Enabling Boundaries: Demographic Subgroups as Stimulus for Social Integration
– An Organizational-Level Study

Organizations are rarely homogenous and more often than not they encompass a diversity of nested subgroups based on affiliation to other social categories. To study such organizational subgroups, we apply the concept of demographic faultlines, i.e., the alignment of organizational member demographic attributes to form subgroups. It can be argued that harmonious intergroup relations between these subgroups can only exist because subgroup affiliates share a membership to the social category of belonging to the same organization as an inclusive property at a higher level. An important subject of debate concerns whether these organizational subgroup necessarily comes at the expense of suffering social disintegration at the organizational level or whether under certain circumstances subgroup identification can even enhance organizational social integration.

Existing theory on intergroup contact has largely assumed a tension between subgroup identification and harmonious intergroup relations and that, at best, this tension can be kept in check. Stemming from social psychological theories of intergroup conflict, such as social identity theory (Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) and intergroup contact theory (Allport, 1954), current accounts of this perspective propose that to prevent intergroup conflict and social disintegration at the organizational level, identification with nested subgroups should be avoided (Gaertner et al., 1999; Pettigrew, 1998). Following this view, resolving this assumed tension is best achieved when subgroup identification is fully replaced by identification with the whole organization (Brown & Hewstone, 2005).

Although there is an impressive body of research supporting this perspective (e.g., Gaertner et al., 1999), there is also evidence indicating that there is not always a tension between subgroup formation and harmonious intergroup relations (Gibson & Vermeulen, 2003; van Leeuwen, van Knippenberg, & Ellemers, 2003). An alternative view, which we
refer to as enabling perspective, posits that nested subgroups can under certain circumstances even increase organizational social integration (Brewer, 1996; Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). Drawing from this literature, we suggest that organizational subgroups enhance social integration when members of different subgroups have regular contact with each other (Hornsey & Hogg, 2000). Field data from four different sources of 104 small- and medium-sized organizations supported our theoretical model. Our study contributes to the understanding of how faultlines operate at the organizational-level and why demographic subgroups can increase organizational social integration.

**Keywords:** Demographic Faultlines, Organizational Social Integration, Small- and Medium-Sized Organizations
Key references


