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WHO ARE 'I'? WHO ARE 'WE'? A STATE-OF-THE-ART REVIEW OF MULTIPLE IDENTITIES AT WORK

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El objetivo de este artículo es presentar una revisión del estado de la investigación y la práctica profesional acerca del papel desempeñado por las identidades múltiples individuales y sobre los procesos implicados en las múltiples identidades organizacionales, así como las consecuencias de ambos tipos de identidades para los individuos y las organizaciones. El artículo concluye con una serie de implicaciones prácticas y de líneas futuras de investigación y de intervención en relación con ambos fenómenos.
Palabras clave: *Identidades múltiples, Identidades organizacionales, Múltiples focos, Salud y bienestar laboral.*

The aim of this paper is to present a state-of-the-art review of research and professional practice regarding the role played by multiple individual identities and the processes involved in multiple organizational identities, as well as the consequences of both types of identities for individuals and organizations. The paper concludes by highlighting practical implications and proposals for future research and intervention related to both phenomena.
Key words: *Multiple identities, Organizational identities, Multi-foci, Health and work well-being.*

The changes experienced in the last two decades in work and organizational contexts have increased the prominence of multiple identities. The grammatical incorrectness of the first part of the title of this article is deliberate. It alludes to a double process of multiple identities (Pratt, 2001), since it refers both to the diverse identities that a worker may experience as a result of their identifications and self-categorizations (Miscenko & Day, 2016), and to the diversity of organizational identities that can coexist based on the differences granted by its members about what is defining, central and distinctive in the organization (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). In the first case, we speak of multiple individual identities, and in the second, multiple organizational identities.

The emergence of both types of multiple identities is due, fundamentally, to the increase of diversity within organizations (Shore, Chung-Herrera, Dean, Ehrhart, Jung, Randel, & Singh, 2009). This term refers to two types of diversity. Firstly, that related to belonging to a social category or a group based on a shared characteristic, such as gender, ethnicity/race, age, religion, national origin, family status, association membership or disability; the first three are considered *visible*, and the others are *non-visible*, although disabilities can be of both types (Clair, Beatty, & Maclean, 2005). And secondly, the term refers to functional diversity, i.e., the characteristics related to what a person is capable of doing. The latter includes several categories, such as knowledge, skills and abilities; values, beliefs and attitudes; and personality characteristics, or cognitive, emotional and behavioral tendencies (Schneider & Northcraft, 1999). Evidently, the characteristics of diversity are not unique or, in many cases, exclusive, so people perceive themselves and their environment based on the different identities or self-categorizations relevant to them. As a result of the increase in diversity in organizations relative to both types of diversity, their members tend to perceive themselves and others as having multiple identities and they perceive their organizational context differently from their peers and superiors. Multiple identities constitute the area that has generated the most research in the last two decades in the field of identity and identification at work (Miscenko & Day, 2016).

The goal of this paper is twofold. It presents a review of the state of research and professional practice, firstly, regarding the role played by multiple individual identities and their consequences; and secondly, regarding the processes involved in the multiple organizational identities and their consequences. The article concludes with a series of practical implications and future lines of research and intervention in relation to both phenomena.

INDIVIDUAL MULTIPLE IDENTITIES

Diversity has traditionally been defined as "a mixture of people with different group identities within the same social system" (Nkomo & Cox, 1999, p. 89). This perspective emphasizes *identity* as the central criterion that defines the degree of diversity in an organization (Terry, 2003). But as social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Turner, 1985) and self-categorization theory (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, &

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Wetherell, 1987) have shown, people possess diverse identities in terms of the groups to which they belong or with which they identify themselves and which they include as part of their self-concept (Riketta, 2005). These identities serve to reduce uncertainty and increase self-esteem. Beyond the concept of dual identity, which refers to two simultaneous identities with the same level of inclusiveness (Miscenko & Day, 2016), multiple identities include an indeterminate but large number of identities with different levels of inclusiveness. Identities can have a deep structure, when they are related to values, preferences and belonging to groups, so they are more stable, or they can be situated identities, when they are contingent on the characteristics of a given context (Rousseau, 1989). A specific identity acquires *salience* according to the specific social context, the distinctiveness of the identity and the type of interpersonal and intergroup relations it generates. So not only do the processes of self-categorization and identification influence identity, but so too do the identity (or identities) that other people in a given social context perceive in others (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Precisely the possibility of perceiving oneself, members of one's own group and members of outgroups through multiple social dimensions or identities has been used as a strategy to reduce biases, stereotypes and, where appropriate, prejudices (Hewstone, Rubin, & Willis, 2002).

Multiple foci and multiple identities

The approach of multiple foci and multiple agency in organizational processes has had different developments in the theory of the psychological contract (Alcover, Rico, Turnley, & Bolino, 2017), organizational justice (Rupp, Shao, Jones, & Liao, 2014), organizational identities (van Dick, 2004) and work attitudes, especially in the analysis of commitment –with the organization, the occupation or the task– which may have the foci on the organization itself, the supervisors or the work team (Clugston, Howell, & Dorfman, 2000). In particular, multiple identities can relate to the organization as a whole, to social entities within the organization, such as the work team to which one belongs, or to the interpersonal relationships that are maintained in the work context (Alcover, 2016), but also to identities unrelated to the organization, although linked to work, such as the profession (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Ashforth & Johnson, 2001), as well as identities resulting from identifications or belonging to other social groups, like those mentioned above. One area of research interest has focused on studying how people negotiate boundaries and the integration or separation of identities at work and non-work identities.

In this sense, Ramarajan and Reid (2013) suggest that the greater or lesser alignment of organizational/professional pressures and personal preferences about whether or not to include non-work identities in the workplace, makes up people's experience of the relationship of power between themselves and their organization/profession and it affects how they handle their non-work identities. Thus, people use different strategies for managing identities not related to work, which the authors classify into two categories according to whether the dual forces of the two identities are *aligned* or *misaligned*. Aligned strategies consist of *assenting*, and involve either the inclusion or integration of identities; or their exclusion or compartmentalization. An example of the former is when the organization encourages members to establish friendly relationships with their peers, so they integrate their identity as a *friend* into their work identity, while an exclusion strategy can occur when the organization strives to assimilate members belonging to ethnic or national minority groups, who decide to eliminate or mitigate their non-work identity in order to facilitate integration into the organization. On the other hand, misaligned strategies –more common than aligned ones– include meeting, resisting or reversing the pressures in relation to preferences. Complying implies external compliance without internal acceptance; resisting implies opposition to systematic attempts at organizational control, and may involve both the revelation of the non-work identity in the workplace or its concealment or compartmentalization. Inverting involves the attempt to counteract the pressures so that the demands of the organizational identity are compatible with the preferences of the non-work identity (Ramarajan & Reid, 2013). Each strategy has different consequences for the identities and well-being of individuals and for the productivity/effectiveness of the organization/profession, as well as for the transformation of the power relations among them, in the sense of obtaining greater or less autonomy.

In the context of work identities, some identities are hierarchical or nested within each other in a chain of means-ends, such as those associated with a job–work group–department–division–organization, while other identities are transversal to this hierarchization, as occurs in interdisciplinary work teams, unions or groups of friends at work (Ellemers & Rink, 2005). The more nested or cross-sectional identities that a person considers define them, the more multiple identities they are said to possess (Ashforth et al., 2008).

The salience or the emergence of identities at work generates different patterns of identification. The levels of identities are usually the individual (*I am*), the group (*we are*), and the organizational (institutionalized identity: *the organization is*) (Ashforth, 2016). This can force the individual to negotiate the tension between the personal identity and the prominent or emerging social identities in the work-organizational context, with the aim of reaching an optimal balance between the "I" and the "we" (Kreiner, Hollensbe, & Sheep, 2006). Taking as a reference the identity of the profession being carried out, the organization in which one works and the work team, considered to be the three basic foci of multiple identities at work (Meyer, Becker, & van Dick, 2006), Johnson, Morgeson, Ilgen, Meyer, & Lloyd (2006) found that when the professional owns the company, he identifies more with the organization than with the profession and the working group. Professionals who work in organizations within their sector identify more with the organization and the work group than with the profession. And professionals who work in companies outside their profession identify more with the profession and the work group than with the organization. In another relevant study, it was found that teaching professionals identified more strongly with their organizations when their organization was compared with other organizations, while they identified more strongly with their occupation when compared with other professional groups. Moreover, when the organizational identity was more salient, it was associated with higher levels of extra-role behavior, such as organizational citizenship behaviors, voluntarily initiated by the employee and benefiting the organization's objectives (van Dick, Wagner, Stellmacher, & Christ, 2005). The interactive effects of multiple identification with the work team and the organization also have positive relationships with job satisfaction and with extra-role behaviors (van Dick, van Knippenberg, Kerschreiter, Hertel, & Wieseke, 2008). However, the occupational field is relevant, as van Knippenberg and van Schie (2000) found, since in the case of government employees and university professors they identified more with the work team than with the organization. In this sense, the results cannot be conclusive, since it would be necessary to have studies dedicated to all professions or occupational sectors, which have been lacking until now.

Multiple identities, health and well-being at work

Psychological research has demonstrated the consistency of results regarding the role played by social relationships and health (e.g., Cohen, 2004). Specifically, multiple identities have effects on people's well-being. The results of the research are consistent in pointing out that the *accumulation of identities* is inversely related to anxiety, depression and psychological distress, contrary to what people who are in situations of *social isolation* experience (Lang & Lee, 2005; Thoits, 1983). An important nuance is that people with multiple identities benefit more from the gain in identities but they also suffer more from the loss of identities than isolated people (Thoits, 1983). When identities are important for individuals, their greater number leads to greater psychological well-being as long as there is harmony among them, whereas when identities are in conflict there is lower psychological well-being. However, when identities are not important for people, neither their greater number nor the level of harmony among them has consequences for their well-being (Brook, Garcia, & Fleming, 2008).

There is evidence that belonging to different groups is a factor that has important consequences for health and well-being at work (Jetten, Haslam, & Haslam, 2012), especially in the case of stress and burnout (Horton, McClelland, & Griffin, 2014). The results of the research suggest that to the extent that people increase their multiple identities at work (with the work team, the organization or other social groups), their health improves, mainly because these identities provide higher levels of social support, control and resilience, factors that act as powerful buffers of stress experiences (Greenaway, Haslam, Branscombe, Cruwys, Ysseldyk, & Heldreth, 2015). However, it has also been found that higher levels of identification at work can be negative for health, since they increase the number of hours dedicated to work activities and the risk of workaholism (Escartín, Ullrich, Zapf, Schlüter, & van Dick, 2013; Ng & Feldman, 2008). Multiple identities can also have negative consequences on well-being when interference occurs among them, and it seems that the strong centrality of one of the identities is not enough to successfully negotiate potentially conflicting identities (Settles, 2004).

In order to verify the real scope of these disparate results, Steffens, Haslam, Schuh, Jette, and van Dick (2016) carried out a meta-analysis on social identifications and health in organizational contexts. The results have shown a positive relationship of identification –both with the work team and with the organization– and health, and these results have been consistent in longitudinal, transverse, and experimental studies. In addition, the positive relationship is stronger for the (positive) indicators of the presence of well-being than for the (negative) indicators of absence of stress or discomfort, for psychological health rather than for physical health, when the identification is shared by the members of the work team (and is not just an individual identification), and when the proportion of women in the sample decreases. This last result can be explained because men tend to put more emphasis on their social identities than women, and also because workplaces are, generally, masculinized contexts, where women find more obstacles to identifying with work teams and with organizations (Steffens et al, 2016). In short, the most recent empirical evidence reinforces the fact that the multiple identities that people consider important in the definition of who they are have a direct positive relationship with psychological well-being, as well as with their ability to adjust to new circumstances both at work and in other areas of life.

MULTIPLE ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTITIES

The concept of organizational identity –*who are we*?– was initially proposed by Albert and Whetten (1985). Organizational identity refers to the attributes that members feel are central and that describe the organization in a distinctive way, which persist in the organization over time (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Consequently, organizations have multiple organizational identities when there are different conceptualizations among their members with respect to what is central, distinctive and lasting about the organization. These identities do not have the same degree of visibility, since some can be explicit and easily perceived, while other identities are more latent and only become apparent when a critical episode or an event occurs that questions the identity or culture of the organization.

Albert and Whetten (1985) also distinguished between *ideographic* and *holographic* multiplicity. The first refers to when an organization has multiple identities associated with different groups that exist within it, that is, they are identities recognized by specific subgroups, not by all members. A typical example is that of organizations where many units coexist, defined by professionals from different specialties (Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997), such as a general hospital. On the other hand, an organization has multiple holographic identities when each of them is maintained by all members, a situation that is usually associated with organizations with a dual identity; representative cases may be the more professionalized non-governmental organizations, where the tension between the altruistic conscience and the company conscience generates that dual holographic identity (Kreutzer & Jagger, 2011), or the consortia created as joint ventures by several companies from different countries (Salk & Shenkar, 2001), which do not manage to build a common supraordinated identity. Another particular case is that of hybrid organizational identities (Albert & Whetten, 1985), which refers to organizations with two identities that are not expected to occur together. These are usually categorized in the normative-utilitarian dimension, poles that refer to identities that are not oriented towards the economic or the monetary, such as (normative) cultural, aesthetic, etc., identities, and to (utilitarian) identities centered on profit, economics or material aspects, as in the case of universities, private hospitals or social enterprises (Pratt, 2016). As this author points out, the tension between the sense of a necessary unity of organizational identity at the same time as assuming the diversity of organizational identities –hybrid or multiple– is an inherent characteristic of social organization.

Organizational identity is also related to the *organizational image*, a concept that refers to the way in which members of the organization believe that others perceive it (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991), or the interpreted external image (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). Based on both of these constructs, Gioia, Schultz, and Corley (2000) proposed the concept of *adaptive instability* to refer to a process of social construction of organizational identity. Initially, identity represents the basis for the development and projection of organizational images, which are received by external agents, who interpret and modify them, returning them modified to the organization. This feedback affects the members' perceptions about their own organizational identity, turning it into a mutable element that gives it dynamic consistency. The result is that the instability of the organizational identity enhances the adaptability of the organization. Consequently, the continuous interactions between identity and images generate a process of social construction, internal and external to the organization, whose result is fluid identity (Gioia et al., 2000). In short, this socio-constructivist perspective enriches the understanding of multiple organizational identities, since the organizational images that are projected are the result of the diversity of intraorganizational perceptions, returned in turn by multiple external agents and adopted as organizational identities by their members.

Management of multiple organizational identities

One of the aspects that have received the most attention has been "how organizational leaders or managers can manage multiple conceptualizations about *who we are* as an organization" (Pratt & Foreman, 2000, p. 19). When an organization has multiple identities, the leaders may choose to increase, decrease or maintain the current number of its identities, so that its response to them is directed towards the goal of a high or low *plurality of identities*. For example, when leaders recognize that multiple identities have significant strategic value for the future, they are more likely to try to maintain, encourage or preserve them as much as possible (Albert & Whetten, 1995). But they can also manage the existing relationships between identities so that they are more divergent or more convergent. In this sense, leaders can pursue an optimal level of multiplicity of identities either by increasing the *synergy* of the identities, so as to reduce the potential conflict between the demands of each of them, or by reducing the synergy so that the organization responds to the demands of most of the social agents involved (Pratt & Foreman, 2000).

With regards to the way of managing them, or the types of management response to multiple identities, the latter authors proposed a model according to which organizations can, firstly, *compartmentalize* the identities of their members, accepting them, but without allowing synergies between them, in a similar way to how it happens at the individual level with the multiple identities analyzed above (Ramarajan & Reid, 2013). This form of management is characterized by being high in plurality and low in synergy. The second type of response is *deletion*, which occurs when leaders deprive the organization of one or more of its identities that they consider offensive or inappropriate to the organization (for example, eliminating units or business areas), similar to the individual decision to eliminate one or more identities that undermine the self-esteem or self-concept. This form of management is characterized by being low in both plurality and synergy. Thirdly, the answer to multiple identities may be *integration*, which results from the leaders' decision to merge them into a new global organizational identity, a similar process to that which can occur at the individual level in the process of *identity fusion* (Buhrmester & Swann, 2015). This type of management is characterized by low plurality and high integration. Finally, multiple organizational identities can be aggregated when leaders try to retain all identities, facilitating the links between them, identifying all of the identities in order to enhance the synergies. This type of response (*integration*) is characterized by high plurality and synergy, and constitutes processes of creation of new beliefs and new identities (Pratt & Foreman, 2000), which represents an emerging phenomenon of organizational identity based on multiple organizational identities.

A final relevant process is the way in which members of organizations with multiple organizational identities build their individual organizational identities (Foreman & Whetten, 2002). According to these authors, the organizational identification of members is conceptualized in terms of a process of cognitive comparison of their perceptions and expectations of identity, that is, a cognitive comparison between what a member perceives and what he believes should be. When organizations have multiple and competitive identities (for example, in the case of hybrid organizations), the resulting level of congruence between this comparison of the members and the perceived organizational identity is what determines the configuration (or not) of the individual organizational identity. Foreman and Whetten (2002) found that identity congruence significantly influences the level of organizational commitment of members.

Costs and benefits of multiple organizational identities

Among the potential benefits, one of the main ones is the belief that organizations with multiple identities generally have the capacity to meet a broader range of expectations and demands than similar organizations that have a single identity (Pratt & Foreman, 2000). Organizations with more than one identity (dual, hybrid or multiple) have more capacity to adapt and respond in complex and dynamic contexts, a flexibility that also gives them a greater capacity to respond to the social agents involved in them and thus satisfy their needs and interests (Albert & Whetten, 1985). This same process takes place within the organization, since it also satisfies the needs and interests of its members, considered as involved internal social agents (Pratt & Foreman, 2000), and it is a highly valuable organizational capacity in contexts of high diversity of members (Terry, 2003). As a result, organizations have more capacity to retain and attract a wide range of people with different skills, experience and professional goals, which increases their capacity for innovation, creativity and learning (Olsen & Martins, 2012). A very important benefit of multiple organizational identities is the greater capacity to build positive organizational identities and generate resilience in the face of unforeseen or severe changes in context (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010), because it allows the continuity of the organization to be maintained, as it facilitates the selection of the identity that is most salient in the new situation.

Regarding the potential costs, one of the most noted ones is the tendency toward inactivity or the hesitation of the organization with regards to which organizational identity to select, or due to ambiguity, conflict or overload of identities, which can lead to inconsistent or erratic decisions or actions (He & Brown, 2013; Pratt & Foreman, 2000). In the same vein, intra-organizational conflicts may arise that require the negotiation of identities, with the consequent power struggle between groups that represent differentiated perceptions about *who we are* (Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997). Similarly, multiple organizational identities can cause ambivalence and, as a consequence, have significant effects on the decisions and strategic direction of the organization (Pratt & Dutton, 2000). This ambivalence may also be perceived by the social agents involved, who may harbor doubts about the identity of the organization and whether it responds to their interests or needs.

Implications for professional practice and future lines of research and intervention

A first implication is related to the promotion of compatible multiple identities related to belonging to or collaboration with other units or work teams within the same organization, with other organizations or within the professional field. This can facilitate cooperation and the establishment of intra -and inter-organizational networks, which has special relevance in interdisciplinary work and in research, innovation and development contexts, while the compatibility of identities increases the motivation to work in the interdisciplinary network or team (Riketta & Nienaber, 2017). The strategy of promoting multiple identities can be effective if members assume that their identities are *nested* –that is, their membership in the interdisciplinary team requires belonging to the organization or profession (Ellemers & Rink, 2005)–, so that the multiple focuses are not only compatible, but also complementary to the definition of the person as a worker or professional.

Secondly, multiple identities can also play a facilitating role in the case of corporate mergers (van Dick, Wagner, & Lemmer, 2004), especially in the case of maintaining identification with the previous organization, which can provide members with the perception of continuity as a differentiated unit in the new context, and it can acquire the identity of the new organization as a supraordinate identity with the current colleagues. When the two identities are maintained and even enhanced as compatible identities, members develop more positive attitudes towards the organization and towards work and they experience fewer negative emotions (van Dick et al, 2004), which can reduce tensions in the processes of mergers and acquisitions (Weber & Drori, 2011). Also the socio-constructivist perspective of Gioia et al (2000) can be applied in the case of mergers; specifically, when the merger involves two previously rival organizations, the creation of a *transitional identity* (Clark, Gioia, Ketchen, & Thomas, 2010), that is, an identity that suspends the two previous organizational identities can contribute to the members being involved in the construction of a new shared identity that avoids conflict between the previous ones.

A third implication is related to the organizational management of multiple identities, both visible and invisible (associated with stigma), which is part of the management of diversity. The policies of organizations regarding the expression of identities can contribute to people with invisible identities –sexual orientation, chronic diseases, some types of disability– deciding to reveal or hide them. These decisions can have consequences –positive in the first case, negative in the second–

for trust, group dynamics, team effectiveness, social networks and even organizational change (Clair et al., 2005).

Fourth, multiple identities play a fundamental role in the case of simultaneous membership of multiple work teams (O'Leary, Mortensen, & Woolley, 2011). On the one hand, belonging to several teams in the same organization can generate intergroup competition and, consequently, tensions and conflicts associated with the members' identity (Fiol, Pratt, & O'Connor, 2009). However on the other hand, multiple membership can generate synergies between teams, and if multiple identities are compatible, members can count on higher levels of social support and social capital, and it also facilitates being part of networks capable of enhancing collaboration. Nevertheless, the relationship between multiple membership and performance is complex, as shown by the study by Bertolotti, Mattarelli, Vignoli, and Macrì (2015), who found an inverted U ratio: performance is lower when members belong to few and many teams simultaneously.

Finally, it is also of great interest to analyze the implications of technology on multiple individual identities. In particular, work and telecommunications modify the social, physical and psychological context of work, such that they can affect the content and strength of identity related to the organization (Rock & Pratt, 2002). In turn, physical isolation and psychological and social distance can hinder the self-verification processes that enable the definition of the identity (or identities), which can be managed by peers, supervisors, and management in remote interactions through the relevant support and communication to each of the teleworkers (Thatcher & Zhu, 2006). Although it has not yet been explored by research, it is very likely that these telecommunication processes that involve a variable part of the workforce make it difficult to identify multiple organizational identities, so it is very difficult for organizations to know what these groups of workers think about what defines their organizational identity.

In short, multiple identities, both individual and organizational, constitute one of the most relevant research and intervention foci at present, due to the growing diversity of organizational and social contexts, as we have tried to show in this review of the current state of this field.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

There is no conflict of interest

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