

Increasing Innovation Through Identity Integration

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Just over a century ago, the Harvard psychologist Joyce (1898) proposed that invention consists of creating new and useful ideas from existing ideas. Studies of organizational and industry level innovation support this notion. Missing, however, is an in-depth understanding of how individuals come up with innovative ideas through the recombination of knowledge they already possess. In our research, we reveal an analog of macro-level innovation processes that unfold at the individual level. Particularly, we argue that individuals who have high levels of “identity integration,” or perceptions of compatibility between seemingly conflicting sets of knowledge and expertise, are more innovative. We present evidence for this proposition, and suggest contextual factors that facilitate creativity through increasing identity integration.

Identity Integration and Knowledge Synthesis

Innovation and creativity entail the recombination of existing ideas to create synergistic and creative solutions to practical problems (Amabile, 1983; Hargadon, 2002). Drawing from Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, 1981), we propose that integration of multiple social identities (groups to which people belong and identify with) is critical to innovation. Even though individuals might possess all the expertise or know-how to solve a problem, relevant knowledge structures--memories, skills, routines, heuristics--may not be available when required to innovate. Rather, knowledge systems are bundled with various social identities, and depending on which social identity is being activated, different knowledge structures become salient to the individual at different times (Shih, Pittinsky, & Ambady, 1999). For example, an individual may identify as an engineer, an MBA, and a lepidopterist; depending on which of these identities or combinations of identities are salient, different knowledge structures will be applied to the problem at hand.

We suggest that individual differences in how multiple social identities are negotiated can influence the salience of multiple identities. Individuals who can activate different and disparate social identities at the same time will have access to different knowledge sets simultaneously, which in turn facilitate the process of knowledge recombination that is necessary for innovation. For example, many women in male-dominated occupations such as engineering believe that their gender and professional

identities have incompatible values, such that activating one identity (e.g., being professional) necessarily entails suppressing the other (e.g., not identifying with being a woman) (Hood & Koberg, 1994). However, women who perceive their professional and gender identities as compatible and complementary are more likely to access knowledge related to both those identities at the same time, resulting in higher levels of innovation in tasks that draw from these identities (e.g., designing a new product device targeted for a female market).

Our research focuses on an individual difference called Identity Integration (II), or the degree to which multiple identities are perceived as compatible (high II) or in opposition to each other (low II; Benet-Martínez, Leu, Lee, & Morris, 2002). In several studies, we find that, compared to individuals with low II, those with high II are more likely to draw upon knowledge structures linked to disparate social identities, leading to higher levels of creativity and innovation. Asian-Americans with high cultural II (i.e., those who see their cultural identities as compatible), produced more innovative products for a start-up fusion restaurant compared to Asian-Americans with low II. Women engineers with high professional/gender II (i.e., those who see their professional and gender identities as compatible) produced more innovative designs for products targeted to women. Supporting our underlying mechanism of knowledge recombination, no differences in innovation were observed for innovative tasks that do not draw from the two specific identity domains measured in our studies

Theoretical and Practical Implications

Theoretically, we demonstrate a psychological mechanism for individual innovation analogous to industry and organizational-level innovation. We show that salient social identities affect the set of knowledge brought to bear on a given problem, affecting the ability of individuals to come up with new ideas. Additionally, our work has practical implications for how firms can strategically increase their employees' levels of identity integration under conditions where disparate knowledge and expertise are brought together, such as in mergers and acquisitions or in cross-functional teams. We propose that specific managerial practices that increase identity integration will lead to higher employee innovation and creativity.

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