



Social identity framing communication strategies for mobilizing social change^{☆,☆☆}



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ABSTRACT

Social identity framing delineates a set of communication tactics that leaders may use to harness follower support for a vision of social change. An experimental design tested the effectiveness of three social identity framing communication tactics (inclusive language, similarity language, positive social identity language) on follower outcomes. Students ($N = 246$) completed dependent measures after reading one of eight possible leader speeches promoting renewable energy on campus. Results showed that participants exposed to inclusive language were more likely to: indicate that renewable energy was ingroup normative; intend to engage in collective action to bring renewable energy to campus; experience positive emotions and confidence about change; and to view the leader more positively. The combination of inclusive language and positive social identity increased ratings of leader charisma. Perceived leader prototypicality was related to followers' social identification, environmental values, ingroup injunctive norms, and self-stereotypes. Positive social identity language increased collective self-esteem. These results underline the important role of implicating social identity in leader communication that strives to mobilize follower support for social change.

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1. Introduction

History is replete with numerous examples of leaders – military, political, religious, spiritual, organizational – who have influenced their followers to effect enormous feats of social change. In the leadership literature, these types of leaders are usually described as transformational (e.g., Bass, 1990) or charismatic (e.g., Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Shamir, House, & Arthur, 1993). These leaders possess an almost “magical ability (Weber, 1946) to influence their followers and motivate them to engage in collective actions to bring the leaders' vision of change into fruition (Yukl, 2006). Moreover, their followers willingly self-sacrifice on behalf of the collective, experience emotional involvement in vision attainment, and place strong trust in the leader (Shamir et al., 1993). How are these change-oriented leaders able to exert such a profound influence on their followers?

Communication may be a key mechanism of influence for change-oriented leaders. Considerable research and theory suggests that social change leaders (i.e., charismatic) use different communication strategies compared to non-social change (i.e., non-charismatic) leaders (e.g., Baum, Locke, & Kirkpatrick, 1998; Bligh, Kohles, & Meindl, 2004; Conger & Kanungo, 1998; Den Hartog & Verbarg, 1997;

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Emrich, Brower, Feldman, & Garland, 2001; Fiol, Harris, & House, 1999; Holladay & Coombs, 1994; Mio, Riggio, Levin, & Reese, 2005; Seyranian and Bligh's, 2008; Shamir, Arthur, & House, 1994). Charismatic leaders are also particularly adept at linking their visions of social change with social identity via specific communication tactics (Seyranian and Bligh's, 2008; Shamir et al., 1993). Yet relatively little empirical work has tested whether leadership communication tactics that implicate the group's social identity en route to social change directly influence follower outcomes. The current research seeks to fill this gap by testing leadership communication strategies derived from *Social Identity Framing Theory* (Seyranian, 2013; Seyranian and Bligh's, 2008). Social identity framing theory outlines a set of communication tactics that may be used by change-oriented leaders to influence followers and mobilize their support for social change. Social identity framing and the postulates tested in the current study are outlined below. Prior to this, social identity theory and the literature on leadership communication are briefly reviewed.

1.1. Social identity theory and leadership communication

Social identity framing extends social identity (Tajfel & Turner, 1986) and social categorization (Turner, 1985) theory to outline the communication process through which leaders can institute social change. Social identity refers to “that part of an individual's self-concept which derives from his knowledge of his group membership of a social group (or groups) together with the emotional significance attached to that membership” (Tajfel, 1974, p. 69). That is, a social identity is an individual's view of the self in terms of a particular group membership (e.g., American). The more individuals identify with a particular group, the more they define who they are in terms of their group membership (e.g., I am American) and seek to fit in with the group. Therefore, group members strive to conform to what it means to be a group member by adopting ingroup prototypes. *Ingroup prototype content* comprises of the predominant norms, attitudes, values, behaviors, and attributes that defines a group and distinguishes it from other groups (Hogg & Abrams, 2001). High identifiers are particularly attuned to information regarding how much the self and others embody the group's prototypes. Research suggests that the person in the group who most typically personifies the group's prototypes is more likely to emerge as a leader (e.g., Hogg, Hains, & Mason, 1998), to be viewed as effective in the leadership role (e.g., Fielding & Hogg, 1997; Hains, Hogg, & Duck, 1997), and to possess substantial power and influence over followers (Hogg, 2001). These studies are in line with the social identity theory of leadership (Hogg, 2001; van Knippenberg & Hogg, 2003), which suggests that leader prototypicality is a key factor in leader-follower influence and how followers perceive the leader; highly prototypical leaders are more likely to be liked, trusted, and seen as effective and charismatic by followers, particularly if followers highly identify with the group. From this perspective, prototypicality is a key aspect of leadership and leaders are in the business of managing prototypes within the group to maintain their leadership position. Hogg and Reid (2006) contend that this is done through “norm talk”. That is, leaders rely on communication to construct and change group prototypes to ensure their prototypically central leadership position.

Reicher and Hopkins (2001) work complements this analysis by suggesting that leaders are “entrepreneurs of identity” who strategically and actively shape ingroup prototypes to mobilize followers to bring about social change. They do this through “social identity constructions”, which involve redefining who is included in the group (e.g., who is “American”) and describing prototype content (e.g., what it means to be “American”). Through discourse analysis, their work has shown that social identity constructions are evident in Margaret Thatcher and Neil Kinnock's speeches (S.D. Reicher & Hopkins, 1996), in speeches about the political mobilization attempts of British Muslims during British elections (Hopkins, Reicher, & Hopkins, 2003), and in anti-abortion speeches (Hopkins & Reicher, 1997; Reicher & Hopkins, 1996). This body of research makes a contribution to the leadership literature by underlining the idea that leaders may use rhetoric to construct and change social identities en route to mobilizing the group towards collective action (Reicher, Hopkins, Levine, & Rath, 2005; see also Fiol, 2002). However, “norm talk” and “social identity construction” do not delineate the communication processes necessary for leaders to redefine who the group is and what it stands for. As Scott (2007) notes, “we still know relatively little about specific communication strategies and practices that may matter most here. Which communicative devices are most likely to increase identity salience? How much interaction, and with which individuals specifically, might best foster a sense of identification with an organization or some other target?” (p. 127). Social identity framing (Seyranian, 2013; Seyranian and Bligh's, 2008) extends social identity theory by outlining the *process* of social identity construction and delineating specific communications tactics that leaders may employ en route to social change.

1.2. Social identity framing

Social identity framing suggests that social change begins with the articulation of a vision of change that is compelling for a group. The very act of communicating a vision entails framing (Hartog & Verburg, 1997). For a vision of change to resonate with followers, social identity framing postulates that the vision must be framed in a way that highlights its compatibility with ingroup prototypes. If a vision of social change deviates substantially from ingroup prototypes, group members may resist social change because it does not fit into their ideas of who the group is. In this case, the group's social identity may need to be reframed so that it is compatible with the vision of social change. To illustrate this process, consider the following situation: A Mayor of a small Midwest town has a vision of implementing an environmentally sustainable initiative in her town (e.g., renewable energy). If city constituents do not generally view environmental sustainability as a part of “who we are”, the Mayor may be met with considerable resistance if she forges ahead with green initiatives. However, if the Mayor implicates social identity and connects the idea of environmental sustainability to specific prototype content – norms (e.g., “most of us recycle”), values (e.g., “we believe in living in harmony with the environment”), and attitudes (e.g., “we are favorably predisposed to getting off fossil fuels”) – she may be able to garner support for her initiative. Although social change is often slow and drawn out, over time, her consistent efforts to redefine “who we are” and connect it with a vision of environmental sustainability may translate into follower support.

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