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2015, Vol. 40, No. 4, 611–629.
http://dx.doi.org/10.5465/amr.2012.0398

BOUNDARY-SPANNING EMPLOYEES AND RELATIONSHIPS WITH EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS: A SOCIAL IDENTITY APPROACH

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Boundary-spanning employees can have a substantial impact on organizational performance based on the relationships they build with external stakeholders. Yet there is currently no theoretical lens through which to understand the nature of—and psychological contributors to—these employee-stakeholder relationships at the individual level. Drawing on social identity theory, the proposed framework reveals that when an employee identifies strongly with the organization, this affects the way the employee views external stakeholders in the social landscape at work, resulting in some surprising consequences. Specifically, when organizational identification is heightened, an employee's engagement with external stakeholders will paradoxically become more adversarial and less collaborative. This effect can be attenuated, or even reversed, to the extent that (a) the employee construes that the stakeholder is an organizational member and (b) the organization's identity orientation is collectivistic. The proposed framework also reveals antecedents to an employee's construal of a stakeholder's membership in the organization—antecedents that are unique to the boundary-spanning context.

Stakeholder theorists argue that an organization's performance, perhaps its survival, depends on the relationships it forms with an array of stakeholders (Freeman, 1984; Freeman, Harrison, Wicks, Parmar, & DeColle, 2010; Post, Preston, & Sachs, 2002). These relationships provide access to tangible and intangible resources that organizations need to generate wealth (Post et al., 2002). Employees[1] who span the boundary between the organization and its external stakeholder base play a critical role by shaping those relationships. Realizing this, many executives encourage employees to forge productive exchange relationships with suppliers, customers, government officials, community members, and others (Harrison & St. John, 1996). For example, a chief human resources officer interviewed by IBM claimed that the organization encouraged employees to stimulate "exchange and collaboration, not only internally but also externally with partners and suppliers" (IBM Center for Business Value, 2013).

Notwithstanding a broad consensus that relationships between employees and external stakeholders are important, our understanding of the nature of these relationships is still limited. For Freeman et al., a pressing question is "How are we to understand key features of most stakeholder relationships, such as collaboration?" (2010: 290). Yet the literature to date is fragmented, reflecting the considerable variability in how employees engage with external stakeholders. For example, many employees cooperate closely with suppliers (e.g., Stank, Keller, & Daugherty, 2001), but many others distort facts or withhold pertinent information from suppliers opportunistically (e.g., Hibbard, Kumar, & Stern, 2001). Similarly, with customers, some employees foster close cooperative relationships (Grizzle, Zablah, Brown, Mowen, & Lee, 2009), while others provide half-hearted service (Thomson & Heccker, 2002) or become so adversarial that they sabotage customers (Skarlicki, Van Jaarsveld, & Walker, 2008). Such prior research documents variability even within a single workgroup where job requirements, training, or incentives are relatively constant. There is a need to reconcile

I thank Anubhav Aggarwal, Tom J. Brown, Jorge Fresneda, Adam Grant, Jeffrey Greenhaus, Verena Gruber, Jeff Harrison, Michael Howley, Camille Korschun, Doré Korschun, Vadake (V. K.) Narayanan, Bobby Parmar, Hoori Rafieian, Raja Roy, Laura Marie Schons, Scott D. Swain, and Andy Wicks for their insightful feedback on previous drafts. I also thank an exceptionally helpful review team for pushing the paper forward.

[1] Employees are, of course, stakeholders as well. For clarity, in this article I retain the convention in the literature (e.g., Fanelli & Misangyi, 2006; Harrison & St. John, 1996) of distinguishing between internal stakeholders (e.g., employees) and external stakeholders (e.g., suppliers, customers, government officials, community members, and others).

these seeming contradictions by describing why and when employees might engage cooperatively or, conversely, in a more adversarial way.

A fruitful starting point for understanding how and why employees span the organizational boundary is research on how employees form relationships with fellow employees (i.e., relationships *within* the organizational boundary). Theorists examining these employee-to-employee relationships have found social identity theory to be a particularly useful lens. Social identity theory predicts individual-level behavior as a function of group-level (e.g., organizational) perceptions (Hogg & Terry 2000). In the management literature the central construct of interest has been organizational identification—the sense of oneness or sameness with the organization (Ashforth & Mael 1989). When such identification occurs, the salience of other identities recedes (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994), and the individual incorporates traits of the organization into the self-concept (Hogg & Terry 2000). Organizational identification can be highly motivating to employees as they work to contribute to the collective success of the organization (Albert, Ashforth, & Dutton, 2000; Dutton et al., 1994). Apropos to *within*-boundary relationships, employees who identify with the organization tend to engage in helping behaviors with fellow employees (Podsakoff, MacKenzie, Paine, & Bachrach, 2000) and develop ties with other departments or business units that fall under the organizational umbrella (Richter, West, van Dick, & Dawson, 2006).

It is tempting to simply extrapolate this prior research to the external stakeholder context and posit that increases in organizational identification will uniformly lead employees to engage in relationships with external stakeholders that most benefit the organization. Yet some compelling counterevidence exposes the limitations of that approach and suggests that, in the boundary-spanning context, organizational identification can result in surprising consequences. Consider the lament of a former executive at Goldman Sachs, who claimed that some of the company's most fervent employees viewed themselves as superior to outsiders. These employees allegedly referred to customers as "muppets" because the customers could be easily manipulated into choosing financial products that benefited the company but not the customers themselves (Smith, 2012). Analogously, employees at other leading companies, such as Google, Facebook, and Apple, are sometimes described as aloof or even arrogant, despite their often cultish devotion to the company (Fottrell, 2012). This anecdotal evidence aligns with research that paints boundary spanners as distinct from employees who operate within the confines of the firm. Boundary-spanning jobs require employees to interact with external stakeholders whose objectives and values might diverge substantially from those of the organization they represent. While organizational identification clearly plays a prominent role in their workplace behaviors, it is, on its own, insufficient to fully understand how boundary-spanning employees resolve a "combination of intimacy and separateness" (Bartel, 2001: 381) from external stakeholders. We need a framework that helps predict how an employee will engage with external stakeholders.

The theory I develop here uses the lens of social identity theory to reconcile the variability in employee engagement with external stakeholders. The central precept of this theory is that the manner in which an employee engages with stakeholders depends on how the employee defines the self in relation to the company, on the one hand, and to the external stakeholder, on the other. This approach reveals a surprising consequence of organizational identification: when organizational identification is high, the perceived boundary between the employee and external stakeholder will become more salient, leading to an employee-stakeholder relationship that is more adversarial than cooperative. However, the tenets of social identity theory suggest that organizational identification functions in combination with perceptions of who is an organizational member (or not) and the content of the organizational identity. Thus, the contingent framework predicts that the effect of organizational identification can be reversed—or at least mitigated—when (a) the employee construes the stakeholder to be an organizational member and (b) the organizational identity orientation is perceived to be collectivistic. The theoretical framework is descriptive and therefore agnostic on the question of when a more adversarial or cooperative relationship is most suitable; each may have advantages or disadvantages in a given circumstance (Jones 1995).

This article contributes to both stakeholder theory and the literature on social identity in the workplace. It contributes to stakeholder theory by resolving the sometimes puzzling variability in employee behavior toward external stakeholders. The framework achieves this by calling attention to the psychological linkages among an employee's perceptions about self, organization, and stakeholders with the employee's engagement with those stakeholders. This additional clarity may enable researchers to study the effects that such relationships have on generating benefits for the organization, the employee, and the external stakeholder. By bringing this individual-level perspective to stakeholder theory, this article responds to calls for stakeholder theorists to take "a names and faces approach" (McVea & Freeman, 2005).

This article contributes to the literature on social identity in the workplace by challenging an implicit notion that organizational identification uniformly leads employees to collaborate with those they encounter at work. A central insight of the framework is that organizational identification can lead to starkly different outcomes depending on how an employee categorizes the stakeholder in relation to the company (i.e., construed organizational membership of the stakeholder). The proposed framework not only emphasizes that construed membership is a critical fulcrum that determines how organizational identification will play out in employee-stakeholder relationships but also draws from stakeholder theory to provide antecedents to such construals. Thus, this article urges scholars interested in employee-stakeholder relationships to open the theoretical aperture and shift from the prevailing dyadic view (i.e., self and organization) to a triadic one (i.e., self, organization, and stakeholder).

The article contributes to practice as well. Many managers operate under the presumption that maximizing organizational identification is always in the interest of the company. The framework exposes hidden dangers of that approach, thereby enabling managers to focus on the full range of social identity processes so that the most desirable employee-stakeholder relationship is pursued (from the company's perspective). Thus, the framework provides levers to encourage boundary-spanning employees to behave in ways aligned with managerial objectives.

HOW SOCIAL IDENTITY THEORY INFORMS EMPLOYEE RELATIONSHIPS WITH EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS

For the most part, the literature on stakeholder theory and the literature on social identity theory have developed independently, and they tend to operate at different levels of analysis (i.e., organizational level for stakeholder theory, and individual level for social identity theory). One might infer that the two theories have little in common. Closer inspection reveals conceptual overlap. In this section I briefly review how social identity theory can provide insight for stakeholder theorists.

Stakeholder Theory and Employee-Stakeholder Relationships

According to stakeholder theory, organizations are composed of a nexus of actors (i.e., stakeholders) who provide the resources necessary to enhance organizational wealth (Freeman, 1984). Stakeholders are those who contribute to an organization's wealth-creating capacity and are therefore its beneficiaries (Post et al., 2002). Stakeholders place resources at risk (i.e., stakes) and develop expectations (i.e., claims) that the organization will reciprocate by sharing the fruits of those stakes (Bosse, Phillips, & Harrison, 2009). Stakes may involve capital invested, payments for product purchases, work effort, or other sacrifices and are the primary basis for a contract (whether explicit or implicit) between an organization and its stakeholders (Donaldson & Preston, 1995).

At first blush, the exchange of stakes and claims—an implicit contract—between employees and external stakeholders implies that these relationships are impersonal and motivated solely by self-interest. But as Freeman and Velamuri point out, "Most human beings are more complicated. Most of us do what we do because we are self-interested *and* interested in others. Business works in part because of our urge to create things with others and for others" (2006: 8, emphasis added). Stakeholder theorists, particularly those who take a more normative position, argue that employee-stakeholder relationships can be deeply personal and value laden. Thus, there is emerging consensus that there is a psychological component to these relationships (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Brown, Dacin, Pratt, & Whetten, 2006; Gregory & Keeney, 1994). Some scholars have posited that when stakeholders share values with an organization, this may function both as a "social glue" that binds them to the organization and as a "social grease" that reduces a tendency to behave adversarially toward the organization (Post et al., 2002; Van Vugt & Hart, 2004; Walsh, 2005).

Perhaps unfortunately, stakeholder theorists have not developed tools to delve deeper into how employees interpret and act on their understanding of the organization and its stakeholders. Moreover, stakeholder theorists have largely overlooked the people with whom the responsibility of maintaining these relationships often rests: individual employees. As a result, the stakeholder literature has largely skirted the issue of when and how individual employees span the organizational boundary and engage with external stakeholders. To gain insight on this question, it is useful to draw on and extend a large and growing body of literature on social identity in the workplace.

Social Identity in the Workplace

Rooted in social psychology, social identity theory predicts individual behavior based on the individual's perceived membership in a social group (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). The degree to which one uses a group to define oneself is known as identification. This results in "a shift towards the perception of self as an interchangeable exemplar of some social category and away from the perception of self as a unique person" (Turner, 1988: 50). Social identification is not simply an attitude toward a group but, rather, an incorporation of the group into the self-concept. It is a voluntary membership based on an individual's assessment of the overlap between his or her sense of self and his or her sense of the target group.

Organizations can be highly salient markers for social affiliation (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008; Bhattacharya & Sen, 2003; Dutton et al., 1994). Analogous to identification with a group, organizational identification involves an integration of an individual's sense of self with his or her sense of the organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Pratt, 1998). For example, UPS employees who identify with the organization often refer to themselves as "UPSers." Employees who identify strongly with an employer organization view its successes and failures as their own (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Mael & Ashforth, 1992) and are known to participate in organizational citizenship behaviors with other employees, such as helping, civic virtue, and sportsmanship (Podsakoff et al., 2000). In the workplace, employees compare their values to those of others with whom they interact, and "the organization . . . provides the context within which similarity comparisons are made" (Hogg & Terry, 2000: 127). Overall, employees are often attuned to the social landscape at work, and they rely on their understanding of that landscape to determine with whom they wish to interact and how (Ellemers, De Gilder, & Haslam, 2004).

Interestingly, most work in the management literature examines the effects of organizational identification on relationships with other organizational members. But the organizational identity may become an especially salient target for identification in the boundary-spanning context. In fact, a boundary spanner's job role is unique in that, to varying degrees, it can require employees to take the role of an organizational representative with external stakeholders. As they interact with external stakeholders, they may act as an exemplar of the organization. These "ambassadors" are expected to speak and act in ways that are consistent with the organizational identity. A salient role as organizational representative may lead to "identity negotiations" whereby employees will identify with the organization as a means of creating a stronger congruence (Polzer, Milton, & Swann, 2002) between how they see their values and how they see those of others in the workplace. Passing out business cards or engaging in public declarations on behalf of the organization (e.g., "we always seek to satisfy customers," "acting with integrity is part of our core values") can tie the employee's self-concept to that of the company (Pratt & Rafaeli, 2001). Such a view can lead a boundary-spanning employee to "submerge variability and diversity in a single representation that characterizes an entire human group" (i.e., the organizational collective; Hogg & Reid, 2006: 10; Hogg & Turner, 2011). And a workplace narrative of organizational membership (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010) is only accentuated by symbols such as uniforms, badges, or rituals of the job (Pratt & Rafaeli, 1997).

In sum, there are numerous reasons to expect that the social identity processes of boundary-spanning employees may become activated as they interact with external stakeholders. What is less obvious is how such an activation might manifest as boundary-spanning behaviors (i.e., employee-stakeholder relationships).

ORGANIZATIONAL IDENTIFICATION AND EMPLOYEE RELATIONSHIPS WITH EXTERNAL STAKEHOLDERS

Prior research shows a wide range of ways an employee may interact with external stakeholders. These relationships may be adversarial, where the employee actively competes with the stakeholder, usually in a zero-sum game. In this case there is usually strong mistrust, and competition with the stakeholder can be fierce. For example, with customers, an employee may use opportunistic sales techniques by withholding pertinent information about products or services to make a sale (Gundlach, Achrol, & Mentzer, 1995; Skarlicki et al., 2008). With suppliers, an employee might pit one supplier against another to reduce supplier profitability or power. With government agencies, an employee might use stalling tactics to avoid inspections, or exploit loopholes that go against the spirit of an agreement. With local communities, an employee might threaten to withhold community donations to gain an advantage in other negotiations.

Conversely, relationships are sometimes highly cooperative, with a high degree of mutual trust and respect (Graen & Uhl-Bien 1995). Here the employee seeks close collaboration and "win-win" solutions. For example, with customers, an employee might provide suggestions and consultation on how the customer can derive more value from a product or service (Homburg, Wieseke, & Hoyer, 2009; Saxe & Weitz, 1982). With suppliers, an employee might openly share logistical information in an effort to improve efficiencies across the supply chain. With government agencies, an employee might participate in task forces or support government-sponsored consortia. With local communities, an employee might incorporate the needs of community members alongside the organization's need for profitability.

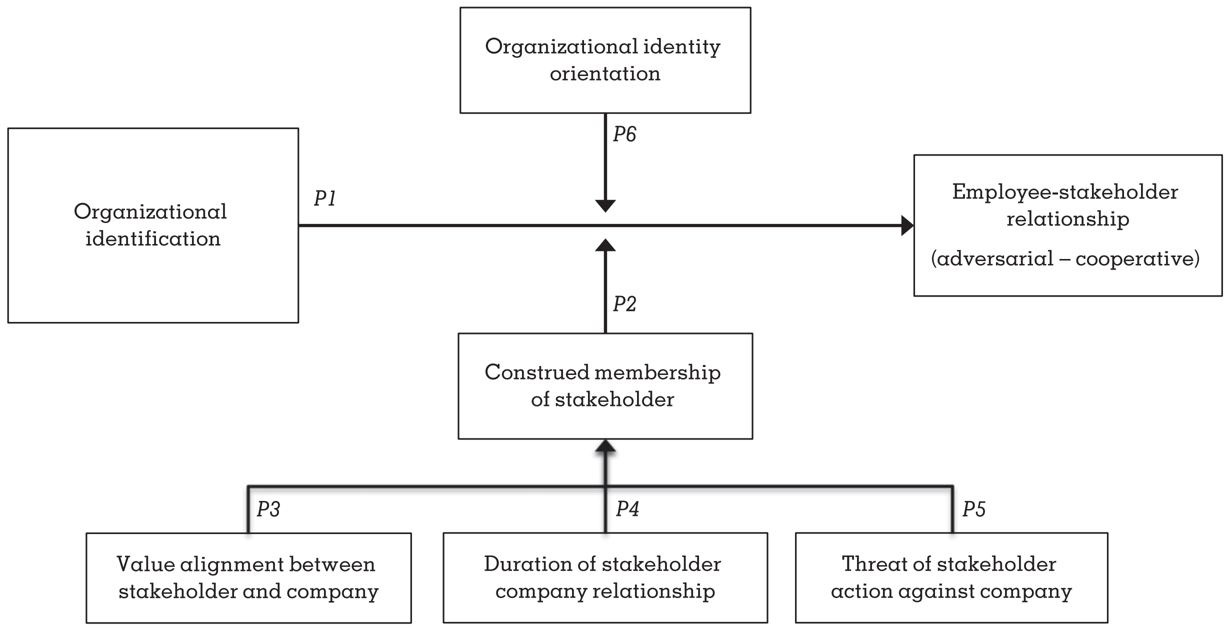
Overall, employee-stakeholder relationships might be described as residing along a continuum. At one end of the continuum, the employee engages with the stakeholder adversarially, while at the other end of the continuum, the employee's engagement is more cooperative. These interactions may sometimes contain both adversarial and cooperative elements, yet the literature suggests that such a continuum is a useful way to describe employee relationships. Researchers have juxtaposed close cooperative relationships against more adversarial ones before (e.g., Dyer & Singh, 1999). Others have successfully implemented measures along this dimension in the field (e.g., Graen & Uhl-Bien 1995; Liao, Liu, & Loi 2010).

In this section I describe how organizational identification works in combination with other social identity factors to determine how an employee will engage with an external stakeholder. Such engagement is determined by the tripartite social identity processes of organizational identification, social categorization of others (i.e., whether the stakeholder is construed to be an organizational member as well), and the content of the organizational identity (i.e., how the identity is "invested with meaning"; Ellemers et al., 2004: 462). In brief, when organizational identification is heightened, relationships become more socially embedded. Organizational identification has a direct effect. However, to fully understand how social identity shapes these relationships, we must also consider the moderating influences of (a) construed membership of the stakeholder and (b) organizational identity orientation. The framework is illustrated in Figure 1.

Paradoxical Effect of Organizational Identification

In the bulk of the literature on boundary-spanning relationships, researchers have examined conditions where an employee's social identity is *not* tied to the organization (i.e., low organizational identification). In these cases an employee will rely on the classic direct exchange of benefits with an external stakeholder (Willer, Flynn, & Zak, 2012). The employee gives external stakeholders something they want based on something the employee and the company want (Kuhnert & Lewis, 1987). Such an approach is redolent of the finding that "the use of binding contracts to promote or mandate cooperation will lead interacting parties to attribute others' cooperation to the constraints imposed by the contract" (Malhotra & Murnighan, 2002), as opposed

FIGURE 1
A Framework for Understanding Employee Relationships with External Stakeholders



to the individuals or groups involved in the exchange. As a result, the outcomes of these relationships are shaped primarily by job characteristics and role expectations of the employee.

However, as organizational identification increases, workplace behaviors become, in part, an expression of an employee's affiliation with the company. For this reason organizational identification encourages employees to cooperate with *internal* organizational members (i.e., fellow employees; Bergami & Bagozzi, 2000; Dutton et al., 1994; Organ, Podsakoff, & MacKenzie, 2006; Podsakoff et al., 2000). However, theory suggests it may produce a very different result for *external* stakeholders. As Al Ramiah, Hewstone, and Schmid point out, "Social identity theory hinges upon treating social identity as a primary determinant of intergroup conflict, irrespective of objective causes" (2011: 46). This is a crucial insight because social identity theory, unlike other theoretical approaches, predicts that merely having a strong sense of belonging to a group can result in opposition toward outsiders.

I contend that organizational identification will make the organizational boundary between the employee and the external stakeholder more salient and, thus, a stronger indicator of divergent social affiliation. Prior research suggests that boundary-spanning employees are quite attuned to external stakeholders (Dukerich, Golden, & Shortell, 2002) and routinely engage in social comparison with those stakeholders (Bartel, 2001). This social comparison can accentuate the sense that a stakeholder is an "outsider," external to the organization and its members. As organizational identification increases, employees will become increasingly aware of their membership in the organization and, as a consequence, of the cognitive distancing of the self from "outsiders." This can be expected to contribute to an employee's sense that an external stakeholder is a potential adversary. Thus, all other things being equal, organizational identification is likely to lead an employee to engage in adversarial behaviors with external stakeholders. Such a paradoxical effect may motivate employees to pursue suboptimal outcomes, such as seeking gains relative to other groups, "even if such a strategy fails to optimize absolute rewards [for the organization]" (Abrams & Hogg, 1988: 319).

Under such a condition, an employee will take an "us against them" approach, where the employee seeks benefits to the organization at the expense of the stakeholder. Here the employee is as concerned with minimizing benefits to the stakeholder as he or she is with maximizing benefits to the organization. Somewhat surprisingly, this may ultimately be counterproductive and even run contrary to role requirements.

While new to the management literature, this proposition extends long-standing theory from social identity research showing that identification can intensify perceptions of group-based differences, accentuating conflict with nonmembers (e.g., Abrams & Hogg, 1988; Ellemers, Kortekaas, & Ouwerkerk, 1999; Gaertner et al., 2000). When this happens, "the social costs of the conflicts that result between groups can be severe" (Kollock, 1998: 195). In one study Brewer, Manzi, and Shaw (1993) successfully created two groups by asking subjects to estimate the number of dots appearing on a page and then randomly informing them that they were either an "overestimator" or an "underestimator"; members of both groups later discriminated against members of the other group. In another study, measuring neural activation of the brain's ventral striatum, researchers found that witnessing the *failure* of an outgroup member produces neural activity reminiscent of witnessing the *success* of an ingroup member (Cikara, Botvinick, & Fiske, 2011). These findings are also consistent with some management research showing that, in the absence of a shared set of values, conflict between members of organizational groups can persist (e.g., Pinto, Pinto, & Prescott, 1993).

In sum, when organizational identification is elevated, the employee becomes conscious of the stakeholder's social position in relation to the organization. The employee's goal becomes maximizing the difference between benefits to the organization and benefits to the stakeholder, even if this makes the relationship counterproductive or dysfunctional, leading to a suboptimal outcome (Amason, 1996; Brehmer, 1976; Jehn, 1994).

> *Proposition 1: All things being equal, when an employee's organizational identification is high, the employee will be likely to engage in adversarial rather than cooperative exchange behaviors with external stakeholders.*

Proposition 1 suggests that as organizational identification increases, the psychological boundary between employees and an external stakeholder may become more salient and increasingly stark, accentuating the stakeholder's social position as external. Given that managers frequently state they want employees to forge close, cooperative relationships with external stakeholders, a natural question is whether there are circumstances under which the above effect can be mitigated or reversed. The next proposition tackles this question by explaining how the effect of organizational identification can be mitigated by the construed membership of the stakeholder as an organizational member.

Construed Membership of the External Stakeholder

In the boundary-spanning context, employees face considerable heterogeneity in their social landscape. As a result, they are likely to seek ways to simplify the complex social landscape at work by categorizing the self and others (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Ostensibly, determining who is an organizational insider and who is an outsider seems a rather objective exercise; employees are insiders and all other stakeholders are outsiders. But, in reality, organizational membership is more complex, with ample room for interpretation on the part of employees. For example, Apple's retail employees may view Apple customers as sharing an identity (i.e., insiders), while viewing food service contractors who work full time at Apple headquarters as outsiders. Even within a segment of stakeholders, there may be considerable variation. For example, community members who picket against a company may be viewed as nonmembers, while those eager to form partnerships with the organization may be viewed as members. In most cases membership is a matter of degree and is construed by the employee. The key difference between construed membership and other concepts in the literature is that construed membership is the employee's use of the organization to engage in social comparison. The organization serves as the reference point. However, rather than using the organization to define the self (as characterized in much of the literature to date), in construed membership the employee uses the organization to define *the stakeholder*.

Construed membership is an employee's assessment of the history, motivations, and objectives of the stakeholder in relation to the organization. It is, in essence, an answer to the question, "Is this stakeholder friend or foe to the organization?" Construed membership becomes an important factor in employee behavior when an employee identifies strongly with the organization, making the organizational identity more salient than role-based or other identities. As noted above, the effects of heightened organizational identification on employee-stakeholder relationships occur in combination and, thus, depend on these construals.

While not immediately intuitive, there is reason to believe that an external stakeholder can be included within an employee's sense of the organization. Scholars have studied close organizational relationships for decades. For example, so-called hybrid forms, where two organizations combine to pursue common interests, test traditional notions of where one organization begins and another ends (Borys & Jemison, 1989). Penske and GM once comprised such an industrial paring. Employees witnessing these sorts of partnerships may determine that the partnership represents a real joint effort where all parties are committed to similar goals and therefore operate under the same extended enterprise. Some managers encourage this way of thinking, referring to some external stakeholders (e.g., customers and suppliers) as partners in annual reports, speeches, and sales materials. Another circumstance in which employees may view stakeholders as being part of the organization is when the stakeholder is extremely devoted to the company. Harley-Davidson serves as an example of how customer devotion can blur the lines between employees and external stakeholders, with riders becoming employees and employees becoming riders (Fournier & Lee, 2009).

To the extent that membership in the organization is construed, organizational identification can be expected to produce more cooperative relationships than adversarial ones. This shared psychological membership is likely to enhance trust of the other perceived members (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman, 1995; Wicks, Berman, & Jones, 1999), which can manifest as any number of cooperative behaviors (McAllister, 1995). The predicted effect is akin to the notion that trust works better in conditions with greater interdependence (Wicks et al., 1999); when an employee believes that an external stakeholder is "on the same team," the interests and desires of the employee and stakeholder will seem more aligned.

Social identity theorists have long posited that identification leads group members to sacrifice personal resources not only for the good of the collective to which they belong but also for the good of fellow group members (e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1986). For example, individuals are more generous in awarding scarce resources (Ellemers et al., 1999; Platow et al., 1999) to ingroup members relative to members of an outgroup, even when group membership is assigned at random. In extreme cases social identification can lead a person to make enormous personal sacrifices in order to benefit others in the group (e.g., a soldier risking personal well-being to save a fellow soldier's life). Researchers have found analogous effects for organizational identification among fellow employees. Podzakoff et al. (2000) found that organizational identification can lead to helping, civic virtue, and sportsmanship among employees. Similarly, Dukerich et al. (2002) found that increases in organizational identification lead to increases in collaborative behaviors among doctors. As Ashforth and Mael put it, "Just as a strong group identity unifies group members, so too should a strong *organizational* identity unify organizational members" (1989: 32, emphasis added). Therefore, the ability of organizational identification to fuel these collaborative tendencies with external stakeholders is contingent upon the employee's believing that the stakeholder is part of the extended enterprise (Sachs, Post, & Preston, 2002).

For a high-profile example of this predicted effect, consider an employee-led protest at the $4.5 billion supermarket chain Market Basket to reinstate their CEO, who was fired by the board of directors. Employees there referred to their movement as "*We* are Market Basket." Those employees perceived suppliers and customers to be organizational members, but they viewed some shareholders and members of the board of directors as outsiders. Such construals appeared to be based on the fact that customers and suppliers shared core values about what the business stood for, and the employees recognized the long-term partnership and loyalty of many of those suppliers and customers; meanwhile, some shareholders and board members were viewed as nonmembers who, in fact, posed an existential threat to the way Market Basket did business (Korschun & Welker, 2015). The result was highly cooperative behaviors with most suppliers and customers before, during, and after the protests, but highly adversarial actions toward some shareholders and board members throughout the same period.

Such construed membership should not be confused with the concept of stakeholder salience, which has been examined in the literature. Stakeholder salience involves a prioritization or sorting of various individuals or groups of stakeholders by managers (Mitchell, Agle, & Wood, 1997). Agle, Mitchell, and Sonnenfeld (1999) found empirical evidence that CEOs conduct such rankings based on stakeholder power, legitimacy, and urgency and that the degree to which these traits make a stakeholder salient depends on the values of the CEO making the assessment. This suggests that internal organizational members use their personal values to assess the appropriateness of working with external others.

Overall, I propose that construed membership can attenuate the simple effect of organizational identification.

> *Proposition 2: The effect that organizational identification has on the exchange behaviors employees engage in with external stakeholders is contingent upon the degree to which employees construe the external stakeholder as a member of the organization: the more employees construe the external stakeholder as an organizational member, the more likely they will be to engage in cooperative rather than adversarial exchange behaviors with the external stakeholder.*

How might an employee categorize any given stakeholder as an organizational member or not? The next three propositions identify several factors that can be expected to lead to such a construal. Briefly, the construed membership of an external stakeholder is determined by perceived stakeholder-company value alignment, the duration of the stakeholder-company relationship, and the threat of action against the organization.

Stakeholder-company value alignment. An employee may also construe a stakeholder's organizational membership based on perceptions of the stakeholder's values in relation to the organization. Prior research shows that CEOs assess such value alignment to determine which stakeholders are most central to their organization's success (Agle et al., 1999). Consider Whole Foods Market, which presents more than a dozen annual awards to those suppliers who best embody the grocer's mission and core values. I propose that employees will engage in their own assessment of value alignment to determine the extent to which a stakeholder is part of the organization's extended network. Such assessments are based on "evaluative standards relating to work or the work environment by which individuals discern what is 'right' or assess the importance of preferences" (Dose, 1997: 227), not between the stakeholder and the employee but, rather, between the stakeholder and the organization.

Returning to the Whole Foods example, employees who become aware of this award may view these suppliers as residing within the core network of relationships defining the organization (Neville & Menguc, 2006) because they are committed to a similar mission based on stated values. Thus, alignment of values not only serves to make the stakeholder more salient as integral to the company's success (Agle et al., 1999) but also provides a superordinate goal of a larger company mission. Such a superordinate goal can break down intergroup barriers by nesting multiple groups under a single identity or purpose (Gaertner et al., 2000). Thus, one can expect value alignment between a stakeholder and the organization to be a contributor to an employee's sense that the stakeholder is part of the organization's extended network.

> *Proposition 3: When an employee perceives alignment between a stakeholder's values and those of the organization, he or she will be more likely to construe the stakeholder as an organizational member.*

Duration of stakeholder-company relationship. Relationships between stakeholders and an organization vary substantially in terms of duration (Joshi & Stump, 1999; Kotabe, Martin, & Domoto, 2003). Stakeholders having a long history of relations with the company are more likely to be viewed by employees as organizational members than are stakeholders with a shorter history. Duration of the relationship is likely to result in a construal of membership for a number of reasons. First, as Weiss and Kurland describe, "Older relationships should have clearer and more efficient communication, greater trust, more flexibility, and/or increased commitment" (1997: 615), all of which can contribute to a shared understanding and sense that the stakeholder resides within the organizational fold. When an organization engages with a stakeholder over long periods of time, the result is often an accumulation of relationship-specific assets that can signal interdependence between the organization and stakeholder (Kotabe et al., 2003).

Second, a long history conveys organizational legitimacy (Mitchell et al., 1997; Scott & Lane, 2000; Suchman, 1995). This communicates to employees that "within some socially constructed system of norms, values, beliefs, and definitions" (Suchman, 1995: 574), the stakeholder is viewed as an appropriate partner with which to interact. One can expect that stakeholders with greater legitimacy will be those most likely to be construed as being part of the extended enterprise (Mitchell et al., 1997). These stakeholders are highly salient to managers, to CEOs (Agle et al., 1999), and, I argue, to employees too. Moreover, some stakeholders have a legal, moral, or presumed claim on organizational wealth (Clarkson, 1995; Suchman, 1995), and such a claim may grow over the lifetime of the relationship.

Third, stakeholders with a longer history will more likely be construed as organizational members because in these circumstances employees will have had extended periods of direct contact with them. Grant (2007) argues that increases in contact can heighten affective commitment toward others. Such contact can thereby dissolve psychological barriers between an employee and those whom he or she serves. In sum, one can expect a positive relationship between the duration of the stakeholder-organization exchange relationship and construal of the stakeholder as an organizational member.

> *Proposition 4: When the duration of an exchange relationship between an external stakeholder and the organization is long term, an employee will be more likely to construe the stakeholder as an organizational member.*

Threat of stakeholder action against the organization. Stakeholders sometimes mobilize in order to coerce an organization into conceding to their demands. Such activities have become "a common occurrence in corporate life and a genuine managerial issue" (Rowley & Moldoveanu, 2003: 204) that can be witnessed in actions by environmentalists, union members, community groups, and investor activists. Even customers engage in severe misbehavior (Reynolds & Harris, 2009), such as shoplifting, illegitimate complaining, verbal abuse, and, in rare cases, physical violence (e.g., Bitner, Booms, & Mohr, 1994; Dube, 2003; Fullerton & Punj, 2004). Threats like these can demonstrate to an employee that a stakeholder's interests run contrary to those of the organization and the employee. Threats draw attention to and magnify the boundaries between opposing groups and can therefore create a sense that an individual is a nonmember of the group (in this case the organization). Such threats are one way individuals define the boundaries of one's social identity (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996) and can therefore play a central role in employees' self-other categorizations.

Extending this phenomenon to the organizational context, one can expect that experiences appraised by an employee as indicating potential harm to the value, meanings, or enactment of the organization or the organizational identity (Petriglieri, 2011) will more sharply demarcate the boundary between member and nonmember. Thus, I posit that as threats become more impending and serious, so too will the sense that the stakeholder maintains an identity that is incompatible and opposed to that of the organization (Elsbach & Bhattacharya, 2001).

> *Proposition 5: When an employee perceives that an external stakeholder is likely to take action against the organization, he or she will be less likely to construe the stakeholder as an organizational member.*

Influence of Organizational Identity Orientation

The tenets of social identity theory suggest that employee behavior results not only from identification and self-other categorization (i.e., construed membership) but also from the *content* of the identity (Ellemers et al., 2004). Prior research suggests that when organizational identification is high, the individual incorporates salient aspects of the organization's identity into his or her concept of self (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Identifying with a company known to be conservative leads identified employees to take on that trait. Once such traits are incorporated into the self-concept, they can have a profound influence on the frame of reference, goals, preferred form of exchange, and other characteristics of exchange between people (Flynn, 2005).

I extend this line of thinking to posit that the content of the organizational identity is an additional attenuating influence on the effect of organizational identification on employee-stakeholder relationships. Specifically, I draw on Brickson's (2000, 2005) notion of organizational identity orientation as a useful way to describe the content of the organization's identity in the boundary-spanning context. Organizations have identity orientations that reflect the "nature of assumed relations between [the] organization and its stakeholders" (Brickson, 2005: 577). These orientations may lead organizations to emphasize some objectives over others—for instance, market share (individualistic) versus sustainability (collectivistic).[2] Organizations with an individualistic identity orientation reward individual performance and stress zero-sum negotiations where one stakeholder's gain is another's loss (Brickson & Brewer, 2001). In contrast, organizations with a collectivistic identity orientation accent their role as a facilitator of interconnected stakeholders engaged in a system of mutual gain. Such an orientation stems from organizational structure (ranging from atomized to strong group divisions), task structure (from individual to group-based tasks), and the reward structure (from individual rewards to group-based rewards). These antecedents have been theorized elsewhere (Brickson, 2000), so here I focus on the moderating influence of organizational identity orientation on other variables in the framework.

This concept has also been theorized and operationalized at various levels; the concern here is with what an employee believes the identity orientation to be. Thus, in the present context organizational identity orientation represents an individual-level perception about an organizational-level characteristic. And while there is likely to be correlation between the observations of employees at a single company, there may also be considerable variance based on individual experiences, work site, job function, or tenure at the company (Brickson, 2005).

It is reasonable to expect that when organizational identification is heightened, an employee will incorporate his or her sense of the organizational identity orientation into the self-concept. Specifically, when an employee identifies strongly with an organization that has a collectivistic identity orientation, he or she likely will seek cooperation with other stakeholders in an effort to act on that orientation. This proposition is also consistent with the finding that a company's orientation of responding to multiple stakeholders tends to generate more productive relationships with stakeholders (Greenley & Foxall, 1997). In contrast, when an employee identifies with an organization that has an individualistic identity orientation, he or she may internalize that orientation, resulting in a relational stance that is akin to a zero-sum game. Thus, theory suggests that the effect of organizational identification is partially contingent upon the perceived organizational identity orientation, which influences its effect.

> *Proposition 6: The effect that organizational identification has on the exchange behaviors employees engage in with external stakeholders is contingent upon employees' perceptions of the orientation of the organizational identity: when employees perceive the orientation of the organizational identity as collectivistic, the effect will be lessened (less adversarial and more cooperative), and when they perceive the orientation of the organizational identity as individualistic, the effect will be strengthened (more adversarial and less cooperative).*

DISCUSSION

Stakeholder theorists contend that long-term performance depends on the relationships an organization fosters with its nexus of stakeholders. Employees are often the primary conduit through which these relationships are forged, yet the literature largely has been silent on how and why an employee might engage with stakeholders. My proposed framework suggests that boundary-spanning employees engage with external stakeholders in part based on how they view those stakeholders within the social landscape at work. Recognizing this helps resolve some of the perplexing variability in individual behaviors that span the organizational boundary.

[2] Brickson proposed three types of organizational identity orientation: personal, relational, and collectivistic. Since extant research does not clearly point to how a relational identity orientation would influence the relationship between organizational identification and employee-stakeholder consequences, I leave such predictions to future research.

It also responds to a "need [for] a relational work design model to capture the social characteristics of work, what behavioral, psychological, and health outcomes they influence, and a core set of mediators and moderators for these relationships" (Grant & Parker, 2009: 339).

Drawing from the notion that social behavior "cannot be [fully] understood apart from the categorization and identity processes of group members" (Albert et al., 2000: 14), the proposed framework submits organizational identification as a potentially fruitful mechanism to explain relationships between boundary-spanning employees and external stakeholders. Conventional wisdom—especially among practitioners—is that strengthening organizational identification will uniformly encourage employees to traverse the organizational boundary. However, applying the wider tenets of social identity theory to the stakeholder context reveals an interesting paradox: the very mechanism that pulls employees together to form a cohesive organizational unit (Hogg & Terry, 2000) can, in some circumstances, create an additional barrier between an employee and external stakeholders. The boundary-spanning context thus exposes a much more complex psychological process than is characterized in much of the literature to date.

I extend social identity theory to explain how, when, and why a boundary-spanning employee will engage with stakeholders. Employees are expected to reach beyond the organizational boundary based on a combination of the degree to which they view *themselves* as an organizational member (i.e., identification), how they categorize *others* with respect to the organization (i.e., construed membership of stakeholder), and how they define the organizational identity (i.e., organizational identity orientation). Moreover, the framework reveals new contributors to construed membership of the stakeholder, contributors that are unique to the boundary-spanning context.

This research complements prior research, which has concentrated on contracts (MacNeil, 1980), transaction costs (King, 2007), or agency costs (Hill & Jones, 1992) to describe the contours of the firm. It adds to this knowledge, proposing that the organizational boundary has a psychological component as well, one that is formed in the mind of the employee. Such a view echoes the call by Donaldson to describe company-stakeholder relationships by "analyzing the psychology of the ordinary [employee]" (1999: 237). It suggests that more research is needed on how employees understand, make sense of, and reconcile jobs that require spanning the organizational boundary. Thus, applying the social identity lens to the stakeholder context points to some additional avenues of scholarly research, and also has implications for managers looking to improve organizational performance via employee-stakeholder relationships.

Construed Organizational Membership: Who Counts?

The stakeholder literature has wrestled with the question of who "counts" as an organization's stakeholders (Agle et al., 1999; Mitchell et al., 1997). Some theorists take a fairly restrictive approach, positing that stakeholders are those who have the ability to generate organizational wealth (Post et al., 2002). Others take the more inclusive view that a stakeholder is anyone who affects or is affected by the organization (Freeman, 1984); such a view might include competitors or even the environment as stakeholders (Phillips & Reichart, 2000). Adding to the confusion, some companies engage in cooperative behaviors with competitors (e.g., forming industry trade or lobbying groups) or competitive behaviors with supply chain partners (e.g., launching a direct-to-consumer retail store after a history of selling only through intermediaries). The lines can also become ambiguous as to who is an employee and who is an external stakeholder. For example, some workers wear the uniforms of one company but are actually employed by another (e.g., Aramark food service employees, some cable repair workers). As a result, when trying to accurately depict where the organization begins and ends, researchers' traditional conceptualizations of stakeholders sometimes fall short.

The framework proposed in this article may provide some clarity to this debate by offering an alternative viewpoint. Specifically, the framework suggests that organizational membership exists in part within the mind of employees. Employees make a determination about external stakeholders' membership based on perceived value alignment, the duration of the relationship, and the perceived threat from the stakeholder. The implication of this insight is that to fully understand employee-stakeholder relationships, researchers need to move beyond employees' identification with the organization and include perceptions about the external stakeholders. Such a triadic view would consider how (a) the employee views the self in relation to (b) the organization and (c) external stakeholders. It represents a theoretical step forward because it acknowledges the complex process through which employees interpret the wider social landscape in which they work. Boundary-spanning employees are particularly likely to engage in these complex social comparisons because their job can force them to reconcile differences between the organization and external stakeholders. This line of thinking invites additional research on how such conflicts arise and how they affect construed organizational membership. It also suggests that membership could be construed differently if the actions of the organization or the stakeholder change dramatically over time. For example, corporate partnerships between competitive organizations are especially prone to dissolution (Dussauge, Garrette, & Mitchell, 2000), and such a sudden change could dramatically turn friend to foe in the eyes of employees. Accounting for these changes over time would conform to the commonly stated need to view the more dynamic nature of stakeholder relationships (Fassin, 2010; Mitchell et al., 1997; Sachs & Maurer, 2009). Future research may examine how employees interpret such conflicting information and how it shapes their conceptualization of the social landscape.

Linking Relationships to Performance

Stakeholder theorists argue persuasively that relationships with stakeholders are critical for understanding organizational performance. My proposed theoretical approach contributes to the stakeholder literature by predicting how an employee will engage with stakeholders. The framework takes a descriptive approach (see Jones & Wicks, 1999), making it agnostic on the question of whether a more adversarial or more cooperative relationship is most desirable from the company's standpoint. It is far from clear that any single form of employee-stakeholder relationship is uniformly beneficial or detrimental to organizational performance. For example, close cooperative relationships can potentially lead to corruption, favoritism, or inefficiency (Anderson & Jap, 2005). Analogously, more adversarial behaviors may be necessary with competitors, especially with those for whom market share is a zero-sum game. And some degree of conflict (perhaps through adversarial relationships) between employees and noncompetitor external stakeholders may even be beneficial at times; teams displaying some degree of instrumental conflict are known to better integrate alternative points of view and thereby heighten performance (Amason, 1996; Jehn, Northcraft, & Neale, 1999).

The extent to which an employee-stakeholder relationship will improve or harm organizational performance likely will depend on the employee, the stakeholder, the organization, and the circumstances. Such a realization invites future research on what these factors are and how they drive performance. Thus, while my proposed framework links employee psychology to employee-stakeholder relationships, there remains a need for research linking these relationships to downstream organizational performance.

In addition to research linking relational forms to organizational outcomes, research may also be warranted on linkages with stakeholder outcomes. Recent advances in stakeholder theory suggest that managers need to understand the utility function of stakeholders so that utility can be maximized more effectively and efficiently (Harrison, Bosse, & Phillips, 2010). There is still a need to identify how the relationships outlined in this article affect the welfare of stakeholders. For example, while cooperative relationships have intuitive appeal, the intense nature of many collaborative relationships may also be costly for the stakeholder (e.g., costs of serving, opportunity costs that result from interdependence). Future research may ask whether and when, from a stakeholder's perspective (e.g., a supplier), it might be better for an employee to engage more cooperatively than adversarially.

Organizational Identification

In addition to advancing stakeholder theory, this article extends our understanding of organizational identification. In prior research scholars argued that one's social identity is quite malleable—that is, depending on the situation, an employee can switch identification between the workgroup, other individuals, or the organization

(Albert et al., 2000; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). However, conceptualizations of each of these targets for identification have been quite static. In contrast, the present framework suggests that even the targets of identification themselves (e.g., the organization) may be quite malleable. Here identification can manifest as very different behaviors, depending on who is included in the employee's sense of the organization. Thus, the framework makes additional progress toward untangling the interactions between organizational identification and the broader social landscape at work. That social landscape has no a priori definition; rather, it may be interpreted or constructed by the employee based on perceptions of the self, the organization, and stakeholders.

In addition, the framework reveals that employees engage in relationships with stakeholders depending in part on how they imbue the organizational identity with meaning. Building on the extant notion that identification can arouse an employee's desire to act on behalf of the organization, I assert that the effects of identification depend on the perceived orientation of the organization toward other entities that reside in its network (i.e., organizational identity orientation). This effect suggests new ways to look at long-standing literature streams. For example, an analogous line of research is organizational culture research (Barney, 1986). Similar to organizational identity orientation, organizational culture research examines how the organization is defined in the eyes of employees. Researchers view culture as a lens through which employees assess how much the organization shares values with them (e.g., O'Reilly, Chatman, & Caldwell, 1991; Vandenberghe, 1999), making it a potential antecedent of organizational identification.

However, the present research suggests an additional effect that has not, to my knowledge, been studied explicitly. That is, culture may moderate the effects of organizational identification on employee behavior, especially with regard to external stakeholders. Thus, my proposed approach invites additional research on which aspects of an organization's identity or culture interact most strongly with organizational identification. Another potentially fruitful topic for future research is whether such interactions are affected by the sources of organizational identification. For example, does the interaction change based on whether the identification stems from an employee's need for belonging or a need for distinctiveness (Brewer, 1991)? One might speculate that the moderating effect of a collectivistic (versus individualistic) identity orientation would be more powerful for employees who identify with the organization because of a need for belonging (versus distinctiveness). Thus, there is a continued need to understand how the organizational identity might be a source through which employees can satisfy personal needs, beliefs, and values.

Multiple Workplace Identities

In this article I have examined the implications of a single and overarching organizational identity; however, theorists recognize that employees may maintain additional workplace identities (Ashforth et al., 2008). These multiple identities are susceptible to salient features of a situation or moment in time. For example, in meetings where company finances are discussed, an employee's sense of self as a certified public accountant might be activated (Pratt, Rockmann, & Kaufmann, 2006), while in another meeting the same employee may become more attuned to his or her gender identity. These identities coexist with and are sometimes nested within one's identity as an organizational member.

While beyond the scope of this article, this additional layer of complexity suggests interesting research questions, such as whether cooperation between an employee and an investor can be strengthened by highlighting a common credential (e.g., master's in business administration). Such inquiries would complement existing research on how board members balance multiple identities (Hillman, Nicholson, & Shropshire, 2008) and how employees try to reconcile conflicting work-related identities as they define their place in the organization (Glynn, 2000).

Managerial Implications

The proposed framework builds on an emerging view that leaders need to be concerned with employees' social identity (Haslam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011; Hogg, 2001; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003). By examining boundary-spanning employees as a subsegment of all employees, the framework reveals how social identity can ultimately affect an organization's relationships with its external stakeholders. However, as noted previously, managers who wish to influence these relationships must first consider which form of employee-stakeholder relationship is optimal for the organization. For example, with some suppliers, it may be important to cooperate closely in order to develop new technologies, whereas with other suppliers, it may enhance performance more to take an adversarial stance, negotiating forcefully and leveraging buyer power. Once this outcome is determined, managers can turn to the key components of the framework in order to encourage the optimal outcome. These are defining *who* is included in the organizational collective and shaping *what* the orientation of the organization is.

Defining who is included in the organizational collective. As cited in the Whole Foods example earlier, some companies recognize suppliers, customers, or other stakeholders who, executives believe, share values and objectives with the organization. However, it is unclear whether executives giving the aforementioned awards take into consideration the reactions of employees. The proposed framework suggests that awards or other public recognition of external stakeholders can have meaningful effects on employees who identify strongly with the organization. It also suggests that managers who wish to foster more cooperation between employees and stakeholders need to look for and communicate corporate activities that appeal to both employees and stakeholders. This is consistent with recent research showing that corporate social responsibility programs can communicate shared values between employees and customers, thereby signaling shared ingroup status and fueling cooperation (Korschun, Bhattacharya, & Swain, 2014).

I extend this notion and advise managers to determine which employee-stakeholder relationships need to be more collaborative, and then communicate to employees that these stakeholders are essential to the organization. In contrast, for cases where the organization would benefit from more adversarial relationships, managers may wish to signal that stakeholders are outsiders who represent a threat to organizational performance. Thus, ingroup versus outgroup status of stakeholders may be a potent lever for motivating employees to engage cooperatively or adversarially.

Shaping a collectivistic identity orientation. Some theorists have called for managers to espouse the idea of a "company stakeholder responsibility," where decisions are made in light of their practical but also ethical impact on stakeholders (Berman, Wicks, Kotha, & Jones, 1999; Freeman & Velamuri, 2006). The present framework is not only consistent with this notion but also suggests that there are benefits to making a stakeholder orientation pervasive among employees. Specifically, to the extent that managers wish to encourage collaboration, they should cultivate a culture that is in line with the notion of a collectivistic identity orientation (Brickson, 2000, 2005; Flynn, 2005).

Brickson (2000) provided a fairly comprehensive set of levers that managers can use to accomplish this. In brief, they must tailor the organizational structure, task structure, and reward structure to accent the collectivistic rather than atomistic aims of the organization. Defining the organization's identity in this way is not unlike what some scholars (Sisodia, Wolfe, & Sheth, 2007) and practitioners call defining the "purpose" of the company. They couch the mission of the organization in societal terms, highlighting that the organization is not motivated purely by self-interest but is also based on the varied interests of a wider collective that includes key stakeholders.

CONCLUSION

Management scholars developing a theory of the firm have long been interested in where organizational boundaries exist. As organizations become ever more complex and these boundaries become more subjective, we need new approaches to understand how stakeholders interpret these boundaries and how they view themselves in relation to them. Our understanding of the psychology behind employees' boundary-spanning behaviors is still nascent. The framework proposed here represents an early step toward a theory of the firm that is psychologically based. It brings theory on social identity to bear on boundary-spanning motivations, revealing how an employee's social identity can lead to some surprising outcomes. However, there remains much work to do in order to trace these psychological phenomena to organizational performance. My hope is that this approach will inspire future research, making additional headway in this burgeoning area.

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