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Post-print version of the following publication: | Versione post-print della seguente pubblicazione:

Original Citation/Citazione:

Wudaru, Sriteja Reddy; Prencipe, Andrea. (9999). Bridging representational gaps through identification: theoretical and practical implications for team work. THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF HUMAN RESOURCE MANAGEMENT, (ISSN: 0958-5192), 1-33. Doi: 10.1080/09585192.2026.2697250.

Availability/Disponibilità:

This version is available at: [11385/264039](#) since: 2026-07-06T07:46:18Z - Questa versione è disponibile alla pagina: [11385/264039](#) dal: 2026-07-06T07:46:18Z

Publisher/Casa editrice:

Published version/Pubblicato:

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2026.2697250>

License/Licenza:

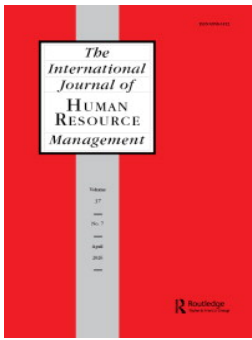
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The International Journal of Human Resource Management

ISSN: 0958-5192 (Print) 1466-4399 (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rijh20

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To cite this article: Sriteja Reddy Wudaru & Andrea Prencipe (03 Jul 2026): Bridging representational gaps through identification: theoretical and practical implications for team work, The International Journal of Human Resource Management, DOI: [10.1080/09585192.2026.2697250](https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2026.2697250)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09585192.2026.2697250>



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Bridging representational gaps through identification: theoretical and practical implications for team work

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ABSTRACT

Cross-functional teams often experience *representational gaps* – incompatibilities in how team members define problems, interpret tasks, and prioritize goals. These gaps impair information processing and coordination, causing misunderstandings and generating relational conflicts. Bridging them requires *cognitive integration* through which members engage with and incorporate others' perspectives, and *affective integration* through which trust, respect, and liking sustain openness to divergent views that are not fully understood. Existing research explored the structural conditions for integration with limited explanation as to why team members may or may not be motivated to engage with them. Drawing on social identification theory, we extend extant research to theorize how *collective* and *relational* identification shape cognitive and affective integration in distinct ways. We propose that collective identification amplifies representational gaps by reinforcing functional in-group boundaries and heightening defensiveness, whereas relational identification narrows them by fostering interpersonal openness, perspective taking, and willingness to reconcile divergent viewpoints. We further theorize that 'relationally identified' members can motivate collectivists to pursue integration, implying identification composition as a team-level lever. Our propositions articulate the interplay between social identification and representational gaps and provide the psychological foundations that structural accounts of managing epistemic differences lack, while offering practical insights into team design and relational culture.

KEYWORDS

Teamwork; social identification; representational gaps; identity motives; collective identification; relational identification

Introduction

Cross-functional, multidisciplinary teams are increasingly diffused across organizations today. By bringing together diverse knowledge, expertise, and perspectives (Van Der Vegt & Bunderson, 2005), they promise to

offer effective innovation, and therefore competitive advantage (Edmondson & Harvey, 2018; Majchrzak et al., 2012). However, these teams may fail to tap into the full potential of members' diverse backgrounds and expertise, as members often interpret tasks and goals through different, incomplete, and often competing views (Sanderson, 2012). These divergent representations of tasks, routines, goals, and challenges – known as *representational gaps* (Cronin & Weingart, 2007) – create persistent coordination challenges. Representational gaps become particularly intense when team members lack a history of working together, represent different knowledge domains, confront complex or novel problems, or work under time pressure that prevents the formation of deep interpersonal ties (Dougherty, 2001; Edmondson & Nembhard, 2009; Hackman, 2002; Seidel & O'Mahony, 2014; Van Der Vegt & Bunderson, 2005). In such conditions, members anchor their interpretations in their own functional expertise, resulting in asymmetric assumptions, priorities, and goals that easily escalate into misunderstandings and conflicts.

Although the notion of “representational gaps” may not have been always used, empirical studies pointed to the phenomenon across different organizations and sectors. Carlile (2002, 2004) shows how functional knowledge boundaries in new product development teams produce interpretive gaps. Gemser and Leenders (2011), analyzing 40 new product development teams in consumer electronics and pharmaceutical industries, demonstrate how functional conflicts typical of representational gaps affect team success. Bechky (2003) illustrates how engineers, technicians, and assemblers interpret shared artifacts differently in manufacturing contexts. Okhuysen and Bechky's (2009) review of coordination literature likewise highlights how functional, occupational, and hierarchical groups construe the same task differently, and how one of the key integrative conditions – developing a “common understanding” – depends on cognitive and affective integration processes we discuss later.

Despite this broad recognition that representational gaps must be overcome to leverage the potential of cross-functional teams (e.g., Carlile, 2002; Dougherty, 1992; Purser et al., 1992; Sanderson, 2012), our understanding of the processes and emergent states that help cross-functional teams navigate asymmetric interests and goals remains limited (Pearsall & Venkataramani, 2015). One of the most promising pathways toward bridging representational gaps is through *cognitive* and *affective integration* (Cronin et al., 2011a; Cronin & Weingart, 2005, 2019). Cognitive integration refers to members' ability to understand and interpret each other's perspectives, whereas affective integration reflects the trust, respect, and liking that motivate individuals to be receptive of others' perspectives they

may not yet fully understand. Although both processes reduce representational gaps, they operate through distinct pathways and produce different outcomes which research has so far largely overlooked.

With few exceptions, such as Cronin et al.'s (2011a) work on the impact of the forms of integration on team processes and outcomes such as member satisfaction, we know little of the precise psychological mechanisms underlying sustained cognitive engagement with divergent perspectives. We also lack an explanation for the motivational forces that drive individuals to re-examine deeply held, identity-defining beliefs when confronted with conflicting viewpoints rather than defensively clinging to their positions. This research gap reflects a broader theoretical lacuna: research examining how epistemic and interpretive differences are managed in organizational settings more broadly has similarly foregrounded structural and institutional conditions while leaving the psychological motivations of individual actors undertheorized (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2001; Kellogg et al., 2006). In other words, we argue for a critical account of *why* and *when* team members undertake cognitive and affective integration, and, correspondingly, how identity-based motivations either enable or inhibit it.

We propose that social identification theory offers the conceptual tools to address this research gap. Unlike structural and process-level theories, social identification theory connects internal psychological processes to external social dynamics (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), enabling to theorize what team members do in the presence of representational gaps and why, i.e., the identity-based motivations that either enable or inhibit engagement with integration. Thus, the research question we aim to address is the following: *How does social identification among team members influence cognitive and affective integration required to overcome representational gaps in cross-functional teams?*

We focus on two forms of identification – *collective* and *relational* (Tajfel, 1982; Zhang et al., 2014) – which represent the two primary social levels on which identification operates in team contexts: group-level belonging and dyadic interpersonal connections (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). We develop propositions that indicate that collective identification widens representational gaps and heightens conflict, whereas relational identification encourages the openness, curiosity, and trust necessary for cognitive and affective integration. By theorizing these identification dynamics, we highlight that representational gaps are not solely epistemic or functional challenges but also deeply psychological ones: individuals must navigate both unfamiliar perspectives and threats to their self-concept. Understanding how different identity orientations either magnify or mitigate these threats helps explain why some cross-functional

teams become entrenched in conflict while others engage in the integrative work necessary for collaboration.

This paper makes three main contributions. First, it provides a theoretical account of how social identification – specifically the contrasting effects of collective and relational identification – shapes the motivational foundations of cognitive and affective integration in cross-functional teams, explaining why some teams struggle with functional conflict while others engage productively with their differences. Second, it extends research on the management of epistemic differences in organizations: whereas existing structural accounts identify conditions under which such differences are pragmatically accommodated rather than resolved, our paper provides the psychological-level explanation such accounts lack, illustrating that the form of identification determines whether structural accommodations can take hold. Third, our theorization carries practical implications for teams and organizations: identifying relational identification as the mechanism enabling productive engagement with representational gaps points to team composition, interpersonal design, and relational culture as concrete levers for organizations seeking to harness the full value of functional diversity.

The paper is organized as follows: it first reviews the concept of representational gaps and the processes of cognitive and affective integration as central to resolving them. It then theorizes how collective and relational identification affect representational gaps. The last section discusses the contributions and implications.

Literature review

From problem representations to representational gaps

Organizations increasingly rely on cross-functional, multidisciplinary teams to tap into the diverse expertise and backgrounds of organizational actors (Randel & Jaussi, 2003). This functional multiplicity fosters creativity, improved decision making, innovation, and efficient problem solving (De Dreu & West, 2001). But diverse backgrounds and expertise also generate challenges: team members from diverse backgrounds often show less attraction and trust in their teammates (Chattopadhyay, 1999), communicate less frequently (Zenger & Lawrence, 1989), and report lower group commitment (Tsui et al., 1992). These challenges are the results of divergent *problem representations* as held by team members.

A problem representation is an individual's cognitive map of a task or a problem, including its objectives, goals, possible solutions, actions that lead to those solutions, and the causal chain that links these moving parts (Hayes & Simon, 1974; Newell & Simon, 1972). Representations are inherently subjective in that individuals construct different cognitive

maps of the same problem based on prior experiences, expertise, and thought worlds (Dougherty, 1992; see Cronin & Weingart, 2007).

When team members bring different problem representations to a shared task, inconsistencies emerge in how they define, interpret, and respond to the task. These incompatibilities are known as *representational gaps* (Cronin & Weingart, 2007; Firth et al., 2015; Weingart, 2010). They are not mere disagreements about what a task is, but reflect fundamental differences in how members construe the task itself. When team members perceive problems differently, they pursue different, potentially conflicting, courses of action, often generating task and interpersonal conflict (Pelled et al., 1999; Wang et al., 2016). Representational gaps often remain latent until frustration mounts, resulting in relationship conflict characterized by negative emotions (De Wit et al., 2012; Jehn, 1995). As tensions deepen, members perceive differences as personal threats, resulting in defensiveness, ego clashes, and increasing dislike that erode members' willingness and motivation to integrate multiple perspectives into synergistic solutions (Wang et al., 2016). Feelings of frustration and anger reduce openness (Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988; Milberg & Clark, 1988) and even encourage fault-finding (Eisenhardt & Bourgeois, 1988). Consequently, representational gaps reduce collaborative problem-solving (De Dreu, 2006), impair cognitive functioning (Staw et al., 1981), and drain time and energy from productive work (Evan, 1965).

It is however important to recognize that conflicts do not always arise from malicious intent; rather, people often gloss over others' concerns and fail to appreciate their complexities (Dougherty, 1992). They may misattribute disagreements to indifference rather than recognizing them as a result of varying knowledge and experiences. Open communication across different thought worlds (Dougherty, 1992) that team members hold is challenging as knowledge is embedded in context (Lave, 1988), shared meanings (Cicourel, 1981), routines (Darr et al., 1995), and expertise (Bechky, 2003) that enact barriers for communication (also see Wang et al., 2016). As a result, consciously or not, members enact divergent priorities and interpretations that impede coordination, knowledge sharing, and joint innovation.

Resolving representational gaps

Extant research emphasizes common task understanding (Edmondson & Nembhard, 2009; Okhuysen & Bechky, 2009), joint knowledge sharing (Edmondson et al., 2001), and psychological safety (Edmondson, 1999; Edmondson et al., 2001; Tucker et al., 2007) as key mechanisms to manage representational gaps. However, this research assumes that team members are aware of how their disciplinary backgrounds and experiences shape their perspectives (Majchrzak et al., 2012), and this

awareness enables reflection on self and others' knowledge (Argyris & Schön, 1978) and 'perspective taking' through dialogue (Boland & Tenkasi, 1995; Hargadon & Bechky, 2006; Majchrzak et al., 2012). In practice, however, team members often fail to recognize that tensions arise from underlying knowledge differences. When representational gaps manifest, the conflict typically registers as interpersonal or motivational; members attribute disagreements to others' dispositions and intentions rather than to structural differences in how problems are represented (Dougherty, 1992). This misattribution is not merely a cognitive error but a predictable consequence of social categorization: individuals tend to locate the source of conflict in outgroup characteristics rather than in divergent representational structures (Tajfel & Turner, 1986, Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Critically, the mechanisms identified in prior research – common task understanding, joint knowledge sharing, and psychological safety – assume a level of metacognitive awareness that representational gaps themselves often erode, leaving teams equipped with tools they are not yet positioned to use.

Therefore, cross-functional teams require mechanisms that can operate in the absence of this explicit recognition, yet preserve the uniqueness of multiple perspectives to avoid conformity. *Cognitive* and *affective integration* act as key mechanisms that shape how teams communicate and function when representational gaps exist (Cronin et al., 2011; Cronin & Weingart, 2005, 2019; Jehn, 1995).

Cognitive and affective integration

Cognitive integration refers to the extent to which team members can understand, translate, and interpret others' perspectives (Cronin et al., 2011b), even without prior knowledge of the topic. Teams high in cognitive integration can incorporate diverse knowledge without enforcing conformity, helping overcome conflicts over the meaning and value of information that arise from representational gaps. However, cognitive integration does not imply agreement: one can understand a viewpoint without concurring with it. Thus, cognitive integration alone cannot fully resolve representational gaps.

Affective integration, on the other hand, refers to the perceived quality of interpersonal relationships among team members (Cronin and Weingart 2019; Cronin et al., 2011b). It develops through trust, respect, and liking for one another (Cronin & Weingart, 2019). Liking grows through repeated exposure and shared interests or experiences, thereby broadening one's knowledge without necessarily altering one's core values. Trust enhances communication and reduces perceived threat and defensiveness. Trust strengthens as members show vulnerability without harm and build

reciprocity over time. Finally, respect promotes constructive conflict, increases attention to others' ideas, and mitigates both task and relational disputes, though it is often the hardest to cultivate. These positive attributes motivate members to bridge representational gaps: trust enhances openness and lowers perceived threat, respect fosters civil conflict and attention to others' ideas, and liking promotes interaction and cooperation (Mayer et al., 1995; Tjosvold, 2008). High affective integration acts as a buffer against conflicts, and help avoid frustration, negative attributions, and defensiveness (Cronin & Weingart, 2019). It strengthens through recurring positive interpersonal exchanges but deteriorates through siloes or relational barriers. However, affective integration reflects emotional connection, not cognitive understanding: liking or trusting someone does not make one able to understand their perspective.

Both cognitive and affective integration are necessary to overcome representational gaps, as they operate through distinct pathways (Sluss et al., 2012). The shared understanding induced by cognitive integration alone does not resolve dissatisfaction among team members, while strong relationships do not improve performance when divergent mental models persist. In other words, cognitive integration engages the “head” and affective integration the “heart”.

However, our understanding of how cognitive and affective integration can be nurtured in cross-functional teams remains undertheorized. Cognitive integration entails difficult processes of enrichment (acquiring unfamiliar knowledge), expansion (exploring new connections), and reconciliation (aligning conflicting assumptions and values), while affective integration requires vulnerability to build trust and respect (Cronin and Weingart 2019; Cronin et al., 2011b). These inherently uncomfortable processes are often avoided, not because they are demanding, but because they threaten individuals' deeply-seated identities. When team members are asked to consider that others' framings of a problem are as valid as their own, they face an implicit challenge to the very expertise and functional perspectives that define their professional self-concept. Though cognitive and affective integration explain *what* is needed to overcome representational gaps, we do not fully know *why* individuals persistently put efforts – or not – to overcome these deep-seated resistances. In short, the psychological motivation that drives engagement with integration, and the identity dynamics that shape it, remain unclear.

Furthermore, the disconnect between the “head” (cognitive integration) and the “heart” (affective integration) needs deeper exploration. We need a better explanation of how emotional bonds sustained by affective integration translate into cognitive engagement with divergent perspectives. Positive feelings may reduce defensiveness but do not necessarily prompt perspective shifts or knowledge integration (Cronin et al., 2011b).

Part of the reason lies in the identity-laden nature of representational gaps themselves. As representational gaps often arise from differing value systems rooted in distinct functional backgrounds (Bechky, 2003; Cronin & Weingart, 2007), they are not merely cognitive differences but reflect how team members define who they are through their professional expertise. Research on motivated reasoning shows that individuals systematically discount or reframe information that challenges their identity-laden beliefs, not from bad faith but as a psychological reflex (Kunda, 1990). These dynamics foster social categorization and in-group/out-group dynamics that reinforce stereotypes and biases that disrupt cognitive integration and result in conflicts (Roberge & Van Dick, 2010; Van Dick et al., 2008; Van Knippenberg et al., 2004). Understanding how individuals transcend these tendencies to build a unified team identity and shared sense of purpose remains critical.

Eventually, both cognitive and affective integration require one to confront their deeply held beliefs, tackle threats to self-concept, and reconcile conflicting perspectives (Cronin et al., 2019; Cronin et al., 2011b). Overcoming representational gaps demands team members to recognize that the gaps arise from their deeply ingrained beliefs and perspectives tied to their functional background and that, defending their perspectives as “right” and others’ as “wrong or conflicting” reflects continued identification with their functional group. Two related critiques of the existing literature emerge from this. First, existing work has largely addressed representational gaps as informational and process challenges, pointing to boundary objects and structured knowledge translation as solutions (Carlile, 2002; Majchrzak et al., 2012). Second, and more broadly, literature across organizational and HRM domains too show that epistemic and interpretive differences are more often managed than resolved, whether through trading zone practices (Kellogg et al., 2006), knowledge management accommodations (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2001), or incremental strategies of practitioners navigating contested, and often sensitive, organizational terrain (Kirton et al., 2007; Kornau et al., 2023; Ozturk et al., 2025; Tatli et al., 2015). Yet, these accounts address the structural conditions for managing difference rather than the identity-based motivations that determine whether individuals are psychologically ready to engage with such processes at all.

Other relevant theoretical perspectives face related shortcomings. Communication theory explains how interactions can become distorted but not why individuals choose to close down, discount, or ignore others’ messages. Diversity faultlines theory captures how subgroup dynamics lead to conflicts (Lau & Murnighan, 1998) but treats this as a latent structural feature without addressing psychological and relational processes that can override these faultlines. It is particularly less applicable

here since the functional unit each member originates from – rather than subgroups formed within the new team – constitutes their in-group, meaning categorization and bias persist regardless. Finally, cognitive psychology theories (Paletz & Schunn, 2010; Reiter-Palmon et al., 2008), while explaining how mental representations are formed and changed, remain focused ‘within an individual mind’ and cannot explain why team members resist integration despite having the cognitive capacity to do so; a decision that is not purely cognitive, but social and motivational.

What these perspectives collectively reveal is that the problem of representational gaps is ultimately a motivational and identity-laden one that cannot be addressed by process-level tools or structural theories alone. Social identification theory, in contrast, connects internal psychological processes with external social dynamics, offering the conceptual tools necessary to explain these motivational foundations. Engaging in cognitive and affective integration demands breaking away from strong functional identification and realizing that others’ perspectives are not only vital for team performance but also for personal growth. Rather than perceiving divergent perspectives as threats to self-beliefs, they must see them as opportunities to expand their self-definition. Consequently, cognitive and affective integration are inseparable from the identification fabric of teamwork, where individual identities confront the very representational gaps they create. Yet, how individuals identify is not uniform: whether team members orient their self-concept through collective group membership or through interpersonal relational bonds shapes these motivational dynamics in fundamentally different ways. This leads to our research question: *How does social identification among team members influence cognitive and affective integration required to overcome representational gaps in cross-functional teams?*

Social identification and representational gaps

Identification is a core concept in psychological theory because it affects emotion, cognition, and behaviour (Tajfel, 1959, 1969). Identification is the extent to which one defines oneself through other individuals, relationships, or groups (Pratt, 1998). It defines one’s distinctiveness and helps internalize social relationships. It is not a singular concept: one may define their self-concept through individuality, profession, membership of a group, or relationships with significant others. Thus, an individual could have individual, professional, collective, or relational identification, with one typically becoming more salient at a given time (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007; Tajfel & Turner, 1986; Zhang et al., 2014). By connecting self-definition with motivational processes, social identification theory can explain why individuals would engage in, or resist, cognitive

and affective integration. Specifically, it can shed light on how categorization into in-groups (own functions) and out-groups (new teams) leads to biases, stereotypes, favouritism, and conflicts when out-group perspectives are dismissed (Tajfel & Turner, 1979).

In this paper, we focus on *collective* and *relational* identification, two forms that together capture the psychological space most relevant for understanding motivational dynamics in cross-functional teams. Collective identification anchors the self in group membership and its associated norms, roles, and prototypes – the group-level dimension of team belonging (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). Relational identification anchors the self in dyadic role relationships and interpersonal bonds with specific others (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007; Zhang et al., 2014). Each activates a qualitatively distinct motivational architecture that shapes how individuals engage with those around them in systematically different ways (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Cooper & Thatcher, 2010). Personal identification, which centres on individual distinctiveness and personal attributes, does not speak as effectively to how individuals orient themselves toward others in a shared social context; hence it is less theoretically relevant and for the sake of parsimony we exclude it from our theorization.

Collective identification is rooted in social identity theory (Tajfel & Turner, 1979, 1986, Hogg & Terry, 2000) and self-categorization theory (Turner et al. 1987). With collective identification, group membership is the most defining element of one's identity and reflects categorization of the self into more inclusive social units at the risk of depersonalization of the self-concept (Brewer, 1991). This depersonalization is grounded in perceived similarities and shared affiliation among group members (Mael & Ashforth, 2001). Individuals with strong collective identification with their organization or team emphasize commonalities (Brickson, 2000) and value group-level attributes, such as group goals and challenges, far more than social relationships (Brewer & Gardner, 1996, Dukerich et al., 2002, Hogg & Terry, 2000). In cross-functional teams, however, collective identification is complicated by competing targets of identification: members often retain strong ties to their original functional group, while the new cross-functional team lacks an established group prototype or shared identity, making it unclear which collective – the function or the team – commands primary identification, and thus hindering the formation of a cohesive collective identification with the new team.

Relational identification, by contrast, is defined by one's role relationships and interpersonal connections within a group, rather than membership in the group as a whole (Zhang et al., 2014). It involves internalizing the meaning of one's role relationships as part of the self-concept (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). It is grounded in personal

connection and the expression of individuality through meaningful, close relationships with others who share similar values or personalities (Polzer et al., 2002; Postmes et al., 2005). Their identification with the new team depends on how personal relationships with its members evolve, rather than on the team's shared group identity.

Together, collective and relational identification span the two primary social levels of team life – group membership and interpersonal connection. They are not mutually exclusive: one can simultaneously hold both with different targets (Johnson et al., 2006; Ramarajan, 2014). Empirical evidence confirms that relational and collective self-concepts can coexist (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001; Dukerich et al., 2002; Gabriel & Gardner, 1999; Gaertner et al., 2012; Gardner et al., 2002; Trafimow et al., 1991), varying in salience depending on context and situation (Van Dick et al., 2008). Our theorization assumes one identification being more salient over the other for a given member entering the new cross-functional team. We now theorize how their relative salience determines the motivational orientation a member brings to the process of cognitive and affective integration. Figure 1 presents our theoretical model, which we elaborate upon below.

Effects of collective identification on cognitive integration

The extant literature suggests that collective identification fosters organizational cohesion and solidarity (Hogg & Terry, 2000) as individuals attach emotional significance to group membership (Van Der Veegt & Bunderson, 2005). While some scholars showed that collective identification reduces intergroup biases and enhances performance (Gaertner et al., 1996), others point to a U-shaped relationship between functional multiplicity and team performance (Van Der Veegt & Bunderson, 2005), suggesting that benefits diminish or reverse when functional differences are sharp. The dynamics of cross-functional teams with persistent representational gaps fall precisely on the problematic side of this curve.

Social identification theory posits that collectivists relate to others based on depersonalized understanding (Sluss et al., 2012), emphasizing similarity via category-based processing (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010). In cross-functional settings, the category that remains psychologically salient is often one's functional origin rather than the newly formed team. Functional identity carries an established prototype, shared norms, and a history of membership, that provide the stable cognitive scaffolding on which collective identity depends. The new cross-functional team lacks these stabilizing features, making the functional category cognitively and motivationally dominant. Dissimilar members and their divergent representations compete with the categories collectivists hold, and the ensuing arguments and perceived threat

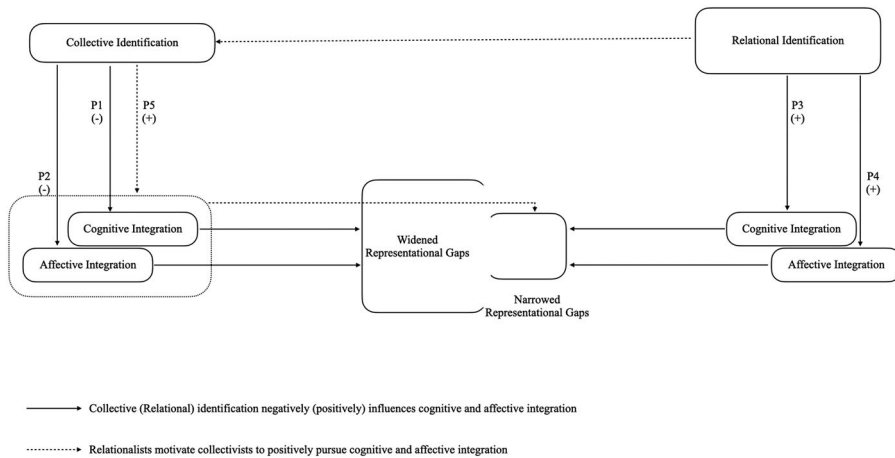


Figure 1. Theoretical model.

to their identity would pose as hurdles to cognitive integration. Even when collectivists cognitively acknowledge the value of cross-functional input, the depersonalized commonality does not translate into the personalized, perspective-taking engagement necessary for cognitive integration. A member may recognize a colleague's expertise in the abstract, yet resist integrating their perspectives when they contradict the categorical assumptions of their functional identity; doing so would require revising the very framework through which the problem is understood. Arguments over task interpretations thus become contests over whose category-based understanding is "right", making it structurally difficult for collectivists to genuinely engage with divergent representations.

Two identity motives further compound this challenge. First, collectivists reduce subjective uncertainty about their self-concept and their place in the social world through clear group prototypes and stable norms (Hogg & Terry, 2000). However, a clear and coherent prototype necessary to prescribe perceptions and appropriate behaviours is weak or altogether missing in cross-functional teams with ambiguous identities and diverse thought worlds. Collectivists therefore revert to the functional expertise and authority as the default mechanism for uncertainty reduction, reinforcing existing functional representations rather than engaging with unfamiliar ones.

Second, self-esteem motive lead individuals to seek positive self-regard (Ashforth et al., 2016) and uniqueness (Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2012) through group membership, specifically by associating with groups that offer positive distinctiveness (Ashforth & Mael, 1989, Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2012, Hogg & Terry, 2000). But in cross-functional teams, the team itself cannot readily satisfy this function; lacking an established prototype, shared identity, or history of achievement, it offers collectivists little reliable basis from which to derive distinctiveness. Collectivists

therefore continue to anchor their self-esteem in their home function that carries the established status, norms, and positive associations from which distinctiveness can be drawn. This anchoring activates social categorization, generating in-group/out-group distinctions (Ashforth & Mael, 1989) through which members stereotype outgroup perspectives, defend their own categorical views rather than seek reconciliation, and interpret challenges to their representations as threats to professional identity – all of which severely impede cognitive integration.

Self-expansion – the desire to accrue different perspectives and resources for the self (Aron & Aron, 2000, Cooper & Thatcher, 2010) – may offer a partial counterforce, as members with strong self-expansion motive could be more inclined to engage in the enrichment, expansion, and reconciliation central to cognitive integration (Cronin & Weingart, 2019), especially in smaller teams where accessing resources and exploiting opportunities could be relatively easier. Nevertheless, examining how dominant identification motives underlying collective identification together shape members' behaviours, we argue that strong collective identification motivates them to defend their existing functional thought worlds more sternly than engage with contradicting perspectives from the new cross-functional team. As members pursue shared goals through different representations, these discrepancies generate move conflicts which can easily escalate into interpersonal conflicts when members cannot understand why others made those moves. Thus, representational gaps widen further when collective identification is strong across the team.

Proposition 1: *A more salient collective identification poses a hurdle for cognitive integration thereby widening representational gaps.*

Effects of collective identification on affective integration

With affective integration, self-enhancement motive becomes vital. It reflects the need for favourable information about the self: competence, moral worth, and positive comparison to others (Hogg et al., 1995). Collectivists pursue self-enhancement through association with the group's positive features (Zhang et al., 2014). They prioritize group-level goals and tasks over interpersonal relationships (Brewer & Gardner, 1996, Hogg & Terry, 2000), and equate group's success with their own. In cross-functional teams, this means self-enhancement is pursued through functional excellence: excelling in ways legible to one's functional peers rather than through cross-functional relationship-building. The relevant audience for self-enhancement remains the home function, not the new team. Members with strong collective identification thus invest less in nurturing relational ties and more in pursuing group goals as defined through their own functional lenses.

Furthermore, self-efficacy – the desire to feel competent and capable of influencing the environment (Easterbrook & Vignoles, 2012) – manifests for collectivists as confidence in the group's ability to achieve its goals (Thomas et al., 2017). In cross-functional teams, this confidence stays invested in one's domain-specific approach as the most competent path to the team's objectives. This affects how other functions' contributions are received: they do not register as alternative inputs but as implicit challenges to the adequacy of one's own approach. Challenges to one's methods are thus perceived as threats to their competence and identity, motivating defensiveness instead of openness. This defensiveness directly forecloses affective integration: the vulnerability, openness, and receptivity that trust, respect, and liking require cannot develop when a team member is oriented towards protecting their sense of competence from external challenge.

Finally, depersonalized belongingness – the desire to belong to a group and be a part of a larger community rather than develop interpersonal bonds with individual group members (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010) – shapes affective integration through a structural mismatch. Collectivists seek belonging through perceived similarity and shared group affiliation (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; Mael & Ashforth, 2001) rather than through personal connection. Cross-functional teams however are structurally constituted by dissimilarity in knowledge, skills, and functional priorities, making the conditions for depersonalized belongingness fundamentally unavailable. This dissimilarity is not incidental but endemic, and for collectivists it generates persistent identity threat: when others' behaviours appear inconsistent with an assumed shared group prototype, collectivists experience the team as identity-threatening rather than identity-supporting, thus deterring engagement in affective integration.

Proposition 2: *A more salient collective identification poses a hurdle for affective integration thereby widening representational gaps.*

Effects of relational identification on cognitive integration

Relational identification – the perceived oneness with another individual or a specific relationship – offers a potent mechanism for fostering cognitive integration. It is strongly associated with the motive for self-expansion: the desire to accrue new perspectives and resources for the self (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; Lee et al., 2012). This motive directly aligns with the aim of cognitive integration: broadening one's perspectives to grasp the meaning of information emerging from different viewpoints. When individuals identify relationally, they are intrinsically motivated to seek and integrate knowledge and perspectives from close relational partners (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010). Incorporating aspects of others into one's own identity is central to this process (Aron & Aron, 2000, Cooper &

Thatcher, 2010). Relationalists thus actively exchange information, take on others' perspectives, and treat discrepancies not as obstacles but as opportunities for self-expansion.

Self-enhancement motive – the need to view one's self positively and accrue desirable attributes (Hogg et al., 1995) – operates differently for relationalists. They pursue self-enhancement through the quality of their role relationships and appreciation by specific others (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). To feel valued by a relational partner requires genuine responsiveness to the partner's perspectives; dismissing their contributions or asserting one's own position at their expense would undermine the very relationship through which self-enhancement is sought. For relationalists, constructive engagement with divergent perspectives is not merely cooperative but is identity-affirming; their sense of competence and worth depends on the quality of interpersonal engagement rather than functional authority. Both self-expansion and self-enhancement motives thus reward the difficult work of cognitive integration, making engagement with conflicting perspectives a means to achieve positive self-regard.

Relationalists reduce uncertainty by aligning with relational partners who provide meaning, predictability, and coherent interpretive frameworks (Hogg, 2007). The epistemic trust embedded in close relationships transforms how divergent information is experienced: rather than amplifying ambiguity, a partner's different perspective serves as a legitimate alternative framework that helps construct more coherent understanding of complex tasks, making representational gaps occasions for cognitive clarity rather than threat. This stimulates systematic information processing: individuals motivated to achieve cognitive closure actively gather, scrutinize, and reconcile information to form well-structured interpretations (Kruglanski, 2013). Relational identification thus equips individuals with additional interpretive resources, enabling them to step outside their own thought world and engage in meaningful sensemaking across divergent perspectives.

If limited to small relational circles or cliques (Lee et al., 2012), relational identification may be insufficient for addressing deep cognitive conflict at the broader team level, as relationalists can be prone to in-group bias (Lee et al., 2012). However, such bias is situational rather than inherent: intergroup cues can override interpersonal focus and relational ties function as a bridging mechanism across levels of self (Ashforth et al., 2016; Cooper & Thatcher, 2010), thus creating the micro-social conditions through which individualized understanding diffuses outward into broader, team-level sensemaking (Sluss et al., 2012; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). Relational identification thus remains foundational for cognitive integration at the team level despite the potential for small-group favouritism.

Proposition 3: *A more salient relational identification motivates individuals to actively pursue cognitive integration thereby bridging representational gaps.*

Effects of relational identification on affective integration

Relational identification plays a crucial role in affective integration through the self-expansion motive. For relationalists to effectively expand the self through another person requires precisely the conditions that constitute affective integration: understanding, trust, and positive regard for their partner. These conditions are not merely compatible but mutually constitutive; pursuing expansion generates the relational warmth and openness that affective integration depends on, while affective bonds deepen the relational identification through which further expansion becomes possible. Divergent perspectives, thus, represent exactly what self-expansion seeks – resources and ways of knowing that can enrich the self. This renders representational gaps motivating factors rather than impediments for relationalists.

Relationalists also possess an inherent need for personalized belongingness – the desire for interpersonal attachments that provide inclusion and acceptance by important others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Cooper & Thatcher, 2010). This motive drives investment in genuine connection rather than superficial harmony, as meaningful belonging requires sustained mutual concern, reciprocal openness, and trust, that affective integration depends on. Shared identity attributes – professional, demographic, or situational – can serve as the initial bias for interpersonal attraction, creating conditions under which relational identification deepens and receptivity to a partner's perspective grows (Hogg & Terry, 2000). Relationalists therefore prioritize forming and sustaining interpersonal bonds over defending their own representations. When members anticipate ongoing interdependence or shared vulnerability, the mutual support these relational ties provide becomes intrinsically motivating for collaborative engagement.

Finally, relationships help reduce subjective uncertainty by providing stable information, clear expectations, and normative guidance. When a relational partner reliably offers guidance and consistent support, it builds trust and psychological safety – key aspects of affective integration. Empirical studies link relational trust and perceived social support to increased psychological safety in interpersonal and team contexts, showing that individuals who feel accepted and supported are more willing to communicate, disclose perspective differences, and tolerate risks during collaboration (Kvalnes, 2023, Wouters-Soomers et al., 2022). In situations that might otherwise motivate withdrawal, such as in the presence of overtly conflicting perspectives, the assurance provided by relational partner enables relationalists to remain open and emotionally grounded. Thus, uncertainty reduction motive does not merely help with

information clarity but develops the affective bonds necessary for deep, sustained affective integration.

Proposition 4: *A more salient relational identification motivates individuals to actively pursue affective integration thereby bridging representational gaps.*

The interaction of relationalists and collectivists

When relational self-concept is activated, individuals become less motivated to enhance their personal self and instead evaluate themselves through their interpersonal roles (Brewer & Gardner, 1996). Relationalists naturally define themselves through interconnected roles and seek mutual support, demonstrating behaviours associated with high affective integration, such as having trust, respect, and liking for their teammates (Brewer & Gardner, 1996; Cronin et al., 2011a). This inherent warmth and focus on reciprocity appeals to the collectivists' corresponding desire to feel included and experience similarity with the group (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010). Critically, in cross-functional teams where collectivists' normal route to belonging – shared group prototype and depersonalized similarity – is structurally frustrated, the personalized warmth offered by relationalists provides an alternative and accessible pathway to inclusion. By encountering relationalists who actively cultivate this emotionally safe and welcoming relational environment, collectivists are motivated to participate and reciprocate, thereby securing their place in the team and making their group membership more personally meaningful (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; Sluss & Ashforth, 2007).

This positive relational groundwork then creates the necessary conditions for cognitive integration. Team cognition processes such as learning, perspective-taking, and knowledge exchange typically depend on a climate of psychological safety – a shared belief that the team environment allows for interpersonal risk-taking without threatening the individual identity (Edmondson, 1999). The trust and respect that flow from relational identity enactment directly result in psychological safety which enables collectivists to be vulnerable and share knowledge without viewing opposing ideas as threatening (Cronin et al., 2011a). By creating this environment where communication is encouraged and vulnerability is accepted, relationalists motivate collectivists to dedicate the intellectual energy required to bridge knowledge gaps and truly comprehend differing viewpoints, facilitating the development of cognitive integration (Cronin et al., 2011a). The mechanism is thus sequential: relational behaviours generate affective safety, affective safety reduces identity threat, and reduced identity threat frees collectivists to engage cognitively with perspectives they would otherwise defend against. Thus, relationalists, by virtue of relational self-construal and interpersonal behaviour, create an

initial affective bridge that motivates collectivists to understand, integrate, and reconcile different perspectives, thus converting what began as a relational dynamic into a foundation for cognitive integration at the team level.

Proposition 5: *Presence of more relationalists in the team would motivate collectivists to actively pursue cognitive and affective integration thereby bridging representational gaps.*

Discussion

Cross-functional teams are designed to leverage the functional diversity of their members, yet they consistently fall short of this potential due to the identity-laden nature of ensuing representational gaps. Arising when team members define, interpret, and approach a shared task through the lens of their functional expertise, these gaps are not simply informational differences but expressions of distinct identities that compete for legitimacy (Bechky, 2003; Dougherty, 1992). Team members grappling with representational gaps need to engage with cognitive and affective integration to overcome these gaps (Cronin et al., 2019; Cronin et al., 2011b). While the extant research has studied these mechanisms at the level of process and structure – through boundary objects, coordination mechanisms, and knowledge translation (Carlile, 2002; Majchrzak et al., 2012), it does not fully account for why team members resist or embrace these solutions, a decision that is as much social and motivational as is cognitive and structural. We know little about why individuals invest efforts in these integration processes, how the two forms of integration reinforce one another, and what psychological mechanisms motivate individuals to engage with them.

Drawing on social identification theory (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; Tajfel & Turner, 1979), this paper addresses these research gaps by theorizing how social identification shapes the mechanisms of cognitive and affective integration. Specifically, we propose that members with salient collective identification tend to impede cognitive and affective integration, thereby widening representational gaps, whereas members with salient relational identification work to bridge these divides. Moreover, relationalists can motivate collectivists to pursue integration, helping the team collectively reduce representational gaps. We discuss the theoretical and practical implications of our theorization now.

Relational identification as a mechanism for overcoming representational gaps

While collective identification helps align asymmetric goals in teams and encourage members to prioritize the team's success, it is insufficient for

creating productive environments in time-bounded cross-functional teams (Pearsall & Venkataramani, 2015). Representational gaps mean that members often lack a shared understanding of what the team's interests are in the first place (Weingart et al., 2008; Cronin et al., 2011b). Without the "motivation to learn about one's teammates, their goals, and the collective team situation" (Pearsall & Venkataramani, 2015, 735), collective identification alone cannot resolve these gaps. In practice, strong collective identification often exacerbates divergence: members default to their most stable identity – their functional group – thus interpreting goals and problems through entrenched thought worlds (Hambrick & Mason, 1984; Walsh, 1988). Collective identification encourages depersonalized similarity (Hogg & Terry, 2000; Sluss et al., 2012) which reinforces siloed assumptions, conformity pressures, and defensiveness when perspectives clash. Members are more likely to stereotype, discount, or misattribute others' views (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Tajfel & Turner, 1986), eroding trust and psychological safety. Such dynamics impede both cognitive and affective integration, thereby fragmenting the team and reducing performance (Roberge & Van Dick, 2010; Weingart et al., 2008).

In contrast, relational identification helps narrow representational gaps. Rather than anchoring identity in categories, relationalists ground it in interpersonal bonds (Sluss & Ashforth, 2007). They seek to build trust, liking, and respect for their teammates, not for strategic reasons but because the relationship itself is valued (Cooper & Thatcher, 2010; Gersick et al., 2000). This orientation fosters openness to others' viewpoints, reduces perceived threat, and diminishes both task and interpersonal conflict. Even when understanding is incomplete, relationalists refrain from dismissing others' perspectives and remain motivated to engage in constructive dialogue with their teammates (Cronin & Weingart, 2019).

The mechanism through which relational identification bridges representational gaps is sequential rather than simultaneous. Representational gaps make cross-functional collaboration cognitively and emotionally taxing, and cognitive engagement without affective safety is unsustainable; members who feel threatened or disrespected will withdraw rather than persist through the difficulty of genuine perspective integration. Relational identification addresses this sequencing challenge by fostering dyadic affective bonds, characterized by trust, respect, and liking, that create the emotional safety necessary for sustained cognitive engagement even as disagreements intensify. This makes relational identification not merely one pathway to integration, but the motivational prerequisite that allows representational gaps to become occasions for productive sensemaking rather than sources of persistent conflict.

Crucially, relational identification does more than counteract the limitations of collective identification; it transforms how representational gaps are experienced. Rather than perceiving them as threats to professional identification and competence, members treat divergent perspectives as opportunities for self-expansion, relational deepening, and mutual growth. This reframing is theoretically important: it suggests that whether representational gaps widen or narrow depends primarily not on the magnitude of functional differences between members but on the identity-based motivations they bring to the team. This dynamic also operates at the collective level. The affective climate generated by relational identification creates the conditions for integration even among collectivistic team members who might otherwise disengage, thus transforming defensive standoffs into a shared capacity for learning and innovation (Cronin et al., 2019; Sluss et al., 2012).

The motivational account we develop here supplies the explanatory layer that structural approaches (e.g. Carlile, 2002; Majchrzak et al., 2012) to representational gaps have lacked, showing that readiness to engage with integration is shaped by identification, and cannot itself be structurally mandated. This explains why structural solutions to representational gaps often fall short in practice but our theorization also connects to a broader theoretical question about how organizational actors manage epistemic and interpretive differences across diverse settings.

Beyond structural solutions: identification motives and the accommodation of epistemic differences

Our theorization goes beyond the boundaries of cross-functional teams and expands the broader literature exploring how epistemic and interpretive differences between organizational actors are typically managed rather than fully resolved. Kellogg et al. (2006) showed that in fast-paced organizations, cross-boundary coordination proceeds through pragmatic practices of display, representation, and assembly that achieve local alignment without requiring shared meaning or the elimination of interpretive differences – what the authors term a “trading zone” in which diverse actors exchange productively without converging on common understanding. Notably, the trading zone is a coordination structure that “facilitates cross-boundary coordination in fast-paced, temporary, and volatile conditions” (Kellogg et al., 2006; 39), precisely the characteristics of cross-functional teams. While the authors show how coordination occurs in these trading zones, they do not fully theorize what conditions are required for such a trading zone to be established. Similarly, Alvesson and Kärreman (2001) revealed how organizational efforts to manage

knowledge pragmatically reduce to managing information or social norms, underscoring the structural tension between epistemic diversity and integrative management.

This pattern is mirrored in HRM research too. Kirton et al. (2007) showed how diversity practitioners adopt “tempered radical” orientations to accommodate prevailing institutional logics without fully accepting or challenging them while Kornau et al. (2023) extended this insight institutionally, demonstrating how actors across contested equality, diversity, and inclusion fields manage competing logics through tactical accommodation. Tatli et al. (2015) showed that effective practice in these conditions depends not on formal authority but on extra-organizational relational resources, thereby underscoring the relational foundations of accommodation under ambiguity. More recently, Ozturk et al. (2025) illustrated how diversity practitioners contest normative tensions and manage deep-seated epistemic tensions through incremental accommodation and solidaristic strategies. Across these accounts, the structural and institutional conditions enabling accommodation of epistemic differences are richly developed but the psychological motivations that make such accommodations possible at the individual level are not fully theorized.

Our paper complements and extends this stream of literature by providing the socio-psychological account of the identity-based motivations. Specifically, we foreground the contrasting effects of collective and relational identification that inhibit or enable, respectively, this accommodation within cross-functional teams. Strong collective identification, by activating depersonalized processing and identity threat, makes even pragmatic accommodation difficult. Team members whose identification motivates defensiveness and categorical closure cannot sustain the productive engagement that trading zones or incremental strategies require. Relational identification, in contrast, does not necessarily eliminate representational gaps but equips team members with the motivational infrastructure – curiosity, trust, personalized belonging, and reduced uncertainty – to work productively *across* them. We present here a psychological parallel to the structural-level dynamic identified across the literature (e.g. Kellogg et al., 2006): the conditions for accommodation are not only organizational and institutional but motivational and identity-laden. Collective identification can render strong group-level coordination impulses unable to translate into genuine perspective integration. However, team members can still accommodate and integrate epistemic tensions if they connect to one another personally through salient relational identification. This parallels the solidaristic strategies identified by Ozturk et al. (2025) and the relational resources identified by Tatli et al. (2015).

Implications for teams and organizations

Team creativity and innovation

Cross-functional teams carry high cognitive value: their diverse knowledge, values, heuristics, and assumptions can generate innovative and creative solutions (Cronin & Weingart, 2007; Paletz & Schunn, 2010). Creative cross-functional work requires generative conflict: integrating and evaluating divergent ideas before converging on joint decisions. However, the presence of representational gaps (Weingart et al., 2008) implies that cognitive diversity alone is insufficient; using divergent thought worlds as raw material for novel combinations of knowledge depends on team members loosening attachment to their functional identities and re-identifying with their cross-functional collaborators.

Our theorization shows that relational identification is central to this process. When relational identification is salient, members are more motivated to take others' perspectives, build trust and respect, and maintain positive interactions. These relational dynamics reduce barriers to idea generation and evaluation, thereby fostering creativity, psychological safety, risk-taking, and persistence when disagreements arise (Mueller & Cronin, 2009). This is consistent with Mathuki and Zhang (2024) finding that cognitive diversity enhances creativity only when mediated by inclusion and knowledge sharing – precisely the key outcomes of affective integration possible through relational identification. Teams high in relational identification not only leverage cognitive diversity more effectively but can also draw collectivists into integrative behaviours, further shrinking representational gaps and developing more robust and innovative solutions.

(Virtual) global teams

The dynamics of relational identification and representational gaps are contingent on physical proximity of team members. In virtual teams, the affordances and constraints of mediated interaction amplify the tensions of representational gaps. Virtuality reduces opportunities for informal interaction, shared cues, and spontaneous bonding, making relational identification difficult to cultivate (Mansour-Cole, 2001; Wiesenfeld et al., 1999). Under these conditions, representational gaps persist and functional identities become even more salient. Virtual settings often amplify depersonalized collective identification while limiting interpersonal connections, leading to conformity rather than true integration. Perceived cultural differences, reduced visibility, and weak relational ties heighten stereotyping and conflicts (Au & Marks, 2012; Vahtera et al., 2017). Despite efforts to create superordinate identities through collective identification, knowledge sharing and trust remain fragile without strong relational identification. Thus, in global virtual teams, collective

identification may widen the representational gaps strongly, while relational identification is both harder to develop and even more critical for overcoming representational barriers.

Practical implications for management

Our paper provides important practical implications for managers seeking to enhance creativity and innovation. We show that cross-functional teams are most effective when relational identification is salient, as it encourages members to coordinate, communicate, and integrate their diverse perspectives more productively. However, this does not imply that organizations should compose teams exclusively of individuals with strong relational self-definitions. Such a strategy risks creating homogeneity in identity motives: members may share relational strengths but also blind spots, by overprioritizing interpersonal ties and neglecting team-level goals. It also introduces selection bias: relational ties may not equally be advantageous across all tasks or contexts; team-level outlook and aggressive leadership may be required for timely decision making or maintaining task clarity. Furthermore, excluding individuals who are less naturally relational can generate broader identity threats at the organizational level and inhibit their opportunities to develop relational identification through interaction.

Instead, managers can cultivate relational identification through thoughtful team and task design. Structuring work in dyads or rotating small pods can help members build interpersonal familiarity while preventing rigid subgroup formation. Peer feedback mechanisms also enhance mutual respect and relational identification (Lee et al., 2012). Leaders can further model relational behaviours by expressing vulnerability, acknowledging diverse viewpoints, and engaging in personalized mentoring. Formal team development initiatives can strengthen interpersonal bonds and foster the relational capacity needed for integrative teamwork.

More broadly, fostering an organizational culture that supports the principles of relational identification is crucial. Cultures emphasizing interpersonal trust, openness, psychological safety, reciprocity, and authentic communication cultivate similar norms within cross-functional teams, turning them into microcosms of a relationally supportive organization. Clan and adhocracy cultures are especially conducive to relational behaviours (Men & Jiang, 2016; Reis et al., 2016). Ethical and servant leadership styles likewise reinforce relational values and reduce interpersonal conflict (Newman et al., 2017), particularly when paired with communication practices such as frequent feedback, informal social interactions, personal storytelling, and rituals that emphasize interpersonal connection (Men & Jiang, 2016).

However, support for relationalism has boundary conditions. Strong professional identities may be essential in certain fields (e.g., healthcare, sales, finance), creating tension with relational expectations. High role ambiguity, tight deadlines, and remote or virtual work may also constrain the development of relational bonds. Excessive emphasis on relationalism can foster groupthink and suppress dissent, which is counterproductive in cross-functional settings where diverse input is vital. Managers must therefore balance relational norms with structures that sustain task clarity, encourage constructive dissent, and preserve the value of functional expertise.

Future research

Temporal dynamics

Collective identification can emerge quickly, whereas relational identification requires repeated interactions and extended time to develop (Ancona et al., 2001; Klonek et al., 2025), meaning the mechanisms we theorize may be constrained in short-duration teams. The influence of relationalists on collectivists similarly takes time to materialize (Rink et al., 2013). How temporal dynamics shape the emergence and erosion of identification, and in turn the maintenance or bridging of representational gaps, represents an important direction for future research.

The effect of power

Although we did not explicitly incorporate power into our theorization for the sake of parsimony, it shapes the conditions under which identification dynamics unfold. Power permeates teams not only through formal authority but also through informal influence, social positioning, and expertise (Chen & Zhang, 2023; Courpasson, 2017; Jevnaker & Olaisen, 2022). Even when cross-functional teams are designed to mitigate hierarchical conflicts, subtle power differences inevitably arising from disparities in knowledge, visibility, expertise, or informal leadership (Pearce et al., 2023; Xu et al., 2024) shape interactions, as members simultaneously contribute to team goals and accumulate informal power within their home functions. When bridging representational gaps aligns with career-enhancing motives, such as acquiring new expertise, increasing visibility, or broadening relational networks, team members are more likely to invest efforts in cognitive and affective integration (Cronin & Weingart, 2007; Edmondson & Harvey, 2018). Conversely, when loyalty to home functions yields greater rewards, members may defend function-specific assumptions, intensifying cognitive boundaries and sustaining representational gaps (Brett, 1997; Hinds & Mortensen, 2005). Future research may explicitly investigate the effect of power on team members' motivation to engage with cognitive and affective integration.

The bidirectional effects

Future research should examine whether members' identification styles shift over time as they work within cross-functional teams (see Ramarajan, 2014). Representational gaps may not only be shaped by identification but may also *reshape* identification itself. Heightened tensions and persistent misunderstandings could erode relational bonds and reinforce functional identification, making this relationship reciprocal: identification influences representational gaps, but unresolved gaps may in turn erode identification (Cronin & Weingart, 2007). Empirical studies, especially longitudinal or process-oriented designs, are well suited to unpack these dynamics (Ancona et al., 2001).

The role of organizational culture

Organizational culture and reward systems shape how identification motives unfold in the presence of representational gaps. Competitive cultures and function-specific performance metrics reinforce collective identification and reduce motivation for relational bonding (Ashforth & Johnson, 2001), while collaborative, empowering cultures encourage cross-boundary interaction and relational identification (Men & Jiang, 2016; Reis et al., 2016). Future research should examine how cultural dimensions and incentive structures moderate whether identification supports or undermines gap-bridging processes (Chatman & O'Reilly, 2016).

The role of boundary objects

Prior work shows that boundary objects such as prototypes, drawings, and models help organizational actors translate, negotiate, and transform knowledge across functional communities (e.g. Bechky, 2003; Carlile, 2002, 2004), yet how their effectiveness depends on the identification motives of those engaging with them remains unexplored. Collectivists may use boundary objects defensively, asserting functional authority, while relationalists may use them as sites for joint sensemaking and perspective-taking, even inviting collectivists into these sites. Future research should explore how identification shapes the interpretive flexibility of boundary objects, and whether shared engagement with them might itself shift identification. This approach would integrate structural coordination mechanisms identified in prior work with psychological processes this paper foregrounds.

Conclusion

The central contribution of this article is to explain how representational gaps in cross-functional, multidisciplinary teams can be resolved. Drawing on social identification theory, we offer a novel account of how

identification motives shape the psychological readiness of team members in engaging with cognitive and affective integration necessary to bridge representational gaps. Our conceptual propositions highlight the distinct roles of identification motives: relational identification facilitates cognitive and affective integration and thus helps bridge representational gaps, whereas collective identification tends to widen them. In doing so, this article extends research on teamwork, collaboration, social identification, and identity work by illustrating how identification motives shape the integrative processes essential for effective cross-functional performance.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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