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"I Identify with Her," "I Identify with Him": Unpacking the Dynamics of Personal Identification in Organizations

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"I IDENTIFY WITH HER," "I IDENTIFY WITH HIM": UNPACKING THE DYNAMICS OF PERSONAL IDENTIFICATION IN ORGANIZATIONS

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Despite recognizing the importance of personal identification in organizations, researchers have rarely explored its dynamics. We define personal identification as perceived oneness with another individual, where one defines oneself in terms of the other. While many scholars have found that personal identification is associated with helpful effects, others have found it harmful. To resolve this contradiction, we distinguish between three paths to personal identification—threat-focused, opportunity-focused, and closeness-focused paths—and articulate a model that includes each. We examine the contextual features, how individuals' identities are constructed, and the likely outcomes that follow in the three paths. We conclude with a discussion of how the threat-, opportunity-, and closeness-focused personal identification processes potentially blend, as well as implications for future research and practice.

"I share joys and sorrows with her . . . I identify with my manager, and I feel she identifies with me. I tell her something happy, and I feel she is happy for me. It's a matter of feeling."

—An employee describing her relationship with her manager (Kark, 2012: 428).

"I identify with her." "I identify with him." These phrases are often heard in all walks of life. What does it actually mean, though, to identify with a person—beyond the colloquial sense of perceiving some similarity? As explained in detail later, we define "personal identification" (PI) as perceived oneness with another individual, where one defines oneself in terms of the other. In organizational behavior, the most commonly studied target of identification is the collective, primarily an organization and, secondarily, an occupation or team (see Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008, for a review). One is a *member* of the collective and so

one is already "identified" by others and oneself as being *of* the collective, whereas to identify with a person is to perceive a sense of oneness with a target that obviously does not include oneself.

Although organizational scholars have not described the nature or dynamics of PI in detail, they have recognized the importance of PI in various ways. For example, research suggests that consultants may identify with their colleagues (Gill, 2015), that mentor identification with a protégée and vice versa serves as both the basis for a mentoring relationship and a process by which each individual influences the other (Kram, 1985; Ragins, 1997a,b; Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Russell & Adams, 1997), that individuals adopt their role models' attributes through identification processes (Bucher & Stelling, 1977; Gibson, 2003, 2004; Gibson & Barron, 2003; e.g., Ibarra, 1999), and that PI is a building block of organizational culture as members identify with the founder and internalize his or her values/beliefs regarding the organization (Schein, 1990). Perhaps not surprisingly, in a recent wave of research on leadership, scholars also view identification with one's manager as a conduit through which leadership has many of its effects (e.g., Chun, Yammarino, Dionne, Sosik, & Moon, 2009; Fox, 2011; Kark, 2012).

At the same time, although many organizational scholars have recognized that PI is important,

they have disagreed on whether its impact is helpful or harmful. For instance, whereas some research indicates that identifying with one's leader is associated with higher job satisfaction and individual performance (Hobman, Jackson, Jimmieson, & Martin, 2011; Wang, Walumbwa, Wang, & Aryee, 2013; Wang & Howell, 2012), other research indicates that this is associated with dependence on the leader and unethical behavior (Gino & Galinsky, 2012; Kark, Shamir, & Chen, 2003). Additionally, the mentoring literature offers many positive consequences associated with a close mentoring relationship involving identification processes, including internalization of desired attributes, career development, and psychosocial support (Bouquillon, Sosik, & Lee, 2005; Kram, 1985; Ragins, 1997a; Ragins & Cotton, 1999; cf. Bowen, 1986). However, there are also hints of negative outcomes, such as dependence on the mentor and withdrawal from organizational life (Baum, 1992). Clearly, if we are to fully appreciate why PI matters, we need to first understand its nature and dynamics.

The purpose of this article, then, is to explore two fundamental research questions: (1) What is PI and how does it unfold in organizational contexts? (2) Why has PI been found to have both helpful and harmful effects on individuals? In so doing, the article contributes to multiple organizational literatures. The first is identification. In our review of the literature, we found approximately forty empirical studies that measured PI in organizations as an independent, dependent, or mediating variable, but with very little explanation of the construct itself.[1] Unpacking what PI means, how it differs from related identification constructs, and how it arises from diverse phenomenologies resulting in contrasting outcomes will enrich our understanding of the various ways

individuals define and situate themselves in organizational contexts. We do so by providing a threefold typology of PI, drawing on the seminal work of Sigmund Freud (1949/1922) regarding psychodynamic identification and of Arthur and Elaine Aron and their colleagues regarding "inclusion of other in the self" (Aron, Aron, Tudor, & Nelson, 1991: 243; see also Aron & Aron, 1986, and Aron, Aron, & Smollan, 1992). We build on this seminal work by articulating an organization-based model that includes the contextual triggers and moderators shaping each type, the complex processes through which each type unfolds, and the resulting individual and work-related outcomes. Importantly, whereas the literature largely depicts identification in organizations as a positive process in terms of the associated affective states and functionality (e.g., Cohen-Meitar, Carmeli, & Waldman, 2009; Lee, Park, & Koo, 2015), we offer a balanced (i.e., positive and negative) take on PI dynamics. Specifically, we articulate two paths—opportunity focused and closeness focused—the antecedents, phenomenology, and outcomes of which are generally positive, as well as one path—threat focused—that is more negative, since its purpose is the cessation of anxiety and the process is associated with some potentially deleterious outcomes. A more nuanced appreciation of the PI process will thus help us understand why studies have found conflicting results about its effects.

Our analysis also contributes to the literatures mentioned above that have presented PI as a crucial process through which their respective phenomena unfold—namely, mentoring, role modeling, and leadership. In the absence of theory articulating the nature and dynamics of PI, it is difficult to appreciate how mentors and protégés reciprocally influence each other, how an individual "becomes like" a close peer or role model, and how and why leadership affects subordinates' sense of self. Further, as we will argue, one path to PI unfolds in close relationships, which are apt to be positive in nature. Articulating the PI process thus contributes to research on how individual identities are constructed in positive relationships at work (Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; see also the edited volume by Dutton & Ragins, 2007) and sheds light on a seldom discussed type of relationship at work—a close relationship.

The article is divided into five parts. First, in "What is PI?" we expand on our above definition of the construct and contrast it with related

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[1] We combed Web of Science and Google Scholar for articles that included various search terms—notably, "identification with a person" or with a "supervisor," "manager," "peer," "coworker," "client," or "individual," as well as each of those targets preceding "identification" or "commitment," as in "personal identification" or "supervisor(y) commitment." We also combed the bibliographies of the resulting articles. We examined the scale items in each quantitative study and found that approximately forty measured PI as we have defined it, several referring to it as "relational identification," "interpersonal identification," "supervisory commitment," or "commitment to supervisor." In several other studies researchers have claimed to measure PI as we have defined it, but they have instead measured the extent to which a person is a role model (i.e., a person who represents something that an individual wants to be), rather than identification per se.

constructs. We argue that there are three diverse paths through which PI occurs—specifically, threat-focused, opportunity-focused, and closeness-focused paths. Second, in "Determining the Path" we discuss the antecedents of each of the three PI processes. Third, in "PI Processes" we articulate the dynamics through which the PI processes unfold. Fourth, in "Outcomes of PI" we consider how PI can generate both harmful and helpful effects. Finally, in the "Discussion" section we consider how the paths may blend together, as well as implications of our model for future research and practice.

WHAT IS PI?

As noted, we define PI as perceived oneness with another individual, where one defines oneself in terms of the other (see also Cialdini, Brown, Lewis, Luce, & Neuberg, 1997; French & Raven, 1959; Hobman et al., 2011; Kark & Shamir, 2002). Measurement items, such as "When someone criticizes [my supervisor . . .], it feels like a personal insult" (Becker, Billings, Eveleth, & Gilbert, 1996: 469), "When I talk about this team member, I usually say 'we' rather than 'he or she'" (Cooper, 2013: 633), and "My mentor is someone I identify with" (Ragins & McFarlin, 1990: 329), provide illustrations of the construct.

The notion of PI has roots in various social sciences, principally social psychology. Freud (1949/1922), the father of psychodynamic theory, discussed how children identify with their same-sex parent to reduce anxiety. Social psychologists French and Raven (1959) argued that one of the five bases of power is "referent power," where an individual gains influence over another person via identification. Similarly, Kelman, a social psychologist, described how social influence may occur through "classical identification," where one "attempts to be like or actually to *be* the other person" (1961: 63). Burke (1969), a literary theorist, argued that persuasion via rhetoric occurs through identification. More recently, social psychologists Aron and Aron and their colleagues investigated how, in the context of a close relationship, "we take on the resources, perspectives, and identities of that person, and we share that person's outcomes" (Aron, Lewandowski, Mashek, & Aron, 2013: 102; see also Aron, 2003). As noted, the Arons and their colleagues referred to this phenomenon as "inclusion of other in the self."

Though nomologically distinct, PI may appear similar to empathy, perspective taking, and role modeling. Indeed, as Sanford (1955) noted, empathy is often confused with identification, which "may stem in part from a basic confusion between ourselves and others" (Wegner, 1980: 133). Empathy has been defined as "an appreciation or understanding of what someone else is going through as well as an emotional reaction to that person's condition" (Kanov et al., 2004: 815), and perspective taking as imagining what another is going through or how that person feels in a given situation (Batson, Early, & Salvarani, 1997; Parker & Axtell, 2001). Appreciating or imagining what another is experiencing, however, does not require that one actually perceive a *sense of oneness* with the other. For example, one may appreciate the career hardships that a peer has endured without defining oneself in terms of the peer or experiencing those hardships as one's own.

PI may also be confounded with role modeling—"a cognitive process in which individuals actively observe, adapt, and reject attributes" of one or more individuals whom they view as worthy of modeling (Gibson, 2003: 592-593). In role modeling, individuals become like the role model through observing the model and "trying out" the model's attributes (Bandura, 1977; e.g., Ibarra, 1999). While role modeling does not require PI, an individual may nonetheless identify with his or her role model. In cases where PI is *not* present, the individual simply emulates without perceiving a sense of oneness, whereas in cases where PI *is* present, the individual perceives a visceral unity with the role model, which facilitates the internalization of desired attributes.

Before we flesh out the dynamics of PI in organizational contexts, it is important to additionally distinguish it from the related constructs of social identification and relational identification.

PI versus Social Identification and Relational Identification

Our focus on PI necessitates a discussion of its relationship with the two most closely related forms of identification in the organizational literature: social identification and relational identification. To provide a complete picture of the relationship between the constructs, we articulate how PI differs from social and relational identification, as well as how it overlaps. These associations are depicted in Figure 1 (which includes

organizational identification as an example of social identification) and explained below.
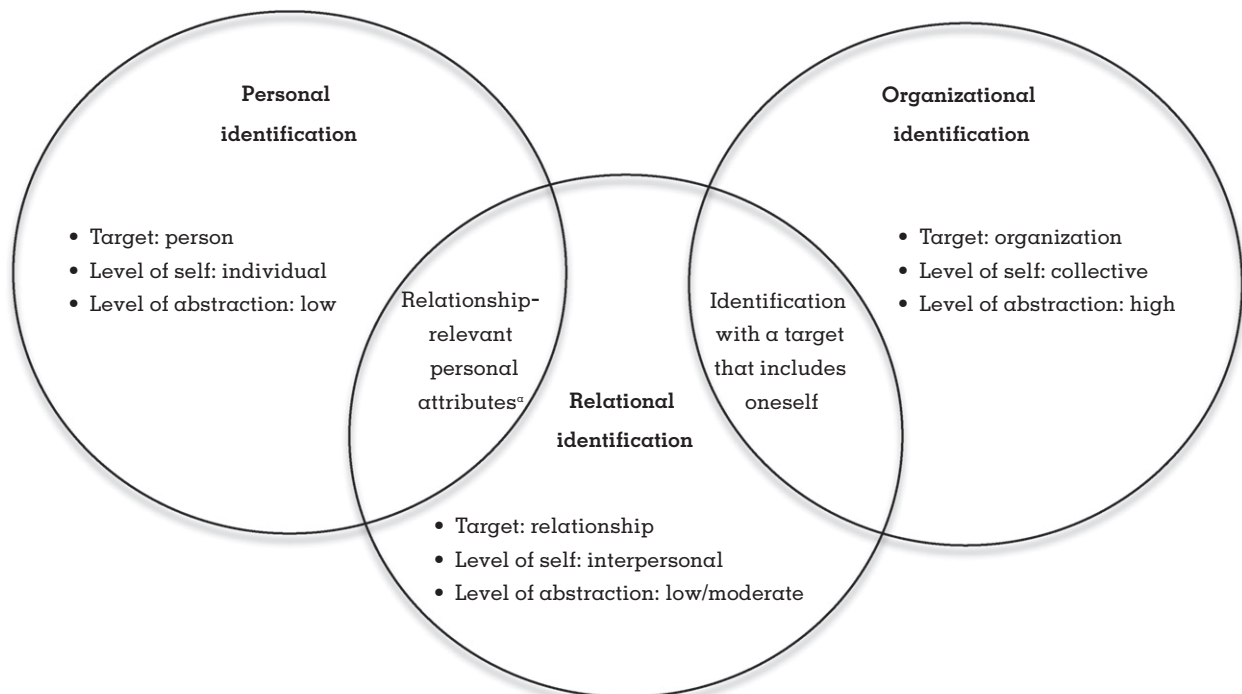
Social identification. Most research concerned with identification in organizational contexts focuses on the collective level of self, including identification with one's team, workgroup, department, occupation, and organization. This research is typically premised on social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1986; see Haslam & Ellemers, 2005, 2011, for reviews in organizational contexts) and its offshoot, self-categorization theory (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987). A social identity refers to attributes that reflect group membership, while a personal identity refers to idiosyncratic attributes that distinguish an individual from others. Accordingly, in PI an individual identifies with the attributes of a target that make that target who he or she is—namely, his or her personal identities.

Indeed, the obvious difference between identifying with a collective and identifying with a person is, of course, the target. This distinction is very important. Pratt asked, "If I identify with my boss [for example] . . . what does this mean? With what about my boss am I identifying?" (1998: 173). In

their review of the literature on identification in organizations, Ashforth et al. argued that the core of *social* identification is "I am 'A' (self-definition), I value 'A' (importance), [and] I feel about 'A' (affect)" (2008: 330) and that the content or attributes of that self-definition—that is, the social identity—includes values, goals, beliefs, and prototypical traits (what is generally done), along with knowledge, skills, and abilities. In the case of *personal* identification, we argue that while the target is different, the core is the same: "I identify with another person, I value that person's attributes, and I feel strongly about that person's attributes."

As to the content, both a collective and a person can be said to have values, goals, beliefs, traits, knowledge, skills, and abilities, but a person is a flesh-and-blood entity, whereas a collective is necessarily more abstract. Attributes that typify every individual and usually reflect personal identities—dreams, fears, morality, ideals, upbringing, aesthetic tastes, physical appearance, characteristic behaviors, sense of humor, likes and dislikes, career goals, and so on—are not as clear in many collectives. Thus, a person tends to

FIGURE 1
Identification in Organizations: Three Primary Targets

Personal identification
- Target: person
- Level of self: individual
- Level of abstraction: low

Relationship-relevant personal attributes[a]

Relational identification

Organizational identification
- Target: organization
- Level of self: collective
- Level of abstraction: high

Identification with a target that includes oneself

- Target: relationship
- Level of self: interpersonal
- Level of abstraction: low/moderate

[a]That is, the personal attributes of the other that bear on the role relationship.

present a greater range of identity attributes or "hooks" for identification. Indeed, psychologists have argued that identification with others, such as parents and heroes, is a primary avenue through which individuals develop a sense of self and aspire to cultivate attributes they admire (Berenson, Crawford, Cohen, & Brook, 2005; Cramer, 2006; Josselson, 1992).

That said, two additional commonalities between PI and social identification should be underscored. First, it is not necessary for one to identify with every attribute of another person (Bucher & Stelling, 1977; Flum, 2001; Gibson, 2004; Peters, 1973); rather, as with collectives, identification tends to focus on those attributes that are perceived to be central, distinctive, and more or less enduring to the target (Albert & Whetten, 1985). Second, like all forms of identification, PI is not a binary variable (yes/no) but exists on a continuum that ranges from low to high identification. The greater the *breadth* of central, distinctive, and more or less enduring qualities one identifies with, and the greater the *depth* of those identifications, the greater the magnitude of identification with the person. Depth refers to a sense of visceral unity rather than a coincidental overlap with the target. (Our model assumes neither extremely low nor extremely high PI, an assumption we relax later.)

Relational identification. Various scholars have argued that in addition to a collective level of self composed of one's memberships in groups, individuals have a relational or interpersonal level of self composed of one's role relationships, such as spouse-spouse and coworker-coworker (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Brickson, 2000; Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; Lord & Brown, 2004; Lord, Brown, & Freiberg, 1999; Sedikides & Brewer, 2001). Brewer and Gardner's foundational article refers to the *relational self* as "the self-concept derived from connections and role relationships with significant others" (1996: 84), which Lord et al. (1999), Brickson (2000), and others expanded upon in the organizational domain. Sluss and Ashforth (2007) subsequently argued that the notion of relational self confounds relational identity and relational identification. Specifically, whereas relational identity refers to content (what those connections and role relationships consist of), relational identification refers to internalizing that content as a (partial) definition of who one is (i.e., how the self-concept is derived from relationships). Sluss, Ployhart, Cobb, and Ashforth

operationalized relational identification through such items as "My *relationship* with my immediate supervisor is an important part of who I am at work" and "My *relationship* with my immediate supervisor is vital to the kind of person I am at work" (2012: 957, emphasis added). The referent in relational identification is one's *relationship* with the other person, not the person as an individual per se (Nübold, Dörr, & Maier, 2015).

The key difference, then, between relational identification and PI is that the target in the former is the somewhat abstract relationship itself, whereas the target in PI is the concrete person him/herself. Also, as depicted by the overlap between relational identification and organizational identification in Figure 1, one is a *member* of the relevant relationship and the organization (i.e., one identifies with a target that includes oneself), but one obviously stands apart from the target person in PI. However, as Figure 1 also shows, the constructs of relational identification and PI do overlap to the extent that PI occurs in the context of an actual dyadic relationship, such as coworker-coworker. In such cases relational identification includes the personal qualities of the dyadic partner *that bear on the role relationship*, such as her friendliness in enacting her coworker role-relationship and the patient way she provides feedback in the context of that relationship (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Accordingly, internalization of the role relationship itself (how the two individuals enact their relationship) usually involves internalization of certain qualities of the relational partner, thus blurring the distinction between relational identification and PI.

That said, PI involves not only the attributes of the other person that bear on the role relationship (the overlap with relational identification) but also the attributes of the other person that have little to do with the role relationship per se. For example, while the individual may *relationally* identify with his coworker as a result of the friendly way she collaborates and patiently offers feedback (relational tasks between coworkers), he may also *personally* identify with her as a result of the way she negotiates skillfully with managers, has surmounted life obstacles, and displays her aesthetic tastes (characteristics that are perceived to define the coworker but do not influence the enactment of the role relationship between the two).

In cases of PI where the individual does not have an actual relationship with the target person, such as when a front-line service agent identifies with the

firm's CEO (Kark, Waismel-Manor, & Shamir, 2012), the distinction between PI and relational identification is most clear. Here the individual's knowledge of the other comes not from dyadic interaction in the context of a relationship, but—as described later—from what one has heard or seen of the target, as when the media lauds one's CEO. In short, PI can occur in the absence of relational identification.

Despite the differences between PI and relational/social identification, identification with a person, identification with a relationship, and identification with a collective are likely complementary and even mutually reinforcing, rather than mutually exclusive. First, research on multiple identities in organizations clearly indicates that individuals are capable of identifying with more than one target simultaneously (Johnson, Morgeson, Ilgen, Meyer, & Lloyd, 2006; see Ramarajan, 2014, for a review). For example, Becker et al. (1996) found that identification with one's supervisor correlated at $r = .53$ with organizational identification, and Sluss et al. (2012, Study 1) found that relational identification vis-à-vis one's manager correlated at $r = .29$ (contemporaneously) and .40 (lagged) with organizational identification. Second, because collectives come to be known largely through the words and deeds of individual members in the context of role-based relationships (Ashforth & Rogers, 2012), identifying with a prominent and prototypical member such as the leader may facilitate identification with the collective he or she exemplifies along with the relationship he or she has with the individual (Carmeli, Atwater, & Levi, 2011; Hobman et al., 2011; Lord et al., 1999; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993; cf. Sluss et al., 2012). Similarly, identifying with a collective such as an organization creates a sense of commonality that may facilitate learning more about and identifying with individual members (PI) and the relationships they forge (relational identification; Steffens, Haslam, & Reicher, 2014), especially those members perceived to be prototypical of the collective (Sluss et al., 2012). Finally, as Aron et al. note, when individuals identify with a person, part of what they include in their self is a kinship for the person's social (and presumably relational) identities: "Thus, to some extent, I feel as if I am part of that group and, thus, feel more positively about that group" (2013: 108).

In sum, PI, as perceived oneness with another individual, represents a unique type of identification in organizations that likely complements other forms of identification.

Three Paths to PI

We argue that there are three paths to PI, each associated with a particular need (as discussed in depth later).[2] *Threat-focused* PI refers to the compensatory process through which one addresses a discerned identity threat by perceiving a sense of oneness with another individual, thereby internalizing his or her identity attribute(s). This process occurs as one seeks to fulfill the need for uncertainty reduction (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Threat-focused PI is compensatory because it is driven by a lack of a viable current identity and therefore addresses an identity deficit.

Opportunity-focused PI refers to the supplemental process through which one addresses a discerned identity opportunity by perceiving a sense of oneness with another individual, thereby internalizing his or her identity attribute(s). This process occurs as one seeks to fulfill the need for self-enhancement (Gecas, 1982). Opportunity-focused PI is supplemental because the individual adds admirable attributes to a viable, foundational identity.

Closeness-focused PI refers to the process through which close relational partners internalize each other's identity attribute(s). This process occurs as individuals seek to fulfill the need for belonging (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Whereas identity change is more instrumental in the first two forms (as one addresses an identity threat or opportunity), identity change here is more of a natural corollary of growing intimacy.

In this section we introduce the three paths to PI, discuss how they apply in organizational settings, and distinguish them from each other. Table 1 provides an overview of these three paths as well as diverse examples of work-related PI.

Threat-focused PI. We noted Freud's (1949/1922) argument that children identify with their same-sex parent to lower their anxiety over potential aggression or rejection from that parent—and to gain, albeit vicariously, the affection of their opposite-sex parent. Because of the dependence

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[2] Because we present "pure" cases of the three PI paths, we focus on the primary need associated with each. However, we recognize that individuals in organizations likely have multiple needs that are salient either simultaneously or sequentially. As a result, we relax this single-need assumption in our "Discussion" section under the heading "Blending Threat-, Opportunity-, and Closeness-Focused PI."

TABLE 1
Differentiating the Three Paths to Personal Identification (PI)

PI Path	Definition of Process	Need Fulfilled	Illustrative Examples
Threat-focused PI	The compensatory process through which one addresses a discerned identity threat by perceiving a sense of oneness with another individual, thereby internalizing his or her identity attribute(s)	Need for uncertainty reduction	"She helps me, Cathy does. When I feel nervous or apprehensive, I think to myself, 'What would Cathy do?' One woman told me, chuckling: 'I am her—Cathy Gale. I identify with her so strongly that I think I've become her. I walk like she walks and talk, I hope, as she talks'" (informants speaking of a television character's impact on their female professional identity formation; Wright, 2007: 67). "She picks her work because each job challenges her. She never stays with one company for twenty-five years to get a pension; in fact she moves all the time. As soon as she has completed one project, if they cannot come up with a challenging project she finds another one. And I feel exactly the same way. I mean I feel like her when those things come up. I identify with her, I not only identify with her I feel like I am her for that moment" (an informant discussing the impact of identification with her mother on her professional identity; Evans, 1992: 103). "The students feel betrayed by the apparent refusal of their mentors to mentor. They believe the women faculty to be unable to accept the power they have both within the university and in their professions. 'They have access to resources and belong to influential networks,' one asserts. 'They publish papers, participate in conferences, write book reviews, hire and fire. And still, they cling to their images of themselves as oppressed victims, courting us as friends by identifying with our powerlessness!'" (Keller & Moglen, 1987: 498).[a]
Opportunity-focused PI	The supplemental process through which one addresses a discerned identity opportunity by perceiving a sense of oneness with another individual, thereby internalizing his or her identity attribute(s)	Need for self-enhancement	"I remember he came here once to one of our festivals, our Black Poetry Festivals, and he said, 'Poets are not here to amuse or entertain; we are here to enlighten.' You know, he had a great deal of insight. He was wonderful with metaphors, and I identify with him strongly; this is what I work for in my poetry" (an English professor speaking about a fellow poet; Lowe & Lane, 2005: 19). "Because I wanted to be her. As a young child I wanted to be a war correspondent—I wanted the 'excitement' and the challenge of that role and I always admired her independence and her 'spirit'" (a young woman in public relations considering her professional role model, BBC war correspondent Kate Adie; Singh, Vinnicombe, & James, 2006: 72). "I identify with her [Sheryl Sandberg's] talks and stories on a personal level and agree that we as women should 'lean in.' I believe that we should be the change that we want to see happening. I'm glad that Sheryl Sandberg has taken this step, and put forth the effort in order to bring more attention to the topic and behavior. She is an incredibly strong woman and is empowering and inspiring other women to do what they love and achieve great success. Many stories of women in business and technology have become public and, even if we do not have many women colleagues in our field, we no longer feel alone and this is very powerful" (Triinu Magi, cofounder and CTO of Neura, in a *Huffington Post* interview; Dunn, 2014).
Closeness-focused PI	The process through which close relational partners internalize each other's identity attribute(s)	Need for belonging	"You know, he's part of me, as I am part of him. We are not parallel. We are not two parallel persons. I think he's made me a better person, yes" (a professional speaking about how a spouse's work identity impacts her professional identity; Petriglieri & Obodaru, 2015).

(Continued)

TABLE 1
(Continued)

PI Path	Definition of Process	Need Fulfilled	Illustrative Examples
			"Karen, a second year MSW student, had been my supervisee for the past few months. . . . She and I were close in age, so that a mutual identification and idealization took place between us, a process that was undeniably pleasant for me. Karen saw me as a mentor, a teacher, and a role model she could identify with, and I perceived her to be someone who, like me, possessed an extensive life experience, was emotionally mature and was someone whom I could relate to as a colleague rather than as a novice" (Ringel, 2001: 176).
			"You have to like who you are working with. And if that is the case, you tend to identify with the people that you work with, you know. I've never been on sports teams but it seems like the same kind of analogy" (a senior vice president of an architecture firm reflecting on the individuals she works with; Vough, 2012: 785).

[a] This example illustrates how a perceived identity threat may lead individuals to identify with potentially dysfunctional targets. The threat of perceiving themselves as victims induced the female faculty to identify with their protégés. While a protégé is unlikely to be perceived as socially dominant, PI in this context may at least confer a sense of shared victimhood as a social-psychological defense against the institution (cf. Leisenring, 2006).

and relative powerlessness of children, identification enables them to feel more independent and powerful. This process has been named identification with the aggressor (Anna Freud, 1946/1936; Kets de Vries, 1980), defensive personal identification (Kagan, 1958; Mowrer, 1950), identification with the frustrator (Spitz, 1957), positional identification (Slater, 1961), identification proper (Sanford, 1955), and the Stockholm syndrome (Bejerot, 1974). We have therefore termed this process threat-focused PI because of the nature of its genesis, which we describe later.

How might threat-focused PI apply to organizational contexts? Although relationships in an organizational context qualitatively differ from that of a parent and child, the experience of powerlessness and the need to reduce anxiety, threat, or fear may also drive identification with others in organizations. Specifically, one identifies with another person to quell the anxiety of being in a context where one's sense of self is threatened, either because one lacks a clear and efficacious sense of self (at least in that setting) or because one's extant sense of self encounters "potential harm" (Petriglieri, 2011: 644). An example of the former would be a newcomer who, feeling lost in the novelty and demands of the circumstances, identifies with her seemingly expert coworker in order to gain ready-made identity attributes; an example of the latter would be an experienced employee whose identity as an aggressive salesperson is severely disparaged by her new sales manager, inducing her to gravitate toward the more socially acceptable identity embodied by a coworker.

Threat-focused PI is, in short, *compensatory*, and the process tends to be experienced more negatively than the other two PI processes (described below) because one is attempting to fill a deficit—and quell the associated anxiety—caused by an identity threat. (Of course, the cessation of the threat is likely to be associated with a sense of relief.) As noted, this negativity contrasts sharply with the organizational literature, in which identification is viewed largely as a positive affective experience.

Opportunity-focused PI. Another, more optimistic, reading of how the PI process unfolds is that identification enables one to internalize the attributes of a positively viewed person. Rather than being a response to threat, this path to PI is more about capitalizing on an opportunity to enhance oneself. Although not as prevalent in the early identification literature, Freud (1949/1922) referred to anaclitic identification, defined by McWilliams as "a benign phenomenon in which a child—or adult, for that matter . . . loves a caregiver and wants to have the qualities that make that person lovable" (1999: 124). And the examples used by Kelman (1958, 1961) to illustrate his

concept of classical identification suggest the existence of both threat- and opportunity-driven aspects. We have thus termed the more positive process as opportunity-focused PI.

In organizational contexts, opportunity-focused PI would apply where one tends to already have a reasonably clear and efficacious sense of self but sees an opportunity to enrich that self. An example would be a veteran employee who greatly admires his coworker's effectiveness in working with clients and thus identifies with her in order to enhance his skill set. In short, opportunity-focused PI is *supplemental,* and the process tends to be associated with positive affect. Consistent with the psychodynamic literature that evolved from Freudian thought, threat- and opportunity-focused PI may occur consciously, as when one makes a deliberate attempt to think, feel, and act—to *be*—like another, or nonconsciously, as when one unintentionally and unreflectively finds oneself becoming like another. Because nonconscious dynamics tend to occur so as to shield the conscious self from debilitating anxiety (Beck & Clark, 1997), they are more likely to arise during threat-focused PI than opportunity-focused PI.

Closeness-focused PI. We draw on existing social-psychological work by the Arons and their colleagues to articulate a process whereby an individual identifies with another person in the context of a close relationship. Social psychologists have conceptualized closeness in terms of interdependence (Berscheid, Snyder, & Omoto, 1989; Kelley et al., 1983), mutual responsiveness (Clark & Lemay, 2010), intimacy (Reis & Patrick, 1996; Reis & Shaver, 1988), and—the essence of PI—perceived self-other overlap (Aron et al., 1992). In organizational studies the concept of a close relationship is often presented as a high-quality relationship, or a relationship involving recurring interactions that is characterized by vitality, mutuality, and positive regard (Dutton, 2003; Dutton & Heaphy, 2003; Dutton & Ragins, 2007; Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1995; Heaphy & Dutton, 2008).

Given the uniqueness of the organizational context (Heath & Sitkin, 2001; King, Felin, & Whetten, 2010), close relationships at work are those relationships that have reached a further stage of interpersonal development (Boyd & Taylor, 1998; Ferris et al., 2009). Because of their level of intimacy, scholars have called close relationships at work "special" relationships (Kram & Isabella,

1985). Accordingly, we define a close relationship at work as a relationship that is perceived as intimate and mutual, characterized by factors such as high levels of trust, responsiveness, self-disclosure, and loyalty and low levels of instrumentality (Ferris et al., 2009; Kram & Isabella, 1985; Sias & Cahill, 1998). We have thus termed identification premised on close relationships as closeness-focused PI. It is worth noting that while relationships forged in organizations tend not to be as intimate as those often studied in close relationships research (e.g., romantic partners), and the link between close relationships and PI in organizations has not yet been empirically examined, Aron et al. (2013) suggested that PI via close relationships may indeed occur in organizational contexts, such as between coworkers or a mentor and protégé.

Fundamental differences between threat- and opportunity-focused PI and closeness-focused PI. Threat- and opportunity-focused PI differ from closeness-focused PI in two critical respects. First, as noted, the intention for identity change tends not to be as strong in closeness-focused PI as it is in threat- and opportunity-focused PI. In closeness-focused PI, individuals do not enter into or maintain close relationships because they see a need to change who they are (the likely outcome of PI). Rather, close relationships meet individuals' need for belonging, providing benefits such as social support, positive affect, and companionship (Dutton & Ragins, 2007; Ferris et al., 2009; Kram & Isabella, 1985). Indeed, while the Arons and their colleagues (Aron et al., 2013; Aron, Norman, Aron, & Lewandowski, 2002; Aron & Aron, 1996) primarily associate the need for self-expansion with what we are terming closeness-focused PI (i.e., "inclusion of close others in the self creates expansion of the self" [Aron & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2001: 93]), we believe that self-expansion is secondary to belonging because self-expansion occurs incidentally as the relationship becomes closer. In contrast, identity change in both threat- and opportunity-focused PI occurs when an individual attempts to resolve a problem or capitalize on an opportunity through identification with a particular person. As a result, the threat- and opportunity-focused PI paths tend to be more intentionally instrumental than the closeness-focused PI path as a means of changing one's self.

Second, in closeness-focused PI, an actual relationship between the identifier and the target of identification necessarily exists, whereas in threat- and opportunity-focused PI, individuals

may or may not have an actual relationship. Additionally, as detailed by the Arons and their colleagues, the intimacy and mutuality of a close relationship induce changes to *both* individuals' sense of self such that they each incorporate attributes of the other person. Indeed, Aron and Aron wrote, "To reduce any connotations of domination, we are using less often the phrase 'including the other in the self'" because "including each other in each other's self" is a more accurate description, albeit "awkward in English" (1996: 50). As a result, in closeness-focused PI, both individuals incur a change in self-definition. At the same time, it is likely that the close relationship is perceived as even closer because mutual identity change indicates that both individuals are becoming more alike. However, to clarify the directionality of the closeness-focused PI path, the perception of a close relationship is a necessary starting point for closeness-focused PI while the mutual experience of this process likely has a reciprocal, reinforcing effect. Conversely, threat- and opportunity-focused PI result in an identity change only for the identifier, as the individual internalizes attributes of another person without the necessary mutuality of the closeness-focused path.

What might identifying with another individual look like if there is no actual relationship between the individual and the identification target, as argued above and illustrated in several Table 1 examples for threat- and opportunity-focused PI? We can draw a useful distinction from the literature on proximal versus distal identification targets. Whereas identification with a proximal person is based on direct interaction and knowledge, identification with a distal person is necessarily more indirect, based on what one has heard or seen of the target, perhaps through some combination of organizational communications (e.g., podcasts, newsletters), surrogates (i.e., more proximal individuals who promote and defend the individual and model followership), media accounts, and so on (Chen & Meindl, 1991; Galvin, Balkundi, & Waldman, 2010). Even without institutionalized embellishment, because of the lack of direct and ongoing interaction with a distal person, one's perceptions of him or her may be idealized—more of a burnished image than a view grounded in messy reality. For example, in a study entitled "Meeting God: When Organizational Members Come Face to Face with the Supreme Leader," Gabriel (1997) described the idealized and almost magical views that some

members had of the top leader and the identification this prompted. That said, PI likely happens more frequently in the presence of an actual relationship because proximal individuals tend to be more salient. Illustratively, Shamir (1995) asked students to describe a charismatic leader with whom they had a direct relationship and one with whom they had a distant relationship and found that respondents appeared to identify more frequently when a direct relationship was present.[3]

Given the examples above involving leaders, it is important to consider whether all targets of PI are likely to be perceived as higher status than the identifier. The literature on role modeling suggests that individuals tend to identify with individuals who are seen as higher status along some dimension (e.g., Ibarra, 1999; Ragins & McFarlin, 1990). However, we contend that PI may occur with a target who is generally perceived to be of higher (e.g., a role model; Gibson & Barron, 2003), lower (e.g., a subordinate; Boyd & Taylor, 1998), or more or less equal status (e.g., a coworker; Sias & Cahill, 1998), as illustrated by the examples provided in Table 1. The role of status, though, likely varies by PI path. In closeness-focused PI, a close relationship at work (defined as intimate and mutual, as noted above) is more likely to emerge when status is more or less equal. Additionally, the characteristics associated with close relationships, such as lower levels of instrumentality, higher levels of trust, and increased responsiveness, are also likely to reduce any status differentials. Conversely, in threat- and opportunity-focused PI, higher status may be an incentive for identification rather than a disincentive. Higher status may indicate that a person has attributes that are worth internalizing to reduce uncertainty or to self-enhance. Further, in the case of potential distal targets, it is likely that one would have more information about individuals who are of higher status (e.g., a CEO versus a summer intern in a different department) and would find high status particularly attractive in lieu of a personal relationship and the rich information it generates.

In the following sections we build a theoretical model detailing the antecedents of the prototypical

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[3] However, Shamir also reported that "surprisingly, indications of followers' high levels of trust and confidence in the leader appeared more frequently in descriptions of distant leaders than in those of proximal leaders. . . . Perhaps . . . greater distance allows the development of illusory and idealized perceptions of the leader" (1995: 39).

threat-, opportunity-, and closeness-focused PI processes in organizations (see Figure 2). (We later consider how these processes may blend together.) To foreshadow our model, we suggest that the organizational context provides the seedbed for threat- and opportunity-focused PI through "potential trigger events" (i.e., occurrences that may be construed as identity threats and/or identity opportunities) and for closeness-focused PI through facilitating the formation of close relationships. We theorize that the organizational context interacts with characteristics of the identifier, leading to perceptions of a potential trigger event as an identity threat and the threat-based PI process, perceptions of a potential trigger event as an identity opportunity and the opportunity-focused PI process, and perceptions of a close relationship and the closeness-focused PI process. We describe the process through which individuals identify with a person in each path, the outcomes the paths have in common, and the outcomes that are unique to each path.

DETERMINING THE PATH: ANTECEDENTS OF THE THREE TYPES OF PI IN ORGANIZATIONS

Threat- and Opportunity-Focused PI

Various scholars have argued that efforts to establish, maintain, or refine a contextually appropriate sense of self are cued by events that challenge one's sense of self. For example, Alvesson and Willmott note that "specific events, encounters, transitions, experiences, surprises, as well as more constant strains, serve to heighten awareness of the constructed quality of self-identity and compel more concentrated identity work" (2002: 626), and Banaji and Prentice add that "data suggest that self-concept change occurs primarily, and perhaps only, in response to major changes in role or situational demands" (1994: 325). As defined above, we see potential trigger events as occurrences that may be construed as identity threats and/or identity opportunities. Potential trigger events vary in their ambiguity and equivocality (Weick, 1995). While some events are typically perceived as clearly an identity threat (e.g., an abusive boss) or an identity opportunity (e.g., a favorable performance evaluation), most events are somewhat ambiguous and equivocal. Examples of equivocal events include entering an organization, engaging in training, gaining a new manager, hitting a career plateau, receiving new assignments, learning
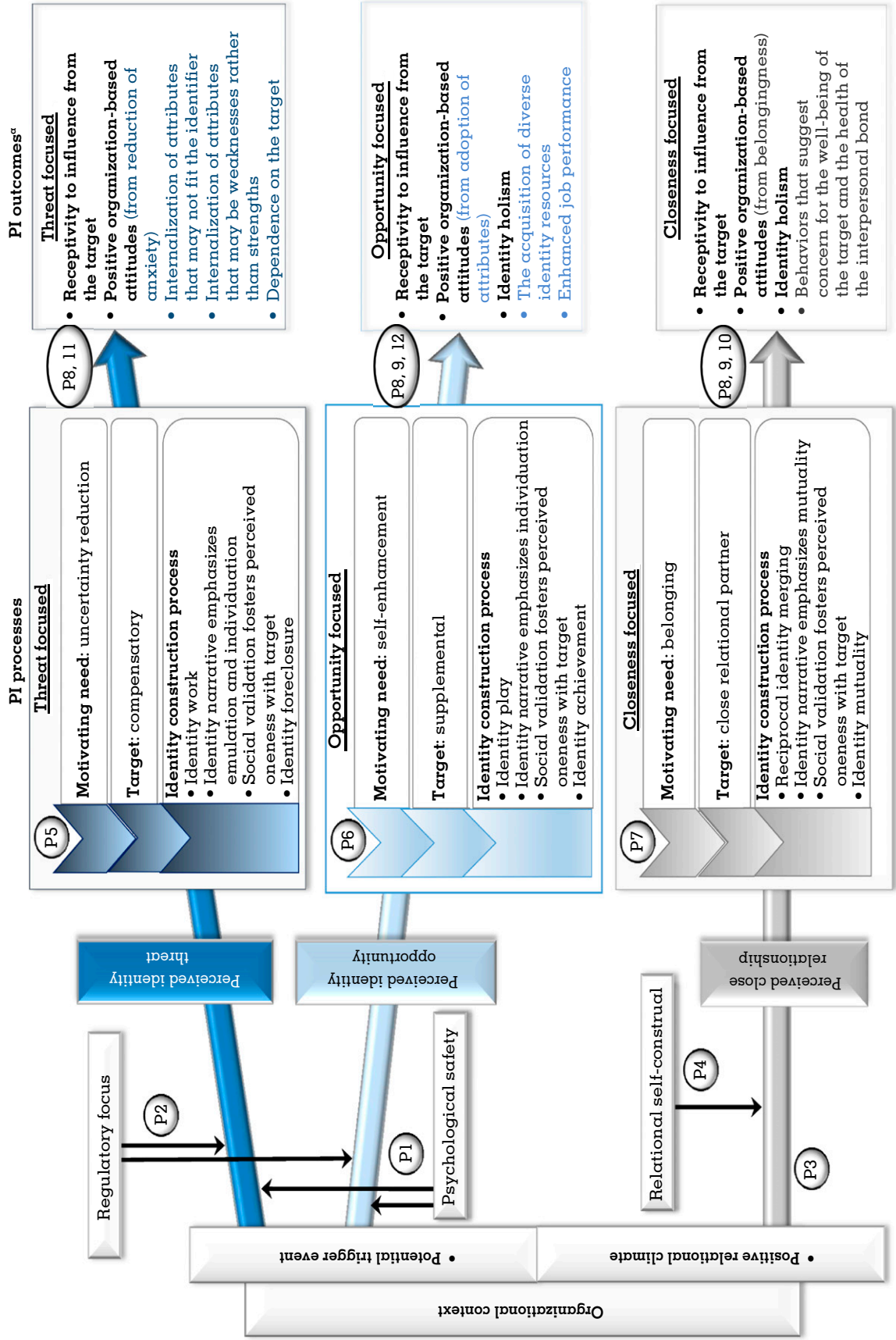
something unexpected about oneself, and experiencing a moderate success (e.g., Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014; Epitropaki, 2013; Petriglieri, 2011). For instance, a moderate success may be interpreted as a challenge to one's existing competence (an identity threat) and/or as a chance to learn something new and thereby strengthen one's existing competence (an identity opportunity).

Although the literature focuses almost exclusively on contextual changes or "external" events, trigger events can also be "internal," such as an anniversary that prompts reflection on one's career (Ashforth, 2001). Further, although the literature emphasizes singular events, a series of seemingly small events, such as missed sales targets, may similarly challenge one's sense of self—whether through reaching a tipping point or through gradually increasing one's concern. Thus, our conceptualization of a potential trigger event includes both a singular event of large magnitude and a series of smaller events—as long as the event or events may be construed as an identity threat and/or opportunity.

Organizational context. Given the ambiguity and equivocality that often attend potential trigger events, characteristics of the organizational context likely impact whether an individual will interpret an equivocal event as an identity threat or opportunity. A key contextual variable that influences interpretation is a climate for psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999). This construct "refers to formal and informal organizational practices and procedures guiding and supporting open and trustful interactions within the work environment" (Baer & Frese, 2003: 50). A climate for psychological safety appears to be fostered by various factors, including (1) leadership behaviors, particularly "being available and approachable . . . explicitly inviting input and feedback and . . . modeling openness and fallibility" (Edmondson, 2004: 15; see also Schein, 1985); (2) structural characteristics, particularly "clarity around roles, procedures, and priorities, and authority relations" (Bunderson & Boumgarden, 2010: 613); and (3) cultural practices, such as encouraging employee voice and experimentation (e.g., Edmondson, 2004).

A climate for psychological safety reassures individuals that they can seek help and support in understanding and coping with a potential trigger event, experimenting with different ways of being and, generally, viewing the experience as an opportunity to learn and grow (Edmondson,

FIGURE 2
Personal Identification in Organizations

PI processes

PI outcomes[a]

Threat focused

Motivating need: uncertainty reduction

Target: compensatory

Identity construction process
- Identity work
- Identity narrative emphasizes emulation and individuation
- Social validation fosters perceived oneness with target
- Identity foreclosure

P5

Threat focused
- **Receptivity to influence from the target**
- **Positive organization-based attitudes** (from reduction of anxiety)
- Internalization of attributes that may not fit the identifier
- Internalization of attributes that may be weaknesses rather than strengths
- Dependence on the target

P8, 11

Opportunity focused

Motivating need: self-enhancement

Target: supplemental

Identity construction process
- Identity play
- Identity narrative emphasizes individuation
- Social validation fosters perceived oneness with target
- Identity achievement

P6

Opportunity focused
- **Receptivity to influence from the target**
- **Positive organization-based attitudes** (from adoption of attributes)
- **Identity holism**
- The acquisition of diverse identity resources
- Enhanced job performance

P8, 9, 12

Closeness focused

Motivating need: belonging

Target: close relational partner

Identity construction process
- Reciprocal identity merging
- Identity narrative emphasizes mutuality
- Social validation fosters perceived oneness with target
- Identity mutuality

P7

Closeness focused
- **Receptivity to influence from the target**
- **Positive organization-based attitudes** (from belongingness)
- **Identity holism**
- Behaviors that suggest concern for the well-being of the target and the health of the interpersonal bond

P8, 9, 10

Perceived identity threat

Perceived identity opportunity

Perceived close relationship

Regulatory focus

P2

Psychological safety

P1

Relational self-construal

P4

P3

Organizational context
- Potential trigger event
- Positive relational climate

[a]Outcomes in bold are common to two or more processes.

2004; Spreitzer, Sutcliffe, Dutton, Sonenshein, & Grant, 2005). Without a climate for psychological safety, a potential trigger event is more likely to be regarded as threatening since individuals may perceive their leaders, organizational structure, and organizational culture as unsupportive, constraining their willingness to try new behaviors. Accordingly, the absence of such a climate makes it more likely that the event will be seen as more of an attack on an extant identity or as a stark reminder that one needs to quickly adopt a "safe" identity.

> *Proposition 1: A climate for psychological safety will moderate the relationship between a potential trigger event and perceptions of identity threat or opportunity such that the greater the climate for psychological safety, the more likely one will perceive the event as an identity opportunity rather than as an identity threat.*

Identifier characteristics. Individuals possess traits that predispose them to experience a potential trigger event as either an identity threat or opportunity. The individual difference of regulatory focus appears to provide a comprehensive take on how people view themselves, interpret stimuli in their work environment, and, in turn, form bonds. Indeed, Johnson, Chang, and Yang (2010) postulate that regulatory focus is highly relevant to whether one forms an affective commitment to another individual. According to regulatory focus theory (Higgins, 1997, 1998; see Lanaj, Chang, & Johnson, 2012, for a review), individuals self-regulate in two distinct ways. A *promotion focus* is characterized by attention to one's growth, since individuals are motivated to attain difficult goals based on an *ideal* self. In contrast, a *prevention focus* is characterized by needing to feel secure, shielding oneself from psychological harm, and fulfilling duties, obligations, and responsibilities based on an *ought* self (Brockner & Higgins, 2001; Carver & Scheier, 1998). Thus, one's regulatory focus plays an important role in how one forms perceptions and responds to events at work. For example, during strategic decision making, a promotion focus is associated with a risky response bias whereas a prevention focus is associated with a conservative response bias (Crowe & Higgins, 1997). We argue that, when experiencing a potential trigger event, individuals with a prevention focus are more likely to perceive an incongruence between

their current and ought self (i.e., an identity threat)—that they are presently not meeting obligatory expectations for themselves. Conversely, those with a promotion focus are more likely to see an incongruence between their current and ideal self (i.e., an opportunity for growth) and will pursue an identification target accordingly.

> *Proposition 2: Regulatory focus will moderate the relationship between a potential trigger event and perceptions of identity threat or opportunity such that (a) the greater one's promotion focus, the more likely one will perceive an equivocal event as an identity opportunity rather than as an identity threat, and (b) the greater one's prevention focus, the more likely one will perceive an equivocal event as an identity threat rather than as an identity opportunity.*

Closeness-Focused PI

The Arons and their colleagues argued that, through close relationships, individuals come to identify with a target—what we are terming closeness-focused PI. Close relationships at work have been studied in multiple contexts, such as "special peer relationships" that serve a mentoring function (Kram & Isabella, 1985), workplace friendships (Sias & Cahill, 1998), positive relationships at work (Dutton & Ragins, 2007), and workplace romances (Pierce, Byrne, & Aguinis, 1996). How individuals relate to each other and whether a given relationship becomes close, however, depend largely on the organizational context and the individuals involved (Boyd & Taylor, 1998; Brickson, 2007; Dutton & Ragins, 2007; Eby & Allen, 2012; Higgins & Kram, 2001; Sias, 2009).

Organizational context. We posit that a positive relational climate largely captures the contextual features of an organization that cause interpersonal relationships to become close. Relational climate refers to "shared employee perceptions and appraisals of policies, practices, and behaviors affecting interpersonal relationships in a given context" (Mossholder, Richardson, & Settoon, 2011: 36). A *positive* relational climate is characterized by factors such as mutual respect among employees, relational coordination, interdependence, and shared social values (Mossholder et al., 2011; Reich & Hershcovis, 2011; Singh & Winkel, 2012). This begs the question,

"How is a positive relational climate created and/ or maintained?"

The literature suggests two primary factors. First, policies and practices regarding human resources shape the relational climate. For example, in an organization with a commitment-based HR system, training is aimed at developing "relational social capital" (Mossholder et al., 2011: 39). Thus, relational climates emphasizing dyadic connections help individuals feel more comfortable and able to form close connections with each other. Second, leadership styles that are relational, transformational, and/or characterized by fairness drive a positive relational climate (Reich & Hershcovis, 2011). For instance, transformational leaders encourage followers to be trusting, cohesive, and friendly in ways that facilitate the formation of positive, and likely closer, relationships (Gittell, 2003; Reich & Hershcovis, 2011). Further, leaders who promote interdependence and a common identity among followers build a foundation for relationships (Heaphy & Dutton, 2008).

While closeness-focused PI remains an understudied phenomenon in organizational contexts (Aron et al., 2013), the social psychology literature provides specific leads on how a relational climate may enable interpersonal closeness and PI to develop. That is, a positive relational climate facilitates the formation of close relationships from which closeness-focused PI tends to develop as relational partners feel supported to engage in self-disclosure (Reis & Shaver, 1988; e.g., Aron, Melinat, Aron, Vallone, & Bator, 1997), participate in shared activities (Aron et al., 2002), experience positive emotions (Waugh & Fredrickson, 2006), respond to each other's needs (Sias & Cahill, 1998), and trust and commit to one another (Clark & Lemay, 2010).

> *Proposition 3: A positive relational climate is positively related to perceived close relationships.*

Identifier characteristics. We posit that the key individual-difference variable moderating the likelihood that a given relationship will become close is *relational self-construal*, a "general orientation toward defining oneself . . . in terms of close relationships" (Cross, 2009: 949–951; see also Cross, Bacon, & Morris, 2000). A sample item is "I think one of the most important parts of who I am can be captured by looking at my close friends and understanding who they are" (Cross et al., 2000: 795). Because individuals with high relational self-construal strongly value close relationships,

they tend to behave in ways that transform work relationships into close bonds, such as encouraging others to express themselves, providing social support, and putting others' interests ahead of their own (Gore, Cross, & Morris, 2006; Mattingly, Oswald, & Clark, 2011; Morry & Kito, 2009). Thus, such individuals are more likely to capitalize on opportunities to develop a close relationship with one or more others.

> *Proposition 4: Relational self-construal will moderate the relationship between a positive relational climate and a perceived close relationship such that the greater the relational self-construal, the more likely one will perceive a relationship as close.*

PI PROCESSES: MOTIVATING NEEDS, TARGET TYPES, AND IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION

Whereas in the previous section on context we discussed where and when PI occurs, here we explore the three paths to PI to better understand why, with whom, and how PI occurs. Specifically, we articulate the primary need met by each form of PI (why individuals personally identify), the type of identification target most likely associated with each path (with whom individuals likely identify), and the nuanced identity construction processes that individuals engage in when identifying with another individual (how the PI process unfolds).

Threat-Focused PI Process

Why? Primary need met. We introduced threat-focused PI as a compensatory process where one identifies so as to quiet the anxiety associated with being in a situation where one's sense of self is threatened. As such, individuals who interpret an event like organizational entry or a mixed performance review in negative terms as a threat to their sense of self are more likely to experience anxiety and thus engage in threat-focused PI. In short, perceived threat activates the *need for uncertainty reduction*, which Hogg and Terry define as "a need to reduce subjective uncertainty about . . . ultimately, one's self-concept and place within the social world" (2000: 124; see also Hogg, 2007). That is, interpreting events as threats to one's self prompts individuals to search for a more secure mooring— an identity that can provide the clarity and efficacy perceived to be threatened by the events.

The stress literature indicates that individuals experiencing anxiety, and thus the need for uncertainty reduction, tend to narrow their focus and seize upon sufficient (rather than optimal) solutions so as to end the aversive state (Janis & Mann, 1977; see also Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014). In threat-focused PI, the identifiers' anxiety reflects the absence of—or challenge to—a context-specific identity such that they feel ungrounded. When individuals feel anxious, their reflex is to quickly and defensively adopt at least the superficial trappings of a target in order to reduce uncertainty and "pass" (Goffman, 1963) as a credible insider, even if mastery remains elusive (e.g., Granfield, 1991). Similar processes can be seen in the existing literature. For example, Nicholson (1984) referred to "absorption" as a mode of work role transition where one becomes the role—or, in this case, the target person—with little modification (cf. Luyckx et al., 2008).

Who? Identification targets. Because threat-focused PI is a compensatory process, a person becomes attractive as an identification target to the extent he or she appears to have what the identifier lacks and hungers for (Kagan, 1958). In particular, given the desire to expediently reduce anxiety and pass as someone who embodies a desirable identity, an individual will tend to identify with a socially dominant person—an "alpha" person, as it were. By socially dominant we mean a person who appears to strongly embody the attributes that confer legitimacy, credibility, and power *in that context*.

Social dominance signals that such a person embodies an identity worth internalizing in order to secure validation for oneself. It seems likely that in many cases this person will be a manager or a particularly respected peer. However, one implication of the nonconscious dynamics that Freud suggests underlie threat-focused PI is that one may reflexively gravitate to a socially dominant person even if he or she is a dubious role model. As a metaphor, think of the entourage that schoolyard bullies often attract (e.g., Maeda, 2003). Additionally, we noted that threat-focused PI may occur even in the absence of a relationship between the individual and identification target. In such cases the individual likely still looks for a target who embodies "socially dominant" attributes; however, these attributes are largely colored by mediating accounts of who the individual is (e.g., via surrogates or the media).

How? The identity construction process. Ibarra and Petriglieri (2010) draw a useful distinction between "identity work" and "identity play." While representing complementary, dynamic processes through which individuals understand who they are, these constructs fundamentally differ in their purposes (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Kark, 2011; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003). Whereas identity work motivates behavior to "protect and defend identities," identity play motivates behavior to "try on and explore identities" (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010: 15). Although individuals can "work" and "play" with all aspects of identity, in practice, superficial behaviors, such as grooming, attire, mannerisms, and expressed beliefs, tend to be quickly mimicked. In contrast, more deeply rooted aspects of being, such as values and actual beliefs, likely take significantly longer, and some aspects, such as intricate knowledge and highly refined skills, may never be mastered.

We suggest that threat-focused PI is most strongly associated with identity work as individuals strive to defend the sense of who they are in reaction to a perceived identity threat. For example, Pratt, Rockmann, and Kaufmann described how medical residents struggled to address violations of their "work-identity integrity" via identity work (2006: 242). The anxiety that accompanies a perceived identity threat is likely to provoke identity work that reflects a narrow, problem-focused search for a solution (Fredrickson, 2003), leading one to more or less unreflectively internalize the identity attributes of the target.

The process of identification with a given target entails identity narratives—stories of varying levels of complexity that individuals craft from the often messy and equivocal vicissitudes that typify careers and organizational life (e.g., Ashforth, Harrison, & Sluss, 2014; Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014; Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Identity narratives play a crucial role in the PI process as individuals endeavor to make sense of their changing identity by weaving together their past and present as a prelude to a hoped-for future. Thus, identity narratives emphasize desired trajectories and downplay events and missteps that may undermine the espoused plotlines. Because of the importance in many organizational settings of articulating a coherent and normative story (e.g., the aspiring protégé, the supportive senior peer), identity narratives are crafted both for oneself and one's role set or network. However, identity narratives must be reasonably plausible,

since "successful stories [are] those that generate feelings of authenticity and are deemed valid by their target audience" (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010: 136).

Given that individualism is a highly prized value, at least in the West (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), threat-focused PI creates a dilemma in crafting a socially desirable identity narrative. On the one hand, a desirable identification target provides a ready narrative ("I want to be just like her"); on the other hand, ceding one's individuality to another person is counternormative ("I should be my own person"), even if one lacks a viable current identity. To retain some sense of individuality, the identity narrative is likely to downplay complete conformity to the target. Thus, the resulting identity narrative under threat-focused PI is apt to be a somewhat equivocal meld of emulation ("I am just like her") and individuation ("I am my own person"). As a manager reflected on his own former manager:

> He [a favorite boss] had been a role model, really a father figure to me. I tried to think to myself, "What would he do in my situation?" I even dressed like him, to look like an authority figure. I could figure out what he would do, but I couldn't do it. I wasn't him . . . I had to come up with another way that fit who I am to create the right office atmosphere. I could keep his concepts, but I had to put my own words and form around them (Hill, 1992: 173–174).

Social validation involves explicit and/or implicit signals that the identity and narrative are accepted as legitimate (Ashforth, 2001; Cable & Kay, 2012; Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014; Smith, Amiot, Smith, Callan, & Terry, 2013; Stryker, 1980). This conferral of legitimacy solidifies and strengthens the identification. Individuals tend to look to proximal others, such as peers and managers, who are familiar with the context and demands the individuals face. Just as individuals are more inclined to identify with socially dominant or at least high-status targets, so, too, are they inclined to look primarily to such individuals for social validation. Further, if a relationship exists between the identifier and target, it is likely important to the identifier that the target affirm the identifier's enactment of the internalized attributes.

Given the anxiety that fuels threat-focused PI, individuals may be particularly concerned about receiving social validation of their emergent identity and identity narrative, may be hypervigilant for signs of acceptance or rejection (Kramer, 1998), and may strive for fidelity in their enactment of the adopted identity. A potentially noteworthy consequence is that the more others similarly feel a defensive need to identify with a socially dominant target, the more likely a so-called cult of personality will arise. The fact that the target's identity attributes are shared by others seemingly sanctifies the target as *the* fount of learning. For example, Stone (1990) discussed how a cult of personality emerged around Michael Milken at Drexel Burnham Lambert, enabling him to create a group of like-minded acolytes and perpetuate unethical practices.

Threat-focused PI is likely to lead to what Marcia (1966), following Erikson (1959), referred to as "identity foreclosure"—when one unreflectively internalizes an identity before exploring other options (even if one constructs a more socially desirable identity narrative after the fact that implies some individuation). "Foreclosure represents the absence of individualization, where the person is undifferentiated from the [target]" (Côté & Schwartz, 2002: 583). In short, one addresses the anxiety associated with threat by internalizing in a relatively swift and nondiscriminating manner the identity attributes embodied by a target person. That said, identity foreclosure speaks to the *process* of unreflective internalization, not to the *content* of the resulting identity; one may well foreclose on a socially desirable identity.

> *Proposition 5: Perceived identity threat fosters the threat-focused PI process such that one (a) is mainly motivated by the need for uncertainty reduction, (b) swiftly seeks a compensatory target, (c) engages in identity work, and (d) articulates an identity narrative that reflects both emulation and individuation. Furthermore, (e) social validation of the emergent identity and identity narrative fosters perceived oneness with the target, and (f) these dynamics result in identity foreclosure.*

Opportunity-Focused PI Process

Why? Primary need met. Individuals who interpret potential trigger events in more positive terms—that is, as opportunities—are less likely to construe that their sense of self is under threat and

more likely to ponder the potential presented by the opportunities. We described opportunity-focused PI as a supplemental process where one likely has a fairly clear and efficacious sense of self and sees a chance to enhance that self by identifying with another person. Accordingly, we argue that perceiving events as opportunities likely activates the *need for self-enhancement*—"the motivation to maintain and enhance a positive conception of oneself" (Gecas, 1982: 20; see also Cooper & Thatcher, 2010, and Pratt, 1998). Under this need, individuals are driven to uphold current valued identities and to acquire new valued identities that bring them closer to an ideal self (Ashforth, 2001; Markus & Nurius, 1986).

Who? Identification targets. In opportunity-focused PI, because one perceives an identity opportunity rather than a threat, one is more inclined to view an extant identity as a positive and secure foundation and to enhance that foundation by assuming the desired qualities of another person via identification. Thus, individuals are more likely to be discriminating in their choice of identification targets since they can afford to be patient and selective. Further, we noted that the opportunity-focused process is likely more conscious than the threat-focused process, enabling individuals to be more deliberate in selecting a target who displays desirable attributes. These attributes include the identity hooks mentioned earlier, such as values, goals, beliefs, traits, abilities, dreams, physical appearance, characteristic behaviors, sense of humor, and career goals. As in the case of threat-focused PI, when an individual identifies with a distal rather than a proximal target, the individual's understanding of the target is largely colored by mediating accounts.

The literatures on informal mentors-protégés and on role models represent two examples of opportunity-focused PI. Scholars have argued that protégés identify with mentors because they see attributes they want to emulate (Kram, 1985; Ragins & Cotton, 1999; Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000). Given the greater experience and perceived status of the mentors, the protégés seek to capitalize on an opportunity to enhance themselves. Likewise, individuals are said to identify with role models because they embody aspirational attributes. Scholars maintain that identification with a role model allows one to internalize desired characteristics (regardless of whether a personal relationship exists with the role model; Gibson, 2003,

2004), although, as noted earlier, role modeling need not entail PI. Further, we speculate that opportunity-focused PI represents the majority of what leadership studies employing the PI construct have implicitly tapped into. For instance, studies showing positive associations between PI and transformational leadership (e.g., Kark et al., 2003; Wang & Howell, 2012; Zhu, Wang, Zhen, Liu, & Miao, 2013), androgynous leadership (where leaders blend stereotypically agentic-masculine and communal-feminine behaviors; Kark et al., 2012), and the leader matching one's ideal leader prototype (van Quaquebeke, Graf, & Eckloff, 2014) may have captured contexts where followers wish to emulate the desirable attributes modeled by their leaders.

How? The identity construction process. In our discussion of identity construction under the threat-focused PI process, we suggested that identity work is likely. Conversely, in opportunity-focused PI, where individuals are not particularly anxious and are motivated by an opportunity to enhance the self, they are more likely to experiment with various possible selves through "identity play" (Ibarra & Petriglieri, 2010; Kreiner & Sheep, 2009). Because one feels relatively secure, the associated positive affect encourages a more "playful" stance (Fredrickson, 2003). In identity play, individuals explore, experiment with, and rehearse various selves, providing additional options for expanding the self. Similarly, in contrast to the absorption mode of work role transition, Nicholson (1984) refers to "exploration," where one modifies the identity attributes as one adopts them (cf. Luyckx et al., 2008).

Because individuals enhance an extant identity by including attractive aspects of another individual, they encounter less of a dilemma—"be just like her" versus "be myself"—when forging an identity narrative under opportunity-focused PI than under threat-focused PI. Thus, the resulting narrative under opportunity-focused PI is apt to emphasize individuation ("I am my own person") more than emulation ("I am just like her"). Finally, given the lower anxiety associated with opportunity-focused PI, individuals may be more relaxed about receiving social validation, and given the motivation to build on a secure foundation, they may be more selective in internalizing the target's attributes. Indeed, in opportunity-focused PI, individuals are more likely to cobble a desired self together from the attributes of *multiple* identification targets (Ibarra, 1999). Ibarra described how neophyte

investment bankers and management consultants observed credible coworkers and managers, experimented with "provisional selves" (1999: 765), and evaluated the selves' viability based on how well the selves resonated with whom they wished to be, as well as with feedback from coworkers, managers, and clients.

Last, whereas threat-focused PI encourages identity foreclosure, opportunity-focused PI encourages "identity achievement." According to Marcia, identity achievement occurs when an individual commits to an identity after evaluating alternatives "on his own terms, even though his ultimate choice may be a variation of parental [target] wishes" (1966: 552). One augments one's identity by grafting on the admired attributes of another person. However, despite Marcia's use of the term *achievement*, we do not mean to imply that one is indelibly locked into an identity—only that one has capitalized on an opportunity to enhance the self. Identity is always a work in progress (e.g., Ibarra, 2015; Kreiner & Sheep, 2009).

> *Proposition 6: Perceived identity opportunity fosters the opportunity-focused PI process such that one (a) is mainly motivated by the need for self-enhancement, (b) discriminately seeks a supplemental target, (c) engages in identity play, and (d) articulates an identity narrative that emphasizes individuation more than emulation. Furthermore, (e) social validation of the emergent identity and identity narrative fosters perceived oneness with the target, and (f) these dynamics result in identity achievement.*

Closeness-Focused PI Process

Why? Primary need met. As noted, a positive relational climate and individuals' relational self-construal impact individuals' propensity to form close relationships in organizations. Baumeister and Leary posit that "human beings are fundamentally and pervasively motivated by a need to belong" (1995: 522; see also Baumeister, 2012; cf. Alderfer, 1969; McClelland, 1961). In organizational settings this need is likely addressed, at least in part, by forming close relationships with other individuals (Dumas, Phillips, & Rothbard, 2013; Roberts, 2007).

Who? Identification targets. In closeness-focused PI, these close relational partners become the target of identification. As the relationship becomes close, the individuals experience reciprocal identity merging (cf. Aron & Aron, 1996). That is, each begins to identify with the other, taking on various elements of the other's respective identity (e.g., beliefs, mannerisms). For example, in the mentoring literature scholars posit that informal mentoring relationships develop on the basis of "mutual identification" (Ragins & Cotton, 1999: 530; see also Ragins, 1997a, and Ragins et al., 2000). Social-psychological research indicates that in close relationships one tends to adopt the perspective of the other, to confuse what the other thought or did with what one thought or did, to treat the other's outcomes as one's own, and to differentiate less between the other and oneself in allocating resources (see Aron et al., 2013, for a review).

How? The identity construction process. It is critical to recall that in closeness-focused PI, unlike in threat- and opportunity-focused PI, the individual does not necessarily *intend* to change; rather, identity change is often a by-product of emerging closeness with another individual. Further, the notion of *reciprocal change* is important, since in most research on identification in organizational contexts the assumption is that an individual becomes more like the target, not that the target becomes more like the individual. In closeness-focused PI, because a close relationship tends to occur when the bond is reciprocated, individuals' identities are modified through reciprocal change, thus encouraging both relational partners to become more like the other. Consequently, the identity narrative associated with closeness-focused PI is likely to emphasize mutuality—a reciprocal and dynamic process of growing together ("We've become like two peas in a pod"). However, both the emergent identity and its associated narrative are apt to remain tentative until their enactment receives social validation from at least the target (cf. Ashforth et al., 2014; Cable & Kay, 2012; Smith et al., 2013). These processes result in "identity mutuality," which we define as a state of reciprocal internalization of each partner's attributes (cf. Snow & McAdam, 2000). Identity mutuality does *not* imply a loss of diversity; rather, the identity of each person is enriched by including attributes of the other. The shared close relationship induces the partners to become more like one

another, which, which, when socially validated, crystal-lizes into a mutual sense that the partners' identities overlap.

> *Proposition 7: A perceived close relationship fosters the closeness-focused PI process such that one (a) is mainly motivated by the need for belonging, (b) targets a person who is a close relational partner, (c) engages in reciprocal identity merging, and (d) articulates an identity narrative that emphasizes mutuality regarding oneself and the identification target. Furthermore, (e) social validation of the emergent identity and identity narrative fosters perceived oneness with the target, and (f) these dynamics result in identity mutuality.*

OUTCOMES OF PI

The empirical literature on PI in organizations suggests various outcomes, some positive and some negative. However, this literature does not differentiate between outcomes associated with the three PI processes described above. In this section we examine common and unique outcomes of the three processes.

Outcomes Common to Multiple PI Processes

Threat-, opportunity-, and closeness-focused PI involve defining oneself at least partly in terms of another person, suggesting that certain outcomes are likely common to all three processes. First, the other's attributes effectively become one's own attributes, rendering the identifier more receptive to influence from the target (Eckloff & van Quaquebeke, 2008; French & Raven, 1959; Gardner & Avolio, 1998; van Quaquebeke & Eckloff, 2013; Yukl, 2010). For example, Fuchs (2011, see Tables 2 and 3) found that identification with one's manager and identification with top management were each positively associated with behavior supportive of managerial change initiatives. Fuchs also observed that "followers are more likely to accept changes without questioning and exhibit greater levels of obedience" (2011: 562). This expanded "zone of indifference" (Barnard, 1968/1938) implies that an individual may give the person with whom he or she identifies the benefit of the doubt. This could foster positive or

negative consequences, depending on the content of the target's identity. For example, Gino and Galinsky (2012) found that individuals who feel "psychologically close" to a person who behaves selfishly or dishonestly are more likely to behave similarly themselves, while Becker et al. (1996) found that internalization of a supervisor's presumably pro-organizational values is positively associated with job performance (see also Kotter, 2003).[4] These studies underscore that the outcomes depend on what the identification target actually values, believes, and does.

A second outcome common to all three PI processes is relatively positive organization-based attitudes. Each path yields the internalization of identity attributes perceived as viable in that context. In this way PI provides individuals with attributes that are context specific, facilitating adjustment to the work context such that there is greater complementarity between the individual and the context. Prior empirical work (which, again, does not differentiate between the three PI processes and focuses almost exclusively on leaders as the target) indicates that identification with a target is positively associated with affective organizational commitment (Miao, Newman, & Lamb, 2012; Zhu et al., 2013), job involvement (Halpert, 1990), and job satisfaction (Hobman et al., 2011) and is negatively associated with intent to turn over (Miao et al., 2012; Zhu et al., 2013). Additionally, identification with one's leader has also been found to mediate the relationships between transformational leadership and job satisfaction and helping behavior (Chun et al., 2009), between authentic leadership and trust (Fox, 2011), and between leader-member exchange (LMX) and organizational commitment (van Vianen, Shen, & Chuang, 2011).

That said, the phenomenology of workplace adjustment is likely to vary somewhat across the three PI processes. In threat-focused PI, the emphasis on the need for uncertainty reduction implies that the primary affective experience is relief from anxiety (the cessation of a negative), suggesting organization-based attitudes that are not quite as positive as under the other PI processes. In opportunity-focused PI, the goal is self-enhancement through the adoption of the target's

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[4] Becker et al. (1996) distinguished between "supervisor-related internalization" and "supervisor-related identification" but reported a relatively high correlation of $r = .65$.

attributes, suggesting a more direct impact on attitudes associated with the context. Finally, in closeness-focused PI, the positive attitudes stem from fulfilling the need for belonging. Thus, the impact of closeness-focused PI on organization-based attitudes is likely a by-product or spillover from the positive attitudes toward the identification target with whom one feels close.

A third outcome that may be common to opportunity- and closeness-focused PI—but not threat-focused PI—is identity holism (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Rogers, 2013). In the literature on multiple identities, scholars have tended to view identities as "silos"—that is, as distinct and separate. However, there are hints in the literature regarding how identities may be combined, including Pratt and Foreman's (2000) notion of identity synergy; Roccas and Brewer's (2002) concept of social identity complexity; Swann, Jetten, Gómez, Whitehouse, and Bastian's (2012) discussion of identity fusion; and Ramarajan's (2014) treatment of intrapersonal identity networks. The inference from such hints is that the more a given identity or identity attribute supplements a focal identity, the more likely the two will combine into a richer whole. Much as expertise develops by creating dense connections among knowledge points, a holistic identity may emerge from combining identity attributes. The benefit of such identity holism is the integrative capabilities—the synergy and wisdom—that arise when the whole is greater than the sum of the parts (Pratt & Foreman, 2000; Wiesenfeld & Hewlin, 2003). In the case of opportunity- and closeness-focused PI, the individual builds on an extant identity foundation to address the needs for self-enhancement (opportunity focused) or belonging (closeness focused), thus providing potential "building blocks" for a more holistic identity. Conversely, because threat-focused PI involves *substituting* a seemingly more viable self for one's extant self, identity holism is less likely to result.

> *Proposition 8: Threat-focused, opportunity-focused, and closeness-focused PI are each positively associated with (a) receptivity to influence from the target and (b) positive organization-based attitudes.*

> *Proposition 9: Opportunity-focused and closeness-focused PI are each positively associated with identity holism.*

Outcomes Relatively Unique to Particular PI Processes

Threat-focused PI. In threat-focused PI, identity foreclosure carries three significant drawbacks. First, in unreflectively foreclosing on someone else's identity, an individual may internalize attributes that are not well-suited to him or her—even as they fit the identification target quite well. Illustratively, we noted Ibarra's (1999) finding that neophyte investment bankers and management consultants needed to try on various "provisional selves" to ultimately cobble together an identity that personally suited them. Premature foreclosure denies the individual the opportunity to engage in identity play—to experiment and thereby learn and modify the identity.

Second, because threat-focused PI tends to be fairly hasty and nondiscriminating in order to relieve anxiety, the identifier may inherit the target's weaknesses along with his or her strengths. For instance, a new Ph.D. student who is struggling to understand who he is in the academic context and swiftly identifies with an established faculty member may inherit not only the faculty member's successful style of doing research but also her tendency to procrastinate and miss deadlines. Similarly, threat-focused PI prompted by an intimidating target may lead to the perpetuation of intimidating practices. For example, consistent with the literature on cascading leadership (e.g., Bass, Waldman, Avolio, & Bebb, 1987), Bandura, Ross, and Ross (1961) found in laboratory experiments that aggressiveness is transmitted from one person to another.

Third, even if a target embodies a laudable identity, the compensatory nature of threat-focused PI means that one may "overwrite" the target's identity on one's own and become dependent on the target (Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Kark et al., 2003). In becoming a facsimile of the target, one tends to think, feel, and act much as the target does, thereby substantially losing an independent sense of self. As the source of the emulated identity, the target may be reflexively relied on by the identifier for guidance. For example, Kark et al. found that PI mediated the impact of transformational leadership on "dependence" (sample item: "Sometimes I find it difficult to do my job without the direction of my branch manager"; 2003: 50). And even if the identification is less than complete, the loss of an

independent counterweight to the target means that the receptivity to influence discussed earlier may morph into "unquestioning obedience" (Kelman & Hamilton, 1989: 307), "blind fanaticism" (Shamir et al., 1993: 582), or "blind faith" (Howell & Shamir, 2005: 105). We mentioned earlier how such unreflective identification may foster a cult of personality wherein the target is revered and followed blindly by like-minded "disciples."

Opportunity-focused PI. Recall that in opportunity-focused PI one's extant identity tends to be reasonably clear and efficacious and that one seeks to address the need for self-enhancement by enriching one's identity to encompass something seen as laudable in another person. The resulting identity achievement involves a broader range of beliefs, behavioral scripts, and so on—in short, more diverse identity resources—with which to engage one's work world (Aron et al., 2013). The direct acquisition of diverse identity resources (compared to the indirect acquisition in the case of closeness-focused PI) suggests that opportunity-focused PI is likely to have a stronger impact on job performance than the other PI processes.

Research indicates a positive association between identification with one's leader and one's self-efficacy (Wu, Tsui, & Kinicki, 2010) and performance (Ahearne, Haumann, Kraus, & Wieseke, 2013; Hobman et al., 2011; Siders, George, & Dharwadkar, 2001; Wang & Howell, 2012; however, see Chen, Tsui, & Farh, 2002), and that PI mediates the relationship between transformational leadership and performance (Chun et al., 2009; Nübold et al., 2015). Although the specific form of PI was not assessed in these studies, we suggest that most such studies implicitly tapped into opportunity-focused PI.

Closeness-focused PI. We discussed how the need for belonging in closeness-focused PI gives rise to reciprocal identity merging and, thus, identity mutuality. Because the individual feels intimately and mutually connected with his or her partner, closeness-focused PI is likely to be associated with behaviors that suggest concern for the well-being of the target and the health of the interpersonal bond. Conversely, in threat-focused PI, with its emphasis on uncertainty reduction, and opportunity-focused PI, with its emphasis on self-enhancement, these needs—unlike the need for belonging—do not depend on a target's reciprocating the bond per se, nor is the target expected to engage in reciprocal identity merging.

Proposition 10: Threat-focused PI is more likely than closeness- or opportunity-focused PI to be positively associated with (a) the internalization of attributes that may not fit the identifier, (b) the internalization of attributes that may be weaknesses rather than strengths, and (c) dependence on the target.

Proposition 11: Opportunity-focused PI is more likely than closeness- or threat-focused PI to be positively associated with the acquisition of diverse identity attributes and enhanced job performance.

Proposition 12: Closeness-focused PI is more likely than threat- or opportunity-focused PI to be positively associated with behaviors that suggest concern for the well-being of the target and the health of the interpersonal bond.

DISCUSSION

Although individuals often say they identify with another person, what does this actually mean? Surprisingly, we are aware of no paper in organizational studies that examines the construct of PI in detail. Thus, our first goal was to explore the nuances of PI as a construct. We defined PI as perceived oneness with another individual, a visceral unity where one sees oneself in terms of the other. While the content of PI, like social identification (i.e., identifying with a collective), may include values, goals, beliefs, characteristic behaviors, knowledge, skills, and abilities, PI may also include attributes that are not as clear in collectives, such as dreams, ideals, aesthetic tastes, physical appearance, mannerisms, sense of humor, likes and dislikes, and career goals. That said, identification with a person and identification with collectives such as the workgroup and organization—as well as with relationships—tend to be complementary and even mutually reinforcing.

Research indicates that identification with a person (e.g., a mentor, coworker, role model) may have both helpful and harmful effects on the identifier, but scholars have not unpacked this paradox. Thus, our second goal was to explore the dynamics through which PI may have its

disparate consequences. We developed the model depicted in Figure 2, which holds that three forms of PI evolve within the organizational context. In threat-focused PI, one seeks to quell the anxiety caused by a perceived identity threat by quickly latching onto the identity attributes displayed by another—often socially dominant—person. In opportunity-focused PI, one capitalizes on a perceived identity opportunity, enhancing the self by internalizing the admirable qualities of another. In closeness-focused PI, one's identity merges with that of a relational partner as one seeks to fulfill the need for belonging.

While all three processes foster increased receptivity to the target and positive organization-based attitudes, threat-focused PI is also associated with dependence on the target and the internalization of attributes that may not fit the individual and may be weaknesses rather than strengths; opportunity-focused PI is also associated with identity holism (i.e., synergy among the attributes such that the whole is greater than the sum of the parts) and—more so than the other processes—the acquisition of diverse identity attributes and enhanced performance; and closeness-focused PI is also associated with identity holism as well as behaviors that suggest concern for the well-being of the target and the health of the interpersonal bond.

Blending Threat-, Opportunity-, and Closeness-Focused PI

Although we have thus far painted a picture of "pure" types of PI occurring in isolation, in reality, individuals in organizations likely have multiple needs and may perceive identity threats, identity opportunities, and close relationships either simultaneously or sequentially (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; Vignoles, Regalia, Manzi, Golledge, & Scabini, 2006). As a result, the antecedents of the three PI paths may blend, causing the PI process to play out in a melded form.

As one example of a *simultaneous* association, a potential trigger event perceived as an identity threat and/or opportunity may impact an individual who is in a close relationship, and the close relationship partner may represent an attractive target for threat- and/or opportunity-focused PI. As a second example, events vary in the degree to which they are perceived as either threats or opportunities, and may have elements of both (cf. Petriglieri, 2011), potentially fostering a blend of

threat- and opportunity-focused PI. Adler and Adler defined loyalty much as we define identification—"feelings of attachment, of belonging, of strongly wanting to be part of something" (1988: 401)—and described how college basketball players were both cowed (threat) and inspired (opportunity) by their coach, inducing "feelings of awe and respect for the coach and, hence, their loyalty" (1988: 405).

As an example of a *sequential* association, threat-focused PI may actually facilitate opportunity-focused PI. Organizational entry is often highly stressful for newcomers (e.g., Ellis et al., 2015), suggesting that threat-focused PI is fairly common. However, this identification may provide a foundation—even if in a compensatory fashion—for subsequently enhancing oneself via opportunity-focused PI. That is, the identity work associated with threat-focused PI may result in a situated sense of self ("I am much like my co-worker") that, in mitigating anxiety, opens the door for an opportunity-focused enhancement of self.

Additionally, as noted, individuals may experience multiple needs (i.e., uncertainty reduction, self-enhancement, belonging) simultaneously or sequentially and, at the same time, may also have multiple relationships at work, suggesting that different identification targets may provide a window for addressing different needs and internalizing different attributes (Kram, 1985). For example, an individual may adopt a close relationship partner's passion for a particular type of music (closeness-focused PI) at the same time as internalizing a mentor's career values (opportunity-focused PI).

Associations among threat-, opportunity-, and closeness-focused PI may also cause the "pure" processes in Figure 2 to play out in a blended fashion. For example, a perception of opportunity may temper a perception of threat, and vice versa, such that the activated needs for uncertainty reduction and self-enhancement play out in a more or less synergistic form. Specifically, rather than swiftly locking onto a compensatory target as in pure threat-focused PI, the individual may look in a more discriminating fashion for a target who also supplements his or her extant identity—or for different targets for different needs—melding identity work with elements of playfulness. The result of these blended identification processes is likely to be mutually mitigating expressions of both identity foreclosure and identity

achievement. For instance, if both PI processes are focused on the same target, rather than the unthinking obedience associated with pure threat-focused PI, the individual may be more circumspect in enacting his or her identification, and the enhanced identity that characterizes pure opportunity-focused PI is likely to be somewhat constrained by the compensatory nature of threat-focused PI.

Contributions

Our model contributes to the burgeoning literature on identification in organizational contexts by articulating a little-understood form that complements the most widely studied form—social identification—providing deeper insight into how individuals' identities are formed within collectives. The notion of PI, along with relational identification (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007), enriches our understanding of what transpires within collectives to generate such intense attachment. Indeed, because researchers have focused largely on identification with a collective, especially the organization, rather than identification with a more proximal person or relationship, it is likely that some of the variance attributed to social identification is actually attributable to personal and relational identification. This begs the intriguing question of which form of identification—social, personal, or relational—tends to be the most impactful and, important for future theory building, under what conditions. Further, the literature depicts identification in organizations as a primarily positive process, both in terms of affect and functions, whereas we describe threat-focused PI as associated with negative affect (i.e., anxiety) and some dysfunctional outcomes. This raises the issue of whether the processes of social and relational identification may also involve less positive analogs (an issue we return to later).

Our model also contributes to the literatures on mentoring, role modeling, leadership, and positive relationships in organizations by helping clarify the processes through which mentors and protégés mutually influence one another, individuals come to be like a role model, leaders shape subordinates' sense of self, and positive relationships foster identification via closeness. Moreover, most empirical studies of PI in organizations have focused on the manager or leader as the target and found both positive and negative effects on individuals—but have not reconciled how this is possible. Our distinction between three forms of PI articulates under what conditions the identification process is likely to help rather than hurt individuals—and, by extension, their organization.

Future Research

The degree of PI. Our theorizing was predicated on the assumption, which future research should examine, that PI is neither extremely low nor extremely high. Just as individuals are generally expected to identify with their collective (Cheney, 1983), a certain degree of identification with co-workers and one's manager or leader is probably not only normal but normative. Extremely low PI may be problematic because it suggests a lack of attachment. To be sure, an individual may nonetheless identify with the collective, but given the complementarity between identification with a collective and identification with the people who inhabit it (e.g., Hobman et al., 2011; Kraus, Ahearne, Lam, & Wieseke, 2012), a lack of identification with one is likely to signal a lack of identification with the other.

Conversely, extremely high PI, even if opportunity or closeness focused, may be problematic because it suggests a more or less complete merging of self and other. The literature detailing the positive effects of inclusion of other in self (Aron et al., 2002) presumes that one retains an independent sense of self as a foundation on which to judiciously build the extension. However, a self-other merger suggests less of an enrichment of self than a negation of self. Similarly, the literature on "overidentification" in organizations clearly indicates that complete overlap with a target tends to be dysfunctional (e.g., Avanzi, van Dick, Fraccaroli, & Sarchielli, 2012; Dukerich, Kramer, & McLean Parks, 1998). Further, we mentioned that threat-focused PI may be associated with dependence on the target. At high levels both threat- and closeness-focused PI may lead to codependence as the target looks to the identifier for affirmation, creating an insular, mutually reinforcing circle (Ashforth & Sluss, 2006; Lindley, Giordano, & Hammer, 1999). For instance, Ahearne et al. found that while mutual PI between a salesperson and his or her manager was positively associated with sales performance and customer satisfaction, each association actually decreased "beyond a critical point" (2013: 632) of

mutual identification. That said, the overarching issue is probably not so much the magnitude of identification as its *exclusivity* (Ashforth & Lange, in press). Even if high, PI can avoid self-negation if it is tempered with other identifications. Thus, future research should examine the interplay between identifications of varying magnitudes.

Alternatives to identification. Our model articulates antecedents of PI, begging the question of whether the antecedents might foster alternatives to PI. As with most models in organizational behavior, we view the proposed causal linkages as probabilistic rather than deterministic, opening the door to alternative dynamics.

Regarding when PI is the most likely alternative, we view the link between a perceived close relationship and closeness-focused PI as the strongest, given the implication in the body of work by the Arons and their colleagues that closeness is virtually defined by a sense of mutual identification. We view the link between perceived identity opportunity and opportunity-focused PI as the next strongest because there is little reason *not* to capitalize on a perceived opportunity for self-enhancement by identifying with the target. We view the link between perceived identity threat and threat-focused PI as somewhat less strong because—in contrast to the parent-child psychodynamics that inspired Freud's (1949/1922) notion of identification—an individual in the workplace may capitalize on alternatives that are more efficient or effective. For instance, a veteran employee may cope with a major identity threat, such as a negative performance appraisal, by challenging the threat itself (e.g., filing an appeal), rationalizing away the threat (e.g., concluding that the manager is biased), or exiting the situation (e.g., requesting a transfer; cf. Aquino & Douglas, 2003). Future research, then, should explore the conditions under which an individual engages in a particular form of PI—especially threat-focused PI—over alternative actions.

Generalizing the model to other levels of self. Our model of PI processes shares certain elements—particularly identity-related needs, identity work/play, social validation, and identity narratives—with models of identification with other levels of self (e.g., occupation, organization; Ashforth et al., 2014; Brickson, 2013; Cable & Kay, 2012; Ibarra, 1999; Pratt et al., 2006). This overlap begs the provocative question of the extent to which our model can be generalized to identification with other levels (Aron & McLaughlin-Volpe,

2001). We see no reason why the constructs of threat-, opportunity-, and closeness-focused identification could not be generalized to other levels of self, provided certain individual-level and dyadic constructs (e.g., identity foreclosure, close relationship, reciprocal identity merging) can be adequately reformulated (e.g., recasting a close relationship as person-team fit vis-à-vis identifying with a team). Importantly, such a generalization would introduce the notion of a *negative* process (i.e., threat-focused PI) to literature in which it is often assumed that identification is primarily positive.

If generalization is indeed possible, how might the organizational context (see Figure 2) activate identification with other levels of self instead of—or in addition to—identification with a person? Future research might begin with three possibilities. First, the contextual factors themselves are hugely important in priming various levels of self. For example, just as we proposed that certain events, such as a negative performance appraisal, and certain situational cues, such as a positive relational climate, facilitate PI, so other events, such as a hostile takeover of one's organization, and other situational cues, such as a leader regularly extolling the organization's mission, may facilitate identification with the organization (e.g., Ashforth & Mael, 1996; Cheney, 1983). Second, we proposed that relational self-construal increases the likelihood that a situation-based trigger will foster interpersonal closeness and, thus, closeness-focused PI. Similarly, one's propensity for *collective* self-construal—a general tendency to define oneself in terms of a group such as a team, occupation, or organization—should increase the likelihood that contextual factors will foster identification with a given collective (van Knippenberg, van Knippenberg, De Cremer, & Hogg, 2004). Third, whether one identifies with a person, relationship, team, and so on likely depends in part on what attributes of potential targets one wishes to acquire. For example, one might identify with a specific person because of her career goals and sardonic humor, one might identify with a specific relationship with a client because it fulfills one's desire to provide meaningful service, and one might identify with a specific team because one admires its mission and task orientation.

Interactions across levels of self. Do identifications interact across levels of self? Extant research suggests that they do. As noted, individuals are

capable of identifying with multiple targets simultaneously, identifying with one level of self facilitates identification with other levels (e.g., PI facilitates social and relational identification, and vice versa), and part of what is included when individuals identify with a person is a sense of kinship toward that person's social and relational identities (Aron et al., 2013).

There are additional provocative issues that might be explored. Two examples will suffice. First, to what extent can one level of self *substitute* for another? That is, can the needs for uncertainty reduction, self-enhancement, and belonging that are met through specific forms of PI be fully met instead by relational and/or social identifications such that the individual no longer engages in PI? We suspect that the content of target identities differs sufficiently across levels of self such that personal, relational, and social identification each contribute somewhat uniquely toward addressing the needs for uncertainty reduction and self-enhancement, if not the need for belonging.

Second, our model articulates individual-level outcomes of PI. Might PI also affect relational and collective outcomes? We believe so. Regarding relational outcomes, because of the recursive nature of relationship quality and closeness-focused PI, it seems likely that the quality of the work relationship will be further enhanced as individuals become more like each other. Regarding collective outcomes, our discussion of the cult of personality also suggests one affirmative answer. Thus, research might explore whether and how processes such as "identity contagion" (analogous to emotional contagion; Barsade, 2002) and "identity aggregation" (cf. Kozlowski & Klein, 2000) occur, whereby the identity that results from a particular instance of PI diffuses to other members and the collective as a whole.

Practical Implications

Looking at our model in Figure 2, we have unpacked three distinct processes by which one individual's attributes can directly impact another's sense of self. As a result, a key practical implication of our model concerns individuals' choice of targets of identification. These choices have profound effects for both individuals and organizations. As mentioned, much of what determines whether PI is good, bad, or both is the content of a given target's identity. Consequently, to the extent that PI is a conscious process, choosing targets (e.g., role models, mentors, leaders) should be done judiciously since it has the potential to impact the identifier's self-definition and, from an organizational perspective, to guide work behaviors. In particular, individuals facing an identity threat should avoid reflexively glomming onto an identification target; rather, they should evaluate potential targets for fit.

Managers can help facilitate functional choices. Whether individuals construe an event as an identity threat or opportunity, they look to others for identity cues to help them manage the event. In this regard, managers are incredibly important because they are often thought by their subordinates to exemplify the organization and to be highly credible referents owing to their greater experience, power, and status (Ashforth & Rogers, 2012; Eisenberger et al., 2010). By displaying through their own behavior and articulating how they make sense of and process the event, managers can intentionally provide attributes for subordinates to emulate—attributes that can become normative for the group and thereby self-perpetuating. The key is to allow sufficient latitude for individuals to expand their repertoire of salient values, knowledge, behavioral scripts, and so on such that they achieve an identity that resonates with their core selves (e.g., Ibarra, 1999; Pratt et al., 2006).

In their seminal work, Katz and Kahn (1978) argued that successful leaders should encourage PI among peers and subordinates. Additional managerial implications thus largely pertain to fostering an organizational context that facilitates PI in a functional manner. Specifically, a major practical implication of our model is to establish a climate for psychological safety such that individuals are more likely to construe equivocal events like newcomer entry and mixed performance reviews as opportunities to enhance the self rather than as a threat to the self, and therefore engage in identity play. Such a climate is established through various means, including being accessible as a leader, clarifying roles and expectations, modeling fallibility and openness, encouraging subordinates to experiment with alternative ways of thinking and doing, and framing mistakes as learning opportunities (e.g., Bunderson & Boumgarden, 2010; Edmondson, 2004). Relatedly, creating a positive

relational climate through HR and leadership practices will help foster closer connections among individuals. And because closeness-focused PI involves identity mutuality—a reciprocal process of merging identities—these practices are particularly desirable for a manager's most effective employees. Indeed, facilitating closeness-focused PI with less effective employees may lead to a diffusion of their problematic attributes. PI should be encouraged only when a manager has a clear sense of what the prospective targets value, believe, and typically do; facilitating PI with "bad" targets is likely to be counterproductive to workplace adjustment.

CONCLUSION

Empirical work indicates that PI has both helpful and harmful effects on the individual, yet there has been very little conceptual work on the nature and dynamics of PI. We have attempted to resolve this contradiction by distinguishing between three forms of PI and developing a process model that articulates how each arises and unfolds and with what effects. Our definition of the construct and model of its dynamics thus help unpack the intriguing black box of personal identification.

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