

Social Identity and Cooperative Behaviour in Virtual Organisation

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Abstract

Virtual organisation is widely recognized as a capital structure in the competitive landscape. However, the role of information and communication technology (ICT) is more valorised than actors in the success of virtual forms. The importance of the human element and the way that workers cooperate with each other should not be taken for granted particularly in virtual context. In this paper we demonstrate that cooperative behaviour in virtual organisation is linked in part by the role of organisation in defining and maintaining status as is predicted by the social identity approach.

Key words: social identity, status, cooperative behaviour, virtual organisation

1. Introduction

The emergence of Internet and advances in information technology has been accompanied by innovations in organisation and management. Extensive use of computers and communications technologies appears to have created opportunities to develop new organisation form such as "virtual organisation" (Mowshowitz, 1986). The concept of virtual organisation refers to a structure emancipated of the spatial and temporal constraints and where members work together remotely through information and communication technology (ICT) to achieve organisational objectives (Foreman et al., 2004).

The wide adoption of virtual working is promoted by the expectation of stakeholders of agility and survival mechanism in face of market turbulence. Virtual form offers many capabilities in order that people across geographical location, disciplines, and departments can cooperate effectively together (Vakola and Wilson, 2004). It provides platform that make easier gathering and sharing information and offers better horizontal and vertical associations among workers and resources (Robey et al., 2000).

However, the move towards virtual organisation is related with a fundamental modification in managing and organizing basic procedures. The success of collaborative work therefore depends not simply on the introduction of preferment information and communication technology (ICT) but also by examining the human aspect of organisation (Gardener et al, 2003). Therefore, it is important to focus on the psychological underpinnings of cooperative behaviour in virtual organisation.

This research focuses on studying the role of social identity in the development of more cooperative relationship in virtual organisation. This involves checking the connection between identity and virtual organisation. The fundamental argument of social identity theory is that workers use interaction with others as a basis of information when assess their identities. Otherwise, people may define themselves in part through the nature of treatment by other people in organisation to which they belong (Hogg & Abrams, 1988; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). They use the social identity information that they draw from the groups to which they belong to define and evaluate their identity. This definition is created through deductions made about one's status based upon quality of the interaction with others organisational members (Cooley, 1956; Tyler, 1999).

Specifically, these social identity processes suggest that people cooperate within organisation to extent that organisational members are important to shape and maintain a favourable sense of self identity and of social identity (Doosje & al, 1999). From this perspective, people will be preoccupied about issues of status when evaluating their link with the organisation. Being a worker of a high status organisation leads to a favourable social identity and higher feeling of self-esteem and self worth.

It also leads to more cooperative behaviour. Applying this approach, the aim of this article is to empirically test the relationship between status and virtual cooperative behaviour. The following sections present the article's conceptual framework, the methodology used to test our hypotheses, the results of our study and a final discussion.

2. Background

2.1 Effect of Status on cooperative behaviour

The concept of status is an important one that has attracted considerable attention from members of the scientific community in recent years (Tyler & Blader, 2001; Ellemers & al, 2004; Dholakia & al, 2004). Acknowledge of the value of organizational status comes directly from the arguments of social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1985). This concept refers to a position occupied in a particular social setting according to various criteria distinctive and to which correspond definite functions socially recognized. In organisation, status reflects the significant dimensions taken on from the group, to define personal judgment of self-esteem and self worth (Tyler & Blader, 2000; Tyler, Degoey, & Smith, 1996). It determines the valence of the group.

This approach toward understanding cooperative behaviour draws upon the core argument that people use status as a source of information when evaluating their identities. A high status will reflect favourably on the own identity of people, they feel as valued members of the group to which they belong.

From this perspective, one reason that people cooperate in groups is because doing so provide a critical function for evaluating their identities. This evaluation allows to clarifying how they think about themselves and motivates to create and enhance feelings of self-esteem and self-worth (Smith & al, 1998). This means that status is a significant predictor of employees' cooperation and can be used to explain people's behavioural cooperation within groups. From this perspective, people cooperate with groups to the extent that those groups are important in their effort to create and maintain a favourable sense of self and social identity.

Two feature of organizational status are essential in determining cooperation with organizations (Smith & Tyler, 1997; Tyler, Degoey & Smith, 1996; Tyler & Blader, 2001). So the status may be reflected by two distinct constructs: firstly, pride reflecting the evaluation of status of organization. Secondly, respect which represents the judgment of their status within organizations. These two aspects represent social emotions that reflect reports of individuals with the same social group. These two judgments are variables that measure identity as they allow directly form perceptions of self-esteem and self worth.

People cooperation behaviour is an answer to information concerning status in organisation. If workers receive positive information about status, they engage in cooperatives behaviour. However, when information regarding status, are negative, this leads to noncooperation. The assessments of two aspect of the status of organization are central to promote cooperative behaviour within the organization (Tyler & Blader, 2002). A worker with a high status within organization will be motivated to adopt cooperatives behaviours with the group and vice versa.

The cooperative behaviour corresponds to the expectations of conduct and behaviours of individuals. They are particularly interesting when they happen in a voluntary way. When individuals act through their internal values, instead of evaluation of the likely reward or loss (Tyler, 1999). These cooperative behaviours occur because they come from internal values of individuals that are from what people wish to do or think they must to do. In this research we were focused on two types of cooperatives behaviours: compliance with rules, and pro-organisational behaviour.

Compliance with rules, according to Tyler, (1999), refers to behaviour that is formed by considering rewards and costs. It implies that the individual adheres to procedures and policies of the group. This adherence allows limiting individual actions and opportunistic partners that are undesirable in the group.

However, pro-organisational behaviour is conceptualized and defined by Tyler & Blader, (2003) as the efforts in and outside the role of individual within the group. It involves doing things that are not required, but that help the group such as: sacrifices to maintain the group's goals or do much to help the organization succeed.

2.1.1 Effect of Pride on cooperative behaviour

Tyler (1999) defines pride as the feeling felt by partner about being part of this own organization. In general, it is a global perspective on the characteristics of the organization to which one belongs. Pride is also assessing the status of the organization, to which individuals belong, compared to other organizations.

Pride reveals judgements concerning the status of the group. Which also refers to prestige group (Mael & Ashforth, 1992; Smidts, Pruyn, & Van Riel, 2000).

Kramer et al, (2001) considers that the individual who considers that his organization has a particularly high status through evaluation of its image or prestige, will opt for a more cooperative behaviour. This is explained by the formation of a more favourable social identity and developing a stronger sense of self-esteem and personal value, due to his judgment.

People will focus on the rules and organizational standards as pride about their organisation is growing insofar as it is a reflection of one's view of the group. Organizational actors established a much more collaborative behaviour based on their feeling that they can adhere to a group with high status.

H1: Pride has a positive effect on cooperative behaviour

H.1.1 Pride has a positive effect on compliance

H.1.2 Pride has a positive effect on pro-organisational behaviour

2.1.1 Effect of Respect on cooperative behaviour

The work of Emler & Hopkins, (1990) explain that respect refers to the assessment of individuals of their own status within the organization. Respect therefore refers to its own social reputation. It is respect that felt by the individual on the part of other organizational members. This perception allows the individual to focus on his personal self and therefore self-esteem (Van Prooijen & Van Knippenberg, 2000). Social identity researchers recognize that people also feel good about being respected by others in their group. The status comes as recognition of own unique qualities of the individual by other organizational members. This recognition will be reflected in a good position within that organization, that is to say a position that the individual perceives as advantageous.

Respect is an essential element for the establishment and success of virtual organization. It provides the foundation for the development of social norms of cooperative behaviour, necessary for the regulation of relations in the virtual forms. In fact, for Doosje & Ellemers & Spears, (1999), respect has a wide influence on behaviour aspects that results from an individual level. The individual, who feels respected in the organization, will be more helpful and will engage in voluntary behaviours that help advance his group. Respect therefore directs the attention of the individual over himself and his relationships with organizational members.

As previous studies suggest that respect predict cooperative group behaviour (Tyler, 1999; Tyler & Blader, 2000). Group members exhibit more cooperative behaviour to the extent that they feel they are members of high status groups and/or are the high status members of groups.

H2: Respect has a positive effect on cooperative behaviour

H.2.1 Respect has a positive effect on compliance

H.2.2 Respect has a positive effect on pro-organisational behaviour

3. Methodology

3.1 Data collection

The selected target population consists of workers in start-up in which virtual cooperation is the norm. The questionnaires were distributed by e-mail or directly to the participants. A total of 500 copies of questionnaire were distributed to all respondents. Of these 500 copies, a total of 356 copies were returned of which 338 were usable. Is an overall return rate of around 71% and a rate of 67% of usable copies. For our work, the sample size (338 respondents) appears to be satisfactory since the experts generally believe that a sample of 300 individuals and 400 is acceptable (Igalens & Roussel, 1998). After gathering the data, it was inserted and coded in SPSS 15. The Component factor analysis was used to estimate the reliability of the scale, the dimensions and the items to be taken. Our database has tested through Confirmatory Factor Analysis. The hypothesis testing is performed using Structure Equation Modeling through AMOS 16. The intention is to test a model composed of all the relationships among the variables.

3.2 Selection of measuring instruments

Measures were developed following the procedures proposed by Churchill (1979). Measuring instruments are borrowed from literature. To collect our data, we use scales that had already been judged as valid and reliable by previous studies.

All the scale items were measured by a 1- 5 Likert type scale (1= strongly disagree and 5= strongly agree). The Tunisian sample is much more accustomed with French than with English, thus the scales developed in English are translated into French through double translations made by bilingual experts. A pretest roughly 40 respondents was done for verifying if the questions are understandable (Rieunier, 2000).

The pride was measured via the scale of Tyler (1999) through nine items. To measure respect, we selected the scale in seven items of Tyler & Blader, (2001). Eight items developed by Tyler & Blader, (2001) have been adapted in order to measure the compliance. It is a five point Likert scale. For the measurement of pro-organisational behaviour, the scale used is the Blader & Tyler, (2001) which was inspired by scale of Tyler, (1999). They use five items to measure pro-organisational behaviour.

4. Results

Confirmatory Factor Analysis (CFA) has been conducted using AMOS 16. CFA model produced a good model fit of Chi-Square = 321.544, Degree of freedom = 98, Probability level (p-value) = .000, GFI = .921, AGFI = .910, TLI = .847, CFI = .875, and RMSEA = .082.

The first part of the hypothesis is intended to examine the link between the pride and cooperative behaviours. To test these relationships analysis of variance were performed. The regression results show that for the sample studied, the pride significantly and positively determine compliance with the rules ($p = 0.113$, $F = 2.017$). Similarly, the link between pride and pro-organisational behaviour was retained ($p = 0.181$, $F = 2.179$). These results confirm the sub-hypotheses H.1.1 and H.1.2.

The second part of the hypothesis is projected to consider the link between the respect and cooperative behaviours. Respect, is significantly and positively related to compliance with rules ($p = 0.109$, $F = 2.224$). This confirms the hypothesis H.2.1. On the other side, the link intended between, respect on the one hand, and pro-organisational behaviour on the other hand is not significant ($F < 1.96$). Hypothesis H.2.2 is rejected.

5. Discussion and conclusion

In our research framework, we defend the principle that cooperative behaviours are at least partly determined by the status accorded to employees in virtual organizations. Results indicate that the success of virtual organizations depends not only on the implementation of technological tools. This is primarily the organizational actor who decides to develop their organization or not to collaborate, to support this virtual organization or abandon it. Beyond the central value of the structuring and implementation of these virtual forms, the success of these would also be affected by its exploitation.

Status measured by indicators of pride and respect, were positively related to cooperative behaviour. This effect confirms the findings of Tyler & Blader, (2001) accord an important status to an employee, allows him to forge a sense of belonging and fully tap into the individual energies to serve organizational interests. The status thus creates a significant individual motivation. It helps create the appropriate behaviour for organizational development and sustainability.

In this regard, status is more a catalyst for cooperation when others recognize it. In organizations that adopt the virtual form, the legitimacy and status recognition is crucial for everyone. Employees compensate for the lack of physical organizational boundaries not only by the pride of belonging to a new concept and innovative but also and above all respect for others by their work. This result also supports the conclusions reached Camarinha & al (2007) and Colky et al, (2002). These authors found that recognition of the status of employees working in a virtual context contributes significantly to their collaboration. It serves to avoid the inevitable comparison between the status of an employee and the virtual non-virtual.

The pride of membership increases the propensity to use the virtual organization as a source of personal definition (Foreman & Whetten, 2002). The pride contributes to creating a sense of place that stimulates their cooperation within the virtual organization. Organizational actors are proud to belong to the virtual organization and feel a complacency towards him, which will boost their cooperation. This result confirms that found by (Blades & Fondas, 2010) in his research on virtual groups. Her results suggest that the focus of virtual organizations has assigned a status to each of its members significantly increases their ability to collaborate and to the success of the firm surveyed. We had expected to observe a positive relation between respect and pro organisational behaviour in this study. The results of our study did not correspond to our expectations.

These results can be considered surprising since they are not consistent with other previous studies. But, in our view, it can be explained by the specificity of our sample. Indeed, temporal and geographic aspects generate a detachment that reduces interpersonal interactions and increase the feeling of solitude (Fisher & Fisher, 2001). Moreover, some members of the virtual network will be difficult to recognize and appreciate everyone's contribution to the project company. These trade offs are experienced as challenges to the function of the organization, leading the stereotype and denigrate the other members, thus inducing the proliferation of conflicts and non-cooperation between actors.

This study is affected by certain limitations. This research takes into account two types of cooperative behaviour. It would also be relevant to examine the impact of virtuality on different types of cooperative behaviours like turnover intention. It would be also interesting to complete this research by integrating others experimental schemes as attitudes or values (satisfaction, commitment, identification).

However, The horizon of this research is open for other work. The results we obtained should permit us to better recognize the impact of virtuality in the workplace. In the future a cross-cultural study may be more instrumental in explaining cultural impact on virtual organization.

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Figure 1: The proposed model

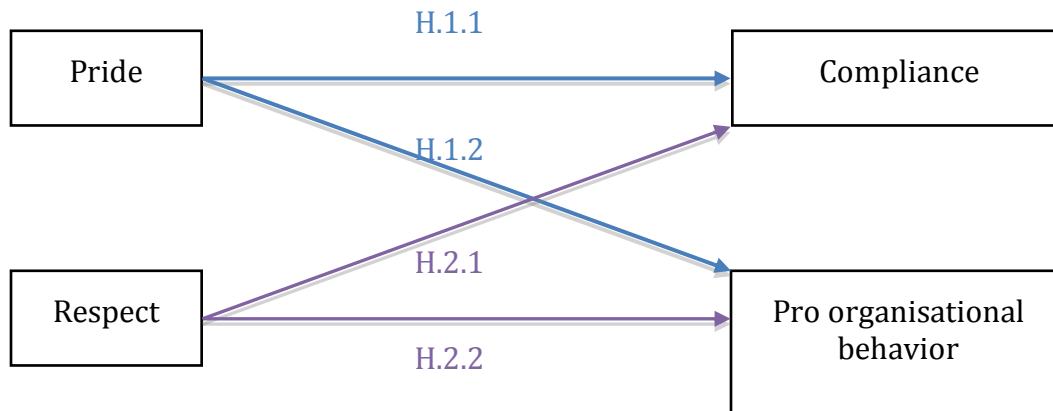


Figure 2: the significant effects

