



## Social interactions and the salience of social identity ☆

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### ABSTRACT

We explore the effect of identity salience on behaviour in a simple social interaction. Specifically, we compare ultimatum bargaining across three treatments: priming subjects with a shared identity, priming subjects with an identity distinct from those with whom they will interact, and priming subjects with no particular identity. We find that subjects are most cooperative in the identity-priming treatment and least cooperative in the distinctiveness-priming treatment. Similarly, subjects reveal the highest demands in the identity-priming treatment and the lowest demands in the distinctiveness-priming treatment. We discuss the implications of these results with respect to the literature on organizational identity.

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## 1. Introduction

An individual has any number of social identities by which they describe themselves. These may include one's ethnic identity, gender identity, corporate identity, or national identity. Past research has shown that each of these identities can be more or less salient at any moment of time and the relative salience of different identities can motivate and affect behaviour (Akerlof & Kranton, 2000, 2005). This is perhaps most clearly seen in the psychology where experiments have shown that priming pre-existing identities in individuals can affect task performance (Spencer, Steele, & Quinn, 1999; Steele & Aronson, 1995). For example, Shih, Pittinsky, and Ambady (1999) shows that when a math test was administered to Asian-American women primed with either their ethnic identity or their gender identity, they performed more or less well, respectively. Similarly, Yopyk and Prentice (2005) show that student-athletes primed with either their student or athlete identity performed more or less well, respectively, on a math exam.

This paper focuses on uncovering how priming identity affects behaviour in a simple social interaction. Our conjecture is that, just as priming a student identity may affect performance on a math exam, priming a shared identity may affect interactions between individuals. Specifically, we explore the role of priming certain identities on social interaction as represented by an ultimatum game. Behaviour in the ultimatum game can serve as a barometer for cooperativeness and

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negative reciprocity wherein offers can be seen as signs of cooperation or generosity, and accept/reject decisions can help identify negative reciprocity or demandingness.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we are interested in the relationship between the salience of an individual's identity and their behaviour in the ultimatum game.

With respect to motivating shared or distinct identities, past research has shown that identity is notoriously difficult to create in the laboratory (see Eckel & Grossman, 2005; Solow & Kirkwood, 2002). Therefore, we take the approach of increasing the salience of individuals' existing identity in order to motivate behaviours such as cooperation. While other studies have explored the effects of salience on task performance (Shih et al., 1999; Spencer et al., 1999; Yopyk & Prentice, 2005) or the effect of laboratory created identities on interactions (Chen & Li, 2009; McLeish & Oxboby, 2007), we add to the literature by exploring the question regarding how the *salience* of an existing identity affects social interactions.

In order to incorporate identity-priming into an experiment, we led participants through a brief identity-priming task along the lines of those used in Yopyk and Prentice (2005) before having them engage in ultimatum bargaining. One may naturally think behaviour exhibited in an ultimatum game is influenced by concepts of social identity: Past research has shown that group identity can have an effect on cooperation (Bernhard, Fehr, & Fischbacher, 2006; Goette, Huffman, & Meier, 2006; McLeish & Oxboby, 2007; Wit & Wilke, 1992), reciprocity (McLeish & Oxboby, 2007; Stroebe, Lodewijckx, & Spears, 2005), and negotiations (Kramer, Pommerenke, & Newton, 1993).

Along the lines of these studies, we see differing degrees of cooperation and negative reciprocity across treatments following our manipulation of the salience of different identities. We find that subjects are most cooperative after a shared social identity has been primed, and least cooperative after a distinct identity has been primed. Similarly, subjects exhibit the highest demands after a shared social identity has been primed and the lowest demands after a distinct identity has been primed. Thus, while cooperation increases with a shared identity, so does the potential to engage in negative reciprocity. Essentially, a shared identity creates an expectation or norm of greater cooperation or "friendliness," the absence of which garners a greater retaliation than when no such cooperation is expected (e.g., when interacting with someone whom there is no shared identity).

The results of our experiments have important implications for our understanding of identity in organizations. Akerlof and Kranton (2005) discusses the extent to which an employee's identification with her employer (or lack thereof) can significantly mitigate (or aggravate) problems associated with incomplete contracting and unobservability. Indeed, if employees identify with their employer or their organization, they are less likely to engage in shirking or sabotage in the workplace. For example, when an organization promotes a positive identity, employees internalize this and exhibit more cooperation and citizenship (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994). Further, when the identity of the organization is more salient (for example, through more contact with the organization, longer tenure, etc.), this effect is increased. In the context of our experiment, a shared identity results in greater cooperation as manifest by larger offers in ultimatum bargaining.

On the other hand, Akerlof and Kranton (2005) also discusses how an identity which is distinct (indeed, contrary) to that of the employer may result in a worker damaging property or shirking in a manner to reclaim an identity which distinguishing the individual from her apparent identity as an employee. In our experiment, we observe lower offers in ultimatum bargaining when individuals are primed with distinct identities. While this is in line with the arguments in Akerlof and Kranton (2005), we also identify a potential cost associated with shared identity. In our experiments we find when individuals share a (positive) identity, responders in ultimatum bargaining display greater demandingness vis a vis a willingness to reject larger offers than when there is no shared identity. This suggests that, in the context of an organization, a strong shared identity may manifest itself via greater negative reciprocity. Thus, a shared identity may result in greater sabotage or shirking in contexts where individuals view themselves as being treated unfairly by an employer or other employees with whom they share an organizational identity.

From the standpoint of invoking a shared identity, our experiments also demonstrate a practical aspect of motivating organizational identity. Literature on identity in organizations (e.g., Brickson, 2002) has argued for the need to *build* identity. However, as demonstrated experimentally by Eckel and Grossman (2005) and discussed in Akerlof and Kranton (2005), building an identity may prove difficult or may motivate individuals to "push back" to re-assert their own individually held identities. Our experiments suggest that an alternate means of motivating identity among individuals in an organization may be to increase the saliency of existing shared identities rather than trying to shape a new "organizational identity". This approach takes advantage of the identity-specific capital individuals have already accumulated by using it as a building block in creating organizational capital.

## 2. Related experiments

There is substantial evidence that priming individuals' identities can affect task performance. One such example is the literature on stereotype threat (Steele, 1997): An individual may feel vulnerable to the stereotypes associated with a salient identity and therefore perform in accord with those identity-specific stereotypes. As discussed above, students who are primed with identities which are typically associated with performing more or less well on a task (e.g., Asian-American or female identity and a math exam) tend to conform to that expectation in their actual performance. Other examples in

<sup>1</sup> In this paper, we will define cooperation broadly as a joint concern for the outcomes oneself and another, with higher offers reflecting more cooperation. Note that cooperative behaviour in this context does not require reciprocation on the part of another individual: Only one individual in the game has the opportunity to extend and offer.

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