these phases unfold. Following this, we suggest how identity negotiation processes may be leveraged for organizational change and how the state of identity congruence may contribute to innovation. We conclude with a discussion of the ways in which future research might further illuminate identity negotiation processes and develop strategies for tapping the “identity capital” inherent in the stable identities of workers.

Our formulation may advance theory and practice in organizational behavior in several ways. First, to the best of our knowledge, ours is the first attempt to offer a systematic process model of how the identity negotiation process ideally unfolds in the workplace. This article may thus help fill a theoretical void within the social psychology and organizational behavior literatures. Moreover, whereas past empirical investigations of identity negotiation emphasized non-organizational relationships between roommates, married couples, and participants in laboratory research (e.g., McNulty & Swann, 1994; Swann, De La Ronde & Hixon, 1994; Swann & Ely, 1984), our analysis extends the approach to relationships between co-workers and management in organizations (see also Swann, Milton, & Polzer, 2000; Swann, Polzer, Seyle, & Ko, 2004). As such, this chapter contributes to an increasing awareness of the importance of employee identity in the dynamics underlying diverse organizational phenomena such as

leadership (e.g., Lord & Brown, 2004), organizational commitment (e.g., Johnson & Change, 2006), group performance and functioning (London, Polzer, & Omoregie, 2005), reactions to justice (e.g., De Cremer & Tyler, 2005; Wiesenfeld, Swann, Brockner, & Bartel, 2007), and changes in the nature of the workplace (e.g., Thatcher & Zhu, 2006). Finally, the chapter also considers the utility of identity negotiation processes for addressing two prominent challenges for the workplace of the future, namely fostering innovation and capitalizing on diversity.

### **The Nature of Identity Negotiation<sup>1</sup>**

The identity negotiation formulation can be traced to the theory of symbolic interactionism (Mead, 1934), particularly the notion that people derive self-knowledge from social interaction. After observing themselves repeatedly enact particular roles, the argument goes, people construct role-specific self-conceptions (Stryker, 2000). These ideas laid the groundwork for Goffman's (1959, 1961) dramaturgical approach, which likened people to actors in a play. Goffman asserted that the first order of business in social interaction is establishing a "working consensus" or agreement regarding the roles each person will assume. Weinstein and Deutschberger (1964) built on this work by elaborating the interpersonal processes that unfold after interaction partners reach an initial working consensus. Later scholars further expanded the formulation, emphasizing the tendency for people to maximize interpersonal harmony by gravitating toward social settings that seem likely to offer support for their identities or self-views (McCall & Simmons, 1966).<sup>2</sup>

In social psychology, ideas related to identity negotiation were introduced by Secord and Backman (1965) and elaborated by Swann (1983) and Schlenker (1985). Swann (1987) suggested that the process of identity negotiation serves to reconcile two competing processes in dyadic interactions. On the one hand, one person (arbitrarily dubbed the "perceiver") may use his

or her expectancies to guide behavior, thereby encouraging the target to provide behavioral confirmation for the perceiver's expectancies (e.g., Miller & Turnbull 1986; Rosenthal & Jacobson, 1968; Snyder & Swann, 1978; Snyder, Tanke, & Berscheid, 1977). Meanwhile, the other person (arbitrarily dubbed the "target") may strive to bring the perceiver to treat him or her in a manner that provides verification for the target's self-views (e.g., Secord & Backman, 1965; Swann, 1983, 1999). When the expectancies of perceivers clash with the self-views of targets, a "battle of wills" may ensue (e.g., Swann & Ely, 1984), with each party vying to persuade the other to see things his or her way.

The research literature suggests that when such "battles of wills" occur, they are typically resolved with perceivers and targets developing higher levels of congruence (e.g., Felson, 1980, 1985; Felson & Reed, 1986; Hoelter, 1984; Lundgren, Jergens, & Gibson, 1982; McNulty & Swann, 1994; Schafer & Keith, 1985; Swann et al., 2000; Swann & Read, 1981; for a review, see Kenny, 1994). Not surprisingly, although perceivers can develop surprisingly accurate impressions of targets on the basis of little information (e.g., Amady & Rosenthal, 1993; Gosling, Ko, Mannarelli, & Morris, 2002), congruence increases with the length of the relationship (Funder & Colvin, 1988; Funder, Kolar, & Blackman, 1995).

Activities of either perceivers or targets can contribute to congruence. For example, perceivers who are seen as highly credible are especially likely to bring targets' self-views into alignment with perceivers' initial appraisals. This phenomenon could emerge because simply being labeled with a quality (e.g., "You are a slow learner") can, of itself, cause targets to internalize the expectancy. Alternatively, the expectancy may cause perceivers to behave in ways that constrain the responses of targets, thereby eliciting "behavioral confirmation" for the expectancy (e.g., McNulty & Swann, 1994; Shrauger & Shoneman, 1959). In either case, we

refer to the process that produces such perceiver-induced congruence as an “appraisal effect” (Shrauger & Shoneman, 1975).<sup>3</sup>

The flow of influence in identity negotiation may also move in the opposite, target-to-perceiver, direction. Research on self-verification, for example, indicates that targets who are highly certain of their self-views behave so as to bring perceivers to confirm their self-views (e.g., Pelham & Swann, 1994; Swann & Ely, 1984). In addition, targets may elicit self-verifying reactions by displaying highly visible markers of a particular identity or “looking the part.” In fact, targets with highly certain self-views elicit congruent evaluations even when they have had minimal contact with the perceivers who evaluate them (Pelham & Swann, 1994). We refer to the process that produces such target-induced congruence as a “self-verification effect.”

The research literature suggests that self-verification effects are somewhat more common than appraisal effects (e.g., McNulty & Swann, 1994; Swann & Ely, 1984; Swann et al., 2000). This is fortuitous, as there is considerable evidence that people prefer self-verifying evaluations over non-verifying ones. For example, college students whose roommates confirm their chronic self-views report stronger intentions to continue living with the roommate, and this is true even among students who view themselves negatively (Swann & Pelham, 2002). Similarly, married people with positive and negative self-views are more satisfied with spouses who confirm their self-views (e.g., Burke & Stets, 1999; De La Ronde & Swann, 1998; Ritts & Stein, 1995; Schafer, Wickrama, & Keith, 1996; Swann et al., 1994). In fact, people whose spouses disconfirm their (positive *and* negative) self-views run an elevated risk of separation and divorce (e.g., Cast & Burke, 2002). Moreover, controlled laboratory studies show that just as people with positive self-views prefer interaction partners who appraise them positively, people with negative self-views prefer partners who perceive them negatively (e.g., Bosson & Swann, 1999; Hixon &

Swann, 1993; Robinson & Smith-Lovin, 1992; Swann, Hixon, Stein-Seroussi, & Gilbert, 1990; Swann, Pelham, & Krull, 1989). Finally, when people receive feedback that challenges their self-views, they behaviorally resist such challenges, and such resistance activity stabilizes their self-views (e.g., Swann & Hill, 1982; Swann & Predmore, 1985).

More recently, researchers have begun to ask if identity congruence might also benefit group functioning. Presumably, when workers know and understand one another, they can count on each other to enact the same identity day in and day out. As a result, interactions will unfold smoothly and seamlessly. Consistent with this reasoning, a study of MBA students in Texas indicated that in groups that enjoyed high levels of congruence, members were more identified with their groups, and more creative in their work (Swann et al., 2000). Furthermore, as in the research with dyads, the benefits of congruence extended to negative self-views as well as positive ones, presumably because communication and collective tasks proceeded more efficiently to the extent that coworkers recognized one another's strengths *and* weaknesses. Indeed, as long as congruence reigns, it seems that the identity negotiation process will govern the relationship routinely and automatically, leaving employees' conscious attention free to address the work at hand (see, for example, Swann's [1983] distinction between routine and crisis self-verification and McAdams' [1999] discussion of the waxing and waning of the self-narrative process). In contrast, when incongruence emerges, interpersonal relations will be turbulent and difficult, to the detriment of individuals and the larger organization.

For readers familiar with the literature on person-organization fit (e.g., Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005; O'Reilly, Chatman & Caldwell, 1991; Swartzendruber, Jackson, & Johnson, 2007), this discussion of the benefits of identity congruence may evoke a feeling of déjà vu. Whereas we emphasize the benefits of a match between the self-views of targets and the

appraisals of perceivers, work on fit extols the benefits of matching the values, abilities, and goals of the individual with the values and culture of the organization (Kristof, 1996). Although both identity congruence and fit involve a matching process, the two phenomena feature distinct causal pathways. Whereas self-verification often occurs when targets shape their experiences within organizations so as to confirm their identities, fit typically occurs when targets select established (and hence relatively immutable) organizations that match their personal characteristics (e.g., Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995).

In addition, many common ingredients in fit – i.e., values and abilities – are thought to be relatively fixed (in some cases, genetically determined), undifferentiated, and independent of situational influences. In contrast, identity is multi-faceted, multi-dimensional, and relatively sensitive to situational influences (e.g., Goffman, 1959; Markus & Kunda, 1986). As a result, when one's enduring values or abilities clash with the organizational culture, the most obvious option is for the individual to simply leave the organization (e.g., Schneider et al., 1995). In contrast, because identities are relatively nuanced, they offer people far more flexibility. For example, if someone receives feedback that is inconsistent with a particular identity, they may respond by substituting an alternative identity that is more compatible with the situational demands at hand. Indeed, within limits, targets can selectively activate identities that are uniquely appropriate to the situation, thus allowing them to display substantial flexibility in the identities that they assume in the workplace. We will have more to say about these issues later in this chapter when we point to ways in which identity negotiation can facilitate organizational change and innovation.

But if targets activate and enact “situated identities” (Alexander & Well, 1969) that conform to the situational demands of perceivers in the organization, does this not frustrate their

self-verification strivings, which have been shown to be so important? Although it seems likely that self-verification strivings play an important role in organizational life, it is noteworthy that evidence for the importance of self-verification has come exclusively from studies of people who were involved in *symmetric* identity negotiation with co-equals (e.g., members of the same study groups, college roommates, or marriage partners). Such relationships afford people considerable latitude to indulge their self-verification strivings. For example, if a peer or relationship partner asks a target to adopt an identity that differs from one that the target is accustomed to assuming, the target may simply refuse. In contrast, when a superior requests an identity shift of an employee, targets will recognize that the organization has the power (and, to a degree, the legitimate authority) to ask for such a shift because it is compensating the target for his or her services. For this reason, targets engaged in such *asymmetric* identity negotiation processes may be relatively open to assuming (at least temporarily) identities that depart fairly sharply from their chronic identities (cf. Morris, Podolny, & Ariel's [2001] discussion of horizontal vs. vertical relationships in organizations).

To be sure, significant departures from chronic identities will take a psychological toll on targets, so there will be limits on their duration and pervasiveness. For example, some relationships undergo a "qualifying stage" that encourages people to suspend their desire for self-verification until a commitment has been made. A case in point is dating and marital relationships. Targets prefer that their dating partners are oblivious to their flaws, but this preference is replaced by a desire for self-verifying evaluations once they get married (e.g., Swann et al., 1994). Similarly, targets in organizations may tolerate incongruent appraisals in the context of asymmetric relationships with superiors until they have "proven themselves." Once the relationship is stabilized, they may take steps to elicit reactions that are more self-verifying.

In the meantime, targets may compensate for non-verifying feedback from a superior by cultivating self-verification from their co-workers. In this way, targets may ensure that they at least receive a steady supply of self-verification from the people who know them the best.

Whether the relationship happens to be symmetric or asymmetric, identity negotiation is a fundamentally iterative process that involves a series of transactions between targets and their interaction partners. In the section that follows, we examine each successive link in the chain of events that make up the identity negotiation process. We move from the identities and goals of the target and perceivers, to their negotiations with one another, their situated identities and appraisals of one another, and finally to the objective and psychological outcomes of these processes.

### **The Road to Identity Congruence: A Process Model of Identity Negotiation**

Before proceeding, we must add a few caveats. First, we should note that the title of this section, “The road to identity congruence,” has at least two potential referents. Whereas past researchers typically used identity congruence to refer to agreement between the beliefs of perceivers and the chronic self-views of targets, here we also allow for congruence between the beliefs of perceivers and the “situated” (i.e., situation specific) identities of targets. Second, the distinction between “perceivers” and “targets” in our discussion is sharpest in the early stages in the model, for initially perceivers have already established themselves in the organization and targets are just entering. Once targets join the organization, they become perceivers as well as targets. Third, although some linearity is implied by the fact that most of the lines in the model in Figure 1 point downward, a considerable amount of recursiveness is implied by: (a) the bi-directional arrows moving from “target’s and perceiver’s negotiations” to “situated

identity/appraisal” and (b) the arrows moving upward from both “situated identity/appraisal” and “ensuing identity and goals” to the top of the diagram.

### *The Target’s Identity and Goals*

All organisms tend to gravitate toward environments that routinely satisfy their needs (e.g., Clarke, 1954; Odum, 1963). Members of organizations are no exception to this rule. Of greatest relevance here, people seek and enter “opportunity structures” (e.g., Hawley, 1950; McCall & Simmons, 1966) that satisfy their *relationship goals* – the desired end states that people pursue when they enter relationships. At the most general level, people pursue goals that satisfy their needs for *coherence* (a sense that the world fits with past experiences) and *connectedness* (positive relations with valued others). In organizational settings, the desire for *agency* (a sense of competence) also takes on special importance. As we will show, each of these goals is intimately related to the manner in which the identity negotiation process unfolds.

The need for coherence appears to be a basic human motive (e.g., Guidano & Liotti, 1983; Lecky, 1945; Popper, 1963; Swann, Rentfrow, & Guinn, 2003). To meet this need, people will seek experiences that are familiar and predictable, and that match their expectations, especially their firmly held identities. There are two key reasons why targets might prefer and seek perceivers who see them congruently. From an epistemic perspective, self-verifying evaluations feel “right,” diminish anxiety, and foster stability in the identities of targets. Stable identities afford people a sense of psychological coherence, a sense that they know what to do and the consequences of doing it. From a pragmatic perspective, stable identities inject a certain degree of orderliness into people’s interpersonal relationships by encouraging them to display continuity in their behavior. Continuity makes targets more predictable to their partners, who will, in turn, become more predictable to them.

The need for connectedness (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Bowlby, 1969) is also very important in organizational settings. In fact, some have asserted that, beyond satisfying economic needs (e.g., Brief, Brett, Raskas, & Stein, 1997), one of the key functions of work is that it allows people to establish and maintain social connections with others (Jahoda, 1981, 1982; Levy, 2006). Once they have joined an organization, targets can satisfy their desire for connectedness by negotiating identities that attach them in various ways to the organization. For example, targets may not only cultivate identities such as “proud employee of Company X” at a broad level, but they may also perceive themselves as dedicated members of particular branches, divisions, or work teams within the organization. At an even more specific level, targets may negotiate identities such as the “cheerleader” of the work group, the one others can count on to remain optimistic and encouraging at the eleventh hour of a challenging project.

Finally, people’s need for feelings of agency (or competence, autonomy, self-efficacy, self-determination; Bandura, 1986; Bowlby, 1988; Deci & Ryan, 1980; Franks & Marolla, 1976; Harter, 1982; Ryff, 1989; Tafarodi & Swann, 1995) will run particularly high in organizational settings. Indeed, workers who feel that they are effective in the organization and enjoy high levels of organization-based self-esteem express more job satisfaction and perform better (Freedman & Phillips, 1985; Judge & Bono, 2001; Pierce, Gardner, Cummings, & Dunham, 1989; Tharenou & Harker, 1982). To attain feelings of agency, targets often strive to build repertoires of knowledge and skills by observing others in the organization, especially leaders, who exemplify group member prototypicality (Hogg, 2001). Employees often use the behavior of leaders as blueprints for building work-relevant skill sets (Ibarra, 1999).

### *The Perceiver's Identity and Goals*

In principle, identity negotiations can take place between two or more individuals within an organization, between individuals and representatives of organizations, or even between representatives of two or more organizations. As such, in our usage, the term “perceiver” may refer to a specific other person (e.g., an individual coworker), a subset of people within an organization (e.g., a department or work team), or representatives of the entire organizational entity (e.g., AT&T).

When the perceiver is the larger organization, the initial focus of our analysis is the organization's identity, or the central and enduring attributes that make each organization unique (Albert & Whetten, 1985). One way that the identity of the larger organization is conveyed to its members is through its culture (O'Reilly & Chatman, 1996; Whetten, 2006), which consists of the shared values, beliefs, assumptions, and traditions that characterize the organization (Ostroff, Kinicki, & Tamkins, 2003; Schein, 1985). For example, Apple is recognized as having a casual, rebellious corporate culture, one where even the CEO walks around barefoot clad in jeans (Rose, 1990). In contrast, military organizations are marked by strong norms for obedience and stringent lines of command and control within a hierarchical bureaucratic structure (English, 2004). The values and ideologies underlying an organization's culture are communicated through several channels, including symbols (e.g., physical objects and settings), language (e.g., jargon and slogans), and practices (e.g., rituals and ceremonies; Trice & Beyer, 1993). By making its culture known to outsiders, the organization conveys its identity to potential employees (Dennison, 1996; Trice & Beyer, 1993).

Ideally, the organization will attract applicants whose identities fit the organization's preferred appraisals of them. Organizations take various steps to realize this goal. For instance,

an organization may structure the recruitment process so as to communicate its identity, thus letting applicants know what identities they are expected to embrace should they join the organization. Furthermore, intra-organizational sources (e.g., employee referrals) may communicate further details about the organization's identity to potential new employees (Zottoli & Wanous, 2000). The organization may also provide applicants with information about its identity through the interview process. Consider, for example, the realistic job preview. In this exercise, the organization's representatives strive to provide applicants with accurate expectations about the organization by describing unfavorable as well as favorable aspects of the job and organization (Cascio, 1998). Together, these and similar strategies may increase the likelihood that applicants will be ready and willing to adopt identities that match the organizations' preferred appraisals of them.

#### *The Target's Negotiation Strategies*

Once they join an organization, targets may begin communicating their identities to other members of the organization before they even open their mouths by displaying *identity cues*, or non-verbal signs of who they are. For example, targets' work attire, accessories, and office or cubicle décor all convey specific identities to their colleagues (Goffman, 1963; Gosling et al., 2002; Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997; Rafaeli & Pratt, 1993; Swann, 1983). Whereas a framed Harvard diploma communicates intelligence and status, a framed picture of one's children conveys a strong parental identity.

Targets convey identity information in other ways as well. Paralleling their tendency to seek identity-consistent vocations and jobs, targets also seek identity-confirming opportunity structures within organizations (e.g., Serpe & Stryker, 1987). For example, people may join work teams and committees which feature identities to which they aspire. People can also express their

identities through salient, repeated behaviors. Just as employees who see themselves as “rebellious” or “non-conformist” may skip work or break rules, those who perceive themselves as “green” might initiate an office recycling program. Most important, people use explicit and subtle statements as well as nonverbal behaviors and cues to communicate their identities (Elsbach, 2003; Goffman, 1963; Swann & Read, 1981b; Swann, Stein-Seroussi, & McNulty, 1992). Such messages are delivered through channels that range from the formal (e.g., self-evaluations during performance appraisals) to the informal (e.g., conversations around the water cooler).

Upon communicating their identities, targets will often receive feedback from individual coworkers or the larger organization. In ideal cases, perceivers’ appraisals will allow targets to meet simultaneously their needs for coherence, connectedness, and agency. For example, a woman who desires connectedness with other members of her work team may achieve it, at least in part, by cultivating a workplace identity as a skilled and conscientious team member. To this end, she may make a point of arriving to meetings on time, taking careful notes, and volunteering to take on difficult assignments. If this workplace identity is at least reasonably similar to the target’s chronic identity, and she routinely behaves in line with it, she should ultimately earn self-verifying (positive) appraisals of her agency from teammates. As such, the target’s needs for agency and coherence will also be met. Thus, competent performance of one’s job can be viewed as a general strategy for achieving connectedness and coherence in an organization.

At times, however, perceivers will respond to targets’ identity-relevant behaviors by offering appraisals that conflict with targets’ firmly held identities. When this happens, targets must decide whether to acquiesce or to utilize a more forceful strategy in order to elicit the desired appraisal. In some cases, targets strive to reaffirm the initial identity by behaving in an

even more extreme fashion (Stets & Burke, 2003; Swann & Ely, 1984; Swann & Hill, 1982; Swann & Read, 1981). For example, if arrogant employees' sense of superiority is not verified by those around them, they may amplify their self-aggrandizing behaviors (Silverman, Shyamsunder, & Johnson, 2007) in an effort to bring perceivers to recognize their virtues. Likewise, individuals who consider themselves submissive will exaggerate their submissiveness during interactions with a perceiver who views them as dominant (Swann & Hill, 1982).

Such compensatory behavior seems to be particularly common when the workplace is structured in ways that discourage identity displays. Research on employees' reactions to "non-territorial" office environments suggests that some workers bristle against rules that prevent them from claiming a permanent workspace that they can decorate with personal possessions (Turner & Myerson, 1998). Cut off from the use of workspace décor as an identity negotiation strategy, targets in these environments report feelings of distress, threat, and sadness over their inability to communicate their unique skills and identities (Elsbach, 2003). Some compensate by communicating their identity through different channels. For example, just as some workers amplified their use of self-descriptive language during casual workplace conversations, others responded by breaking the rules, marking their territory with forbidden personal possessions such as photographs and books.

Targets whose self-verification strivings have been frustrated may also react by omitting behaviors that elicit incongruent appraisals. Witness the results of a case study of female lawyers working in male-dominated firms. Attorneys who wanted to be perceived as more competent and ambitious – and less stereotypically feminine – sometimes made conscious efforts to curtail their enactment of female-typed behaviors in front of coworkers. One woman noted that she

eventually stopped expressing her genuinely felt insecurities to colleagues because “Men don’t do that” (Ely, 1995, p. 619).

This example highlights the conflict that targets sometimes experience when their need to feel competent or connected to the organization outweighs their desire for verification of their chronic identities. The woman quoted by Ely (1995) had less-than-positive self-views regarding her job abilities, but gradually learned not to reveal these self-views to others because of her needs for agency and connectedness to her law firm. Thus, try as they might, targets cannot always satisfy their desires for coherence, agency, and connectedness simultaneously. Perhaps the most obvious consideration is practical. Employees are generally aware that employers can fire them – or at least refuse to promote them – if the employer loses confidence in the employees’ potential for contributing to the organization. To prevent this, employees may sometimes suppress identity related motives in their negotiations. For example, targets with negative self-views may encourage their peers to recognize their areas of incompetence, but suppress their desire to have their superiors recognize their flaws. Similarly, targets may express their desire for connectedness with their coworkers but suppress it with their supervisors. The identity negotiation formulation assumes that people are sensitive to such contingencies and generally learn to negotiate identities that minimize tensions between pragmatic considerations and their identity related needs. Clearly, however, the suppression of important identities will sometimes create tension that can ultimately prove costly.

Once targets have received and reacted to perceivers’ feedback, negotiations should continue in an “offer-counteroffer” fashion until an agreement is reached regarding who is who. For example, a target who reasserts his identity as highly intelligent following incongruent feedback must now await further feedback. If the next volley of appraisals indicates that a

discrepancy still exists, the target has several options at his disposal. He may take an even more forceful approach to communicating his identity, he may accept the appraisal and change his situated self-views accordingly, or he may even ignore the incongruent appraisal temporarily and compensate by seeking confirmation of other important identities. Ideally, in interactions characterized by cooperation, targets and perceivers will each make counteroffers that successively approach a mutually agreeable common ground. Thus, although the target may never get his manager to view him as the genius he perceives himself to be, he may convince his manager that he is at least intelligent enough to merit the competitive promotion that he desires.

Over time, targets' use of these corrective negotiation strategies will often yield the desired outcome – identity-congruent appraisals from perceivers. For example, in the Texas MBA study, individual targets succeeded in bringing perceivers' appraisals of them closer to their own self-views roughly twice as often as they changed their self-views to match perceivers' appraisals (Swann et al., 2000).

#### *The Perceiver's Negotiation Strategies*

Once targets and perceivers enter into a relationship, perceivers often present targets with a series of experiences that are designed to communicate the identities targets are to assume in the relationship. When the perceiver is the larger organization, it may communicate its expectations through formal written contracts that specify the job-related expectancies of targets and the consequences of violating those expectancies. Formal contracts, however, pertain only to those identity expectancies associated with concrete job functions, performance expectations, and compensation agreements. More expansive in coverage are the implicit, *psychological contracts* that characterize organizational interactions (Conway & Briner, 2005; Rousseau, 1995). Psychological contracts are employers' and employees' unwritten assumptions and

expectations about what they “owe” one another. In contrast to formal written contracts, which sketch in a very specific way the mutual duties and responsibilities of employees and organizations, psychological contracts include informal as well as formal expectations and obligations. Psychological contracts can have wide-reaching implications for understanding target’s work-related attitudes, behaviors, and affective reactions. For example, to the extent that employees perceive an organization as honoring its obligations under a psychological contract, they are more likely to perform organizational citizenship behaviors, or voluntary prosocial behaviors that benefit the organization (Moorman & Byrne, 2005; Robinson & Morrison, 1995).

Formal training is another mechanism through which organizations communicate the situated identities that targets are expected to assume (Kraiger, 2003; Noe, 2005). Although training typically focuses on specific knowledge, skills, and abilities, it also conveys information about the organization’s values and expectations. When, for example, participants in safety-management programs receive training regarding accident prevention, they learn something about the culture of the organization – that it values employee health and well-being. Often, training programs also provide targets with information about meta-cognitive skills, including mental models and decision making strategies, that are commonly used in the organization (Smith, Ford, & Kozlowski, 1997). The products of such training are targets who ideally adopt situated, organization-specific identities that are compatible with the preferred situated appraisals of the larger organization.

Socialization is an informal component of the training process (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). Through interactions with coworkers and supervisors, targets gain additional, “insider” information about the culture of the organization (Chao, O’Leary-Kelly, Wolf, Klein, & Gardner, 1994). Socialization also provides targets with information about the core values, goals, policies,

and assumptions of the organization (Klein & Weaver, 2000; Van Maanen & Schein, 1979), beyond that which they learn during recruitment and selection. Effective socialization enables targets to transition easily into their assigned organizational roles, because it supplies them with a cultural perspective that can be used to interpret novel workplace experiences (Van Maanen & Schein, 1979). In fact, socialization is a particularly useful negotiating tactic for organizations because, unlike recruitment and selection, socialization is a continuous process that extends beyond the initial hiring stage (Schein, 1971; Van Maanen, 1977). To the extent that the information gleaned from the socialization process is acceptably consistent with targets' chronic identities, they should be more likely to incorporate it into their situated workplace identities.

Experienced employees who mentor newcomers can serve as particularly powerful socializing agents by conveying information about the organization's culture, identity-related expectations, and norms within the context of a trusting and supportive relationship (Allen, McManus, & Russell, 1999). This process may bear considerable fruit: compared to their non-mentored peers, mentored employees exhibit better adjustment, more job commitment, and greater career success (Allen, Eby, Poteet, Lentz, & Lima, 2004; Underhill, 2006).

The organization's performance appraisal systems constitute another mechanism of identity negotiation. In addition to providing feedback on specific work goals, the performance appraisal system has become a broader tool that also includes information pertaining to personal development, organizational socialization, and career advancement (Murphy & Cleveland, 1995). These systems, when properly executed, specify what is expected of targets and offer suggestions for improvements. As such, performance appraisals can constitute a crucial pathway through which identity related information is communicated to targets (as long as they occur relatively frequently; Meyer, 1991). Optimally, organizations should provide continual feedback

to targets and encourage them to seek feedback routinely (Steelman, Levy, & Snell, 2004). For the identity negotiation process to unfold smoothly, it is therefore important that organizations motivate targets to seek and use feedback (Ashford & Cummings, 1985; Miller & Jablin, 1991). Indeed, evidence suggests that feedback seeking is associated with high quality performance and interactions in the workplace (Ashford, Blatt, & Vandewalle, 2003). We suspect that some of the positive effects of feedback seeking are partly due to targets acquiring an accurate understanding of the organization's situated appraisal of them. For example, regular feedback seeking is associated with greater agreement between self- and supervisor-evaluations of performance (Williams & Johnson, 2000).

Compensation is yet another mechanism through which organizations can influence the identities of targets. For example, organizations that desire employees with highly cooperative self-views can reward targets who perform prosocial behaviors such as helping coworkers and championing the organization to outsiders (e.g., Borman & Motowidlo, 1997; Organ, 1997). More generally, organizations can facilitate a wide array of behaviors and associated self-views by compensating targets who display the desired behaviors (Kerr, 1975).

Through repeated iterations of such processes, perceivers communicate their desired appraisals to targets, and offer feedback to targets concerning their identity relevant behaviors. In doing so, perceivers may gradually elicit identity change from targets. As noted earlier, however, the tendency for perceivers to bring targets' self-views into alignment with their initial or ideal appraisals seems to be weaker, on average, than the tendency for targets to bring perceivers' appraisals into line with their strongly held self-views (e.g., McNulty & Swann, 1994; Swann & Ely, 1984; Swann et al., 2000).

*The Target's Situated Identity and Perceiver's Situated Appraisal*

After Alexander and Well (1969), we use the term “situated identity” to refer to a target’s identity within a specific, circumscribed context or situation, such as the work environment. Akin to Markus and Kunda’s (1986) notion of the “working self-concept,” the situated identity is the currently accessible and active portion of a target’s identity (cf. Lord & Brown, 2004). In this article, we introduce the sister concept, “situated appraisal,” to refer to a perceiver’s impression of a target within a specific context or situation.

As shown in Figure 1, the situated identities of targets reflect not only their contributions to the identity negotiation process but also inputs from perceivers in the organization. Similarly, the situated appraisals of perceivers are influenced by inputs from targets as well as their own expectations and goals. The wide array of potential influences on these identities creates the possibility of several distinct types of discrepancies, two of which are particularly important. First, targets’ situated identities may conflict with their chronic identities. Second, targets’ situated identities may conflict with perceiver’s situated appraisals of them. We consider each of these types of discrepancies in turn.

Targets who are fortunate enough to enter organizations whose cultures match their own firmly held chronic self-views will find that their situated identities usually support their chronic self-views. This happy state of affairs is far from universal, however. In some instances, for example, people are unable to enter organizations that support their identities, or they unwittingly enter organizations that are less supportive of their identities than they had hoped. In other cases, people will enter organizations that support their identities initially but the organization itself, or their position within it, changes. In still other instances, people may enter organizations with an eye to changing some aspect of their identity. In each of these instances,

targets will encounter feedback that challenges their chronic self-views. Such feedback will be especially impactful insofar as the source of the feedback seems highly credible, certain of the appraisal, and trustworthy (e.g., Josephs, Bosson, & Jacobs, 2003; Mayer & Davis, 1999; Steelman et al., 2004; Swann & Ely, 1984).

Discrepancies between targets' situated and chronic identities will also emerge when targets are forced to satisfy some identity concerns at the expense of frustrating others. This may occur because some phenomena within organizations elicit multiple identities (e.g., transformational leadership activates followers' collective and relational identities; Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003). When multiple identities are salient, people must sometimes deal with competing motivations. For example, the stress some organizations place on dependent, interconnected situated identities may force targets who see themselves as independent to relinquish their desire for verification of their independent self-views.

Organizations are not the only source of discrepancies between the chronic and situated identities of targets, for sometimes targets themselves may accept or even actively create such discrepancies. If targets are highly motivated to work in a particular position, they may intentionally embrace new identities that contradict their chronic identities. Indeed, there is growing evidence that targets monitor and sometimes purposely distort the situated identities they assume at work (Bolino, 1999; Gardner & Martinko, 1988), especially when seeking employment (Birkeland, Manson, Kisamore, Brannick, & Smith, 2006; Mueller-Hanson, Heggestad, & Thornton, 2003; Snell, Sydell, & Lueke, 1999). For example, to obtain and maintain an attractive job, a shy person might suppress her 'true' identity and act more sociable and outgoing in her workplace role. Targets may also make conscious decisions to emphasize job-relevant self-views (competence, confidence, conscientiousness, etc.) and deemphasize

irrelevant ones, even though this may necessitate acting out situated identities that differ from their chronic ones.

There are, of course, limits to such phenomena. First, the situated identities must not be too different from the associated chronic identity (Swann, Bosson, & Pelham, 2002). Second, targets should perceive the chronic identity that is being overridden by the discrepant situated identity as relatively uncertain, unclear (Campbell et al., 1996; Maracek & Mettee, 1972; Pelham & Swann, 1994; Swann & Ely, 1984; Swann, Pelham & Chidester, 1988), or unimportant (Markus, 1977; Pelham, 1991; Swann & Pelham, 2002).

Although targets will sometimes tolerate discrepancies between their situated identities and chronic self-views, the identity negotiation model assumes that it is generally desirable to maximize overlap between situated and chronic identities (Buss & Briggs, 1984). For one thing, behaving in a manner that is too discrepant from a chronic identity may be uncomfortable and distracting for targets. Such feelings could undermine performance. To illustrate, MBA students whose chronic self-views were challenged by the members of their study groups were less committed to their study groups and less productive than students whose self-views were confirmed (Swann et al., 2000). Other research suggests that if acting out a discrepant situated identity undermines targets' feelings of authenticity, emotional exhaustion may result (Brotheridge & Lee, 2002). Emotional exhaustion in the workplace has been linked, in turn, with increased job turnover, physical and psychological distress, and decreased job performance (Brotheridge & Grandey, 2002; Morris & Feldman, 1996; Schaubroeck & Jones, 2000; Wright & Cropanzano, 1998).

Discrepancies between a target's situated and chronic identities are not the only source of discomfort and stress in the workplace, as anxiety may also result from discrepancies between

the target's situated identity and the perceiver's situated appraisal of him or her. Even under optimal circumstances, it often takes time for the individual and the organization to negotiate a mutually acceptable identity for the target to assume. In some instances, initial discrepancies between targets' situated identities and the perceiver's situated appraisals refuse to go away, as when the individual employee and her or his group members or coworkers are fundamentally incompatible. Such unsuccessful identity negotiations will likely leave both parties feeling dissatisfied, and may undermine employees' work attitudes, performance (Swann et al., 2000), and interest in remaining with the organization (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005; Schneider et al., 1995). These and related outcomes of the identity negotiation process will be considered next.

#### *Work Outcomes of the Identity Negotiation Process*

When targets successfully negotiate situated identities that are reasonably similar to their chronic identities, a "working consensus" is achieved (Goffman, 1959). Such a consensus sets the stage for targets and perceivers to pursue the goals that brought them together in the first place. The extent to which the working consensus "works" for both parties will influence a wide array of outcomes.

*Job performance.* Identity negotiation theory assumes that people perform best when their chronic identities (or at least, their situated identities) are supported by the organization. In support of this proposition, there is evidence that study group members who are evaluated congruently outperform those who do not and this was true whether the evaluations confirmed negative or positive self-views (Swann et al., 2000).

As noted earlier, targets sometimes experience discrepancies between their chronic and situated identities, as when a job they want requires qualities or proficiencies that are inconsistent with their self-views, abilities, or both. Although such discrepancies may degrade

the performance of many people, others (e.g., high self-monitors; Snyder, 1987) may not only tolerate situated identities that are discrepant with their chronic ones, they may actually flourish. For example, in jobs that emphasize interpersonal competition (e.g., financial brokers), non-assertive targets who are high in self-monitoring (and thus acutely sensitive to situational cues to performance) may feign aggressiveness and thus perform well. Similarly, in positions that require a high degree of interdependence and interpersonal sensitivity (e.g., virtual teams that use groupware), high self-monitors may successfully negotiate a highly sociable situated identity even if they are normally shy and withdrawn. In these and similar instances, the capacity for targets to free themselves from their chronic identities may facilitate job effectiveness.

Thus far, the discussion has been limited to the impact of identity negotiation processes on *task* performance, as in duties that contribute directly to the products or services that the organization provides (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997). Job performance also entails extra-role behaviors that may be influenced by the identity negotiation process. For example, a strong match between the organization's culture and the target's situated identity may predict more frequent performance of organizational citizenship behaviors (Hoffman & Woehr 2006), such as volunteering at company functions and staying late to assist coworkers (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). Employees who perform such pro-social behaviors benefit both their coworkers and organizations (Borman & Motowidlo, 1997; Organ, 1997; Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bacharach, 2000).

Likewise, the breakdown of the identity negotiation process may foment a host of interpersonal difficulties (Campbell, McHenry, & Wise, 1990). For example, targets whose identities are disconfirmed by the appraisals of others in the organization may react with verbal aggression and bullying that could undermine performance (see Bies & Tripp, 2001). Such

counterproductive behaviors might also emerge due to faulty person perception processes. Consider, for example, a supervisor who unwittingly “rewards” a shy subordinate by asking her to deliver a prestigious speech. Such failures of the identity negotiation process may degrade feelings of trust in the organization and thereby undermine productivity.

*Organizational commitment, withdrawal, and turnover.* In addition to job performance, identity-congruent appraisals may also affect targets’ attachment to coworkers and the organization. For example, targets who receive feedback that verifies their chronic identities report higher levels of commitment to their work team (Swann et al., 2000) and organization (Swartzendruber et al., 2007).

Interestingly, different situated identities may lead to qualitatively different types of organizational commitment. Johnson and Chang (2006, 2008), for example, found that employees with salient interdependent self-views placed greater emphasis on their level of *affective* commitment to their organization (i.e., genuine emotional attachment to the organization and acceptance of organizational goals and values). In contrast, employees with salient independent self-views displayed *continuance* commitment (i.e., commitment stemming from recognition of the personal costs associated with leaving one’s organization; Allen & Meyer, 1990). Thus, situated identities that are more interdependent may foster a form of organizational commitment that is more genuine and relatively unconditional (Johnson, Chang, & Yang, 2007; Meyer, Becker, & Vandenberghe, 2004).

Because commitment is a key antecedent of employee withdrawal (Mobley, Griffeth, Hand, & Meglino, 1979; Steers & Rhodes, 1978), it is not surprising that incongruence between targets’ situated identities and the appraisals of the organization predicts absenteeism and tardiness (Kristof-Brown et al., 2005). More extreme forms of withdrawal, such as turnover, may

also result when targets' identities contrast with organizational appraisals (Hoffman & Woehr, 2006). For example, in a longitudinal study, among employees with high self-esteem, those who failed to receive pay raises were most apt to quit their jobs. In contrast, among employees with low self-esteem, attrition was highest among those who received raises (Schroeder, Josephs, & Swann, 2006). Apparently, people become dissatisfied and leave their jobs when they receive professional feedback – in the form of financial compensation – that is inconsistent with their identities. And in those instances in which practical considerations preclude quitting, targets who feel misunderstood may nevertheless withdraw effort and performance will suffer accordingly.

*Relationship quality.* In general, the self-verification literature suggests that people's satisfaction with their relationships increases to the extent that their partners view them in a manner that confirms their chronic self-views (e.g., Swann et al., 1994). There exists at least one key class of exceptions to this rule, however. If the survival of the relationship depends on targets' possession of a certain quality (e.g., "physical attractiveness" for people in a romantic relationship), people eschew their chronic identities in favor of situated identities that insure the survival of the relationship (Swann et al., 2002).

The consequences of identity negotiations in organizations may be magnified by the fact that such settings offer targets opportunities to verify multiple self-views, with multiple different relationship partners (Swann et al., 2004). For example, a manager may receive confirming appraisals pertaining to her technical expertise (personal self-view), her ability to mentor a protégé (relational self-view), and her role as an executive officer of a Fortune 500 company (collective self-view). Identity verification at multiple levels should be especially effective in creating harmonious interpersonal relationships and satisfied employees (e.g., London, 2003; Swann et al., 2000; Swann, Rentfrow, et al., 2003).

*Perceived fairness of the organization.* In general, when people are treated in ways that are consistent with their expectations and with normative standards (e.g., Folger & Cropanzano, 1998), they perceive that they are being treated fairly. Identity negotiation is relevant here because one source of perceived fairness may be the perception that one's identity is honored by interaction partners. When targets and perceivers establish mutually acceptable situated identities, it creates the expectation that one's identity will be honored (Goffman, 1959). Employees typically gauge fairness at three levels (Colquitt, 2001; Greenberg, 1993): *distributive* (e.g., Do my outcomes reflect what I deserve?), *procedural* (e.g., Do the rules that guide organizational actions meet my expectations?), and *interpersonal* (e.g., Am I being treated as I should?). A break-down in identity negotiations at any of these levels would contribute to perceptions of unfairness (Ambrose & Arnaud, 2005; Blader & Tyler, 2005).

Targets' chronic self-views may influence the types of cues that they emphasize in gauging the fairness of organizations (Johnson, Selenta, & Lord, 2006; Lord et al., 1999). Those who view themselves as independent may focus on the fairness of objective outcomes and how they are allocated. Conversely, targets with interdependent situated identities are more attuned to the interpersonal treatment that they receive from the organization (Johnson et al., 2006).

The positivity and certainty of targets' self-esteem can also influence their reactions to justice in the workplace. For example, narcissistic people, who possess exalted but uncertain self-views, punish unfair treatment with aggression (Exline, Baumeister, Bushman, Campbell, & Finkel, 2004; Penney & Spector 2002). Similarly, people with true high self-esteem display less commitment to organizations that treat them unfairly, as they feel deserving of fair treatment. In contrast, people with low self-esteem tolerate unfair treatment and even indicate that they feel

more known and understood by organizations that treat them unfairly, apparently because such individuals are not convinced that they deserve fair treatment (Wiesenfeld et. al., 2007).

*Health and well-being.* Identity negotiation theory assumes that a lack of correspondence between targets' identities and the appraisals they receive from perceivers will have unfavorable consequences for affect and well-being. In general, even when identity-disconfirming events are more positive than expected, they increase anxiety (Burke, 2004; Wood, Heimpel, Newby-Clark, & Ross, 2005), trigger physiological stress reactions (Ayduk, Mendes, & Akinola, & Gyurak, 2008), and predict decreases in physical health (Brown & McGill, 1989; Shimizu & Pelham, 2004). Although none of this research was conducted in organizational settings, there is reason to believe that similar effects will arise there as well. For example, role ambiguity (i.e., uncertainty about others' appraisals) and role conflict (i.e., incompatibility among the appraisals of others or between one's own identity and others' appraisals) are common stressors that employees encounter on the job (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970). Such role stressors are associated with high levels of anxiety and tension and other psychological and physiological strains (Jackson & Schuler, 1985). Moreover, as noted earlier, employees report heightened levels of psychological distress when they are forbidden from displaying personal possessions that communicate unique aspects of their identity to others (Elsbach, 2003). Presumably, the inability to communicate identity relevant information in this manner creates distress because it promotes real (or perceived) discrepancies between targets' chronic and/or situated identities and perceivers' situated appraisals of them.

#### *The Target's Resulting Identity and Goals*

As shown in Figure 1, the final steps in our model consist of the resulting identity and goals of targets and perceivers at the conclusion of a given iteration of the identity negotiation

process. We consider targets first. Although targets' final identities will usually resemble their initial identities, identities can shift during the identity negotiation process, especially when one considers that identity negotiation is an iterative process that may repeat itself over a period of months or even years. In this sense, the identity negotiation model can accommodate change as well as stability of self-views. Consider the case of work groups in which the group's situated appraisals of its individual members gradually encourage those individuals to change their self-views. In one investigation of such processes, a substantial minority of the dyads exhibited identity change over a three month period, with targets' self-views gradually shifting toward the initial appraisals that group members held of them (Swann et al., 2000).

The foregoing discussion points to both personal and situational variables that will increase the probability of relatively permanent identity change. Personal variables that are associated with change include initial identities of targets that are relatively unimportant or uncertain. Relevant situational variables include the degree to which targets recognize that they can meet some important need only by relinquishing one or more identities. For example, if a target decides that to be competent in her new job she must become more directive with her subordinates, she may relinquish her easygoing identity in favor of a more assertive one.

#### *The Perceiver's Resulting Identity and Goals*

The organization's culture, and the identity it fosters, is largely dependent upon the industry and business context in which the company is embedded (Ostroff et al., 2003). For this reason, change in organizational identity is often triggered by environmental disruptions such as industry discontinuities (e.g., drastic change in political or technological conditions; Tushman & Romanelli, 1985). Nevertheless, it is also true that the organization's identity is based on the cumulative self-views of its individual members (Schneider, 1987, 1990), making internally-

directed change possible (Cummings & Worley, 2001). Hence, to the extent that targets negotiate situated identities that are incompatible with the organization's culture, individual perceivers within the organization, and even the larger organization itself, may be compelled to adopt new identities and goals as well.

Having said this, we must add a qualifier. When one considers changes in the identities of perceivers in the organization, it is important to consider exactly which perceiver one is referring to. In general, changing the identities or goals of individual perceivers (e.g., co-workers) will be far easier than changing the identity of the larger organization. After all, an organization's culture and identity can often be traced to founders who possess charismatic personalities, unwavering values, and well-articulated visions (Furnham & Gunter, 1993; Tushman, Newman, & Nadler, 1988). The situated appraisals communicated by these powerful figures can override competing appraisals, and disproportionately shape how other members of the organization think and act. Nevertheless, it is possible to change an organization's identity, particularly if the organization is in its infancy, there is discontentment and identity change among its members, and "resisters" (i.e., champions for the status quo) are terminated (Cummings & Worley, 2001).

### **The Interpersonal Roots of Congruence: Principles of Identity Negotiation**

In this section, we identify and discuss several principles that theoretically guide the process of identity negotiation. Largely through trial and error, people learn rules of social interaction and communication that ensure that most identity negotiations unfold smoothly (cf., Athay & Darley, 1980; Goffman, 1959; Grice, 1978). Although people routinely conform to these rules, the rules themselves remain implicit and adherence is typically unwitting and non-conscious (Jones & Pittman, 1982). We should emphasize, however, that this is an idealized model that is designed to describe how this process should occur *optimally* as compared to how it

operates ordinarily. Also, although we believe that the four principles that we list here are particularly important, the list is not intended to be exhaustive.

### *The Clarity Principle*

During organizational identity negotiations, clarity concerning the identities that targets will assume is important if they are to successfully satisfy their desires for coherence, connectedness, and agency. Ambiguity regarding matters of identity throws interaction partners off balance and can undermine trust among coworkers. In extreme cases, ambiguity may result in miscommunications that, in turn, undermine job performance and organizational commitment. Although there are contexts in which ambiguity is unavoidable (e.g., when optimal role assignments are unclear), in most instances it is best to strive for clarity in the identities people will assume in the organization. By the same token, targets should avoid negotiating identities that are irrelevant to their relationship with the perceiver. This is to say that the clarity principle applies only if targets intend to assume a particular identity with the perceiver (see also the compatibility principle below).

To foster clarity of identities, organizational leaders should promote a culture in which organizational roles, and the behaviors associated with them, are clearly delineated (Adler & Borys, 1996; O'Connell, Cummings, & Huber, 1976). Likewise, once targets have determined the identity that they plan to assume, they should communicate this identity to others as quickly and clearly as possible. Moreover, targets should communicate their desired identity via as many channels of communication as possible, as redundancy provides others with corroborating information and thereby diminishes the probability of misunderstanding and conflict. For example, as noted, people may simultaneously communicate their preferred identities through

both verbalizations and the display of identity cues (Goffman, 1959; Gosling et al., 2002; Schlenker, 1980; Swann, 1983).

Of course, maximal clarity is only possible insofar as targets are certain about the identity that they want to negotiate. If targets are uncertain of a given situated identity either for situational reasons (e.g., they are unfamiliar with the job requirements) or dispositional reasons (e.g., they are uncertain of their ability to deliver performances associated with a given role), assuming that identity may provoke anxiety. In such instances, targets may choose to lay back and search for additional cues regarding the identity that they should assume. As a result, such individuals may be particularly inclined to adopt identities that behaviorally confirm the expectations of perceivers (e.g., Snyder & Klein, 2005; Snyder & Swann, 1978).

In addition, at times, targets may intentionally *conceal* cues to an identity. For example, if targets fear that the cue that they are using to signal a valued social identity has been or might be “poached” by members of an outgroup, they may simply refrain from displaying that cue. Although we know of no direct tests of this hypothesis, there is evidence that when an identity cue has been appropriated by members of an outgroup, targets abandon its use. In one study, for example, a group of college students stopped wearing a fashionable wristband when members of a geeky dorm began wearing it (Berger & Heath, 2007, 2008). Although withholding identity cues may seem to violate the clarity principle, the spirit of the clarity principle is being followed if the intent is to ensure that an identity cue is not contaminated by association with a disliked outgroup.

### *The Cooperation Principle*

Members of organizations should cooperate with one another by honoring the identities they offer one another. Failing to honor others’ important identities may be perceived as

violating norms of interpersonal fairness in the organization (Lamertz, 2002) and may thereby undermine feelings of connectedness. Moreover, violations of the cooperation principle may undermine targets' sense of agency (if they receive appraisals that fail to verify a favorable identity related to job performance) and coherence (if they receive appraisals that fail to verify chronic identities).

Organizations often have formalized structures urging co-workers, managers, and subordinates to honor the identities that others negotiate. For example, clear-cut hierarchical roles (such as those found in bureaucratic organizations) often mandate subordinate behaviors that confirm the identities of their superiors (Burns & Stalker, 1961; Merton, 1940). Even informal structures – such as psychological contracts – can facilitate cooperation by shaping people's expectations about the benefits that will accrue if they honor others' identities (Rousseau, 1995). Relatively unstructured organizations that lack formalized hierarchies (e.g., organic organizations; Burns & Stalker, 1961) may be at greater risk for violations of the cooperation principle. Such violations can sow seeds of discord in organizations. For example, employees who fail to honor important aspects of their supervisor's identity are likely to undermine leader-member exchange (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995), perhaps inspiring ostracism from the leader's in-group.

An organization's culture and structure are not the only (and may not even be the primary) factors that influence cooperation during identity negotiations, however. For example, *climate strength* – the extent to which organization members agree about the practices, policies, and values of the organization – may contribute substantially to cooperation. This may occur because the compatible viewpoint shared by employees in organizations with strong climates fosters effective interactions between targets and perceivers and creates a sense of esprit de

corps. It is thus encouraging that high levels of climate strength can be achieved in both bureaucratic and organic organizations (Dickson, Resick, & Hanges, 2006).

The likelihood of cooperation may also vary as a function of the target's job status or rank. In relationships between leaders and subordinates, for example, subordinates will experience more pressure to honor the leaders' identities than vice versa. Furthermore, regardless of position, targets will be more motivated to elicit confirmation for firmly held and important identities than uncertain or unimportant identities. Similarly, those with strongly held expectations about a coworker's identity will be especially reluctant to honor an identity claim that violates their expectancy. In such instances, cooperation is still possible, provided that both parties are able and willing to be flexible. When both parties are strongly invested in conflicting conceptions of a given target's identity, however, cooperation may not be possible and conflict may result.

### *The Continuity Principle*

In their personal relationships, perceivers expect a certain degree of predictability and consistency from targets (Athay & Darley, 1982; Rempel, Holmes, & Zanna, 1985).

Organizations also prefer predictability and continuity from employees, and will often institutionalize this preference in the form of explicit and implicit expectations for individual behavior, as well as rules that define the larger organizational culture. For all of these reasons, the identity negotiation process will proceed more smoothly insofar as people maintain continuity across time in the identities that they negotiate.

A challenge to the continuity principle may occur when targets shift to a different position, as occurs during promotions (or demotions), or when different self-views become salient, as when a job requires that the target display a novel skill set (interpersonal skills as

compared to number crunching). Such shifts can pose problems for targets, as they must reconcile the new identity with their existing identities, a process that can be stressful and anxiety provoking (Hill, 1992; Ibarra, 1999). Ordinarily, such transitions are finessed through cognitive gymnastics that are designed to maximize the apparent overlap between the old and new identities. One such strategy is discussed by McAdams (1996, 1999), who suggests that people may facilitate overlap between old and new identities by structuring their multiple identities around underlying cognitive or affective themes. For example, themes of efficacy characterize many of the identities targets negotiate in organizations, providing cognitive unity to the multiple roles that they enact. Similarly, targets may imbue their various identities with a common affective tone, such as optimism, humor, pessimism, or passive acceptance. Using such higher level cognitive and affective themes, targets may perceive continuity between two or more identities that outside observers might perceive as conflicting. Depending on the particulars of the relationship between such targets and the observers who perceive the discrepancy, this state of affairs could jeopardize the identity negotiation process.

Cognitive gymnastics notwithstanding, problems can emerge when targets are promoted to positions in which they are supervising former coworkers (e.g., Hill, 1992). Not wanting to threaten existing social connections or alienate coworker friends, promoted targets may attempt to enact, simultaneously, the incompatible identities of buddy *and* boss with their subordinates. Such discontinuity can threaten the quality of relationships between coworkers, as well as undermine job performance and even threaten worker morale. Such instances are theoretically interesting because they simultaneously violate not only the continuity principle, but also the compatibility principle described in the next section.

### *The Compatibility Principle*

Whereas the continuity principle refers to the relationship of the same identity at two or more points in time, the compatibility principle refers to the relationship between different identities at a single point in time. Although some relationships within organizations are highly constrained and one dimensional (e.g., the relationship between an executive and the custodian who cleans her office), most relationships require people to relate to one another as multidimensional human beings. In such cases, people will negotiate a wide range of identities of a more idiosyncratic and personal nature, and these identities will define who they are as human beings as well as employees in particular roles.

The compatibility principle states that there should be coherence to the different identities that targets negotiate, both within a single relationship and across multiple relationships. Several different forms of compatibility are of interest here. One common form occurs within a given relationship when two people know one another in separate contexts that call for distinct identities. Just as friends or married people who happen to be co-workers know one another on both a personal and professional level, coworkers sometimes know one another within several different units in the organization (e.g., academics may know one another as colleagues within a department but also as members of various organizations within a university). In these and similar instances, people should avoid negotiating identities that are fundamentally incompatible with each other because such incompatibility can create confusion and undermine trust. For example, the senior executive who treats her junior colleague like an equal during one-on-one meetings, but assumes an authoritarian role during faculty meetings, risks being perceived by the junior colleague as an untrustworthy and capricious relationship partner.

Compatibility issues may also arise when individuals must negotiate discrepant identities with two or more relationship partners in different contexts. Between-relationship incompatibility may occur, for example, when the identity that a target negotiates with coworkers is fundamentally inconsistent with the identities that he or she negotiates with relationship partners outside the workplace. Consider the individual whose work role calls for assertiveness, competitiveness, and rigid adherence to a tight schedule, and whose family role calls for warmth, patience, and flexibility. Research on work-family conflict indicates that perceived incompatibility between work and family roles predicts diminished job satisfaction and organizational commitment (Lambert, Pasupuleti, Cluse-Tolar, Jennings, & Baker, 2006; Williams & Alliger, 1994). Problems associated with work-family incompatibility may be particularly threatening for individuals high in work centrality (Paullay, Alliger, & Stone, 1994), because these individuals' work-related identities are so central to their self-concepts.

One final form of incompatibility arises because social interaction typically occurs over several different channels at once. Usually some aspects of the identity negotiation process occur over the verbal channel, as when people introduce themselves to one another or disclose background information. Large amounts of information are also communicated nonverbally, however. Careful analyses of social interaction, for example, have revealed that nonverbal cues – such as extremely rapid facial expressions and body language – can convey more meaning than verbalizations (Birdwhistell, 1970). Cues such as facial expressiveness, distance from others, vocal interruptions, and physical touch can all communicate information about the status and power associated with a given identity (Hall, 1996; Hall, Coats, & LeBeau, 2005).

Although the information communicated in different channels will often be redundant, it can also be distinct. For example, people may sometimes communicate one message verbally yet

precisely the opposite message nonverbally. In one study, people interacting with low self-esteem persons refrained from communicating their disdain for such individuals in the explicit, verbal channel but unwittingly conveyed their disliking in the implicit, nonverbal channel (e.g., Swann et al., 1992). The ambivalent reactions that individuals with low self-esteem elicit may be sufficiently bewildering that they contribute to these individuals' tendency toward self-uncertainty (e.g., Baumgardner, 1990; Campbell, 1990). In an organizational setting, such mixed messages could create confusion about one's job performance, and perhaps even undermine job satisfaction, interpersonal harmony, and commitment to the organization.

In many cases, however, people deftly avoid confronting the implications of conflicts between their various identities. Targets may, for example, carefully compartmentalize their relationships so that perceivers with whom they negotiate some specific identities never realize that they have negotiated incompatible identities with other perceivers. Biases in information processing may also help avoid strain due to incompatible identities. Targets may, for example, selectively attend to aspects of their identities that are compatible with one another and ignore or deemphasize areas of incompatibility (Swann & Read, 1981; Swann, Griffin, Predmore & Gaines, 1987). Moreover, people may create overarching identities – or meta-self-schemas – that lend higher-level coherence to identities that are incompatible at a lower level. In these and similar ways, people are often able to impose order on seemingly disharmonious clusters of identities.

In summary, in a perfect world, identity negotiators will faithfully adhere to the principles of clarity, cooperation, continuity, and compatibility. The result will be congruence between perceivers' situated appraisals and targets' situated (and sometimes chronic) identities.

Nevertheless, the world is seldom perfect, which means that identity negotiators will sometimes encounter various threats to congruence.

### **Threats to Identity Congruence**

At the most general level, perceivers will develop incongruent impressions of targets when targets fail to follow the cooperation principle. Such failures often occur when perceivers develop firmly held expectancies that are non-verifying, such as erroneous social stereotypes or idiosyncratic impressions. Whatever form they take, expectancies can encourage perceivers to overlook unique features of targets, harbor inaccurate beliefs about them, or both. The result will be that targets are deprived of self-verification. For example, in the Texas MBA study, perceivers who formed relatively negative initial impressions of targets on several personal qualities (e.g., intelligence, sociability) failed to individuate them (Swann, Kwan, Polzer, & Milton, 2003a). Such failures to individuate, in turn, meant that targets received relatively little self-verification later in the semester. In this study, then, negative initial impressions set the stage for incongruent impressions several weeks later.

In a related investigation of the factors that prompt perceivers to relinquish their gender stereotypes, perceivers who individuated targets on gender-related qualities were more apt to verify the gender-related self-views of targets later in the semester. The extent of self-verification was, in turn, positively associated with the extent to which perceivers eventually abandoned their gender stereotypes (Swann, Kwan, Polzer, & Milton, 2003b).

Incongruence may also emerge when targets fail to follow the clarity principle. Targets who are uncertain of a self-view, for example, are less likely to elicit self-verifying evaluations than their highly certain counterparts (Swann & Ely, 1984; Pelham & Swann, 1994). Targets may also fail to elicit self-verifying evaluations if they are lower in status or power than the

perceiver. Low status minorities, for example, may fail to express themselves because they fear that members of the dominant group will reject them for being different (e.g., Polzer & Caruso, 2007). In addition, those in positions of power may fail to note cues from targets that would foster individuation (e.g., Galinsky, Magee, Inesi, & Gruenfeld, 2006; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003).

In addition, minority targets may recognize cues that signal devaluation of their social identities in their workplace, such as low minority representation in positions of power (e.g., Purdie-Vaughns, Steele, Davies, Dittmann, & Crosby, 2008). Such cues may foster the perception that others believe that they cannot perform adequately, which may trigger anxiety. This anxiety may diminish targets' ability or willingness to fully disclose their identity and associated feelings and perceptions – a “stereotype threat” effect (e.g., Steele & Aronson, 1994). And even if low status targets are not members of minority groups, they may suffer evaluation apprehension due to the knowledge that their fate is controlled by a superior who may not have their best interests at heart.

Minorities who find themselves in diverse groups may try to cope with their anxiety by relying on “safer,” implicit modes of communicating their identities instead of verbal, explicit modes (e.g., Polzer & Caruso, 2007). Unfortunately, because implicit modes of communication typically rely on indirect, nonverbal signals, they are more prone to misinterpretation and misunderstanding than direct, verbal signals. For example, when a target attempts to communicate group membership through the clothes she wears or by the way she speaks, she is banking on the assumption that perceivers will know and understand the implicit rules that guided her choice of clothing or speaking style – an assumption that may often be inaccurate. No wonder, then, that researchers have discovered that explicit (i.e., verbal) identity negotiation

strategies promote more congruence than implicit negotiation strategies (e.g., Polzer, Caruso, & London, 2006).

In the foregoing example, in which the target's insecurity due to low status led her to display identity cues with which the perceiver was unfamiliar, it would appear that the target sabotaged her own self-verification efforts. Nevertheless, one could argue that the perceiver also played a role in this failure of self-verification, for a perceiver who was more knowledgeable about the target's culture or subculture would have been able to correctly decode her identity cues.

In related scenarios, perceivers and targets may not only see the same behavior as indicative of different identities, they may also associate the same identity with different behaviors. For example, whereas a manager may believe that fairness is communicated by displaying equivalent amounts of warmth to all employees, his employees may believe that fairness is defined by the amount of money different employees receive in their paychecks. In these instances and related ones, targets may fail to receive self-verifying feedback because perceivers and targets are speaking "different languages" of identity negotiation.

Finally, incongruence may arise when organizational policies or norms are structured in ways that reduce the likelihood of recognizing targets' unique identities. This may often occur when the target's identity has a low base rate in the population. Examples include ethnic or religious identities that are relatively rare. A more common example is targets who have low self-esteem. For example, although most people have highly favorable self-views (e.g., Diener & Diener, 1995), including flattering beliefs about their work-related skills and job performance (e.g., Atwater, 1998; Harris & Schaubroeck, 1988; Meyer, 1980), roughly a third of people have relatively negative beliefs about themselves (e.g., Swann, Chang-Schneider, & McClarty, 2007).

This means that the indiscriminate use of praise will be experienced as non-verifying for employees whose self-views tell them that they do not deserve praise. Instead, recipients of feedback must perceive it as *contingent* on their actual identities and accomplishments. To this end, feedback should communicate accurate, detailed information about mastery (or lack thereof) of specific job-relevant tasks. This is especially important when providing feedback to employees with low global self-esteem, as such individuals have, paradoxically, been shown to be ambivalent about feedback that connotes worthiness (Wiesenfeld et al., 2007).

A key assumption underlying the foregoing discussion is that identity congruence is adaptive and desirable. Nevertheless, skeptics might challenge this assumption by contending that although congruence makes targets more comfortable with the organization, it suffers from the same crucial disadvantage that plagues person-organization fit. Specifically, like fit, identity congruence might encourage people to remain in their patterns and resist change, thereby impeding innovation (e.g., Nemeth & Staw, 1989; Sutton, 2001). In the next section, we challenge such speculations by arguing that they are based on a failure to appreciate fully the implications of the target-to-perceiver flow of influence that typifies the identity negotiation process.

### **Is There a Down Side to Identity Congruence?**

#### **Leveraging Identity Negotiation for Organizational Change and Innovation**

Critics of person-organization congruence or fit (e.g., Nemeth & Staw, 1989; Sutton, 2001) contend that, in the interests of fit, the organization labels potential dissenters as “deviants” who must be eliminated lest they obstruct the organization’s ability to achieve its goals and devise a shared solution. Although this strategy may minimize conflict, critics assert that eliminating dissent can be costly. That is, even when wrong, dissent is thought to encourage

groups to think more divergently and ultimately to solve problems more creatively (Nemeth & Kwan, 1985; Nemeth & Wachtler, 1983). In the end, the organization that places a high priority on fit may create a homogeneous climate in which creative ideas are never expressed. Be this as it may, it does not appear that these same arguments apply to identity congruence.

### *Identity Congruence and Creativity*

Investigations of the impact of identity congruence paint a very different picture of its relationship to creativity than the one painted by critics of person-organization fit. Instead of stifling creativity, identity congruence actually seems to promote creativity. Consider findings from the Texas MBA study, in which identity congruence stemmed from either self-verification or appraisal effects (Swann et al., 2000). As noted earlier, when congruence grew out of self-verification (i.e., the extent to which targets brought perceivers to see them as they saw themselves), performance on creative tasks improved – precisely the opposite of the pattern predicted by critics of fit. Furthermore, even congruence that stemmed from appraisal effects (which occurred when perceivers brought targets to see themselves as perceivers initially saw them) was beneficial in that it predicted improved performance on computational tasks. In short, congruence that reflected target-to-perceiver influence optimized creativity and congruence that reflected perceiver-to-target influence optimized performance on non-creative tasks. Furthermore, because verification effects tend to be more common than appraisal effects (e.g., McNulty & Swann, 1994; Swann & Ely, 1984; Swann et al., 2000), one can conclude that identity congruence typically fosters creativity.

How did congruence foster creativity? Evidence from the Texas MBA study indicated that feeling that one is known and understood by other members of the organization makes people feel more connected to the group (Swann et al., 2000), which, in turn, presumably allays

social anxiety. This is significant because anxiety may cause people to “clam up” and suppress innovative but “iffy” ideas. Feeling connected may thus embolden targets to open up and express ideas and hypotheses that would have otherwise been suppressed. The result is that group members who enjoy congruence share a relatively wide array of ideas with the group, and these ideas serve as grist for the creativity mill.

Identity congruence may not only reduce *social* anxiety by fostering feelings of connectedness, it may also bolster feelings of coherence and thereby reduce *epistemic* anxiety – that is, anxiety associated with doubt regarding the validity of one’s knowledge system. Indeed, researchers have provided converging evidence that congruence diminishes anxiety, even when it involves confirming identities that are negative. For instance, one study demonstrated that whereas high self-esteem persons were relieved by success, low self-esteem participants reported feeling less anxious after failure, apparently because success was surprising and unsettling for those low in self-esteem (Wood et al., 2005). A separate team of researchers reported parallel results using an implicit (cardiovascular activation) index of anxiety: Whereas people with positive self-views grew anxious when they received negative evaluations, people with negative self-views grew anxious when they received positive evaluations. Moreover, people with negative self-views seemed “galvanized” (aroused, but in a positive manner) by negative feedback (Ayduk, Mendes, Akinola, & Gyurak, 2008). Still another study offered evidence that providing depressed people with negative but congruent feedback may actually lay the groundwork for raising self-esteem (Finn & Tonsager, 1992). In this study, depressed college students enjoyed improvements in self-esteem when they received verifying (i.e., negative) feedback paired with social support from a therapist. Apparently, validating targets’ identities fostered a sense of coherence and diminished anxiety. This increased targets’ readiness to

internalize supportive feedback into their self-views. In short, identity congruence fosters feelings of connectedness and coherence, which in turn inoculates targets against a powerful enemy of change and innovation: anxiety.

In addition to considerations involving the direction of causal influence in the group, there may be an independent set of reasons why achieving identity congruence does not impede change and innovation as person-organization fit may. As noted earlier, identities are profoundly different from the variables that fit researchers focus on, which include values, abilities, and goals. Most important, identities are multifaceted, flexible, and supremely nuanced. In fact, when workers seek self-verification, they can select, from a wide palette of identities, the particular identity that is best suited for meeting their needs in that specific context.

#### *Identity Substitution*

When organizations change, workers must often adopt new identities so that they can assume new roles in the organization. Although identity change can pose a threat to the target's feelings of coherence, anxiety can be diminished by encouraging the target to substitute an existing identity for the one that they must relinquish. Identity substitution can take several different forms. In the simplest case, targets who are promoted to a new position may be encouraged to shift from emphasizing the verification of one personal identity (e.g., "organized") to one that is more compatible with the new position (e.g., "assertive"). Alternatively, targets may be encouraged to suspend efforts to verify a *personal* identity and shift instead to focusing on the verification of a *relational* or *collective* identity. Consider an illustrative case study of workers on offshore oil platforms (Ely & Meyerson, 2008). In such dangerous settings, members of the largely male workforce historically placed a premium on displays of "manliness": toughness, proficiency, and detachment. Nevertheless, when management initiated a movement

that was designed to make the workplace safer, workers abandoned their efforts to maintain their “manly” personal identities and instead embraced “safe worker” social identities. The result was that the group members began to exemplify non-masculine qualities that promoted safety, such as disclosing personal limitations and displaying empathy toward co-workers.

A common trigger for the identity substitution process is a shift in the identity related motive that happens to be most salient to targets. In the study of oil platform workers, for example, workers’ desire for connectedness prompted them to shift to a “safe worker” social identity that overrode their desire to verify their self-perceived masculinity. Hence, the desire for connectedness trumped the desire for coherence.

In other instances, management may need to bring workers to prioritize their connectedness needs over their agency needs in the service of identity substitution. Consider a member of a team of office workers who must be persuaded to perform an essential but colorless “background” role during an inter-office competition. To this end, her supervisor may try to persuade her that her connectedness needs must take priority over her agency needs. If successful, the target will abandon her usual emphasis on personal achievement and “take a hit for the team” that will enable the team to succeed.

Although the identity substitution process can often be used effectively, employers should stop short of asking workers to assume identities that are beyond their “latitude of acceptance” (Jones, Rhodewalt, Berglas, & Skelton, 1981). A case in point can be found in an unfortunate practice in the history of flight attendant instruction. In particular, at one time Delta airlines specifically trained flight attendants to suppress their normal emotional reactions and adopt personas designed to please and reassure the passengers (Hochschild, 1983). This practice placed fledgling flight attendants in an unenviable position, for the situated identity they were

required to negotiate clashed dramatically with their “true” feelings and beliefs, producing feelings of incoherence and inauthenticity that became exhausting (Hochschild, 1983)

Even when workers are asked to adopt a new identity that is within their latitude of acceptance, the process of identity change can be psychologically wrenching. One strategy for smoothing the transition from a chronic identity to a substitute identity is to form a “provisional identity”: a temporary identity that people use to bridge the gap between their current and new identities (Ibarra, 1999). Thus, for example, instead of asking workers to move from being a rank and file member of an organization to a leading member of management, the organization may initiate a series of promotions that help minimize the shock that would inevitably accompany a more dramatic promotion. Another strategy for smoothing the process of identity change might be to encourage the person undergoing change to enlist the help of friends and co-workers. To this end, they should signal others that they are undergoing identity change.

### *Signaling Identity Change*

Whether one is engaged in strategic identity negotiation or identity substitution, the trauma associated with the change can be minimized if the social environment provides targets with opportunity structures (e.g., social networks, physical and psychological resources) that nourish the new identity. To this end, targets can invoke a “signaling machinery” that is designed to enlist accomplices (e.g., friends, co-workers, and management) who can support an anticipated, ongoing, or completed identity change (Cammozzo, 2008). If successful, targets will receive a steady stream of feedback from their interaction partners that will help consolidate and nurture the identity change.

In summary, although identity negotiations will ideally result in congruence between the impressions of perceivers and the chronic self-views of targets, the dynamic and interactive

nature of the identity negotiation process enables it to accommodate change when the goals of targets or perceivers require doing so. Nevertheless, even when the target is undergoing a change, it is essential that all parties are clear about the situated identity that the target is attempting to claim. With this in mind, in the next section we suggest that a major direction for future research will be to consider systematically those processes that may thwart effective identity negotiation.

### **Remaining Questions**

Given that ours is a *rudimentary* theory of identity negotiation in the workplace, it should not be surprising that it raises as many questions as it answers. One such question centers around one of the most surprising findings in the identity negotiation literature: self-verification effects lead to more creativity than appraisal effects (Swann et al., 2000). On the face of it, the apparent importance of self-verification seems at odds with some influential exemplars of symbolic interactionism. In his dramaturgical approach, for example, Goffman (1959) likened identity negotiators to actors in a play, actors who presumably could enact any role that the play required. Evidence linking self-verification to creativity suggests that individuality and a stable sense of self is more important to performance than Goffman's formulation implies. Indeed, such findings suggest that fostering congruence in the workplace may represent an effective means of tapping the "identity capital" inherent in the stable identities of workers.

Having said this, we hasten to add that Goffman clearly captured a portion of social reality. For example, the same research (the Texas MBA study) that provided evidence that self-verification predicted creativity also showed that appraisal effects predicted optimal performance on computational tasks (Swann et al., 2000). The latter finding suggests that when the task is computational in nature, improvisation on the part of targets is not only unnecessary, it may

actually degrade performance. It thus appears that there exists a class of instances in which outcomes will be maximized when targets simply take on the identities that perceivers expect, or want, them to enact.

Of course, the fact that many jobs require workers to perform tasks that are relatively un-engaging poses a challenge for managers responsible for motivating such workers. In some settings, managers may strike a compromise that is mutually satisfactory. A case in point is offered by a field investigation of managers in a French manufacturing plant (Anteby, 2008). Recognizing that technological advances had encroached on the ability of workers to practice their “craft,” managers learned to look the other way when craftsmen-workers illegally made “homers” (objects such as kitchenware and toys that the workers would take home with them). In such instances, an implicit contract was established wherein managers allowed workers to enact a valued identity (craftsman) in exchange for compliance and hard work.

The provocative research initiated by Polzer and colleagues on identity negotiation processes in diverse groups (e.g., Polzer et al., 2002; Polzer et al., 2006; Polzer & Caruso, 2007; Swann et al., 2004) raises a host of issues that have only begun to be addressed. We are especially intrigued with Polzer et al.’s (2006) recent evidence that minorities tend to rely on implicit rather than explicit modes of identity negotiation when they feel that they are low in social power. This finding is interesting in itself, but it also raises more general questions involving the conditions under which people deploy these two modes of identity negotiation and the consequences of doing so. It seems likely, for example, that people are more likely to use explicit modes of identity negotiation during symmetric identity negotiation and implicit modes of identity negotiation during asymmetric identity negotiation. In addition, evidence that groups which enjoy high levels of self-verification are able to capitalize on diversity (Polzer et al., 2002)

will hopefully inspire researchers to build upon recent evidence that it is possible to systematically increase the amount of self-verification in groups (Seyle, Athle, & Swann, 2008).

With a few exceptions, most studies of identity negotiation have been conducted with dyads. Although the identity negotiation processes that unfold in groups undoubtedly share many of the same properties as those that occur in dyads, the dynamics of group relationships are unique in many respects. This raises the possibility that new and distinctive phenomena may emerge in groups. For example, under the right circumstances, groups of low status people can consolidate their collective resources and become activists who demand that their personal and group identities are recognized and verified. Indeed, the mere fact that members of diverse groups are often numerical minorities will encourage them to focus attention on themselves (dubbed the “solo effect” by McGuire, McGuire, & Winton, 1979) and this may, in turn, increase the salience of their stable self-views and felt need for self-verification. For this reason, they may be inclined to rally together as a group and demand verification from the leaders of the group or organization. In the end, it seems possible that despite their relative powerlessness, under the right conditions minorities may sometimes receive more, rather than less, self-verification.

Still another set of issues includes the role of identity negotiation processes among individuals or organizations that are undergoing change. We speculated that there are several qualities of the identity negotiation process that facilitate change and thus contribute to the process of innovation. We are particularly intrigued with extending recent investigations of signaling identities (e.g., Berger & Heath, 2008) to the phenomenon of identity change.

Although the outcome of these and related tests are difficult to predict, one thing is certain: Just as identities define people and make them viable, so too does the process of identity negotiation define organizational life and make it viable. For this reason, as continued increases

in globalization, diversification of the labor force, worker mobility, and reliance on electronic modes of communication place unprecedented demands on the identity negotiation process, it will become increasingly important to gain deeper insights into this process. Indeed, these insights may be fundamental to ensuring the smooth and efficient functioning of the workplace of the future.

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## Footnotes

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<sup>1</sup> For many readers, the word “negotiation” may call to mind those processes that occur when people strive to reach agreements regarding the exchange of materials, expertise, or services (e.g., Lempert, 1972-1973; Rubin & Brown, 1975; Thompson, 2005). Although such “asset negotiations” have some similarities to identity negotiation, they are distinct in many important ways (for a discussion, see Swann & Bosson, 2008).

<sup>2</sup> In this paper, we define *identities* as beliefs about the self, and we use this term interchangeably with *self-views* (Swann, 1983, 1999). In our usage, identities imply behaviors but they are not, of themselves, behaviors. As such, when we use phrases such as “assume an assertive identity,” we are employing it as a short hand for the longer and more cumbersome phrase “enact behaviors associated with the identity of an assertive person.”

<sup>3</sup> We use the term “appraisal effect” rather than “reflected appraisal effect” here because the former term does not require conscious mediation and there is little evidence that these effects are consciously mediated (e.g., Kenny & DePaulo, 1993; McNulty & Swann, 1994; Shrauger & Schoeneman, 1979).

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Figure 1. A process model of identity negotiation in the workplace.

