SPECIAL ISSUE CALL FOR PAPERS

I AM MY WORK: NEW LINES OF INQUIRY IN THE STUDY OF IDENTITY REGULATION IN AND AROUND ORGANIZATIONS

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Introduction

The influence of work organizations on our lives can extend as far as our sense of self. The notion that organizations exert control over workers' identities through social processes has been described as identity regulation (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002). The objective of this special issue is to foster new lines of inquiry that consider how organizations use and abuse identity regulation. We encourage studies from across the social sciences that adopt novel perspectives to address our insufficient understanding of the emergence and effects of identity regulation in and around organizations.

A variety of studies have examined organizations' attempts to exert control by shaping workers' reflexively organized self-narratives. Researchers have studied identity regulation across diverse populations, including professionals (Paring et al., 2017), creative workers (Gotsi et al., 2010), disabled employees (Jammaers and Zanoni, 2021), refugees (Ortlieb et al., 2021) and the unemployed (Holmqvist et al., 2013). This broad empirical base has illuminated different aspects of identity regulation. For instance, some scholarship has explored the processes through which identity regulation unfolds (Bardon et al., 2017), spanning micro, meso, and macro levels of analysis (Boussebaa and Brown, 2017). Other studies have considered identity regulation within families

(Essers et al., 2013) and outside the manager–employee relationship (Ainsworth and Hardy, 2009). Relatedly, considerable scholarly attention has been paid to workers' sophisticated responses and resistance to identity regulation (Knights and Clarke, 2014; Meriläinen et al., 2004; Thomas and Davies, 2005; Wasserman and Frenkel, 2011). While the dynamics and operation of identity regulation have received attention, particularly in terms of the identity work associated with it, much less examined are the cognitive and emotional costs of this regulation for workers (Costas and Kärreman, 2016; Gill, 2015). Our understanding of the benefits of identity regulation, which can include fostering desired (Anteby, 2008) and aspirational (Thornborrow and Brown, 2009) identities, are also limited. More fundamentally, the emergence and development of systems of identity regulation and their implications for society has been a relatively neglected topic.

Objective of this special issue

This special issue seeks new perspectives to enrich identity regulation research. The special issue will challenge existing scholarship by encouraging scholars to question the assumptions of how identity regulation operates as well as how we study this concept. We are particularly interested in research that critiques and reflects on the limits of identity regulation as a concept. Has, for example, identity regulation been stretched to become a 'hembig' (Alvesson and Blom, 2022) that covers everything and nothing? We are also interested in how identity regulation may operate in increasingly digital and virtual settings and particularly in non-western workplaces. We encourage a range of qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods and especially thick descriptions that allow us to come closer to people being studied (as exemplified by Sennett, 1998). The special issue will enrich existing scholarship by encouraging theoretical and empirical studies that span scholarly disciplines to address important questions at both the macro and micro levels. *Human Relations* is uniquely placed to draw together a variety of scholars that employ different perspectives to advance our understanding of identity regulation in and around work organizations.

We believe that there are at least three opportunities to enrich identity regulation research: (a) to draw on untapped and diverse theoretical and philosophical traditions; (b) to explore the impact of identity regulation on organizations and their members; and (c) to understand the changing nature of work in different settings. We believe these different opportunities will appeal to a broad range of social science researchers across multiple disciplines. New perspectives are at the heart of this special issue, and we explicitly encourage the participation of researchers from around the world.

Different assumptions, philosophies, and theories

The first opportunity that motivates this special issue is to connect and combine new perspectives with the extant literature on identity regulation. The theoretical foundations of identity regulation have been drawn primarily on discursive approaches and the philosophy of Foucault (1975), which emphasizes that regulation is accomplished through the disciplinary power of discourse (Knights and Morgan, 1991; Knights and Willmott, 1989;

Townley, 1993). Discipline is not just externally imposed but becomes a self-disciplinary process (Deetz, 1995) as people draw on discourses to perform their identity work and construct narrative accounts of who they are. While some studies have more explicitly integrated ideas of identity regulation with alternative theoretical frames, such as institutional theory (Lok, 2010), discursive and critical perspectives continue to dominate theorizations of identity regulation. The limits of discourses remain under-theorized and are likely to be illuminated by drawing on and integrating different philosophies and theories (Gill et al., 2025).

Potential research questions

1. How can different philosophies and theories enrich our understanding of identity regulation? For example, how might philosophies of critical realism, phenomenology, pragmatism, or psychoanalysis among many others, provide a different perspective on identity regulation?
2. How might different theories and bodies of scholarship complement or challenge the assumption of existing identity regulation scholarship? For example, how might sensemaking, institutional theory, post-colonial theory, or gender scholarship build upon existing identity regulation studies or vice versa? How is meaningful work intertwined with identity regulation?
3. Given the dominance of an identity work perspective, can different theories of identity, such as role identity theory or social identity theory, enrich our understanding of identity regulation? May theories of identification also offer new ways to think about identity regulation?

The impact of identity regulation on organizations and their members

The second opportunity that motivates this special issue reflects the growing calls to make management research more meaningful to people (Alvesson et al., 2017). We believe that the concept of identity regulation has the potential to make significant contributions to our understanding of the challenges individuals face within organizations. For instance, there is evidence that identity prevents people from taking social actions to address the behaviors within their profession that are changing our climate (Gill, 2020). Similarly, seemingly intractable issues such as oppressive and paralyzing organizational deadlocks have also been shown to be sustained by people's identities (Lok and Willmott, 2014). Yet identities are often precarious (Koning and Waistell, 2012), which suggests the potential for change. Nonetheless there is limited exploration of how organizations' attempts to shape identities impacts individuals and their relationships over time and the implications of this for society.

Potential research questions

1. How does identity regulation within an organization impede (or facilitate) members' attempts to address social issues – broadly defined – that they care about?
2. How does identity regulation aggravate or ameliorate identity tensions? For example, how might social activists wrestle with being a corporate employee?

3. How is identity regulation in the workplace implicated in the creation and maintenance of social identities such as those linked to class, ethnicity, gender, nationality, and race?
4. How does identity regulation affect the subjective experiences of wellbeing of people working in or around organizations?

New settings: Beyond the West and the rise of virtual work

The third opportunity that motivates this special issue considers the changing nature of work and its role in our societies. The importance of culture and context for identity has long been emphasized (Willmott, 1993). Despite examining identity regulation across diverse populations (Lai et al., 2020), the majority of scholarship has been confined to Western empirical settings (Boussebaa, 2020). Given that important insights have emerged from studying identities in, for example, the global south (Zulfiqar and Prasad, 2022), or the identities of immigrants and migrants (Fernando et al., 2020; Zanoni and Janssens, 2007) we seek new insights into identity regulation in different parts of the world. Further, there is a need to consider newer settings, such as digital and virtual workplaces, that have become more prominent (Barros et al., 2023). We cannot assume earlier examinations of identity regulation account adequately for contemporary workplaces given the rise of virtual workplaces and modes of working that were accelerated during Covid.

A related opportunity is to consider the different ways in which identity regulation functions as one of many modes of control in contemporary workplaces. Although it is well-established that multiple forms of control operate simultaneously within organizations, it is less clear how identity regulation interacts with different arrays of control mechanisms. Integrating identity regulation with other modes of control would offer a more holistic theorization of control in organizations.

Potential research questions

1. How are new forms of work (e.g., gig work, remote and virtual work, iterating between home and workplaces) shaped through forms of identity regulation?
2. How do different settings inform the effectiveness of identity regulation? Are there different mechanisms or processes of identity regulation in different settings? We are particularly interested in studies that consider non-Western settings.
3. How do different societies and social systems influence identity regulation e.g., caste, class?
4. How do different levels e.g., group, organizational, professional, and social contexts, reinforce or undermine processes of identity regulation?
5. How can we theorize the relationship between identity regulation and other modes of control?

Potential contributors should note

This Special Issue is aligned with the mission and focus of *Human Relations.* Potential contributors are strongly advised to familiarize themselves with the Journal's scope and

expectations. In line with *Human Relations* policy and the objectives of the Special Issue, please note:

1) We are committed to pluralism in terms of perspectives and theoretical grounding. We are particularly interested in receiving submissions from and about marginalized voices and contexts.
2) We are seeking papers which address the social relations in and around work and workplaces – across the levels of immediate personal relationships, organizations and their processes, and wider political and economic systems.
3) We are keen to receive submissions from a range of social science perspective which challenge orthodoxy, engage critically across disciplines where relevant, and consider practical and policy implications.
4) We invite papers which consider work across the 'micro' (immediate relationships between people), the 'meso' (organizations and workplaces and their rules, processes, and structures) and the 'macro' (the wider economy and society) levels.
5) Conceptual or empirical papers are equally welcome as long as in line with the Call for Papers' focus.
    a. Rigorously executed research following any social science method is welcome in empirical papers.
    b. Conceptual or theoretical papers which make a novel contribution are encouraged.
6) The guest editors will select a number of papers to be included in the Special Issue, but other papers submitted in this process may be considered for publication in a regular issue of *Human Relations* if rejection is owing to fit with the Special Issue.

Deadlines

To be considered for this special issue, submissions must fit with the aim and scope of Human Relations. Papers should be prepared in accordance with the journal's submission guidelines. Full-length papers should be submitted through the journal's online submission system: https://mc.manuscriptcentral.com/hr between **1st May 2025** and **31st May 2025.** Please make sure to tick the box "Special Issue" when submitted, and also to indicate in your cover letter that the submission is intended for this Special Issue. Please direct questions about the submission process, or any administrative matter, to the Editorial Office: humanrelationsjournal@tavinstitute.org . Questions about expectations, requirements, and the appropriateness of a topic should be directed to the corresponding guest editor of the special issue: Michael Gill Michael.Gill@sbs.ox.ac.uk.

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