The role of organization-based social support and internal two-way communication in fostering organizational identification in nonprofits: Insights from AHEPA

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Abstract:
In the current volatile economic and geopolitical environment, the role of Nonprofit Organizations (NPOs) has become increasingly critical as a stabilizing force, creating value for local communities. Organizational Identification (OI) has gained significant attention in the literature as a crucial factor contributing to organizational reach, sustainability, and long-term endurance. Despite its pivotal importance, empirical evidence from NPOs remains scarce. In this study we set to explore the influence of a) perceived organization-based social support (POBSS) and b) two-way communication (TWC) on nurturing OI. A structured questionnaire was administered to 389 AHEPA members residing on the eastern coast of the USA. The findings indicate that both variables significantly enhance OI, yet TWC demonstrates a greater impact compared to POBSS in fostering OI. Furthermore, the theoretical and practical implications of the results, as well as directions for future research, are presented.

Introduction

In the concurrent volatile environment due to military conflicts, economic challenges, and humanitarian crises in various global locations, the role of nonprofit organizations becomes exceedingly critical. Members of nonprofit organizations (NPOs) endeavor to unify their actions, providing stewardship within their local community and creating value by investing in human capital and intercommunity relationships (Alfes et al., 2016).

Organizational Identification (OI) is recognized as a key concept in organizational research (Greco et al., 2022). Previous studies have highlighted OI's substantial impact on organizational performance, influencing employee behavior both within and outside the organization. It upholds the organizational culture and supports the stewardship of its values. Despite its vital role in organizational dynamics, the literature on OI remains fragmented. Most research has focused on the private sector, neglecting NPOs despite their significant role in adding value to their communities through philanthropy, advancing education, and promoting civic responsibility.

Researchers in organizational studies have highlighted several factors contributing to the enhancement of OI. Individuals' perceptions of being valued members within their organization are significantly affected by both psychological factors and the quality of communication they receive (Weisman et al., 2022). In this study, we examine Perceived Organization-Based Social Support (POBSS) and Organizational Communication as two of the most prominent antecedents of OI. Specifically, POBSS develops cohesiveness, enhances the organizational climate, and fosters a sense of incorporation into the social environment of the group (Jolly et al., 2020). Moreover, organizational communication, particularly the adoption of a symmetrical perspective, is linked with building strong bonds between members, enhancing transparency, promoting inclusiveness, and supporting organizational culture (Bartels et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2015).

To gain valuable insights from the perspectives of NPOs, we sought the facilitation of members from the American Hellenic Educational Progressive Association (AHEPA). AHEPA is one of the oldest and most consistent NPOs, actively engaging in numerous local communities around the world, including North America, Europe, and Oceania. The organization focuses on upholding the ancient Hellenic ideals of education, philanthropy, civic responsibility, family, and individual excellence through community service and volunteerism.

The purpose of this study is to explore the effects of social support and two-way communication on OI in the context of NPOs. Through this, we directly contribute in developing a comprehensive understanding of members' affiliation with NPOs, which can lead to enhanced organizational effectiveness, improved member satisfaction, stronger community relations and greater trust, from managerial, human resources, social, and psychological perspectives. Furthermore, this empirical research compares the impact of each factor on cultivating OI in an individualistic social environment like the USA.

The paper continues with a literature review, followed by an explanation of the methodology. The subsequent sections present the study's findings and engage in a thorough discussion, examining their significance and implications. Finally the paper concludes with a summary of the findings, the limitations, of the study and suggestions for future research.

Literature Review

Organizational identification

Organizational Identification (OI) is defined as the perception of oneness with or belongingness to an organization (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). The significance of this concept has drawn considerable attention in organizational studies due to its extensive influence on various aspects of employee behavior and organizational success (Ashforth & Schinoff, 2016). OI encompasses a wide range of positive outcomes, including increased employee engagement, higher job satisfaction, stronger organizational commitment, improved performance, and enhanced productivity (Yue et al., 2021). Although recognized as a fundamental aspect of organizational efficiency, much of the research on organizational identification has primarily focused on the private sector, especially profit-oriented companies, leaving NPOs relatively underexplored (Rho & Yun, 2015). Organizational researchers, acknowledging the profound impact of OI on all aspects of organizational effectiveness, have concentrated their efforts on identifying its origins to gain a deep understanding of the dynamics behind its development (Greco et al., 2022). Existing literature emphasizes the importance of interpersonal interactions within organizations, and internal communication as key factors in enhancing OI (Loi et al., 2014).

Perceived Organization-Based Social Support

Support from the organizational environment is a key element, serving as an invaluable asset for members and positively influencing numerous outcomes (Bang et al., 2023). Literature shows that enhanced POBSS is associated with members' determination, self-worth, and the development of their personal skills (Poulsen et al., 2016), while nurturing emotional security, reducing stress within the organizational setting, and building trust among members (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2015). In this study, we define POBSS support that may come from board members of local chapters or districts, as well as from peer members within the organization.

Previous research has extensively focused on this type of social support. Studies by Ng and Sorensen (2008), Halbesleben and Wheeler (2015), and Poulsen et al. (2016), among others, have identified a positive relationship between the two facets of perceived organization-based social support (POBSS) — perceived peer support and perceived supervisor support — in enhancing engagement and, by extension, fostering a consistent propensity for nurturing OI. Therefore, based on the above, we propose the following hypothesis.

H1: The Perceived Organization-Based Social Support of the AHEPA members is positively associated with Organizational Identification.

Two-Way Communication

Two-way symmetrical communication was first mentioned in terms of public relations aspect by Grunig and Hunt (1984). It refers to bidirectional communication that is conducted between parties that take into consideration the interests of all involved, meaning the organization and the external stakeholders (Cheng, 2018). This concept is based upon a productive dialogue through which the parties aim to reach a mutually beneficial outcome. Symmetrical communication involves a balanced exchange of information between organizational leaders and members, promoting transparency, and trust. This communication style closely aligns with principles of participative decision-making and inclusiveness, which are fundamental to enhancing OI (Yue et al., 2021).

Previous research suggests that two-way communication serves as a catalyst for building trust within organizations, as members perceive their opinions as important and valued (Men & Stacks, 2014). Moreover, literature has indicated that TWC promotes reciprocity and a sense of inclusiveness while creating the tendency for members to involve in organizational citizenship behaviors (Barsade & O'Neill, 2016).

Nonprofit organizations (NPOs) that implement two-way communication foster a culture of transparency and mutual trust. This approach helps create a cohesive organizational environment where members feel valued and respected. Drawing from the abovementioned we project the following hypothesis for testing:

H2: Two-way communication within the AHEPA organization is positively associated with organizational identification of its members.

Methodology

Sample and procedure

In this study we employed a structured questionnaire, as it is the most suitable for collecting information regarding opinions, conducting statistical analyses, as well as reassuring the anonymity of the individuals that choose to participate in (Vogt et al., 2014). To conduct the research, we secured the support of the local Presidents of AHEPA Chapters by presenting the purpose and goals of our study to them. Subsequently, we emailed the questionnaire to the board members, who then forwarded it to their chapter members. Two months later, we sent a reminder email. All communication was conducted in English, but some key words were translated into Greek since many AHEPA members are bilingual. The adaptation of the scale items to fit the AHEPA context, as well as the reliability of the research instrument, was tested through a pilot study with a sample of 20 AHEPA members from the Richmond and Hopewell Chapters in Virginia, as recommended by the literature (e.g., Creswell & Creswell, 2017). Findings from the pilot test were analyzed using SPSS Statistics 23, revealing good internal consistency and reliability (Cronbach's alpha) for all scales, ranging from .88 to .91. Our final sample included 389 complete questionnaires, which were used to conduct the statistical analysis. The response rate was 55%.

Measures

Organizational-Based Social Support (POBSS) was evaluated by adapting six items from Shanock & Eisenberger (2006) and Hayton et al. (2011). Regarding the Two-Way Communication (TWC) we leveraged four questions that were used from Yue et al. (2021). The measurement of Organizational Identification (OI) included six questions extracted from Ashforth and Mael (1989). All the items included in the research instrument had already been tested for their validity and reliability in the aforementioned researches. The questionnaire comprised of Likert-type using a 5-point scale (1=strongly disagree, 5=strongly agree) grading of the independents (POBSS and TWC) and the dependent (OI) variables.

Results

Descriptive statistics

The results indicate that AHEPA members rely on their peers within the organization for support in fulfilling their tasks, demonstrating a strong psychological bond (POBSS, M=3.22, SD=0.89). Additionally, members perceive two-way communication as the predominant communication style (TWC, M=3.60, SD=1.05). This suggests a prevailing tendency towards achieving mutual understanding, benefiting the organization, and fostering a positive organizational climate and appreciation. Regarding organizational identification, the findings show that members feel deeply affiliated with the values and principles of the Order of AHEPA (OI, M=4.08, SD=0.93).

To ensure the consistency of these relationships, we conducted additional analyses using 'years as an AHEPA member' and 'parents as AHEPA members' as covariates to exclude them as potential explanations for the results (Pugliese et al., 2023). After controlling for these factors, we observed that the results were not affected by their presence. We used Eigenvalues above 1 for factor extraction, with the total variance explained by three factors being 71.42%.

Delving into the clusters of questions forming the variables, we identified the following results. For the POBSS variable, we included two dimensions of social support: managerial and peer, with three questions in each strand as presented in Table 1. All six questions had extraction values above the accepted threshold of 0.55, and by extension all were included in our statistical analysis. The responses from AHEPA members showed that a very small percentage were not particularly satisfied with the social support received in the organization [1=6 (1.5%), 2=53 (13.5%)]. Nearly half of the respondents felt neutral about the support [3=203 (52.2%)], while more than one-third felt they received adequate support [4=105 (27.1%), 5=22 (5.7%)].

The TWC variable was measured using four questions (Table 1), all of which had an accepted rate. The data collected from AHEPA members suggest that a very small portion of participants felt unable to express themselves openly or be heard by the organization representatives [1=2 (0.5%), 2=26 (6.6%)]. Less than half of the respondents characterized the communication as neutral [3=169 (43.4%)], while the other half found the communication employed, during interaction within the organization, to be symmetrical [4=122 (31.5%), 5=70 (18%)].

The OI variable was calculated using six questions as presented in Table 1. All of these questions made a considerable contribution to the variable extraction, and thus, all were included in the analysis. A meticulous examination of the OI variable reveals impressive results. The number of members who feel a lack of affiliation with the organization is almost negligible [1=3 (0.8%), 2=16 (4.1%)]. Similarly, less than one-third of participants believe their level of identification is neutral [3=104 (27%)]. The vast majority of participants, nearly 70%, feel a deep connection with the principles of the organization [4=155 (39.8%), 5=124 (28.3%)].

Table 1 Questionnaire Analysis

Variable	Coding	Question	Extraction
Perceived Organization-Based Social Support (Managerial Support)	POBSS1	I am given supportive feedback on the task I do	0,675
	POBSS2	I can rely on my chapter officers to help me out with an organization-related problem.	0,688
	POBSS3	I can talk to my chapter officers about something that has upset or annoyed me about an assigned task.	0,650
Perceived Organization-Based Social Support (Peer Support)	POBSS4	If a task gets difficult, other AHEPA members will help me	0,702
	POBSS5	I get help and support I need from AHEPA members	0,660
	POBSS6	I receive the respect I deserve from AHEPA members	0,646
Two-way Communication	TWC1	Most communication between me and AHEPA can be said to be two-way communication	0,755
	TWC2	AHEPA encourages differences of opinion	0,724
	TWC3	AHEPA members are informed about changes in policy or upcoming events	0,785
	TWC4	AHEPA members are not afraid to speak up during meetings with Chapter officers.	0,799
Organizational Identification	OI1	When someone criticizes the AHEPA Organization, it feels like a personal insult.	0,698
	OI2	I am very interested in what others think about the AHEPA Organization	0,765
	OI3	When I talk about the AHEPA Organization, I usually say 'we' rather than 'they'	0,739
	OI4	The AHEPA Organization's successes are my successes	0,751
	OI5	When someone praises the AHEPA Organization, it feels like a personal compliment	0,799
	OI6	If a story in the media criticized the AHEPA Organization, I would feel embarrassed	0,653

Table 2. Chronbach's alpha, Means and Standard Deviations among the Variables

Variables	a	M	SD
1.Years as AHEPA member	-	16.32	9.49
2.Parents as AHEPA members (0= yes)	-	.58	0.49
3. POBSS	0.90	3.22	0.89
4. TWC	0.88	3.60	1.05
5. OI	0.91	4.08	0.93

Hypothesis Testing

The statistical analysis of the relationship between the POBSS and OI revealed as being fairly strong, positive and significant (b= 0.266, p=0.006). Therefore the H1 was confirmed. Furthermore, the investigation of the relationship between TWC and OI showed that the relationship between them is strong, positive and statistically significant (b=0.304, p=004); leading to the conclusion that H2 was also confirmed.

Table 3. Correlations and 95% bias-corrected confidence intervals

	OI	LLCI	ULCI
1. POBSS	0.266**	0.081	0.328
2. TWC	0.304**	0.096	0.398
3. OI	1	0.099	0.448

**p<.01

Discussion

In this study, we aimed to examine two of the most significant antecedents that contribute to building OI in an NPO environment. OI is crucial because it fosters beneficial organizational outcomes, serving as the cornerstone for utilizing social and material resources to address both immediate and long-term community challenges. Despite its importance, existing literature has largely overlooked empirical data from these organizations, creating a noticeable gap. To bridge this gap, we investigated how two-way communication and perceived organization-based social support enhance organizational identification.

The first hypothesis, as confirmed, suggests that social support within the organizational environment forge the enhancement of OI, creating a stronger and deeper association with the organization. This finding comes along with previous studies indicating the beneficial role of organization-based social support (Halbesleben & Wheeler, 2015; Ng & Sorensen, 2008; Poulsen et al. 2016).

The second hypothesis, upon its confirmation, indicates that symmetrical communication is a consistent and strong predictor of OI within NPOs. This type of communication, which emphasizes mutual respect and a genuine interest in ensuring members feel heard, is a cohesive factor in nurturing a positive psychological bond between members and the organization. This finding is coherent with past research, which has shown that balanced communication contributes to building a good organizational climate where members flourish through higher satisfaction, self-esteem, and a sense of empowerment (Bartels et al., 2007; Lee et al., 2015; Men & Stacks, 2014).

The comparison of the two independent variables, revealed a tendency for responses to indicate a higher level of two-way communication within the AHEPA organization, while POBSS slightly lagged behind. One possible explanation is that the majority of AHEPA members, having grown up in the States or being second- and third-generation Greeks, have embraced the more individualistic aspects of American culture. These results may derive from an unconscious preference for communication empowerment over peer support, which might be more deeply embedded in collectivistic societies like Greece (Desai & Hogg, 2023).

Theoretical Implications

This study is one of the few empirical initiatives delving into the impact of organizational communication and social support on the psychological bond between members and the organization, offering valuable theoretical and practical insights. Social support within the organizational environment is perceived as a crucial framework for understanding the relationship between members and the organization. It is pivotal in interpreting and predicting members' behaviors and attitudes toward organizational goals, as well as motivating them to contribute their best efforts. Our findings, in line with previous researches, contribute directly to the social reciprocity framework advocating that social relationships can develop organizational assets and extend its reach (Simbula et al., 2023).

Our findings contribute to the growing body of research on internal communication, organizational climate, social support, organizational identification, and human resource management within NPOs. These insights are valuable for nonprofits aiming to enhance member engagement and organizational effectiveness. By prioritizing symmetrical communication and robust social support systems, NPOs can strengthen members' psychological bonds, leading to greater organizational cohesion and success.

Practical Implications

Pragmatically, the results suggest that leadership should systematically foster member-centered internal communication, as it can boost members' self-esteem and empowerment. This type of communication not only reinforces individual confidence but also enhances overall organizational cohesion (Bartels et al., 2007). Additionally, it is plausible that NPO leadership should engage in such communication to forge morale and convey the perception that internal stakeholders are the backbone of organizational effectiveness, cultivating gradually a more motivated and dedicated membership base.

According to existing literature, members exposed to balanced and responsive communication tend to exhibit significant engagement, satisfaction, and supportive behaviors, both in their social environment and on social media (Lee et al., 2015). This engagement is crucial for enhancing the organizational image, as members become ambassadors for the organization, promoting its values and mission (Dai et al., 2023). Based on the relationships discussed in the previous section, we propose that leadership should prioritize developing a supportive organizational climate founded on mutual trust, open opinion sharing, and a sense of fellowship. Unlike employees who depend on their organizations for survival and prosperity, NPO members volunteer their time and resources from their personal lives. Furthermore, fostering an environment of open communication and mutual respect can lead to a more dynamic and resilient organization.

Limitations and Directions for Future Research

Like any other research initiative, we encountered some limitations. First, the study was conducted exclusively on the eastern coast of the USA. Additionally, from the NPO perspective, we only included opinions from members of

the AHEPA organization. To provide a more comprehensive understanding of organizational climate and social support perceptions, it would be beneficial to gather opinions from various NPOs involved in social relief efforts.

Future studies should explore specific beneficial outcomes that OI can promote, such as enhanced marketing, increased organizational citizenship behaviors (OCB), and attracting new members. Additionally, research should identify more antecedents of OI to uncover the underlying mechanisms through which NPO leadership can strengthen the organizational image, extend operational reach, and enhance sustainability. An intriguing avenue for future research would be to conduct a comparative analysis between AHEPA members who grew up in different societal backgrounds. For instance, comparing members from Greece, where collectivist values are more prevalent, with those from the USA, where individualistic values dominate, could yield insightful findings. This comparison could help understand how cultural differences influence organizational identification and the effectiveness of communication and social support strategies within the organization.

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