

## **Inclusion in the COVID-19 Era**

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The ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has already had a profound impact on the work experiences of millions of people all over the world, as it cultivated fear and uncertainty (Restubog, Ocampo, & Wang, 2020). Challenges such as the ability to effectively use technology, solo working in social isolation, work at home whilst undertaking caring duties, but especially the lasting effects on wellbeing (Zacher & Rudolph, 2020), have brought to the fore the importance of inclusive human resource management (HRM) practices and processes, highlighting the challenges that leadership is called upon to face if people are, or perceived to be, excluded from the corporate culture (Caligiuri, De Cieri, Minbaeva, Verbeke, & Zimmermann, 2020). What organizations are now experiencing is not just a slowdown but a complete transformation in the overall organizational culture and structure, with a potentially long-term impact on their business strategy and priorities. While it cannot be predicted how long this will last and what the new reality of work will look like, investing in inclusion can help organizations seize the opportunities and address the current and forthcoming uncertainties and challenges. Principles of an inclusive workplace such as a climate of trust and guidance, adaptive teams that are led by empathetic management (e.g., servant leaders; Hu, He, & Zhou, 2020), leadership that puts aside minor grievances and focuses on creating a common goal, inspired and motivated workforce, (Pless & Maak, 2004) can help overcome these present-day challenges.

On this basis, the aim of this study is to explore the relationship between the perceived inclusion climate and the subjective wellbeing of people who were working from everywhere during the COVID-19 pandemic, with organizational identification mediating this link. Our premise is that a strong perceived inclusive climate implies a human-oriented management, enhanced by social solidarity, genuine concern in others and morality (Rayner, 2009). Within this context, we argue that employees' organizational identification will be strong with a positive impact on their subjective wellbeing. Through the lens of social identity theory, we then explore how this strong sense of identification mediates the relationship between the

perceived inclusion climate and individuals' wellbeing. The theoretical explanation forms the basis of the hypotheses tested in this three-wave study.

Data collection took place in June-July 2020. We conducted a three-stage study with one-week lag between stages. Subjects were recruited via online platform Prolific.co which filtered respondents based on our criteria on nationality (US), location (US) and employment status (full-time employees of for-profit business). In terms of demographics, 101 respondents (65%) were female and 92 (59%) said they were the primary wage earner in their household. The average time working for their current employer was 7 years ( $SD=6.1$ ) and their average age was 37.4 years old ( $SD=11$ ).

Our findings suggest that employees' perceptions of inclusive climate have an impact on the organizational identification. This advances our understanding of factors that enhance organizational identification during times of uncertainty occurring in the macroenvironment. In line with our hypothesis, our data showed that in inclusive organizations individuals are likely to strongly identify with the organization because the participation, support, and engagement that are cultivated as part of the inclusive culture represent a form of identity enactment. This finding extends work by Gotsis and Grimaldi (2016) who posit that an organizational climate for inclusion leads to organizational identification, organizational citizenship behaviors, and wellbeing and is aligned with studies on inclusive workplaces (Shore, Cleveland, & Sanchez, 2018). Our study therefore confirms that a positive organizational inclusion climate implies an organizational culture in which individuals feel valued and encouraged to be themselves which in turn are consistently related to positive outcomes (Mor Barak et al., 2016; Nishii, 2013).

This research builds and expands on previous research on organizational identification by exploring an unfortunate but important boundary condition: the perceived impact of COVID-19 as an indicative type of socioeconomic crisis. To the best of our knowledge this is the first study that explores of the nexus between a macro-level crisis, i.e. COVID-19, and organizational HRM practices (in this case in the form of inclusive climate) and how this relationship influences employees' levels of organizational identification. Organizational identification, in the context of COVID-19, becomes even more critical for both individuals and organizations. From the perspective of employees, imposed remote work policies for example may result in perceptions that they are losing an important part of their social identity due to the decreased sense of belongingness and the loosening of the social ties they had with members of the organization. Employees working remotely may experience a significant loss in meaning as many everyday practices and rituals of the organizational life help provide a sense of meaning (Ashforth et al., 2008: 336). It can also be argued that the amplified blurring of the boundaries between family and work (e.g., Ashforth, Kreiner, & Fugate, 2000) when working remotely may result in the shrinkage of work-related identities. From an organizational perspective, research evidence suggests that organizational identification is linked to important work-related attitudes and behaviors (e.g., task performance and turnover intentions; Mael & Ashforth, 1995; van Knippenberg, 2000). For instance, Riketta's (2005) study indicated that organizational identification has a stronger relationship to performance

(in-role and extra-role) than organizational commitment. Thus, if, in the context of hybrid mode of work in the COVID-19 era, organizational identification is eroded, organizations may face increased turnover intentions and decreased in-role and extra-role performance.

From a wider macro perspective, our study should encourage and persuade organizations to invest in their employees, as a means to safeguard their devotion and commitment. If employees feel respected, valued, and safe during unforeseen external circumstances they will be willing to demonstrate positive attitudes and behaviors.

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