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CONFLICT AND COMPLEMENTARITY BETWEEN RELIGIOUS AND OCCUPATIONAL IDENTITIES IN THE WORKPLACE

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INTRODUCTION

Religion can have an important influence on people's lives. In the USA, nearly 80% of people are religiously affiliated (71.3% Christian, 5.9% non-Christian, and 22.8% unaffiliated – Pew Research Center, 2015), suggesting that a large segment of the workforce may identify with a religion. Despite the recognition of religious identity as a key diversity issue (Gebert, Boerner, Kearney, King, Zhang, & Song, 2014), relatively little research has explicitly investigated the intersection of religion and the workplace. Yet there are indications that religious beliefs and commitments can affect employees' (attitudes towards the) performance of occupational duties. For example, in 2014, the case of two Catholic midwives who wished to avoid supervising nurses involved in abortion procedures reached the United Kingdom's Supreme Court, which ruled against them (BBC News, 2014). This can be understood as a matter of identity, although the relationship between employees' occupational and religious identities is not well understood.

This paper seeks to advance organizational research by focusing on religious identity in the workplace through (i) a systematic review of relevant research and theory on the relationship between occupational and religious identities and (ii) the subsequent development of a conceptual framework regarding their interplay. It is guided by the overarching question 'How do religious and occupational identities relate to each other in the workplace?' In addressing this question, the paper explicates the implications of failing to consider religious identity as a component of workplace diversity, given its potential centrality to an individual's sense of self (van Knippenberg & Schippers, 2007; Shlema, Meyer, Greer, & Jehn, 2016). The grounding of the paper in a systematic review (Denyer & Tranfield, 2009) – a comprehensive, structured and replicable search, selection, appraisal and synthesis of empirical and theoretical publications relevant to religious and occupational identities – allows us to consolidate the fragmented research on the topic across the fields of management, psychology, and sociology.

The full paper is divided into four sections. First, we define key terms and explicate the importance of the connection between religious and occupational identities to the workplace diversity debate, and we develop the specific questions that guide our systematic review. Second, we describe the methodology of our review. Third, we present its findings. Finally, from that review and relevant theory, we develop a conceptual framework that specifies key themes and propositions regarding how the activation of religious and occupational identities in the workplace triggers identity negotiation, its behavioral implications and resultant individual, interpersonal, and organizational outcomes.

SYSTEMATIC REVIEW

Our systematic review of relevant empirical research and theory focused on two specific questions:

- 1) How and why do religious and occupational identities interact?
 - a. In what situations are these identities compatible?
 - b. In what situations do they create tension and conflict for the employee and their occupational practice?
- 2) What are the implications of conflict and complementarity between religious and occupational identities for the well-being of employees and organizations?

Benefits of Using Systematic Review Methodology

Adhering to a structured, transparent protocol, systematic review represents a comprehensive approach to reviewing literature (Tranfield, Denyer, & Smart, 2003). It aids in consolidation of literature across different fields (Rojon, McDowall, & Saunders, 2011). This was important in our case, as advice from subject matter experts indicated the need to search across such fields as management, psychology, and sociology. Systematic review methodology also appealed to us as a way of drawing out ‘what is known’, ‘what is not yet known’ and ‘where future research should go’ from a body of evidence, helping formulate recommendations for research, practice and policy-making (Tranfield et al., 2003).

Methodology of Our Systematic Review

Our systematic review of relevant empirical research and theory consolidates existing literature and charts both its intellectual territory and gaps. We first conducted interviews with subject matter experts, eleven academics (professors in management, research methods, and organizational psychology) and practitioners (religious officials and a university librarian) who served as an advisory panel throughout the review process. These interviews informed our questions, keywords, and search strategy.

Next, we identified sources for our literature search. We chose to focus on peer reviewed articles and non-peer reviewed publications (i.e., reports, summaries, opinion pieces and essays) and books/book chapters identified via eleven electronic academic databases (e.g., Business Source Complete, Web of Science, Sociological Abstracts, Medline, Cochrane Library). We also considered conference proceedings, papers in press, dissertations, as well as publications recommended by our advisory panel. After initial pilot searches, we developed our search strategy specifying search strings regarding identity, religion, occupation, complementarity and conflict. We then developed our criteria for selection. To be inclusive, we did not specify a start date, publication type or format for the materials searched. Publications included would need to be in English with an abstract or summary available on or before March 2017. Our search resulted in 68,337 potentially relevant

publications. These were screened in light of our inclusion criteria, ultimately leading to the 46 publications comprising our review. These were coded using a standardized data extraction form, specifying each publication's purpose, theoretical framework, method, data analysis, findings and contribution. Following Popay and colleagues (2006), we grouped each by the question(s) addressed and synthesized its findings.

Summary of Findings

Our systematic review addresses how and why religious and occupational identities interact in the workplace and what the implications are for the well-being of employees and organizations.

In response to our first review question, our systematic review points to the role played by the values and practices that underpin and inform religious traditions and religious identities on the one hand and those that inform professions, occupations, occupational identities, and work practices on the other hand. Although there is no definitive picture of the relationship between these, there are indications that occupational practice may be enhanced when these values coincide, which raises possibilities for integration (e.g., in fostering empathy in counselling practice), but may be undermined in contexts where they are not aligned (e.g., when client actions contradict counsellor values).

In answer to review question two, we find consistent evidence linking the expression of religious identity to employees' personal and occupational well-being. At the same time, religious identity has both positive and negative consequences for behaviors at work and for stakeholders including patients and clients. These differential consequences appear to be moderated by workplace norms regarding religiously-motivated behaviors and the preferences of the organization's clientele.

Thus, our key findings suggest that religious identity and the values and practices associated with it (e.g., compassion, empathy, helping) tend to have benefits at work in specific occupations (e.g., mental and physical health professions: Pawlikowski et al., 2012; Pelechova et al., 2012; Seale, 2010) by enhancing emotional labor and relational elements in dealing with patients/clients. Several studies find that constraining the expression of identity, including religious identity, can have negative consequences for employees' well-being by increasing stress (see Haines & Saba, 2012; Koerner, 2014; Sav et al., 2014). Nonetheless, context matters for the expression of identity and its consequences. For example, although integrating religious and occupational identities was reported as beneficial in faith-based organizations (Flanagan, 2009), tensions can arise among workers of different (or no) religious affiliations (Cintas et al., 2013). Thus, some work environments may better support religious identity expression than others. Further, the review identifies theoretical implications that we address next.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

In our work, we elaborate a conceptual framework grounded in our review findings and supplemented by relevant theoretical literature on identity, in order to better explicate the conditions under which religious and occupational identities are competitive or compatible with each other and the nature of their effects in the workplace. These conditions are presented as propositions supported by existing research and theory, which merit testing in future research.

Initial conditions. Our point of departure is the salience or activation of religious identity in relation to occupational identity (Ashmore, Deaux, & McLaughlin-Volpe, 2004; Lobel, 1991). Given the co-activation of religious and occupational identities in the workplace, the next question is how this co-activation influences the negotiation of these identities. In line with Ramarajan and Reid (2013), we expect that individual preferences and work-related pressures affect how individuals enact religious identity at work. However, we also argue that a third factor, the belief system associated with a religious identity, contributes to this enactment.

We propose that demands from all three of these initial dimensions can influence the process of individual identity negotiation. Taking these factors together, we posit:

Proposition 1: How employees enact their religious identity in the workplace is influenced by (a) the strength of their religious identity and the opportunities to enact their identity in their organizational role, (b) the degree of support from the larger organizational environment, and (c) the expectations that come from their specific religious belief system.

Identity state. In addition to the conditions prompting identity negotiation, our systematic review shows that two (or more) identities can be enacted or related to each other in different ways. We characterize these states as: (a) identity tension/conflict, (b) identity compatibility/complementarity, and (c) identity coexistence. That is, a religious (or other non-work identity) can be in tension or conflict with an occupational identity when values, norms, and beliefs are non-overlapping or in opposition, that is, when the content of one identity (in terms of values, norms, etc.) acts as a constraint on or challenges another identity (Rothbard & Ramarajan, 2009). We also found evidence for identity tension in the literature that can arise from intra-individual or inter-individual processes (e.g., Chan-Serafin et al., 2013; Graber & Johnson, 2001; James, 2007; Sav et al., 2014). Based on the foregoing, we formulate the following two propositions:

Proposition 2a: Employees with strong religious and occupational identities will experience conflict when the expression of both identities cannot be satisfied at the same time.

Proposition 2b: Employees with strong religious identities will experience conflict with their occupational identity when workplace requirements or policies constrain the expression of religious identity.

Co-activation of identities can also be experienced as compatible or complementary. Identity complementarity occurs when there is an overlap or synergy between religious and occupational identities. As with conflict, identity compatibility/complementarity is influenced by the three initial conditions specified in Proposition 1. Thus, we propose the following:

Proposition 3a: Employees experience their religious identity as being compatible with their occupational identity when the respective beliefs, values, norms, and/or behavioral requirements overlap or are synergistic.

Proposition 3b: Employees experience their religious identity as compatible with their occupational identity when workplace requirements/policies promote the expression of religious identity.

Positive and negative consequences of identity negotiation. Both identity conflict and compatibility/complementarity have implications for individual and organizational outcomes. This review points to benefits arising from integrating religious and occupational identities in terms of increased well-being, reduced stress, and positive job attitudes and behaviors (e.g., Kutcher et al., 2010). Likewise, the literature highlights that identity conflict leads to negative outcomes such as increased stress levels, decreased well-being, and reduced organizational performance outcomes such as productivity (e.g., Lait & Wallace, 2002; Olivares-Faúndez, Gil-Monte, Mena, Jélvez-Wilke, & Figueiredo-Ferraz, 2014). We therefore posit:

Proposition 4: Experienced compatibility of religious and occupational identities increases employee well-being and constructive workplace attitudes and behavior.

Proposition 5: Experienced conflict between religious and occupational identities decreases employee well-being and constructive workplace attitudes and behavior.

Proposition 6: Experienced compartmentalization (separation) between religious and occupational identities (a) decreases identity conflict and (b) reduces identity conflict-related stress.

CONCLUSION

Facilitating greater integration between religious and occupational identities is a complicated process. Our conceptual framework and its propositions point to the multi-layered nature of this undertaking and the emotional labor involved. Indeed, seeking to enable the alignment of religious and occupational identities may challenge a common Western representation of religion as belonging in the private sphere, to be placed in the public sphere under only limited conditions (Tracey, 2012). Concern and resistance are likely from co-workers, clientele and the organization broadly. Our systematic review points to the potential benefits of promoting integration of religious and occupational identities in relation to its effects on work attitudes and performance. Still, organizational costs may accrue if integration-promoting interventions are interpreted as preferential treatment or if they fail to promote a shared sense of psychological safety. Although we offer recommendations for practice, all interventions carry an element of risk. As with other diversity issues, we must remain mindful in balancing the needs, rights, and obligations of individuals, organizations, and society. Yet, to do nothing misses the opportunity for enhancing workplace diversity, identity integration, and the well-being of individuals and their organizations.

REFERENCES AVAILABLE FROM AUTHORS