

THE SOCIAL NEGOTIATION OF GROUP PROTOTYPE AMBIGUITY IN DYNAMIC ORGANIZATIONAL CONTEXTS

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This article focuses on how the changing nature of work and working today elicits prototype ambiguity in groups—a shared perception among group members that the attributes, attitudes, and actions that define and describe the typical group member are unclear. We offer a functionalist account of prototype ambiguity identifying social contexts that reliably trigger ambiguity in group prototypes, group-level consequences of prototype ambiguity that motivate corrective action, and social negotiation processes by which group members adaptively resolve prototype ambiguity. We outline how group members' social negotiation efforts unfold in different but predictable ways (in response to specific triggers of prototype ambiguity) to yield emergent prototypes based on either central tendencies (as exemplified by the average group member) or ideals (as exemplified by the extraordinary group member). Concluding the article is a discussion of implications for research on social identity processes, group prototypes, and social hierarchies in organizations.

Changes in industry structure, competitive dynamics, organizational strategies, and departmental objectives can call into question group prototypes that define the very essence of what it means to be a group member. Prototypes bring people's cognitive representations of their collective identities to life by defining those features that best epitomize the group and its members and distinguish them from other groups—the way that a tech-savvy salesperson in a white shirt, dark blue suit, and tie was the prototype of IBM in the 1970s and 1980s. Because group prototypes are based on who is in the group, how the group performs its work, and which other groups are used for social comparison purposes, they may change dramatically as work contexts evolve (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Turner, Oakes, Haslam, & McGarty, 1994). Group members coping with organizational changes or shifts in the external environment may find their group prototypes particularly unstable. Indeed, people's experience of work and working is often marked by *prototype ambiguity*—a shared perception among group members that the attributes, attitudes, and actions that define and describe the typical member are unclear. Prototype ambiguity, if left unresolved, is highly problematic for groups and their members.

Consider the example of Tom Richardson¹ and his fellow news reporters employed at a local newspaper. Industry-wide changes in journalism, reporting, and newspapers have called into doubt the characteristics that represent members of his news department. Verifying facts reported and presenting all sides of a story once served as clear standards of behavior for department members. These standards are now violated regularly in the rush to publish quickly to meet public demand for 24/7 news and to compete with specialized news outlets reflecting market interest in news slanted by a particular agenda. Also, as the public looks to the web to get news, the news department has expanded its offerings such that professionally educated and trained reporters like Tom now work alongside people without these credentials who maintain a blog or Twitter feed. To reduce costs, Tom's department also relies on freelance writers with highly varied backgrounds, training, and contractual relationships with the paper to generate news items. Tom's newsroom is not the bustling center it once was because technology has enabled people to work from their homes,

¹ We have changed his name to maintain anonymity.

coffee shops, and cell phones with only digital tethers to the organization, blurring the group's boundaries in the process. As a result, Tom and his colleagues lack clarity about precisely what defines a typical department member today. Formerly representative features such as members' education and training, jobs and work locale, and job attitudes and behavior have been called into question.

Our example provides a window into how contextual changes prompting prototype ambiguity potentially have cascading effects for groups and their members. Tom and his colleagues are struggling to define the essential qualities of their news department and the features that best represent the people composing the group. Consequently, members may find themselves without a strong guide for determining who should (and should not) be in the group and how members ought to behave. Moreover, department members may feel insecure in their relationship with the group. Tom, for instance, believes that the prototype of a newspaper journalist that existed in his department no longer matches many of the people he encounters professionally and it is unclear what it means to cover the news. Lacking a clear group prototype, Tom questions whether he is sufficiently representative of the department to merit respect from his colleagues. In short, our example illustrates how prototype ambiguity is one of the realities of work and working today that poses a dilemma for group members and the group as a whole.

Our central goals in this article are to draw attention to prototype ambiguity as an understudied yet increasingly prevalent feature of modern organizations and to offer a functionalist account of how groups resolve it. Social identity research (Hogg & Abrams, 1993; Hogg & Terry, 2000) and related work on self-categorization² (Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987) emphasize the individual-level benefits of prototype clarity, which refers to the ease with which members can discern and describe how a group's essential properties are manifested in its members. Prototype ambiguity, which is the absence of such clarity, has not been systemat-

ically considered as an important facet of group life, despite the fact that it is likely to occur regularly in groups operating in dynamic organizational contexts. We recognize the functional value of prototype clarity for groups as a whole, suggesting that prototype ambiguity creates problems with respect to member coordination, the efficient allocation of group resources, and the group's strategic effectiveness. Such implications of unresolved prototype ambiguity will motivate corrective action on the part of the group.

Our analysis of group prototypes and prototype ambiguity addresses two key questions. First, *what contextual conditions reliably trigger prototype ambiguity?* Social identity perspectives emphasize the context-dependent nature of group prototypes (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Turner et al., 1994), suggesting that any contextual change is a potentially destabilizing force prompting prototype ambiguity. Yet some contextual changes are likely to be more potent than others in creating prototype ambiguity. We propose that threats to a group's collective identity lie at the heart of this phenomenon. We distinguish two forms of collective identity threat that challenge existing group prototypes in distinct ways. The first is threats to group entitativity—that is, when a group has difficulty defining itself as a coherent entity that is distinct from other groups, such as when a newsroom is fractured by competing subgroups associated with its online and print products. The second is threats to group status—that is, when the value of the group relative to other groups falls, such as when a newspaper's circulation numbers and advertising revenue fail to outperform a rival newspaper. Threats to group entitativity and group status, by challenging the essence and value of the group, create doubt about the attributes assumed to be most characteristic of group members.

Second, *how do groups resolve prototype ambiguity?* Intuitively, it is difficult to imagine a group that operates in an ongoing state of confusion about its essential properties. Although suggestive evidence of prototype ambiguity is implicated in prior studies of organizational identity change (e.g., Corley & Gioia, 2004; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996), the group processes that characterize productive responses to prototype ambiguity have not been considered. We offer a functionalist ac-

² Henceforth we use "social identity perspectives" to refer to social identity theory and related research on self-categorization processes.

count detailing how and why adaptive group responses follow distinct patterns based on the specific collective identity threat (group entitlement or group status) prompting prototype ambiguity. Importantly, we identify differential outcomes in the form of emergent group prototypes that represent either the ideal or average group member, and we outline the interpersonal processes by which members negotiate the content of these emergent prototypes. Central to our argument is the idea that such negotiations occur in discussions about whether individual members are worthy of more or less respect in the group. Because respect is based in large part on a member's fit with the group prototype (Hogg, Fielding, & Darley, 2005; Hogg, Hardie, & Reynolds, 1995), such discussions are essentially dialogues between members about criteria that ought to define the group prototype.

Throughout the article we focus on prototypes associated with groups that result from formal boundaries created by the organizational structure (rather than informal friendship groups that emerge in the workplace). These groups can range from small, interactive, task-oriented groups (e.g., units and workgroups) to large, highly dispersed groups (e.g., the organization itself or a large division). Nonetheless, we recognize that prototype ambiguity and the group responses we describe apply to groups more broadly—for example, professional groups that span organizational boundaries (e.g., management consulting, investigative journalism, or pediatric medicine). We structure our analysis into several parts. First, we situate the construct of group prototype ambiguity within the literature on social identity and distinguish it from other sources of ambiguity in the workplace. Next, we elaborate the prototype ambiguity process, focusing on the social contexts that reliably trigger ambiguity in group prototypes, group-level consequences of prototype ambiguity that motivate corrective action, and social negotiation processes by which group members adaptively resolve prototype ambiguity. We conclude with theoretical and practical implications of our perspective.

PROTOTYPES AND PROTOTYPICALITY

Our conceptualization of group prototypes and prototype ambiguity in relation to the broader literature on group identity is outlined

in Table 1. Social identity perspectives define group prototypes as members' shared representation of the attributes assumed to be most characteristic of the group and that also distinguish the group from other groups (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). For example, the group prototype associated with Southwest Airlines flight crews comprises attributes such as efficient, friendly, and good humored (Gittell, 2003). Prototypes are part and parcel of a group's collective identity, which is members' shared sense of who they are as a group. For example, an organization's collective identity comprises members' central perceptions and beliefs about what differentiates their organization from others (Albert & Whetten, 1985; Hatch & Schultz, 2002), represented by both the labels used to describe the identity (e.g., exceptional customer service) and the shared meanings underlying those labels (e.g., giving individualized support to customers; Gioia, Schultz, & Corley, 2000). Collective identity emerges from and, in turn, influences the people as well as the place—the organization's values, practices, and culture (Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Nag, Corley, & Gioia, 2007). While identity is not just descriptive of the people who belong to a group, prototypes are the everyday manifestations of the collective identity in individual members—the interpretation and translation of identity features into attributes, attitudes, and actions at the individual level. It is through prototypes that group members enact their collective identity.

Prototypes can take different forms. Social identity perspectives have emphasized group prototypes based on central tendencies (i.e., attributes that members actually share and that are most common among members; Turner et al., 1987; Turner et al., 1994), but some attention has now shifted to how ideals (i.e., attributes beneficial to group goals and that members ideally should possess) also provide a basis for defining the group (Hogg, 1992; Hogg & Terry, 2000). This distinction is consistent with research in cognitive psychology distinguishing between central tendencies and ideals as two different drivers of typicality (see Murphy, 2002). Prototypes based on central tendencies include characteristics that group members actually share. Such prototypes describe the average group member—as, for example, the way that risk averse and cost conscious might describe members of an accounting department. In contrast,

TABLE 1
Linking Prototype Ambiguity to Related Constructs

Construct	Definition	Example Literature	Key Differences from Prototypes and Prototype Ambiguity
Group prototype	Group members' subjective representation of the attributes, attitudes, and actions that define the group at the individual level; prototypes are actively constructed and context dependent	Hogg (1992); Hogg & Terry (2000); Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell (1987)	Target of prototype ambiguity
Prototype ambiguity	Group members' shared perception that the attributes, attitudes, and actions that define and describe the typical member are unclear	See literature on prototype clarity: Haslam, Oakes, McGarty, Turner, & Onorato (1995); Hogg (1992); Hogg & Hains (1996)	
Prototype valence	The degree to which an individual perceives the group prototype in positive or negative terms	Hogg & Hains (1996)	Prototype ambiguity is not contingent on valence; any prototype can be called into doubt
Prototypicality	The degree to which an individual resembles the group prototype and, thus, fits in with the group; prototypicality can be assessed by the self and other members	Hogg & Terry (2000); Turner et al. (1987)	Threatened when prototype ambiguity is high; when the prototype is unclear, members lack a clear standard for assessing how well self and others fit the group
Collective identity	Group members' shared sense of who they are as a group and how they differ from other groups; collective identity is represented in the labels used to describe the identity and the shared meanings underlying those labels	Albert & Whetten (1985); Hatch & Schultz (2002)	Basis for group prototypes; describes not only group members but also group values, practices, and culture; ambiguity about how members ought to enact the collective identity is prototype ambiguity
Identity ambiguity	A collective state wherein group members lack a sense of the group's collective identity because no identity labels exist or because the meanings underlying the labels are in doubt or subject to alternative interpretation	Corley & Gioia (2004); Gioia, Schultz, & Corley (2000)	Likely source of prototype ambiguity but not necessary; lack of clarity about identity labels and/or meanings makes it difficult for group members to articulate the qualities that ought to define the typical member
Identity conflict	Multiple, simultaneous perceptions of a group's collective identity vie for dominance within the group	Fiol, Pratt, & O'Connor (2009); Glynn (2000); Golden-Biddle & Rao (1997)	Possible source of prototype ambiguity; ongoing debate about multiple, inconsistent prototypes makes it difficult for group members to develop a consensually held representation of the group's prototypical features
Identity threat	Events that refute or challenge group members' perceptions and beliefs underlying the group's collective identity	Dutton & Dukerich (1991); Elsbach & Kramer (1996); Nag, Corley, & Gioia (2007); Ravasi & Schultz (2006)	Source of prototype ambiguity
Norm ambiguity	Uncertainty about accepted and expected ways of behaving in a group	Arrow, McGrath, & Berdahl (2000); Hackman (1992)	Likely source of prototype ambiguity only when norms are identity based
Role ambiguity	Uncertainty about others' expectations/job requirements	Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman (1970)	Applies to individuals or subgroups rather than all group members; may be unrelated to collective identity, group prototypes, and group boundaries; socially negotiated with role alters rather than fellow group members

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Construct	Definition	Example Literature	Key Differences from Prototypes and Prototype Ambiguity
Intragroup status	The degree to which group members respect and value an individual member; based mainly on competence	Magee & Galinsky (2008)	Member prototypicality is one of a number of antecedent factors; may be unrelated to group boundaries and collective identity
Status hierarchy instability	Perceived malleability of intragroup status ranking	Doosje, Spears, & Ellemers (2002)	Likely consequence of prototype ambiguity, but factors unrelated to group prototypes can destabilize status rankings
Status conflict	Within-group disagreement over status/competence ranking; elicits status challenges	Bendersky & Hays (2012); Porath, Overbeck, & Pearson (2008)	May be unrelated to collective identity, group prototypes, and group boundaries; socially negotiated through processes similar to member prototypicality
Social hierarchy legitimacy	Use of values/beliefs/etc. in wider social context to generate acceptance of a social innovation or system of social order	Johnson, Dowd, & Ridgeway (2006)	May be unrelated to collective identity, group prototypes, and group boundaries; socially negotiated through processes similar to member prototypicality

prototypes based on ideals offer an extreme or exaggerated representation of those characteristics that define, describe, and differentiate the group. Such prototypes therefore describe the exceptional, perhaps hypothetical member—for example, the way that virtuous and idealistic might describe an exceptional set of traders and advisers in an investment banking division.

Prototypes have evolved as adaptive, survival-promoting features with intragroup and intergroup functions. These include enabling groups to appraise and categorize events, actions, and people and motivating actions that regulate group membership (i.e., including or excluding people and conferring respect on members) as well as regularize member behavior (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Abrams, 1993; Hogg & Terry, 2000). Perhaps the most vital function prototypes serve is providing a common standard against which current and prospective members are evaluated as being fit for group membership. Prototypicality refers to the degree to which an individual matches the set of attributes strongly associated with the group (Turner et al., 1987). The more a person deviates from these attributes, the less prototypical he or she is considered by others.

Individuals become aware of the group prototype when they assume a particular group identity and notice and react to differences in how

prototypical they and others are (Haslam, Oakes, McGarty, Turner, & Onorato, 1995). Critically, prototypicality is a primary basis for judging individual members' respect within the group—that is, how much the group includes and values them (Hogg et al., 1995; Turner, 1991; also see De Cremer & Tyler, 2005, and Tyler & Blader, 2002). Members who are highly prototypical are more respected because they better represent the group's essential features. For example, a smart, khaki-clad, computer savvy technical whiz who embodies the underdog spirit of his fast-growing Silicon Valley company will be highly respected by his fellow coworkers. In contrast, less prototypical members will be less respected because they do little to affirm the qualities that make the group a coherent and distinct entity. Moreover, members rely on group prototypes as a guide to appropriate workplace behavior. When members assume a particular group identity, they tend to assimilate themselves into the group prototype (Turner et al., 1987)—that is, members behave in prototypical ways.

Because group prototypes and member prototypicality are inextricably linked, changes in group prototypes also alter the criteria for judging members' prototypicality. Thus, the same person in the same group can be seen as more or less prototypical depending on how the social

context alters members' shared definition of the group's essential features (Hogg & Terry, 2000). For example, the hubristic, well-paid, maverick trader may be highly prototypical of her investment firm when the market is booming but much less so in the depths of a financial crisis, when being conservative and prudent become essential member features. This suggests some inherent instability in prototypicality, with group members at times experiencing the standards for their membership, social worth, and work behavior as moving targets.

Indeed, ambiguity can arise in groups' collective identities and prototypes and in members' prototypicality. Corley and Gioia (2004) defined identity ambiguity as a collective state wherein organization members are in doubt about who they are as an organization. An important aspect of identity ambiguity is equivocality: multiple possible interpretations of the features that should define the organization exist simultaneously. These emerging interpretations are considerations for the group and are not necessarily indicative of identity conflict—which is a situation wherein different subgroups, each possessing a clear group prototype, vie to have their representation of the collective identity adopted to gain legitimacy and material benefits (see Fiol, Pratt, & O'Connor, 2009, and Glynn, 2000). Prototype ambiguity has a different referent than identity ambiguity; it is anchored in defining and describing group members rather than the group as a whole (Hogg & Abrams, 1993; Hogg & Hains, 1996). Thus, prototype ambiguity exists when group members are in doubt about precisely how the collective identity is manifested at the individual level.

Identity ambiguity and prototype ambiguity are not perfectly correlated. Prototype ambiguity may occur even when the collective identity is unambiguous because groups will reconsider their prototypical qualities when meaningful shifts in context occur, such as when new strategic initiatives alter customer expectations and define new competitors for an organization. For example, Gioia and colleagues (2000) noted that while the "HP Way" is a label that Hewlett-Packard has used to symbolize its collective identity for decades, the specific attitudes and actions that give meaning to the HP Way have changed over time in response to shifts in HP's competitive landscape (also see Collins & Porras, 1994). Arguably, such changes reflect adjust-

ments in how HP's identity is manifested in specific prototypical elements. We expect that prototype ambiguity often precedes and acts as a prompt for such adjustments to group prototypes. Thus, as the HP example suggests, even an unambiguous collective identity may be accompanied by prototype ambiguity and change, which allows identity labels to remain stable while the meanings associated with those labels adapt to new demands. In general, the reverse seems less likely (i.e., high identity ambiguity but low prototype ambiguity), but this may occur in some instances, such as in a new start-up where homophily among the founders informs a group prototype before any clear definition of the organization's central, enduring, and distinctive qualities emerges.

It is important to distinguish group prototype ambiguity, our main focus in this article, from other sources of ambiguity in organizations (also outlined in Table 1). Prototype ambiguity, which affects the group as a whole, is distinct from yet related to ambiguity in individual members' prototypicality. Group prototype ambiguity reliably calls into question members' prototypicality. When prototype ambiguity emerges, all members likely will be insecure in their relationship to the group because the very basis for judging their fit with and social value within the group is vague and unclear. However, it is also possible for individual members to question how prototypical they and others are without this ambiguity being shared throughout the group. In such cases the group prototype is unambiguous, but meaningful changes at the individual level (e.g., change in work role, performance level, etc.) call into doubt a member's fit with the group's prototypical qualities (e.g., Bartel, Wrzesniewski, & Wiesenfeld, 2012; Wright, 2009).

Prototype ambiguity also differs from norm ambiguity. While norms refer to the accepted and expected ways of behaving in a group (Hackman, 1992), some norms are identity based and, thus, reflected in group prototypes, whereas others are not. For example, norms defining when people should arrive at meetings or what communication media to use (e.g., email versus meeting) may be critical guides for individual behavior in a given group but unrelated to prototype ambiguity when such norms are not identity based. Prototype ambiguity also differs from role ambiguity. Roles are sets of behavioral

expectations for a given job or position, and successful group functioning seems to require heterogeneity in intragroup roles (Caporael, 1997). Role ambiguity therefore reflects a lack of clarity about what a particular job or position within the group requires (Rizzo, House, & Lirtzman, 1970), rather than ambiguous standards for group membership that cut across individual roles.

Likewise, prototype ambiguity is distinct from status hierarchy conflict or instability. Status hierarchies are ordinal rankings of group members based on task competence or performance (Magee & Galinsky, 2008), rather than a basis for defining group membership or differentiating the group from other groups. Status conflict occurs when groups fail to reach a consensus regarding the status hierarchy, leading members to compete for status (Bendersky & Hays, 2012; Groysberg, Polzer, & Elfenbein, 2011; Overbeck, Correll, & Park, 2005; Porath, Overbeck, & Pearson, 2008). Status hierarchy instability reflects individuals' perception that status rankings are changing and possibly malleable (Doosje, Spears, & Ellemers, 2002). Research suggests that prototypicality may be one basis for intragroup status hierarchy (Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003), with the implication that anything that calls these prototypicality judgments into question may elicit status conflict or status hierarchy instability. Nonetheless, group prototypes comprise identity-based attributes other than competence; they provide standards for membership and, thus, define group boundaries, unlike status hierarchies. Also, status conflict and instability may originate in sources other than prototype ambiguity, suggesting that these constructs are only modestly related.

Having introduced the core ideas that underscore our perspective on prototype ambiguity, we now turn to developing a model of the general process through which prototype ambiguity arises and affects organizational groups.

THE PROTOTYPE AMBIGUITY PROCESS

Our model of the prototype ambiguity process is depicted in Figure 1. Within this general process we focus on three issues: (1) social contexts that reliably trigger ambiguity in group prototypes, (2) group-level consequences of prototype ambiguity that motivate corrective action, and (3)

social negotiation processes by which group members adaptively resolve prototype ambiguity.

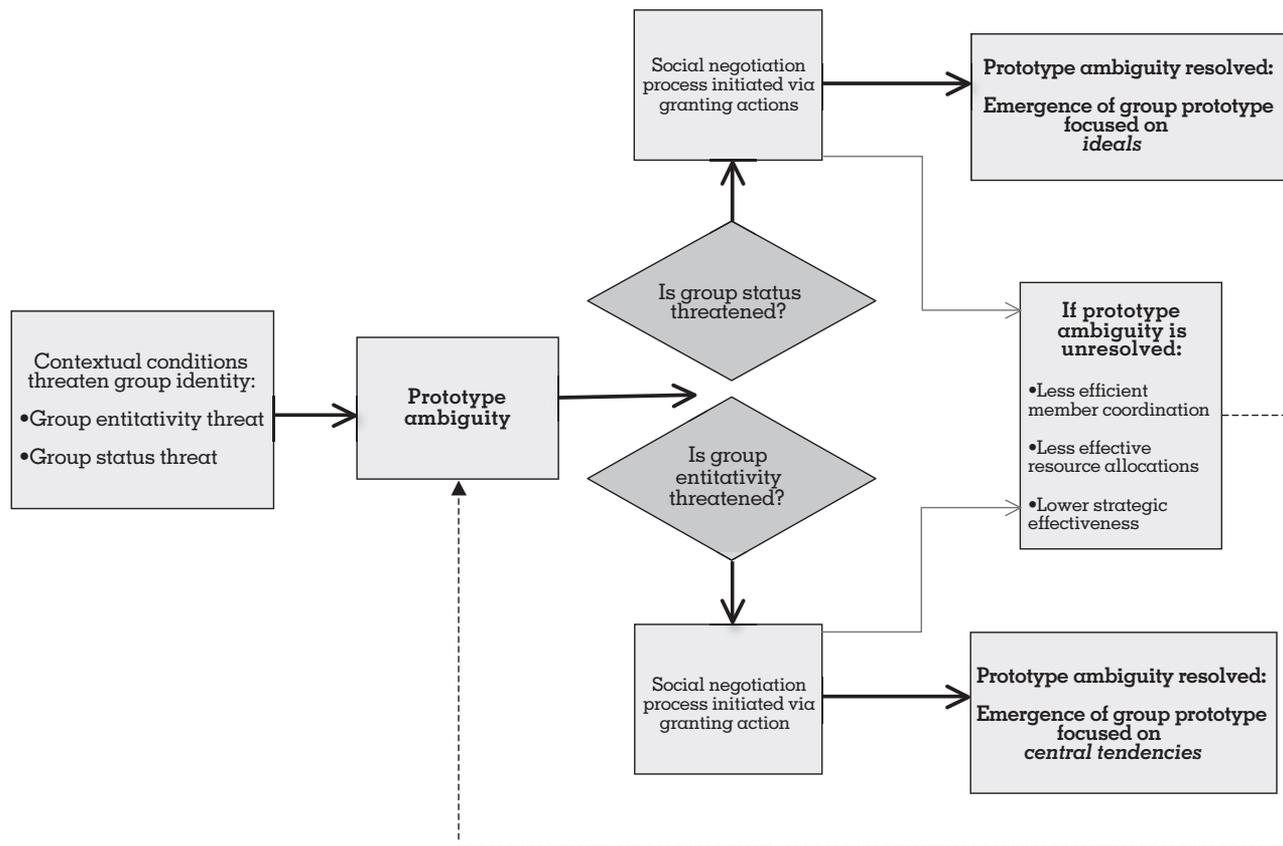
Contextual Shifts, Identity Threat, and Prototype Ambiguity

Changes in groups' social contexts often catalyze changes in group prototypes. Yet, from the standpoint of social identity theory, there has been little systematic consideration of contextual forces that cast doubt on existing prototypes and the implications of working in groups that lack or have lost clear prototypes. Related organizational research on collective identity threat and change (e.g., Corley & Gioia, 2004; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Elsbach & Kramer, 1996; Gioia & Thomas, 1996) offers rich examples of organizations likely struggling with prototype ambiguity as they confront specific challenges in their external environment. Yet this work does not explore the link between collective identity threat and prototype ambiguity explicitly, particularly how different categories of threat prompt distinct group responses to prototype ambiguity.

Our consideration of social context begins with some of the fundamental problems of group life implicated in members' experience of prototype ambiguity. We propose that prototype ambiguity arises in response to situations that threaten a group's collective identity. Identity threat challenges the very essence of the group—that it is a coherent entity possessing distinctive features. Two fundamental threats to group identity are threats to group entitativity and threats to group status (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002; Tajfel & Turner, 1986). Below we distinguish group entitativity and group status threats as triggers for prototype ambiguity and outline contextual factors associated with each.

Entitativity threats to group identity. Group entitativity refers to the degree to which a group is perceived as a coherent, unified entity (Campbell, 1958; Lickel et al., 2000). Groups with higher entitativity have clearer boundaries distinguishing them from other groups, similar to how homogeneous groups can readily articulate what members have in common and identify those who don't belong. Members generally experience entitativity threat as a lack of cohesion and solidarity within the group—a feeling that the group is more a collection of individuals than a unified entity.

FIGURE 1
A Model of Group Prototype Ambiguity



Social contexts that make group prototypes too complex or too vague threaten to reduce group entitativity because the group's essence and what membership means lose coherence. Change processes that expand, extinguish, or consolidate formal group boundaries within organizations are especially potent contexts for entitativity threat, such as mergers, acquisitions and spin-offs, organizational restructurings, workforce downsizing, and employee turnover. Such contexts often alter who is in a group and what work the group performs, necessitating a dialogue about what defines and differentiates the group prototype in this new context and what makes individuals more or less prototypical. For instance, a rapid increase in group or organization size is likely to threaten group entitativity. When groups become larger, there is a natural tendency for diversity in the group to increase, whether that diversity is in the form of demographic characteristics, values and attitudes, or work activities. Increased diversity, in

turn, reduces the perceived similarity that draws group members together into a coherent unit (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001). For example, when tech start-ups are small, the members may all be software engineers, but as the organizations grow, members will have training in fields as diverse as accounting, marketing, and human resource management. In these situations of increased diversity, the clarity of the group prototype is likely to decline, and individuals may become unclear about their own and other members' prototypicality (Chattopadhyay, George, & Lawrence, 2004).

Another common threat to group entitativity stems from how organizational structures create groups that are nested or embedded within others (e.g., workgroups embedded in departments) or groups that are cross-cutting (e.g., task forces spanning multiple functions or departments). This inevitably leads groups to have similar or overlapping purposes and goals, values, norms, and member profiles. For example, many invest-

ment banks have groups of proprietary traders working on behalf of the firm and groups of traders working on behalf of clients. However, the activities of the two groups are similar and frequently overlap, and there is substantial movement of personnel between them. In such cases the criteria that separate groups are more continuous than discrete, making it difficult to create or maintain prototypes that define a group as a coherent, unified entity.

Subgroups may also emerge organically and threaten group entitativity because they fragment the group and offer alternative group boundaries that compete with those of the group as a whole. In research on workgroup dynamics, scholars have considered how faultlines emerge when a subgroup of individuals recognizes that they have certain characteristics in common, such as gender and hierarchical rank, which also differentiate them from other ingroup members (Lau & Murnighan, 1998). These faultlines create ambiguity about what attributes should be part of the group prototype and, thus, who is more or less prototypical of the group. Consider a product division that assigns different-colored ID tags to contingent employees who are otherwise interchangeable with other division employees. With these IDs worn on lanyards around employees' necks, two distinct subgroups form that undermine the common group prototype previously uniting division members.

Still other threats to group entitativity stem from changes in how work is performed. For example, many firms contract out their information technology (IT) department to a different technology firm. That is, IT employees may operate within a company and support the IT infrastructure of that company, but their paycheck comes from another organization, blurring the department's boundaries for those within and outside it. Joint ventures may be experienced similarly because employees may feel torn between membership in a partner organization or the joint venture, just as cross-functional teams divide employees' loyalty between the team and their department. These initiatives aim to break down silos and boundaries between units or to leverage competencies in different organizations, but, in doing so, group entitativity is threatened as members struggle to define their group as a coherent unit and to identify those attributes that best characterize the group and also distinguish it from other groups.

Finally, external groups may take actions that elicit entitativity threats. For example, competitive mimicry is a common and widely acknowledged path to legitimacy (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983), which, when manifested in individual member profiles, may lead to similarity in member features across organizations that complicates members' ability to clearly differentiate themselves from members of other organizations. Mimicry may be increasingly prevalent because of increased information exchange, such as competitive benchmarking and the use of consultants who diffuse best practices. Along similar lines, career mobility (whereby organizations hire employees from other organizations, rather than promoting from within) may similarly stimulate entitativity threat by complicating efforts to distinguish the group from other groups.

Status threats to group identity. While entitativity threats often result from contextual changes within the group, a second type of group identity threat concerns group status and often results from changes outside the group or organization. Group status threat calls into question how the group relates to other groups in a comparative sense. Members generally experience status threat as an unfavorable evaluation of the group—a feeling that the group is less socially desirable than other groups.

Group status threats may be more common today as trends such as globalization, increased information exchange, innovation, reduced barriers to competition, shifts from relational to transactional professional relationships, and increased focus on short-term performance are making once-rare tournament-like forms of competition increasingly pervasive. Frank and Cook (1995) characterized these as "winner-take-all" competitions, with those at the top of such markets winning disproportionate rewards while those just below find their position unsustainable, making group status threat highly salient and ubiquitous.

The altered tenor of competition and its implications for group status threat are visible in many ways. In certain industries, such as consulting and investment banking, "beauty pageants" have become a common way to win clients and business (replacing the more relationship-oriented process previously in place). In these situations teams representing different organizations make their pitches to the

client, hoping that their organization will be hired for the project or deal. The clients' ultimate choice has clear implications for group status and may induce status threat for the losing organizations.

The proliferation of rankings is another manifestation of this formerly rare form of competition. Examples include *Business Week* and *U.S. News & World Report* rankings of schools, the "league tables" in the investment banking industry, the "Best Places to Work" survey, numerous corporate social responsibility rankings, and the increasingly common organizational practice of ranking divisions on their short-term financial performance. Rankings force variance in group status, exaggerating sometimes insignificant intergroup differences and thus increasing the intensity and pervasiveness of group status threat. Despite the fact that small differences in rankings often do not reflect meaningful differences in critical attributes, groups that lose rank are often viewed negatively and forced to respond (Elsbach & Kramer, 1996). Consider, for example, the effect of business school rankings on group prototypes. Different ranking publications use different criteria, and both the metrics and how they are weighted frequently change without notice, all of which create uncertainty about what will positively distinguish one school from another in any given year. Consequently, business schools are unsure about whether their group prototype should focus on professors who are responsive to students, those who are frequently quoted in the popular press, or those who publish their research in top-tier scholarly journals. The end result is that group status threat resulting from these rankings can destabilize group prototypes.

In our increasingly networked and connected world, information availability may increase group status threats as the number of dimensions on which groups are compared expands. Moreover, the rate of intergroup comparisons may also increase as stakeholders adopt a more short-term and transactional orientation in their interactions with organizational groups. Critically, interactions guided by such an orientation make it less likely that criteria that generated a favorable evaluation of the group in the past will be relevant in future situations. As a result, groups may be unclear about what features will positively differentiate them from other groups, resulting in prototype ambiguity. For example,

in the skittish U.S. financial markets of 2010 and 2011, stock prices were often battered when firms missed earnings by a fraction of a penny, but announcement of the discovery of a promising new pharmaceutical compound had little effect on stock price because regulatory concerns led investors to sour on the entire health care industry. In these situations it is difficult to evaluate whether group prototypes associated with honest accounting or product innovation will bring a firm comparative advantages.

In sum, social contexts likely to produce prototype ambiguity include those that make it difficult for a group to clearly differentiate itself from other groups (i.e., entitativity threat) or win valued resources in competition with other groups (i.e., group status threat). As our examples imply, prototype ambiguity is not a novel phenomenon in groups, but changes in organizations and the environments in which they operate today suggest that prototype ambiguity is far more pervasive—affecting more organizational groups more frequently. The potential negative group-level outcomes of unresolved prototype ambiguity are described next.

Group-Level Consequences of Unresolved Prototype Ambiguity

Social identity perspectives have emphasized the costs of prototype ambiguity at the individual level (e.g., how it frustrates individuals' need for uncertainty reduction; Hogg, 1992) but have largely overlooked the group-level consequences. This omission is surprising because prototypes define the basis on which groups regulate group membership (i.e., member inclusion/exclusion and member respect), so prototype ambiguity is not localized to a single or select set of members but, rather, is an issue for the whole group. We suggest that prototype ambiguity interferes with key aspects of group functioning, including member coordination, allocation of group resources, and the group's strategic effectiveness.

Member coordination. Prototype clarity aids coordination by serving as a clear and consensual standard for behavior, allowing members to form predictive expectations for their own and others' behavior and to anticipate and execute needed adjustments in workplace interactions (Hogg et al., 1995). When prototype ambiguity is high, group members may participate reluc-

tantly and act guarded in social interactions because they are unsure about what they can or should do. For example, instead of being confident that it is acceptable for them to seize a leadership role and take charge when a team project is lagging behind schedule, group members may be afraid of overstepping their bounds because they are unclear about what constitutes prototypical behavior. Consequently, they formulate decisions and execute responses slowly and inconsistently and shift their opinions more readily, making social interactions less efficient and even counterproductive.

Efficient resource allocation. Prototype ambiguity deprives a group of signals regarding how representative of the group members are and of the likelihood members will behave in accordance with the group's wishes and collective welfare. This undermines efficient allocation of a group's human resources by making it difficult for the group to place individuals in specific roles and to expect that other members will understand and support these decisions. For example, it may be unclear who can best represent a group in a boundary-spanning role, a formal presentation of work accomplished, a union-management negotiation, or a request for resources. Moreover, prototype ambiguity may elicit conflict among group members about their prototypicality and give way to intragroup status contests that absorb the time and attention of group members, preventing attention from being more efficiently directed toward group goals (e.g., Bendersky & Hays, 2012; Groysberg et al., 2011).

Strategic effectiveness. A group's ability to accomplish its strategic goals depends in part on member coordination and efficient resource allocation (Arrow, McGrath, & Berdahl, 2000), which themselves are diminished by prototype ambiguity. In addition, when prototype ambiguity is low, members will be clear about what the group represents, where it is headed in terms of its strategic objectives, and how they can contribute to these goals. This clarity can enhance a group's ability to make wise decisions about, for example, who should be admitted to the group and who should not. Because members' interests and efforts are better aligned when prototype ambiguity is low, group members also should be better positioned to compete effectively against other groups. In contrast, high prototype ambiguity may promote confusion about the group's

strategic priorities and the decisions and actions that are essential to overall group performance. For example, prior to founder Howard Schultz's 2008 return to leadership at Starbucks, the corporation had lost sight of its strategic direction with an aggressive but poorly controlled and executed pattern of growth that led many stores to underperform and even close their doors. Employees' lack of clarity about the organizational prototype made it difficult for them to select and manage the best members and to identify appropriate strategic activities capable of generating effective performance (Schultz & Gordon, 2011).³

In sum, unresolved ambiguity about group prototypes compromises both individuals' and groups' efforts to pursue their goals. Left unresolved, the costly group consequences of prototype ambiguity may elicit or exacerbate the experience of prototype ambiguity within the group. Therefore, prototype ambiguity and its costly consequences are likely to motivate proactive identity work—collective efforts on the part of group members to minimize prototype ambiguity, which we describe next.

Social Negotiation of Group Prototypes and Member Prototypicality

Prototype clarity and consensus may be pursued through top-down and bottom-up efforts. Top-down efforts refer to attempts by one or a few influential group members to offer a clear definition of "who we are" as a group for other members (e.g., Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991; Pratt, 2000). Social identity perspectives on leadership have focused on the top-down path, whereby an individual member defines and then generates social support for a group prototype (see Has-

³ It is worthwhile noting that the harmful effects of unresolved prototype ambiguity at the group level are likely to neutralize any short-term benefits. For example, it is possible that the absence of a clear and consensual prototype will facilitate individual-level creativity on the part of those group members who interpret the lack of a clear prototype as a release from constraint, which frees them to craft their jobs and roles more creatively and think more broadly (Wrzesniewski & Dutton, 2001). However, individual creativity is more likely to facilitate group-level innovation when the group is able to effectively execute member ideas. To the extent that prototype ambiguity undermines group-level coordination, it may limit the group's ability to transform creativity into innovation that benefits the group.

lam, Reicher, & Platow, 2011). For example, newsroom managers with an online background may emphasize rapid turnaround and de-emphasize precise fact-checking as aspects of the group prototype in an effort to clarify the group's essential qualities. Research on organizational identity change also has focused on formal group leaders' efforts to provide identity clarity, as shown in Corley and Gioia's analysis of leaders' sensegiving efforts following a corporate spin-off. In their case study leaders described the efforts as "walking the walk as well as talking the talk" (2004: 198) and explained how they defined the desired future identity and image through public statements, such as "What counts is being the most caring company that delivers to its customers" (2004: 197). Top-down efforts involve direct and explicit social negotiation over the group prototype itself but may be relatively isolated because they involve highly strategic efforts undertaken by individuals who hold or wish to assume leadership positions.

Bottom-up approaches, though relatively neglected in prior research on organizational identity threat, may be more common and involve a wider variety of group members. Bottom-up prototype negotiations involve little direct and explicit discussion of the group prototype itself. Instead, group members socially negotiate over their own and others' prototypicality. Such negotiations are likely to feature discussions of members' social worth (De Cremer & Tyler, 2005) and relative standing within the group (e.g., Overbeck et al., 2005; Ridgeway, Boyle, Kuipers, & Robinson, 1998). By coming to agreement about who is more and less respected in the group, the group as a whole arrives at a shared and legitimated understanding of who is more or less prototypical (Johnson, Dowd, & Ridgeway, 2006). Thus, we view social negotiations about prototypicality as a vehicle that enables the group to infer those attributes that make up the group prototype. Based on research regarding the social negotiation of roles, identities, and other social categories (e.g., Bartel & Dutton, 2001; Johnson et al., 2006), we propose that the social negotiation of group prototypes consists of acts to claim (for the self) and grant (to others) prototypicality, described below.

Claiming and granting prototypicality. Individuals actively construct their experiences and interactions to shape how other members view

their prototypicality (Haslam et al., 2011). For example, individuals looking to increase their prototypicality in the eyes of other members will signal their loyalty to the group (Jetten, Branscombe, Spears, & McKimmie, 2003), cooperate with other members (De Cremer, 2002), perform discretionary (extrarole) behaviors (Sleebos, Ellemers, & de Gilder, 2006), and exhibit greater derogation and competitiveness against outgroups (Noel, Wann, & Branscombe, 1995; Van Kleef, Steinel, van Knippenberg, Hogg, & Svensson, 2007), presumably in an effort to prove their worthiness as a group member. Prototypicality therefore is a social accomplishment because it involves socially directed effort to influence others' beliefs.

Recent research in several bodies of literature acknowledges the social effort involved in creating, enacting, and legitimating identities, roles, and social categories in the workplace (e.g., Bartel & Dutton, 2001; Bechky, 2006; DeRue & Ashford, 2010; Fiol, 2002; Johnson et al., 2006; Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2005). This literature depicts similar social processes with different targets; we draw primarily upon Bartel and Dutton (2001) because of the focus on group identity and, specifically, individuals' perceptions of how much of a member they are (evidenced by their fit with the group identity). Bartel and Dutton outlined a negotiated process to define group membership through claiming and granting acts. Claiming acts are attempts to assert one's self-perceived worth as a member and to make this view a social reality by winning support for one's claims from fellow members. Granting acts are attempts to convey what another member's value to the group is or should be. Claiming and granting acts thus center on members' intragroup respect (i.e., the degree to which a person is included and valued as a group member) and directly implicate members' prototypicality.

Prototypicality negotiations involve a dynamic pattern of claiming and granting acts (Bartel & Dutton, 2001). Claiming acts are likely to elicit a response from others, who can accept or reject these claims of prototypicality by signaling to what extent they see the person as worthy of inclusion and respect in the form of granting acts. Granting acts may affirm a member's claims by granting high prototypicality, or they may reject such claims by granting low prototypicality. Alternatively, granting acts may

precede or occur independently of claiming acts. For example, a member may give certain individuals unsolicited recognition (e.g., designating them "employee of the month," seeking their counsel, or creating opportunities for them to publicly represent the group) or rejection (e.g., omitting their contributions to the group's task or giving them a different color employee ID, different type of email address, or distant office). Members can also target their granting acts at other group members with the goal of shaping the collective evaluation of a particular individual's prototypicality. For example, a mentor may signal his or her support for a protégé to other senior members of the organization.

We propose that negotiations over prototypicality unfold in different but predictable ways in response to group status and group entitativity threats because these contexts motivate members to assess prototypicality differently. Central tendencies and ideals each provide distinct standards for assessing prototypicality; they are not mutually exclusive and can have overlapping features. Yet when the focus is ideals, the most prototypical member is not the individual who exemplifies the average but, rather, the individual who embodies the idealized notion of the group and, thus, is extraordinary (an outlier) in some way. We propose that contexts posing threats to group entitativity elicit granting to average members, supporting prototypes based on central tendencies. In contrast, contexts posing threats to group status elicit granting to extraordinary members, supporting ideal prototypes.

Group entitativity threats and granting prototypicality to average members. Situations that threaten to reduce group entitativity (e.g., when the group prototype becomes too vague or complex) will motivate members to seek or maintain the group's distinctiveness (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). For example, the evolution of newspaper journalism to include publishing stories online as well as in print, supplemented by blog posts, tweets, and moderated online discussion, threatens the distinctiveness of a newspaper organization, motivating the effort to alleviate the threat. Similarly, Corley and Gioia's (2004) case study of a spin-off described the new organization's ("Bozkinetic") efforts to address its inability to differentiate itself from its parent ("Bozco").

Group members can reclaim group entitativity by constructing a prototype that is clear and

consensually agreed upon (Hogg et al., 2005). Prototypes organized around central tendencies—that is, the attributes that members have in common—imbue the group with coherence and unity because it is clear what makes the group a distinct social entity rather than a collection of loosely bound individuals. For example, a management department in a U.S. business school struggled to define a coherent identity after a period of marked growth that led distinct subgroups to emerge (i.e., with respect to research focus, such as organizational behavior and strategy, and with respect to employment status, such as tenure track and clinical faculty). At a department retreat, discussions about who would best represent the department's perspective on the school's promotions committee stressed the importance of someone interested in organizationally relevant phenomena because it reflected a (more abstract) collective interest that most members shared. Efforts to grant high prototypicality to select individuals via appointments to important committees thus brought into focus both an essential feature of the group prototype and a specific criterion for judging member prototypicality.

Key events recounted in Ravasi and Schultz's (2006) longitudinal case study of Bang & Olufsen (B&O) may be more clearly understood as group members' tendency to respond to group entitativity threats by emphasizing a prototype based on central tendencies. The authors described how at one point the company felt threatened by competitors' attempts to imitate B&O and struggled to differentiate the firm and its products. This is an example of how mimetic behavior on the part of other organizations makes it more difficult for organization members to draw clear boundaries between their own group and others, threatening group entitativity. According to Ravasi and Schultz, this threat to entitativity prompted a company-wide initiative whereby B&O members could restate and debate their common values to arrive at an inclusive, if more abstract, conceptualization of the organization. Indeed, the company called this effort "Bang & Olufsen United" (2006: 445), suggesting a desire to unite the group around a broad set of commonly shared attributes. While the authors did not provide information regarding interpersonal processes at B&O, it is likely these processes involved actions to grant higher prototypicality to members who better represented

the central tendency in the form of B&O's core values.

When group solidarity and prototype clarity are salient concerns for members, any atypical member jeopardizes the distinctiveness and integrity of the group (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Under such conditions, we expect group members to strip prototypicality away from those who fit the prototype less, thus pulling in the boundaries of the group. In the example of the management department that identified interest in organizationally relevant phenomena as a criterion for selecting a representative for the school-wide promotions committee, this tightening of boundaries would be reflected in efforts to deny tenure to faculty members whose research advanced work only in specific scholarly disciplines (e.g., psychology and sociology), as well as in efforts to make organizational relevance an important criterion in hiring decisions.

This type of response is especially likely for members who not only lack essential qualities that most group members share but also possess characteristics that members associate with other groups (Marques, Yzerbyt, & Leyens, 1988). For example, Nag and colleagues (2007) studied an engineering-oriented R&D organization that (unsuccessfully) attempted to change into a business development, marketing-oriented R&D organization. Marketing expertise was imported into the organization by hiring a subgroup of people who had marketing backgrounds but lacked specialized technical knowledge. The marketing people who were "grafted" onto the organization reportedly undermined group cohesion. The fact that these less prototypical members were rejected, marginalized, and even forced out by those who shared the more technical and engineering background of the organization's past (Nag et al., 2007) suggests that they elicited an entitativity threat. In general, group members' efforts to reject atypical members when group entitativity is threatened might include, for example, actively disassociating from the atypical member through explicit rejection or ostracism or through more passive moves such as ignoring, excluding, or otherwise curbing interactions with the member (see Bartel & Dutton, 2001, for an overview of specific granting tactics).

In sum, group entitativity threats are likely to motivate granting acts, which may precede and set the tone for social negotiations that empha-

size group members' shared qualities. In particular, members are likely to focus on granting low prototypicality to members who are least similar to most other members because these actions serve to reclaim group entitativity, consolidate a clear prototype, and thus reduce prototype ambiguity.

Group status threats and granting prototypicality to ideal members. When group status is threatened (i.e., the group is comparatively less favorable than other groups), members will seek to construct a more favorable redefinition of their group, necessitating modifications to group prototypes. Group members can reclaim positive distinctiveness by constructing a prototype that has positive valence (Hogg et al., 2005). Members therefore are less concerned with what they all have in common than they are with what favorably sets the group apart from other organizational groups. Group members thus will likely favor a prototype representing an idealized notion of the group. The construction of such a prototype may involve considerable negotiation among members; members may be unclear about precisely what attributes ought to be included because ideals are loosely coupled with the attributes that members actually share, which broadens the range of attributes for consideration.

Ravasi and Schultz's (2006) case study provides evidence of such a shift to ideal prototypes in response to group status threats. Prior to the entitativity threat described above, B&O suffered from the entry of lower-priced Japanese competitors, which raised questions about B&O's standing in the marketplace and the sustainability of its high-cost, high-design niche strategy. The company responded with an initiative to "select the strongest elements [of the identity] for the company's international future" (2006: 445)—perhaps indicating that it engaged in an effort to define the prototype around the ideal. Notably, these actions represented an entirely different way of coping with the threat to the organization's status than the response to the entitativity threat described earlier, which is both consistent with our predictions and lends new insight into events depicted in prior research.

Focusing the group prototype around ideals—that is, the attributes that reflect how the group and its members successfully accomplish their core goals—offers a favorable abstraction of the

group and its members. To accomplish this, group members will confer higher prototypicality to more extreme individuals who better represent the group ideal. For example, Elsbach and Kramer's (1996) study of business schools' responses to the group status threat associated with the *Business Week* rankings highlights how schools emphasized distinctive, socially valued attributes, such as offering a public management or entrepreneurship program or having an innovative culture. While their research did not investigate interpersonal processes within these schools, it is likely that members of schools disappointed with their ranking focused less on what they all had in common and more on those qualities that would help their school gain status relative to other schools. We therefore would expect members motivated by group status threats to grant higher prototypicality to those individuals possessing more of these ideal qualities.

As above, these prototypicality negotiations may frequently begin with group members proactively engaging in granting acts, but in contrast to the response to entitativity threats, the individuals who are viewed as highly prototypical are likely to be outliers that make an extreme positive impact on the group. Hogg and Terry (2000) referred to these members as the overachievers and high fliers in the group, and Abrams, Marques, Bown, and Henson (2000) referred to atypical members whose behaviors are deemed constructive as pro-norm deviants. Because such individuals personify the group ideal, they contribute to a positive redefinition of the group, and other members can bask in their reflected glory (cf. Cialdini & de Nicholas, 1989). Thus, group members will strongly accept these individuals and upgrade their prototypicality. In contrast, members who fall far short of the group ideal will be viewed as having a negative impact on the valence of the group, and their prototypicality will be downgraded.

In sum, negotiations about prototypicality that emerge in response to group status threats will likely begin with and be driven by granting acts. Granting higher prototypicality to members who are closer to the group's ideal serves to reclaim group status by consolidating a clear and positively valenced prototype and, thus, reduces uncertainty about how prototypicality should be allocated to members.

THEORETICAL IMPLICATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our research builds on the notion that group prototypes are adaptive, survival-promoting features enabling groups to appraise and categorize events, actions, and people. Group prototypes' important intergroup and intragroup functions include regulating group membership (including or excluding people and conferring respect on individual members) and regularizing member behavior (Hogg, 1992), differentiating prototypes from other constructions in groups, such as norms and roles. The functional value of prototype clarity serves as the basis for our novel theoretical perspective on group prototype ambiguity—an elemental aspect of group life that more groups experience more frequently because of ongoing changes in the nature of work and working in organizations today. We have explored how threats to group entitativity and group status, by challenging the essence and value of the group, raise doubts about the attributes that group members view as most characteristic of the group. Group responses to prototype ambiguity follow distinct patterns based on the specific collective identity threat that prompted it, with implications for whether the prototype adopted is anchored on ideals or central tendencies. Our proposed model has theoretical implications for research on collective identity, group prototypes, and social hierarchies, as well as practical implications for group members coping with changes in work and working in modern organizations.

Implications for Research on Collective Identity and Group Prototypes

Our analysis of prototype ambiguity offers insight into the relationships among group prototypes, group prototype ambiguity, and collective identity. Research on organizational identity change emphasizes the role of externally generated identity threats, particularly in the form of disparities between members' perception of the organizational identity and their perception of its external image (e.g., Corley & Gioia, 2004; Dutton & Dukerich, 1991; Gioia et al., 2000). Our proposed model enables deeper insight into both the nature and the consequences of these collective identity threats by distinguishing threats to group status and threats to group en-

titativity, as well as the content of emergent, socially negotiated group prototypes—specifically, whether a group's prototypical attributes represent the ideal or average group member. Our predictions about how groups respond adaptively to these different forms of threat enable further insight into precisely why organizations observed in prior research exhibited particular responses.

For example, Ravasi and Schultz's (2006) longitudinal case study of B&O depicted sequential threats implicating what we see as group status (i.e., competition from Japanese producers offering lower-price products, which threatened B&O's market position/ranking) and group entitativity (i.e., competitors invading B&O's profitable niche for "design products," which threatened B&O's uniqueness). Organizational initiatives following each threat differed with respect to whether response efforts centered on B&O's ideals or central tendencies, consistent with our predictions. Our model also offers greater insight into why the effort to change the organizational identity from technology to marketing focused in Nag and colleagues' (2007) case study was unsuccessful; grafting new marketing-oriented members likely threatened group entitativity, which resulted in efforts to strip membership from those who did not fit the central tendency in the group. In short, by differentiating forms of collective identity threat and relating these threats to emergent group prototypes, opportunities abound to draw new insights from prior work on collective identity threat and change.

Linking identity threat to the social negotiation of group prototypes also offers insight into processes underlying the adaptive instability of organizational identity. The concept of adaptive instability is that collective identity becomes dynamic and malleable to allow adaptive responses to external environments undergoing continuous change (Gioia et al., 2000). Organizational identity research highlights how identity labels may be consistent over time, while the meanings attached to those labels may change in response to contextual changes (e.g., Corley & Gioia, 2004; Fiol, 2002; Gioia et al., 2000; Ravasi & Schultz, 2006). Arguably, group prototypes serve as a key mechanism allowing groups to alter the meanings associated with identity labels, without endangering the enduring nature of collective identity. It is through prototypes that group

members enact their collective identity, with episodes of prototype ambiguity necessitating new interpretations and translations of identity features into attributes, attitudes, and actions at the individual level. Thus, the adaptive aspect of collective identity may be reflected in the socially negotiated process through which group members create clear and consensually held prototypes.

We recognize that the social negotiation process we depict largely reflects collaborative efforts among members to resolve prototype ambiguity. Future research may fruitfully explore social negotiation processes intended to resolve instances of prototype conflict—which occurs when different group prototypes are put forth that contain irreconcilable and conflicting features. It is possible that different interpersonal patterns emerge when the subtext for member negotiations moves from clarifying the prototype itself (our focus here) to determining which prototype should dominate. We suspect that instances of prototype conflict may generate a highly political and less collaborative process than that we have described here.

Our account also extends social identity perspectives on group prototypes and prototypicality. Social identity perspectives recognize that prototypes change with the context (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Turner et al., 1987) and may be more or less clear to an individual (Hogg, 1992), but researchers have not focused on prototype ambiguity as a group-based perception worthy of study in its own right. Our research draws attention to the negative implications of prototype ambiguity for group success, outlines how and why prototype ambiguity emerges, and links specific collective identity threats prompting prototype ambiguity to predictable group responses. Importantly, our analysis details the bottom-up interpersonal processes that give way to emergent group prototypes. These processes generally have received little attention in existing social identity research, with some efforts focusing primarily on top-down efforts by emergent leaders (see Haslam et al., 2011). Additionally, our research offers insight into prototypicality judgments in groups. Whereas social identity perspectives generally depict members' judgments of each other's prototypicality as straightforward, we suggest that such judgments are quite complicated when prototype ambiguity arises. We draw upon research on the

social negotiation of collective identities and individual role identities (e.g., Bartel & Dutton, 2001; Bechky, 2006; DeRue & Ashford, 2010) to shed new light on how perceptions of group members' prototypicality and, by implication, the group's prototypical standards are collectively constructed in discussions of members' respect within the group.

Other work concerned with prototypes can be found in the sociological literature on typecasting and social category boundaries (e.g., Johnson et al., 2006; Rao, Monin, & Durand, 2003, 2005; Zuckerman, Kim, Ukanwa, & von Rittman, 2003), which explores how categories or prototypes gain legitimacy and how they change. Like the social identity literature, this work focuses on top-down processes shaping prototype conflict and change (e.g., Rao et al., 2003, 2005) and on the implications of prototypes or categories for individual actors (Johnson et al., 2006; Zuckerman et al., 2003). However, this literature relatively neglects the possibility of prototype ambiguity, the types of contextual conditions that raise doubts about category boundaries, and the role of within-group processes in creating emergent prototypes that take distinct forms. It is possible that our model may elaborate and extend research in this tradition by addressing several of these gaps, but caution must be exercised given differences in level of analysis (e.g., the "actors" in the sociological literature may themselves be collectives).

Our analysis of group prototype ambiguity opens up interesting possibilities for future research. While we begin to unpack the dynamic social processes associated with prototype ambiguity, our model does not fully consider the subsequent effects of these processes. For example, we highlight how social contexts create different types of threat, but it is likely that group responses to a threat may alter the social context in ways that create new and different threats, as when action taken to reduce a group status threat inadvertently threatens group entitativity. For example, the case study by Nag et al. (2007) described earlier depicts how an engineering-focused R&D organization faced with competitive threat (i.e., a group status threat) initiated a top-down effort to define the group prototype around more marketing-oriented, business development R&D. The particular method used to accomplish this involved introducing a competing subgroup of dissimilar in-

dividuals, which we suggest may have aroused group entitativity threat and social negotiation processes that may well have helped derail the organizational change. Along similar lines, we have proposed that threats to group entitativity or status often lead groups to tighten criteria for defining prototypicality and, thus, the boundaries of the group, but these actions may have long-term implications for group effectiveness that are dysfunctional, such as exacerbating existing faultlines between subgroups rather than focusing the group on inclusive or more adaptive prototypes. Future research may fruitfully explore the ways that top-down and bottom-up social negotiation processes influence one another, the possibility of simultaneous status and entitativity threats in groups, and the long-term outcomes of prototype changes.

Relatedly, our account of the prototype ambiguity process could be expanded to consider the recursive relationships between the negative consequences of prototype ambiguity and the group's experience of collective identity threat. Presently, we depict these costly group-level consequences (e.g., less efficient member coordination, less effective resource allocation, and lower strategic effectiveness) as a result of an unsuccessful negotiation process that, in turn, can elicit or exacerbate prototype ambiguity. Yet it is possible that such outcomes may also trigger group identity threat. For example, groups unable to accomplish their strategic goals may suffer a status threat when their performance relative to other groups declines.

Opportunities for further theorizing include how the social negotiation of group prototypes might unfold differently when initiated by individuals seeking to clarify their own prototypicality rather than in response to group prototype ambiguity. Contemporary work may involve role changes that call members' prototypicality into question, even when group prototype ambiguity is low. Career mobility and lateral career moves, for example, suggest that new members may enter groups more frequently, and newcomers are unlikely to have a clear grasp of how prototypical they are. Telecommuting, part-time work, and contingent work, when performed in organizational settings with mostly full-time, in-office work arrangements, also may leave employees unclear about their prototypicality (Bartel et al., 2012). Questions may also be raised about how well boundary spanners fit their

group's prototype because they interact extensively with outgroups. Such role changes may make individuals' prototypicality unclear in their own and other members' eyes, motivating efforts to resolve such ambiguity.

We would expect individuals whose prototypicality is unclear to initiate the social negotiation process by proactively claiming prototypicality in contrast to the granting-initiated negotiations we expect to result from threats to group status or entitativity. For example, van Knippenberg and Hogg (2003) found that leaders who are atypical often attempt to gain respect and approval through behaviors that signal their concern for the group. At the same time, individuals' efforts to negotiate prototypicality might ultimately bring about changes to group prototypes. Suggestive evidence appears in Haslam and colleagues' (2011) description of how would-be group leaders looking to increase their prototypicality will simultaneously attempt to activate a perception of identity threat within the group, shape the collective view of what the group could represent (group prototype), and actively represent themselves and their proposals in ways that match these prototypical attributes, attitudes, and actions. Such efforts by members to claim prototypicality for themselves, when considered in tandem with the granting efforts we have outlined, suggest recursive influences at the group and individual member levels that warrant further analysis.

Implications for Research on Social Hierarchies

Our analysis of group prototypes and prototype ambiguity informs research on social hierarchies in organizations. From the standpoint of social identity theory, social hierarchies are partly defined in relation to group prototypes, with prototypical individuals being more respected and so holding higher intragroup status (Hogg & van Knippenberg, 2003). The prevalence of prototype ambiguity in groups operating in dynamic social contexts and the ongoing adjustments to group prototypes that such ambiguity necessitates suggest that part of the foundation for intragroup status may be inherently unstable, perhaps eliciting the status uncertainty, conflict, and contests that have recently drawn attention in organizational research (e.g., Bendorsky & Hays, 2012; Groysberg et al., 2011; Over-

beck et al., 2005; Porath et al., 2008). Indeed, as group members negotiate changes to their existing group prototype, the standards for prototypicality and, thus, intragroup status also change. Our functionalist account of group prototypes therefore informs an identity-based view of when and how social hierarchies may change, which is an issue that has been understudied in existing status research. Moreover, our focus on group prototypes shifts attention from how individual members struggle to attain higher status to how members collectively struggle to clarify the very basis on which status is gained and lost.

By relating the source of group prototype ambiguity to the content of emergent group prototypes, our research raises new questions about when and how status hierarchies evolve. For example, group prototypes focused on central tendencies tend to be more inclusive, effectively differentiating those inside versus outside the group but also reducing variance in members' prototypicality and, hence, intragroup status differences (as compared to when prototypes focus on ideals). Given recent evidence suggesting that status conflict and status contests are more likely when people perceive that fellow group members are nearing their level in the status hierarchy (Pettit, 2012), it is likely that central tendency-based prototypes may elicit greater status competition than prototypes focused on the ideal.

If focusing prototypes on the ideal is inversely associated with the likelihood of status contests, new questions arise regarding the neglected potential costs to the group of less contested and less differentiated status hierarchies. In those organizational groups operating in contexts that consistently pose potential threats to group status (e.g., consulting teams and creative advertising teams), group members are likely to be regularly compared to the group ideal. Social comparison research suggests that comparing oneself to a superior referent (i.e., an upward comparison) can often be a source of inspiration but that ongoing comparisons to such referents, particularly when they seem unrealistic, can be debilitating (Suls & Wheeler, 2000). It is possible that group prototypes based on ideals result in social negotiations with unfavorable group outcomes to the extent that a majority of members are left feeling inadequate or undervalued.

Last, our research provides a more textured perspective on the social negotiation process through which group members allocate status to each other via assessments of prototypicality. Notably, we propose that the work involved in reducing group prototype ambiguity requires an ensemble effort and that group members will be motivated to engage in proactive behavior (whether in the form of claiming or granting). By identifying the conditions under which prototype ambiguity produces a common motivational orientation within the group (e.g., to reclaim group entitativity or group status), our perspective highlights how negotiations about members' prototypicality and intragroup status can be highly cooperative. This offers a decidedly different view on intragroup status negotiations than has been commonly depicted in prior research emphasizing member conflict and competition (e.g., Groysberg et al., 2011; Porath et al., 2008).

Implications for Managers and Organizations

Our analysis of prototype ambiguity suggests several implications for managing in and coping with modern work contexts. First, our perspective draws attention to the potential prevalence of prototype ambiguity prompted not only by relatively rare, large-scale organizational changes that have been the focus of prior research (e.g., strategic reorientation, corporate spin-offs) but also by more mundane activities (e.g., competitive rankings, career mobility, intergroup and interorganizational linkages) that now occur with greater regularity. While in prior research scholars generally cast prototype ambiguity as a problem for individual members (e.g., Jetten et al., 2003), we focus on potential consequences for the group as a whole. We suggest that prototype ambiguity is an issue that demands managerial and organizational attention, and it is worth devoting even scarce resources to reducing it. Group members call on prototypes constantly to inform their decisions and actions on the job; prototypes enable group members to act in accordance with the collective group identity. When managers do not take action to reduce prototype ambiguity through their personal (top-down) efforts, they should be aware that the group will collectively address such ambiguity (bottom-up), perhaps in ways that are at odds with managers' strategic objectives.

More specifically, it is possible that individual members will define the threat that prompted prototype ambiguity differently from their managers or one another (i.e., group entitativity threat versus group status threat), which will raise the potential for conflict and misunderstanding as they socially negotiate the group prototype. For example, managers and other boundary spanners with an external focus may be sensitive to group status threats, leading them to construe situations as relevant to the group's standing vis-à-vis other groups. Meanwhile, other members with a more internal focus may be more sensitive to entitativity threats. As a result, members in certain departments or at certain levels of the hierarchy may consistently seek to support prototypes defined by extremes, whereas others may support prototypes defined by central tendencies. This tension may be as old as time: Greek mythology recounts that when Achilles died, his armor was supposed to be given to the most valuable soldier, and both Ajax and Odysseus claimed the honor and the armor. Ajax was the courageous, loyal, and hard-working soldier—attributes widely shared among members of the army. Odysseus, on the other hand, was the innovative, clever, and strategic soldier—an apparently positive ideal. King Agamemnon gave the armor to Odysseus, leading the troops to revolt and to his own downfall, suggesting that the troops may not have shared Agamemnon's perception of the prototypical soldier worthy of the armor. Sensegiving efforts may bridge this gap (Gioia & Chittipeddi, 1991), but our analysis elaborates on the content essential to managers' effective sensegiving efforts: sensegivers may be best served by clarifying their perspective on the nature of the threat (status threat versus entitativity threat) in addition to their view of the appropriate response to the threat so that group members' claiming and granting efforts will be properly aligned and managers can avoid King Agamemnon's unfortunate fate.

Our analysis of prototype ambiguity also helps make managers aware of the bottom-up social negotiation processes directed at clarifying the group prototype. As we noted, this bottom-up process may complement or conflict with managers' and other leaders' top-down efforts. Indeed, many well-intentioned organizational change efforts may be derailed when these processes are at odds (e.g., Nag et al., 2007). When

prototypes are in doubt, interactions within the group may have hidden subtexts, with group members seeking to reduce uncertainty by drawing inferences about their own and others' prototypicality from seemingly innocuous encounters. Effective managers should be aware not only of when prototype ambiguity exists in their group but also of the possibility that members will interpret their behaviors as granting efforts, even when they did not intend to send such signals, leading to misunderstandings, perceived slights, and the need for prompt and thoughtful corrective action.

In conclusion, to say that ongoing changes in work and working today elicit a variety of uncertainties is an understatement. Our research calls attention to prototype ambiguity as a critical factor that makes essential group activities such as member coordination, resource allocation, and task performance more difficult to accomplish. Our account depicts the experience of prototype ambiguity and the collective work involved in the construction, reconstruction, and maintenance of group prototypes as serving critical regulatory functions in groups. Of special note, prototype ambiguity alerts members to contextual changes that require revisions to their group prototypes to better suit the realities of their surroundings. When effectively resolved within the group, prototype ambiguity can ultimately aid adaptation to dynamic contexts.

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