

Optimal Distinctiveness and Human Resource Development

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Abstract

As human resource development (HRD) research and practice has flourished, researchers have called for new theoretical perspectives that might be brought to bear on increasing the effectiveness of HRD initiatives (e.g., Nolan and Garavan, 2016). In this chapter, we suggest how optimal distinctiveness theory (Brewer, 1991) could be applied to HRD. Optimal distinctiveness theory is a social psychological theory with roots in social identity theory that addresses individuals' propensity to identify with groups. We present the results of an empirical study involving members of organizational work groups and discuss how HRD interventions could benefit from considering how individuals' identification with a work group can be affected by optimal distinctiveness and the composition of the work group (age and functional backgrounds represented in the group). Based on these findings, we impart practical advice such that composing work groups such that members share commonalities with some members, but are distinctive in other ways at the same time should be most fruitful for group members who are younger and who have fewer competing identities. In addition, we discuss how the tenets of optimal distinctiveness theory have both research and practical implications for HRD.

Optimal Distinctiveness and Human Resource Development

Human resource development (HRD) has been found to increase employees' capabilities as well as employee commitment and organisations' financial performance (Sung and Choi, 2014). As HRD has grown in prevalence both in practice and in research, scholars have called for more extensive application of theory and, in particular, consideration of new theoretical perspectives that might have been overlooked as they relate to HRD (Nolan and Garavan, 2016). In this chapter, we describe and demonstrate the implications of Marilyn Brewer's optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT) for increasing the effectiveness of HRD initiatives (Brewer, 1991, 2012).

Increasingly, ODT has been used in research on identity and identification (e.g., Carton and Cummings, 2012; Slotter, Duffy, and Gardner, 2014; Sluss and Ashforth, 2007) and, in particular, ODT has addressed how individuals come to identify with a group. Optimal distinctiveness theory holds relevance to human resource development efforts by informing researchers and practitioners how HRD training interventions and efforts to build a climate conducive to team performance should consider how individuals' identification with a group can be affected by identity dynamics stemming from work group composition. A field study testing aspects of work group composition relevant to HRD as it relates to ODT and work group identification is presented and the results of this study are discussed. Our findings have several implications for HRD including when and how HRD initiatives can be more or less effective through work group composition. In addition, we identify two individual differences that

influence individuals' identification with work groups. Finally, other implications of the tenets of ODT for HRD are discussed as they relate to both practice and research.

Optimal Distinctiveness Theory

Optimal distinctiveness theory is a social psychological theory with roots in social identity theory that addresses individuals' propensity to identify with groups (Brewer, 1991, 2012). Optimal distinctiveness theory has been of interest to researchers largely because it offers an explanation for why individuals may or may not identify with a group: individuals identify most strongly with groups that allow them to simultaneously satisfy needs for: 1) *assimilation*, a sense of belonging that draws people towards being a part of a group and 2) *differentiation* or wanting to feel different from others (Brewer, 1991). These two opposing needs involved in optimal distinctiveness theory – assimilation and differentiation – have been conceptualized in two separate ways by scholars. One school of thought has been to focus on how individuals look for assimilation within their own group while they simultaneously look to be differentiated from other groups (Badea, Jetten, Czukor, and Askevis-Leherpeux, 2010; Eckes, Trautner, and Behrendt, 2005). Another school of thought interprets optimal distinctiveness theory as involving an interest in satisfying assimilation and differentiation needs within the same group (Jansen, Otten, Van der Zee, and Jans, 2014; Shore et al., 2011; Slotter, Duffy, and Gardner, 2014). When needs for assimilation or differentiation are unmet, ODT proposes that an individual will seek to restore the imbalance by searching for a way of satisfying the need that is lacking. For example, when individuals feel highly assimilated into a group, they will strive to distinguish themselves from group members by, for example, highlighting their unique characteristics. Hornsey and Hogg (1999) found that individuals with unmet needs for differentiation will show a preference

for subgroups rather than the overall group as a way of trying to satisfy their needs for differentiation. By contrast, individuals who feel too much differentiation from group members will seek greater assimilation into a group, which could mean that they search for ways of finding similarity with others. According to ODT, optimal distinctiveness occurs at an equilibrium point that occurs when a person's needs for assimilation and differentiation are met (and identification with the group is strong).

Unfortunately, optimal distinctiveness theory has most often been tested by using group size as a proxy for creating the psychological experience of differentiation and assimilation (e.g., Sorrentino, Seligman, and Battista, 2007). These studies have found that group identification is strongest for individuals in intermediate-sized groups (Badea *et al.*, 2010; Hornsey and Hogg, 1999). However, empirical research involving ODT has involved what Brewer (2012) herself has called a “misunderstanding” by considering optimal distinctiveness a property of groups (moderately sized groups). Most empirical research on ODT has focused on the relationship between group size and group identification rather than building on the perceptual nature of satisfying needs for assimilation and differentiation (two notable exceptions are Badea, Jetten, Czukor, and Askevis-Leherpeux, 2010 and Hornsey and Hogg, 1999). Below, we present the results of a study in which we operationalize optimal distinctiveness in terms of perceptions of assimilation and differentiation and test how work group composition influences the relationship between optimal distinctiveness and work group identification, which holds implications for increasing the effectiveness of HRD initiatives.

Work Group Composition

There are two factors that often are present in contexts in which human resource development occurs and that we would like to consider both theoretically and empirically as they relate to optimal distinctiveness theory. First, building on Brewer's (2012) idea that some people are more sensitive to optimal distinctiveness, we argue that older individuals are less reliant on proximal groups (e.g., their work group) as a source of optimal distinctiveness compared to younger individuals. Age also is important to consider since to date most ODT studies have relied upon young adults in their samples (e.g., Badea et al., 2010; Hornsey and Hogg, 1999). Second, we focus on individuals' functional social identity (self-reported identification with those of the same functional background within the work group) to capture contexts in which group members identify with subgroups (Randel and Jaussi, 2003). Work groups are often utilized for the purpose of drawing upon different perspectives, but there can be a potential for ties to a subgroup (representing one's functional background or department) to conflict with identification with the work group as a whole (e.g., Chattopadhyay, Glick, Miller, and Huber, 1999). Thus, those who identify more strongly with their functional background would be less sensitive to their current work groups for their sense of optimal distinctiveness. Organisational work groups in which HRD initiatives are implemented often include diversity with respect to age and functional background, yet these have not been a factor in previous tests of optimal distinctiveness theory or tests of HRD initiatives.

Age. Human resource development efforts benefit from participants who demonstrate motivation, which can be facilitated by a high level of work group identification (e.g., Froehlich, Beausaert, and Segers, 2015). Age is an individual difference variable related to perceptions of optimal distinctiveness and, in turn, to work group identification. We propose that, for younger

individuals, more so than older individuals, perceiving optimal distinctiveness will be positively related to work group identification. Individuals at young ages may turn to proximal groups as a way of satisfying needs for assimilation and differentiation, which in turn is associated with identifying with the work group (c.f., Hogg, 2007). Younger individuals with a less established sense of self search for proximal relationships that allow for closeness to others (Knights and Willmott, 1989). These closer relationships help to satisfy assimilation needs within the immediate social environment. At the same time, individuals are known to want to establish differentiation (that they are not the same as everyone else) (Snyder and Fromkin, 1980). Thus, younger individuals will seek to satisfy assimilation and differentiation through proximal groups, such as the work group, which they will identify with in order to contribute to their evolving self-definition.

By contrast, seeking identification with proximal work groups is of less interest to older individuals. Individuals typically gain a better understanding of who they are as they get older and thus do not depend on proximal groups for their self-definition (Alvesson, 2010). Older individuals also tend to have lower openness to experience than younger individuals (Kanfer and Ackerman, 2004) such that seeking identification with proximal work groups would be less imperative than it would be for younger individuals. Typically, older individuals have relationships that are characterized by close, established social ties from which support is received (Schnittker, 2007).

Another reason why we expect that optimal distinctiveness will be positively related to work group identification more strongly for younger individuals than for older individuals is due to uncertainty. When individuals have less time and experience with particular identities, as

younger individuals do, they can experience more uncertainty. Uncertainty reduction theory suggests that individuals seek to reduce uncertainty by identifying with others (Hogg, 2007). When individuals are younger, a level of uncertainty exists about who they will more fully become (Staff, Harris, Sabates, and Briddell, 2010). As a result, younger individuals are likely to attempt to reduce uncertainty by seeking to satisfy assimilation and differentiation needs through proximal groups, such as their immediate work groups.

In contrast, older individuals tend to experience less uncertainty about who they are (Kashima, Kashima, and Hardie, 2000). For example, older students' more extensive life experience has been argued to be an important influence impacting identification when compared to younger individuals as Kashima et al. (2000) theorized to be the case when comparing younger and older university students' identification with their university. In a similar vein, the greater life experiences of older individuals may result in more security in the identities these individuals have chosen. Thus, the positive relationship between optimal distinctiveness and work group identification is weaker for older individuals since they have other groups that they have established as sources for satisfying needs for assimilation and differentiation. As a result, older individuals' work group identification will not differ based on whether or not a proximal group provides for optimal distinctiveness, whereas younger individuals' work group identification will be more sensitive to optimal distinctiveness achieved through the work group.

Functional Social Identity. Functional social identity also is important to consider as a factor influencing the strength of the relationship between optimal distinctiveness and work group identification. Since many work groups, particularly those charged with HRD program implementation, are composed of individuals with different functional backgrounds, we examine

how individuals' identification with their functional background may compete with work group identification. We propose that, for individuals with weaker (relative to stronger) levels of functional social identity, the relationship between optimal distinctiveness and work group identification will be stronger. Individuals who perceive optimal distinctiveness within the work group and have weak functional social identities are likely to identify with the work group because it provides a proximal source that satisfies needs for assimilation and differentiation that are not satisfied through identification with others of the same functional background. By contrast, the allegiances that individuals with strong functional social identities have formed with others with the same functional background have the potential to interfere with an individual's identification with functionally diverse work groups. Prior research on top management teams and on diverse work groups have highlighted how sub-identities can impede work group identification (e.g., Chattopadhyay *et al.*, 1999). Thus, for individuals with strong functional social identities, the relationship between optimal distinctiveness and work group identification is not likely to be strongly positive since they identify with their functional background subgroup and thus are less concerned with satisfying needs for assimilation and differentiation with proximal work groups (e.g., Carton and Cummings, 2012; Tasdemir, 2011).

Empirical Evidence

In order to provide an empirical test of the relationships we propose to occur involving age and functional social identity as they influence the relationship between optimal distinctiveness and work group identification, we recruited individuals working in functionally diverse work groups in seven technology-oriented companies to participate in a survey-based study. The survey was administered in the western U.S. to 262 individuals in 41 work groups.

The final sample included 167 employees from 35 work groups. Work groups were comprised of individuals from a variety of functional backgrounds including accounting, marketing, human resources, and engineering. These work groups were identified by the company contact as participants' primary work groups. Work group size ranged from 3 to 15 with an average of approximately 8 group members. The sample was fairly gender-balanced (54% men, 46% women).

We included established measures for constructs other than optimal distinctiveness (e.g., work group identification, Mael and Ashforth, 1992; functional social identity, Randel and Jaussi, 2003). Controls were included for an individual's tenure in the work group (years), work group size, race (1=white; 0=nonwhite), sex (1=male; 0=female), task conflict, and functional background dissimilarity. Race, sex, and functional background dissimilarity were included to account for demographic factors that could influence work group identification.

We also created an optimal distinctiveness measure that allows respondents to assess their perceived assimilation and differentiation within a work group. We purposely opted to include items that would sample the construct broadly so that the scale could have wider applicability across different work group contexts. In addition, consistent with other researchers (e.g., Jansen, Otten, Van der Zee, and Jans, 2014; Slotter *et al.*, 2014), our items focus on assimilation and differentiation within the same group instead of considering differentiation to apply to comparisons between groups (e.g., Badea *et al.*, 2010). We conducted exploratory pre-tests with 15 doctoral students providing comments about how well the items captured assimilation and differentiation and 37 MBA students in a Western US university responding to the items. The scale items did not include group size and were worded generally (rather than

specific to particular identities) since we did not want to assume which identity was used as the basis for perceptions of assimilation or differentiation. Further, these items were intended to sample different domains in which people experience optimal distinctiveness, such that the items could apply to non-work groups as well. Finally, all items were measured on a five-point scale (1 = *strongly disagree*, 5 = *strongly agree*) and reverse-coded so that higher values indicate greater optimal distinctiveness, rather than relying on the midpoint as an indicator for the optimal level of distinctiveness. The five items in the scale are: “I usually like working with a more diverse mix of people than we have in the group,” “As group members, we are too different from one another to work as effectively as we should,” “We have not created a common bond as a group,” “Not that it is the fault of anyone in the group, but I wish there were more of a variety of people in the group,” and “My group would benefit from a broader mix of people in the group.”

Using Hierarchical Linear Modeling (HLM) because the data consist of employees nested within work groups from seven organisations, the initial intercepts-only model showed that the majority of variance in work group identification was at the individual level (97 percent) as compared to the work group level (3 percent) (Raudenbush and Byrk, 2002). This supports Brewer’s (2012) critique about individual-level perceptions of optimal distinctiveness predicting an individual’s work group identification (rather than ODT being a property of the group). We found optimal distinctiveness ($b = .181, p < .01$) to be positively related to work group identification. Likewise, functional social identity and age are positively related to work group identification. The interaction between optimal distinctiveness and age was found to be negative and significant ($b = -.017, p < .01$), and to explain approximately 4 percent of the individual-level variance in work group identification. The interaction between optimal distinctiveness and

functional social identity was found to be negative and significant ($b = -.132, p < .05$), and to explain an additional 2 percent of the individual-level variance.

To help interpret the interaction effects, we follow the procedures recommend by Preacher, Curran, and Bauer (2006) for graphing two-way interactions in HLM. Specifically, they recommend using the HLM regression coefficients and variance-covariance matrices to graph the interaction effect at conditional values (e.g., one standard deviation above and below the mean) of the predictor and moderator. In addition, they provide a formula for calculating significance of simple slopes at these conditional values. Figure 1 indicates the moderating effects of age and functional social identity on the relationship between optimal distinctiveness and work group identification. To summarize our key findings, Figure 1 indicates that for older employees the relationship between optimal distinctiveness and work group identification is not significant (simple slope: $b = .040$, n.s.), while for younger employees the relationship is positive (simple slope: $b = .310$; $p < .001$). Figure 2 shows that the relationship between optimal distinctiveness and work group identification is significant for individuals with a weaker functional social identity (simple slope: $b = .272$; $p < .01$), but is not significant for individuals with a stronger functional social identity (simple slope: $b = .091$; n.s.). Thus, as expected, we found that older team members and those who identified more strongly with their job function were not subject to optimal distinctiveness pressures in their teams.

 Insert Figures 1 and 2 about here

Implications of Optimal Distinctiveness Theory for HRD

Work Group Composition

We have shared results from a field study providing evidence of factors particularly relevant to HRD efforts in organisational settings that matter in the activation of optimal distinctiveness. The relationship between optimal distinctiveness and work group identification not only was stronger for younger employees and for those with a weaker functional social identity, but this relationship did not hold for older employees and for those with a stronger functional social identity. These findings hold implications for the effective implementation of HRD efforts in addition to increasing theoretical knowledge about a relied-upon theory and expanding our understanding of how and why individuals identify with their work group.

Our results suggest that ODT is not universally applicable across all individuals. When strong work group identification is needed in order to realize a climate conducive to HRD initiatives, efforts that provide optimal distinctiveness for group members will be most effective when factors (such as age and functional social identity) are taken into account. For example, composing work groups involved in HRD such that members share commonalities with some members, but are distinctive in other ways should be most fruitful for group members who are younger and have fewer competing identities. Our results suggest the possibility that optimal distinctiveness may be especially relevant for individuals with less entrenched identities, such as during organisational start-ups and in the early stages of professional careers. Thus, the success of HRD initiatives may be better ensured when work group identification is strong as the result of optimal distinctiveness that is more prevalent in younger employees and those with less strong ties to their functional sub-groups.

These findings hold implications for HRD during on-boarding; for instance, new employees who are younger could be placed in work groups with a mix of young and older

employees to maximize the likelihood of achieving optimal distinctiveness (and thus high work group identification) while such a mix is not as important for new employees who are older. Our findings also could be useful when selecting individuals for off-site training opportunities of significant duration. Older individuals may have an easier time than younger individuals returning to their work group or organisation after training because they are influenced less by proximal group optimal distinctiveness (which otherwise could focus their attention on fitting in the work group upon their return) and so they may be more effective in applying their training to their work group. Choosing older employees for such training assignments also counters perceptions of age bias and may reduce turnover. By contrast, our results suggest it will be substantially more difficult for managers to encourage work group identification through optimal distinctiveness for employees who are older or have other subgroup allegiances within the work group. These findings point to the value of further investigation about identification so that work group members for whom ODT does not apply can be better understood and researchers can better predict the circumstances in which work group identification is more assured.

One possible direction for better understanding when individual differences such as age and sub-group identification will influence the effectiveness of HRD initiatives draws from prior research on work group identification. For example, research could examine whether work group identification is stronger for older individuals when the group provides a forum for achieving a sense of meaning (Steger, Oishi, and Kashdan, 2009) or offers ways in which to make a lasting impact (Zacher, Rosing, and Frese, 2011). It may be the case that ensuring identification with a work group in which HRD is being implemented for older employees and for those with a strong allegiance to a subgroup would be better ensured by appealing to a sense of legacy rather than by

trying to compose the work group as a way to maximize the positive effects of optimal distinctiveness.

This chapter also contributes a new measure of optimal distinctiveness that does not confound perceptions of one's optimal distinctiveness and group size as past measures have (e.g., Badea *et al.* 2010). Further, this new measure allows for individual variability in perceived optimal distinctiveness instead of assuming that the same perceptions apply to all individuals in groups of a certain size. Finally, our measure was developed for use in field settings and can be applied to a wider range of organisational settings, including departments and organisations.

Addressing Both Assimilation and Differentiation Needs Through HRD

Human resource development efforts often focus on ensuring that employees feel assimilated. That is, HRD professionals understand that individuals have a strong need to belong and, therefore, direct efforts towards showing receptivity towards that need (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Optimal distinctiveness theory provides another perspective: that individuals also want to feel distinctive in addition to feeling that they belong. There are many implications that result from understanding that individuals desire to feel distinctive. Managers must not focus exclusively on making individuals feel that they are part of a group such that the individuals feel interchangeable. Instead, an implication resulting from optimal distinctiveness theory is that managers must simultaneously allow employees to feel assimilated while also feeling valued for what they bring to the group that allows them to feel individuated or unique.

In practice, recognizing individual differences can result in challenges, including demonstrating equity while recognizing each individual for being different. Offering training to

employees based on their individual needs is one way to appeal to employees' differentiation needs, but often that approach still may group employees together in categories of training needs such that it is truly belonging needs that are being addressed instead. Following optimal distinctiveness theory, differentiation needs might be best considered as a complement to efforts that convey a sense of belonging. For instance, if a leadership training opportunity is offered to high potential employees, holding individual conversations with employees before or after the training about what knowledge, skills, and abilities each individual would like to develop further via training can help communicate how they each are different while simultaneously allowing for a reflective approach towards gaining value from the training.

Optimal Distinctiveness Depends on Individual Factors

A key principle of ODT that has tended to be overlooked and underspecified is that the effects of optimal distinctiveness are dependent on individual factors (Brewer, 2012). For example, Brewer (2012, p. 92) notes "some people will react strongly to a slight loss of inclusiveness (or slight expansion of group boundaries), whereas others will be more tolerant of a range of ingroup inclusiveness." Individual factors are thought to activate assimilation/differentiation motives in ways that can lead to higher or lower group identification (Brewer, 2012; Leonardelli, Pickett, and Brewer, 2010). Consequently, HRD initiatives may be most effective when attention is paid to tailoring the degree to which assimilation and differentiation needs are addressed on an individual basis. Furthermore, building in opportunities for trainers or HRD professionals to check in on participants and make adjustments to more closely approximate the level of optimal distinctiveness for participants in HRD efforts should

allow for higher levels of work group identification and thus a higher level of motivation that will increase the success of the HRD initiatives.

Striving for Optimal Distinctiveness Within and Across Groups

As previously mentioned, two approaches have been used by researchers when interpreting optimal distinctiveness theory: that individuals seek assimilation and differentiation within the same group versus that individuals strive for the satisfaction of assimilation within the group while attempting to achieve differentiation in comparison with other groups. These varied approaches provide HRD professionals with myriad ways to address individuals' assimilation and differentiation needs involving considering how employees interact within and across group boundaries. For HRD researchers, testing the relative effectiveness of within and across group boundary approaches to achieving both optimal distinctiveness and HRD initiative effectiveness holds implications for theory and practice in promising ways. The benefits for theory would extend to both HRD as well as optimal distinctiveness.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we discuss the implications of optimal distinctiveness theory for the implementation of human resource development initiatives based on an original field study. Because HRD efforts are more effective when employee motivation is stronger, we draw on ODT to understand how work group composition is related to work group identification, which in turn is related to employee motivation. Our findings identified two individual factors (age and functional social identity) that HRD professionals should be aware of when implementing new initiatives. These factors influence the degree to which individuals will identify with a work

group when varying levels of optimal distinctiveness are present. Specifically, we suggest that HRD initiatives need to balance individuals' needs for assimilation and differentiation in a way that recognizes individual differences in these needs. We also provide a new measure of optimal distinctiveness that can be used in a variety of organisational contexts and with different focal units including groups, departments, and organisations. Ultimately, the effectiveness of HRD efforts will depend on building individuals' identification with the appropriate unit, whether it is through optimal distinctiveness or another relevant experience such as the meaning and impact of the work.

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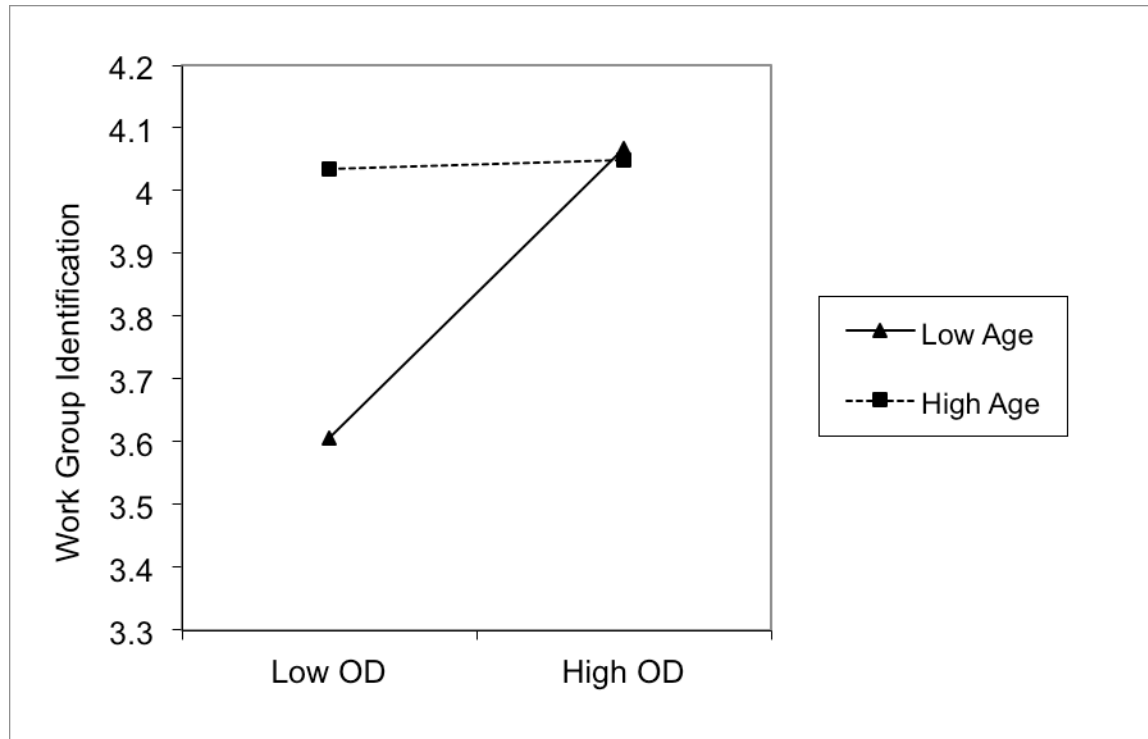


Figure 1. Age as a moderator of the relationship between optimal distinctiveness and work group identification.

Note. OD=Optimal Distinctiveness.

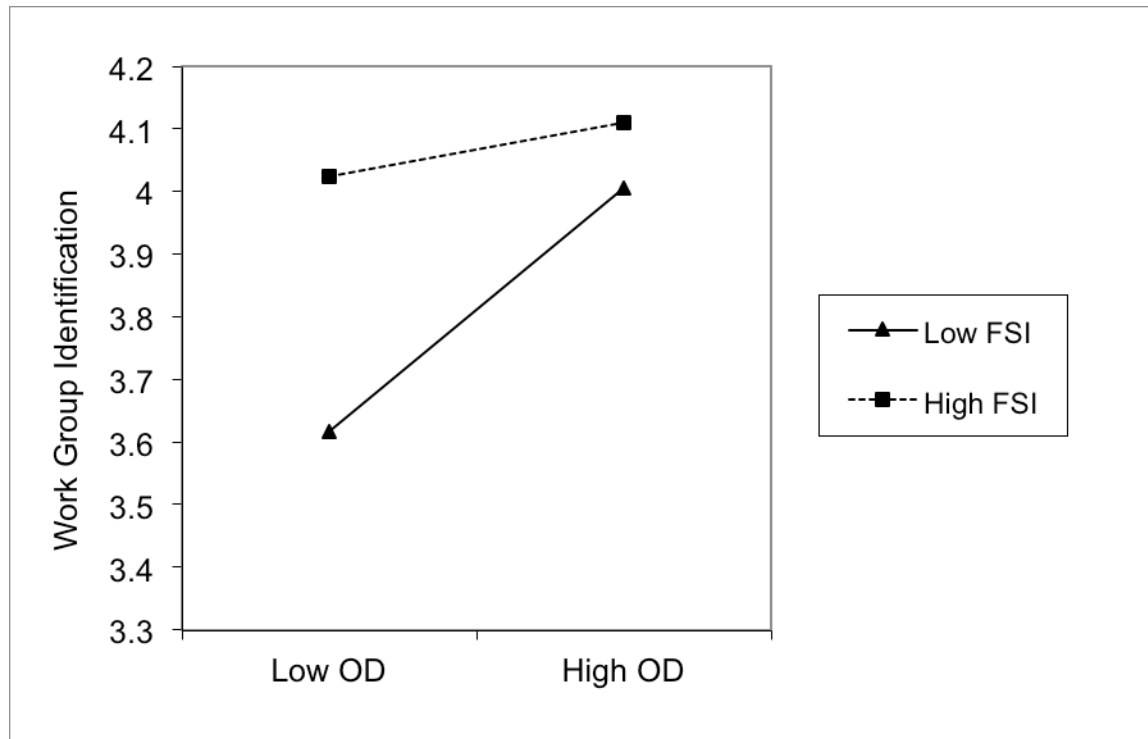


Figure 2. Functional social identity as a moderator of the relationship between optimal distinctiveness and work group identification.

Note. OD=Optimal Distinctiveness; FSI=Functional Social Identity.