

# Critical elements in defining work-based identity in a post-apartheid South Africa

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**Orientation:** The main focus of the study was to answer the question: 'Who am I at work?' in a post-apartheid South African organisation.

**Research purpose:** The aim of the specific research questions was to determine which life sphere and life role elements, and which work-based identity facets were significant in forming work-based identity.

**Motivation for the study:** The findings of the study will enable the formulation of an integrative definition of work-based identity applicable to the South African context.

**Research design, approach and method:** Qualitative data was collected by means of unstructured interviews with 29 employees representing a range of job titles, levels and demographics in a large South African manufacturing company. A grounded theory approach (open and axial coding) was used to analyse the data.

**Main findings:** Distinctive individual self-definitions and a number of common themes integrating social and personal identity perspectives emerged from the data. These themes provided a sound basis for the proposed integrative model to define work-based identity.

**Practical/managerial implications:** The findings of this research will assist human resource practitioners to develop training interventions and management strategies for the potential enhancement of work-based identities. This will result in a more engaged and harmonised workforce.

**Contribution/value-add:** This was the first study of its kind to identify and delineate significant work-based identity elements for the formation of a work-based identity within a South African work context.

## Introduction

Limited research has been carried out on work-based identity formation in post-apartheid South Africa. The following researchers have examined the concept of identity and the dynamics of identity formation: Abend (1974); Erikson (1959); Hall (1996); Schley and Wagenfield (1979); Scott and Lane (2000); Van Tonder (1987, 1999); and Whetten and Godfrey (1998). The variables of identities have been explored by Brewer and Gardner (1996) and Fearon (1999), whilst the process of complex negotiation of work identity, the meaning of work, and its centrality within the individual have been researched by Gini (1998), Philipson (2001) and Steers and Porter (1991). In spite of these studies, some aspects have received very little research attention. Little is known, for example, about the influence of life spheres and life role elements on specific work-facets to which an individual may anchor his or her work identity construction (Strain, 2000). Most studies have focused on the transition of the identification process into the workplace. This article seeks to determine which life spheres and life role elements of South African individuals (developed external to the workplace), influence their transition into an integrated work-based identity.

South African researchers need to establish the relational context of the complex negotiation process of South African individuals' work-based identity (see Alvesson & Willmott, 2002; Giddens, 1991; Ibarra, 2003; Snow & Anderson, 1987; Svenningsson & Alvesson, 2003). This process involves theories from the field of social psychology (Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934), psychoanalysis (Erikson, 1963) and structural conditions of the South African workplace (Kirpal, 2004a, 2004b). Individuals' particular life spheres and life roles affect their construction of work-based identity.

Against this background, the search for answers to South African employees' question 'Who am I at work?' seems to be an appropriate departure point to empirically identify meaning parameters for a work-based identity concept.

The research findings would assist human resource practitioners to develop training interventions and management strategies to potentially enhance work-based identities. More clearly developed work-based identities could therefore assist in the development of a more harmonised South African workplace.

The literature review will concentrate on elements in three core contexts, namely:

- life spheres
- life roles
- work-facets.

For this purpose a three-layer onion model is presented in Figure 1 (derived from the impact assessment wheel of Duke & Greenblat, 1979) that indicate these layers' and elements' significance and their possible influences on the construction of work-based identity.

## First layer

### Life spheres and work-based identity

Life spheres refer to an individual's prominent contexts (be they historical, political, cultural, work or economical), from which he or she draws on in significant discourses and discussions (Craig, 1995; Giddens, 1991; Harré & Gillett, 1994; Parker, 1992). To identify these contexts, one has to assume that the self-concept has two components: a personal identity and a number of social (contextual) identities (Tajfel & Turner, 1985). Much research has been done on the tension between individuals' *social* identities and their *personal* identity. *Social* identities (Brewer, 1991, 2003) essentially refer to 'categorisations of the self' into more inclusive social units (Tajfel & Turner, 1985), whilst *personal* identity refers to the 'individualised self' – those characteristics that differentiate one individual from another.

The consequence of a segregated society (life sphere) in South Africa is explored by investigating the extent to which individuals' norms, values and attitudes formed in a particular life sphere affect the degree to which these individuals identify with work-based facets. The concepts of personal identity and the distinctive character that individuals develop are linked through social identity theory (Hall & Lindzey, 1957; Van Tonder, 1987). This linkage establishes the cognitive connection between life spheres (formed external to the workplace) and life roles in individuals' perceptions of

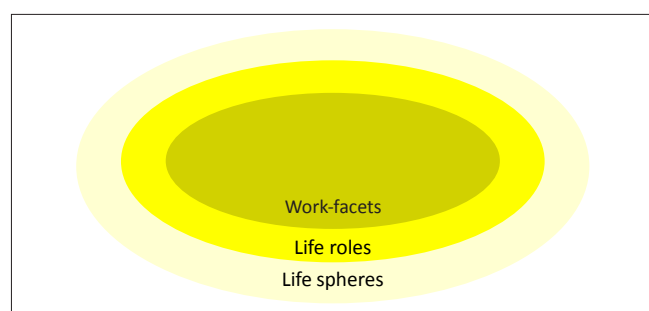


FIGURE 1: The proposed onion model for the formation of work-facets.

their work-based identity. The ongoing tension between an individual's personal identity and his or her various social (contextual) identities (Brewer, 1991, 2003) is facilitated by his or her self-concept (Abend, 1974; Erikson, 1959; Hall, 1996; Schley & Wagenfield, 1979; Scott & Lane, 2000; Van Tonder, 1987, 1999; Whetten & Godfrey, 1998) and formed within a particular life sphere.

**Work as a central life interest:** What prompts individuals to consider work as central to their being? Where did the idea originate that work provides meaning to an individual? (see Frankl, 1992). As a central life interest, work is defined by Kahn (1990, p. 692) as the extent to which it is viewed by individuals as a main part of their life. As each work facet has its own elements and unique constituencies, the interaction amongst employees in the workplace will demonstrate the transition of life spheres and life role elements into the workplace. These transitions fall within the entrenched parameters of individuals' self-formed life spheres and varying individual motivations (see Freud, 1928). The salience of different life spheres in work identity formation will be specifically investigated in this study.

Researchers have thoroughly examined the concept of work and what it represents to individuals. Such research includes work as a central life interest (Lawler & Hall 1970; Lodahl & Kejner, 1965); work's psychological meaningfulness (May, 2003; Kristof, 1996; Renn & Vandenberg, 1995; Shamir, 1991); conditions for employees to engage in their work (Aktouf, 1992; Brown, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1990; Kahn, 1990; Kanungo, 1982; Schaufeli & Bakker, 2003, 2004); psychological safety (Deci & Ryan, 1985; Edmondson, 1996; Feldman, 1984); and the psychological availability of work (Goffman, 1959; Hall & Richter, 1989; Kahn, 1990; Morris & Feldman, 1996; Schlenker, 1980).

## Second layer

### Life roles and work-based identity

To truly comprehend the aspect of identity, one would have to consider the issue of life roles. Super (1990) maintains that individuals occupy various roles over the course of their life span including career, work, home and family, community, study, and leisure. Accepting a (work) role implies taking on an identity that will assist the individual to integrate into a (work) community and display features that distinguish one group from the next (Goffman, 1959). Social identification with roles is a perception of oneness with a group: people perceive themselves as psychologically intertwined with the group's fate. Within the group they share a common destiny and experience its successes and failures (Tolman, 1943).

**Work-role centrality:** The work-role may be a central role compared to an individual's other life roles. The subject of work performance and job involvement as argued by Brown (1996) and Paullay *et al.* (1994) relate to the concepts of work identity and work-role centrality. Understanding how individuals choose to identify with their work is an important social process because, as research suggests, it helps discern

combinations of identities that an individual will develop (Elsbach, 1999). An understanding of the importance of work-role centrality for individuals would assist South African organisations to apply human resource initiatives to evoke the highest levels of work-based identification. In turn, this will improve performance and overall organisational effectiveness (Pfeiffer, 1994). Examples of applicable human resource initiatives include enhanced engagement, job enrichment, work-role fits, co-worker-supervisor relations, co-worker norms, and work-role security. The salience of different life roles in work identity formation will also be investigated in this study.

### Third layer

#### Work-based facets

Against the background of significant life spheres and life roles, one may question why individuals choose to identify with particular work facets. In order to delineate meaning parameters of work-facets, one needs to first focus on important facets of individuals' identification with their organisation and occupations. Dutton *et al.* (1994, p. 243) view organisation or occupational identity as the 'cognitive connection' between individuals' perceptions of their organisation or occupation. Whetten (1995) views these concepts as the distinctive and enduring character of an occupation or organisation. Both views are meaningful to this research, as the mention of a 'cognitive connection' implies a reference point in the individual, which we imply to be the influence of one's life spheres (inherent programming). In addition, the 'distinctive, enduring character of an occupation or organisation implies an interface between the values, attributes and norms of the individual to his or her occupation' (Albert & Whetten, 1985, p. 227). It can be argued that individuals create their work identity through consciously determining work-facets that will enhance their social belonging or individuality. In doing so, individuals apply an embedded 'unconscious' reference to their self-concept developed under particular life spheres and engrained life roles.

A number of work-facets shed light on particular anchors in the work place that appeal to individuals. These anchors assist individuals to reach a point of self-expression as to who they are in the workplace. This research will identify life spheres and life role elements (developed external to the workplace) that influence South African individuals' transition into an integrated work-based identity. The first work-facet of such a multifaceted identity is that of *profession*. A profession can be defined as an organised group consisting of unique knowledge and skill sets through which society grants individuals higher levels of prestige (Larson, 1977, p. 216). A *career* is viewed by Thompson and McHugh (2001, p. 345) as the source of *vocational identity* that affects an individual, including the effect that this identity has on job security and the individual's level of identification with a career path (Herriot & Pemberton, 1995, p. 204). Ashforth and Kreiner (1999, p. 417) define *occupational identity* as 'the set of enduring, distinctive and ensuring characteristics that

typify the line of work done'. This definition illustrates that individuals will develop their own unique goals and values to preserve their self-esteem, serve their goals and present behaviours that are congruent to their self-concept (Dukerich *et al.*, 2002; Dutton *et al.*, 1994).

The theoretical positions highlighted earlier suggest that the work-identification process relates to transitions into the workplace. The work-identification process is presumed to be constructed during social interaction in the organisational setting. Social belonging to a group implies elements of distinction. It can be argued that social belonging relates to the question 'How do we see ourselves?' (Wodak, 1996, p. 126). This link between social and personal orientated work-based identities is vital to determine an individual's relationship with his or her work in terms of work-role centrality. The concept of job orientation as referred to by Wrzesniewski *et al.* (1997) maintains that individuals who have inherently programmed membership to social groups are likely to identify with social groups like unions, a group of co-workers and other social groups. Wrzesniewski *et al.* (1997) further distinguish this socially embedded identification against individuals' relationship with their work. He categorises them as having a *work* orientation, for example, a career, job, and calling. On the other hand, individuals who think of their work and life as inseparable (Wrzesniewski *et al.*, 1997; Wrzesniewski, 2002), are said to have a *job* orientation in that they prefer to pursue passions outside their work. The different work-based identity facets individuals are focusing on will also be investigated in this study.

One should ask: How does this work orientation or work identification develop? Kahn (1990, p. 694) conceptualises work engagement as 'the harnessing of organisational members' selves to their work-roles' (own emphasis). The members' selves thus play a central role in the work identification process. Despite the existence of a fairly clear conceptualisation of this identity formation or negotiation process, researchers still define work-based identity differently. (Kreiner, Hollensbee & Sheep, 2006; Walsh & Gordon, 2007). The following definitions can be reflected upon.

Alvesson and Willmott (2002, p. 627) define work-based identity as a dynamic 'interpretive activity involved in reproducing and transforming *self-identity*' (author's own emphasis).

Buche (2008, p. 134) defines work identity as '... a socially constructed representation of an individual's unique *self-perception* of his/her own interactions with the employment environment' (author's own emphasis).

Kirpal (2004a, p. 274) refers to work identity as '... forms of *identifications* individuals develop with their job, work setting or their employer ...' (author's own emphasis). He further indicates that work-based identity is a multilayered and multidimensional phenomenon (2004b, p. 202). Work identity therefore develops within the complex negotiation

between personal resources, attitudes, and values on the one hand and work processes and settings on the other.

Tajfel and Turner (1985, p. 24) consider work-based identity as a description of one's *self-concept* in terms of the work-role. In addition, Walsh and Gordon (2007, p. 2) refer to individual work identity as:

*a work-based self-concept, constituted of a combination of organisational, occupational, and other identities, that shapes the roles individuals adopt, together with the corresponding ways in which they behave when performing their work in the context of their jobs and/or careers.*

(Tajfel & Turner, 1985, p. 24; author's own emphasis)

From the preceding definitions it becomes clear that work-based identity can be considered as a multi-identity, multifaceted and multilayered construction of the self. In this view, the self-concept fulfils a core and integrative function in shaping individuals' roles within their employment context.

From the aforementioned theoretical explication of work-based identity, this study aims to first establish responses to the guiding research question 'Who am I at work?' Consequently, answers will be obtained for the following specific research questions:

- Which *life sphere elements* are significant in relation to work-based identity formation?
- Which *life role elements* are significant in relation to work-based identity formation?
- Which *work-facets* are dominant in establishing work-based identity?

A further objective of this study is to specifically determine whether facets in these different layers contribute to differences in emphasis that are relevant to work-based identity formation.

## Research design

### Research approach

This qualitative research study used an inductive approach to drive its data interpretation. The inductive method and existing literature were compared and each was used to inform the interpretation of the other. Notes made from the existing literature were compared to the recordings and to the notes taken during interviews. The interpretation process became an iterative process where the research question was continuously re-evaluated to ensure that the data sets were valid. The study was approached from a position where the researcher (referring to the first author) did not assume that she understood the work identity phenomenon in the South African context. Data analysis is based on the interpretation of the meaning that the respondents assigned to work identity. The researcher's ontology (personal considerations of social reality) found that the interpretivist approach (Babbie & Mouton, 2003; Cresswell, 2002) allowed her to consider people in the way in which they described themselves. A modernist epistemology was followed in which knowledge

acquisition was viewed as inter-subjective and grounded in the context of the people under study. The modernist approach allowed for the analysis of and exposure to existing literature and for a methodological discussion on the ambiguous definitions of work-identity. Based on the research done, an integrative model was proposed for defining work-identity from a South African perspective.

### Research strategy

Grounded theory techniques (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998) were used to create a conceptual model that combined personal and social identity concepts into an integrated approach to work identity formation. In order to elicit reflection on various life spheres and life roles, the participants were asked to tell the researcher their '*life story*'. Nine descriptive categories were retained and produced hierarchical layers which were clustered under life spheres, life roles and work-facets. After analysing the 29 interview transcripts, the researchers found no new themes emerging. This suggested that they had reached their key goal in the grounded theory research known as *theoretical saturation* (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This research comprised a multiple case study since the researchers explored life spheres, life roles and work-based identity facets from the personal narratives of 29 employees (Burton, 2000).

### Research method

#### Research setting and entrée

This research forms part of a larger qualitative research project which was conducted in an international manufacturing plant in South Africa. The participants were recruited by the company's Human Resource department and voluntarily participated in the interview process. The participants were randomly identified from various departments, ranging from manufacturing to human resource management. The study attempted to include all job titles and representatives of all management levels. With clarity on the phenomenon of work identity and essential themes thereof in the South African context, the engagement of the entire organisation in this study has proved to be a productive avenue for future research. In order to ensure a diverse sample, four different departments were chosen for conducting this research, namely the departments of packaging, administration, engineering, and human capital.

#### Establishing research roles

The first role of the researcher was to participate in a research team and to determine by means of a literature study the meaning of work identity. Reflecting on this task, the researcher was confronted with the ambiguousness of this phenomenon. The research team presented elements of understanding that corresponded with the literature study. The researcher and research team reflected upon these elements of understanding during group discussions. There was substantial growth in understanding within the research team as the concept of *work identity* and its construction gradually unfolded. This growth in the research team can

be described as a watershed experience in the development of the researchers involved. This growth also presented the researchers with continuous reflection and sharper analytical thinking.

### Sampling (selection of cases)

Table 1 provides a socio-demographic profile of the 29 respondents who were initially selected to participate in the study. The racial composition of the participants predominantly consisted of White people (13), followed by Black people (9), Coloured people (4) and Indian or Asian people (3). Eighteen men and eleven women were interviewed and their mean age was 38 years. A process of theoretical and purposive sampling was followed (Mason, 2002). The sampling criteria were provided by the gatekeeper. The interview question was simply: 'Tell me your life story'. Research team members were encouraged to use their discretion to elicit significant passions, practices and relationships that the employees engaged in. The data collection strategy allowed the researchers to understand the dynamic process of *how* people defined themselves according to their life roles and life spheres in their own words.

### Data collection methods

The research was based on two unstructured interviews which were conducted on a one-on-one basis with each participant. Interview 1 was a preliminary, exploratory interview where a single enquiry was posed by the interviewer, namely 'Tell me your life story.' Data gathering in this qualitative study was based on 'building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants and conducting in a natural setting' (Cresswell, 1994, p. 126). Questions following the opening question were open ended to allow each participant to tell his or her life history and experiences so that the researchers could gain a greater understanding of the concepts and facets which unfolded spontaneously by the participants. Subsequent to Interview 1 a feedback session on the findings was facilitated by the project leader. This was attended by other expert qualitative researchers and provided the research team with structured guidance on the data and themes identified. The feedback session also ensured clarity for all research team members for Interview 2. The design of Interview 2 offered interviewers the opportunity to verify, further prompt, and gain insights on identity-related issues. It also provided the research team members with important themes to pursue further. The cycle between the two interviews was two weeks and the interviews were finally transcribed over a total of 586 pages.

### Recording and transcribing data

Permission to record interviews was granted to the research participants and the respondents were reassured of confidentiality. One way for a researcher to address the credibility challenge is to play back his or her observations to his or her subjects in either verbal or written form (Shaffir & Stebbins, 1991). The researcher made use of all the research teams' recordings in order to ascertain the true context of themes that emerged from the recorded transcripts. In order

**TABLE 1:** Socio-demographic profile of respondents.

Job Title	Age	Gender	Race
Payroll clerk salaries	53	Female	Asian/Indian
Unit manager packaging	27	Male	Asian/Indian
Training controller	40	Male	Asian/Indian <sup>a</sup>
Financial accountant	30	Female	Black <sup>a</sup>
Manufacturing development specialist	32	Female	Black
Reg. manufacturing development consultant	44	Female	Black
Business support specialist	27	Male	Black
Training controller	51	Male	Black
Training specialist	62	Male	Black
Technician engineering	46	Male	Black
Operations manager	34	Male	Black
Reg. manufacturing development consultant	44	Female	Black
Maintenance planner	28	Female	Coloured <sup>a</sup>
Training specialist	36	Female	Coloured
Controller planned maintenance	33	Male	Coloured
Section engineer, brewing, packaging and utility	34	Male	Coloured
Human resources coordinator	31	Female	White <sup>a</sup>
Clerk administrator	33	Female	White
Secretary	38	Female	White
Clerk administrator	45	Female	White
Technician engineering	31	Male	White
Controller planned maintenance	34	Male	White
Business support specialist	34	Male	White
Vibration analyst	56	Male	White
Utility maintenance planner	29	Male	White
Process control engineer	39	Male	White
Technician engineering	54	Male	White
Logistics and planning manager	58	Male	White
Maintenance planner	33	Male	White

<sup>a</sup> The reference to colour is as per the Republic of South Africa (1998a), *Employment Equity Act, No.55* colour classification.

to ensure confidential, yet traceable records of the analysed data, the original data was indexed and made available to all the research team members for analysis. The credibility of data was further ensured by the use of field notes.

**Field Notes:** Personal field notes were made to record associated emotions, behaviours and attitudes of respondents. This ensured clarity on themes. These notes that were made on each respondent also included comments and questions received after the interview (Adler & Adler, 1994).

### Data analysis

Themes were developed through an extensive review of literature using the qualitative data as described by Patten (1998). The grounded theory approach was used for ethnographic interviews with South African employees to illustrate their life and work experiences. Qualitative research requires that data collected be rich in describing people and places (Patten cited in Schurink, 2004). The initial (open) coding process involved the coding of self-descriptions, life spheres and roles, as well as work-based descriptions. The analysis yielded 726 statements with nine descriptive categories. In the axial coding processes, categories were reassembled to prominently establish the interactional context of the self-descriptions. Three main themes emerged for categorising the self-descriptions. By following the grounded theory method (categorisation, codification, fragmentation of texts, re-conceptualisation and interpretation) the analysis reached a level of convergence.

## Strategies for ensuring quality research

The collected data was re-evaluated and re-formulated to ensure that the identified datasets and themes were credible. This was achieved by data interpretations which became an iterative process. Findings were circulated to the research team members and the internal reliability of the research was enhanced in the following manner:

- Interviews were kept to a maximum of four interviews per day and conducted over a two week period to limit interviewer fatigue.
- An auditable trail was recorded, which included the actual recorded interviews, the transcribed interviews and other field notes.
- The researcher, in association with two academic peers, analysed the themes to check for consistency in the interpretation and outcomes.
- The reliability of the findings was further verified by referring to the extensive field notes and recordings of each interview.
- The researcher used a uniform process when analysing the data. Similar themes in the interview data were clustered into broad themes. In addition, the themes were rearranged to remove unrelated statements and to obtain further supporting evidence.

The researcher, participants, measuring instrument and research context are variables that can potentially influence the reliability of the data (Mouton & Marais, 1990). The research design attempted to restrict possible bias regarding the data, by allowing the project leader, who is an experienced researcher, to facilitate the research team. The project leader was skilled in conducting interviews, familiar with the field of qualitative research and experienced in conducting research in diverse environments. Throughout the process the project leader reflected on the dynamics of interacting with the research team. Care was taken to accurately interpret the results and a systematic approach to the data analysis was followed. This, together with regular input from the co-researchers, assisted in minimising errors with the summary and interpretation of the results.

## Reporting

The research findings were placed into contextual perspective by analysing the data in relation to relevant literature reviews on identity formation.

## Findings

In the following sections, important layers and dimensions (based on the onion model) are presented to inform work identity in the South African context. This model provides a framework for the research findings. The researcher sought to create a model that was anchored in narrative data but nevertheless included explanatory value in terms of work identity in the South African context. Details of the emerging model will be presented under the findings. Table 2 presents a summary of the life spheres, life roles and work-facets elements that emerged from the data analysis.

**TABLE 2:** Influences on work identity in South Africa.

Prominent life spheres	Descriptors of findings
Political – Influence of Apartheid (Social Aspect)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employees have an inherent psychological awareness of race due to historic legislatively imposed consciousness and this is carried over into the workplace where transformation policies reinforce the awareness and memberships to social groups giving a psychological reinforcement to the “us” and “them” groups which is historically programmed.</li> </ul>
Culture ( Social Aspect )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collective values, beliefs and ideologies fuel the social aspects of culture and race which is transferred into the workplace.</li> <li>• Social memberships and categorization is accentuated by political influence and legislation and is extended into the workplace.</li> </ul>
Family ( Personal Aspect )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Marginalisation of traditional work-roles affect the work centrality of many individuals who seek entrepreneurial ventures to support families for various intrinsic and extrinsic reasons</li> </ul>
<b>Prominent life roles</b>	
Religion (Personal Aspect )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The centrality of work is influenced by persons values and beliefs this manifests as the prominent role in preserving the “me-ness” in the workplace.</li> </ul>
Breadwinner /Provider Role (Personal Aspect)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employees consider work as a way to a means and it supports their passions as family is a central life interest.</li> </ul>
Political /Change Agent Role (Social Aspect)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The influence of transformation policies reinforces social categorisation in the workplace and fuels beliefs and values. Employees identify with memberships in the workplace that maintain the same beliefs.</li> </ul>
<b>Prominent work-facets</b>	
Job Identification (Personal facet)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employees consider their job important to them as this brings value to organisation, team and in return growth and reward to them.</li> </ul>
Profession (Social facet)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individuals seek to identify with memberships belonging to occupational groups as it gives a strong work orientation and the value they bring into a organisation is reinforced as a professional.</li> </ul>
Workplace Role (Personal Facet)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Individuals identify with their roles and tasks as it adds a value in a particular team, division and organisation.</li> </ul>
Team Role (Social Facet)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Employees with common work goals and targets identify with team memberships and relationships in order to achieve work goals and objectives.</li> <li>• Attitudes and norms at individual level are aligned to the common goals and responsibilities of the team.</li> </ul>

## First layer

### Life spheres

In the request ‘*Tell me your life story*’ the researchers sought to document the various life spheres that the respondents reflected upon as most central to how they view their work identity. The study found ample evidence of a strong influence of life spheres on work identity formation. A correlation was also found between the respondents’ significant life spheres and significant social roles in the community.

It was therefore important to recognise the life spheres of ‘where we come from’ within the context of the workplace and to find out how this affected the respondents’ understanding of ‘who they are’ at work.<sup>1</sup> The following three subthemes emerged in the first layer.

### Subtheme 1 – The political influence of apartheid

It is evident from the analysis of the datasets that racial awareness in South Africa is psychologically deeply

1.Fiske and Morling (1985) proposed five types of schemata that an individual develops. They specifically refer to the role schemata, which revolve around the behaviours we expect of people in certain positions and situations. Our theoretical framework also considers life spheres (in addition to life roles) as dimensions that contribute to the construct of work identity.

embedded at individual, organisational and societal levels. In line with this deeply embedded racial frame of reference that constructs individuals' fabric of identity, the analysed data makes it clear that South African employees display a very strong social identification that reinforces their membership to particular social groups<sup>2</sup>. The following statements illustrate the collective racial mindset as it displays itself in the workplace:

*'Colour of skin in most of our minds it's still a very sensitive issue. You look at a person; you'll say white woman or black man. I mean, if I may have an example, I was hijacked. You would say I was hijacked any other white person or even me as a black person.'*<sup>3</sup>

(S3, p. 3)

*'In the working environment it doesn't count for me as you won't always get a promotion because of employment equity. In the bigger picture in South Africa you have to study to be one step ahead of the others and that is why I am studying.'*

(R2, p. 20)

*'I think if I can say to you one will always be aware that in the South African workplace you bring blackness into workplace as the lines are clearly set.'*

(S1, p. 20)

In another interview, a respondent emphasised that being Black compelled him to prove his competency, regardless of the fact that he was an African professional with relevant qualifications. This particularly occurs in contexts where a strong awareness of White and Black surfaces. Transformation policies that force the integration of facilities and the re-engineering of recruitment and appointment policies do not create new beliefs or values in the workplace, but rather fuel collective values and beliefs. This can be illustrated as follows:

*'With the BEE thing as well, you then are coming to work with the feeling that as much as you made the qualifications that everybody has made, people are quite conscious of the fact that you are black; you are quite conscious of the fact that they are white.'*

(S3, p. 6)

*'Working at XX for 40 years I see relationships becoming artificial as the relationship is done within a framework. Especially other colours... I see the way they pull their faces, it is a smoke screen. I can deal with this artificialness as I am an introvert.'*

(S1, p. 2)

In the following extract, the respondent commented that being of another race implied diversified culture and ideas. It can be suggested that collective values and beliefs fuel the social aspects of culture and race in the workplace. The respondent illustrated this complexity as follows:

*'Unfortunately in this country, there are different cultures. Different cultures, different ideas, and different levels of commitment. So it becomes a bit more difficult as it were.'*

(C1 8 AB, p. 33)

2. On collective identity, see Abdelal *et al.* (2005), who, as part of the collective identity concept, distinguish two important dimensions, namely contestation and content of and within groups.

3. All names in the paper have been omitted to preserve interviewees' confidentiality, a condition guaranteed in the research design. Pronouns are used to reflect the speakers' gender.

## Subtheme 2 – Culture

Social membership and categorisation are accentuated by political influence and legislation and this extends to the workplace. These aspects require careful consideration as they control the way individuals see themselves and their work or profession. The following statements illustrate this:

*'She is proudly South African but is an Indian South African. I was born and bred here. If you go back to the apartheid days, the Indian community was instrumental in the fight. My mom's brother was high up in the ANC in the Eastern Cape.'*

(S2, p. 17)

*'Black managers don't like to discipline. I think they crave the acceptance of the work force. So they actually don't want to stand out and be different from the work force. They are the manager but they still don't want to adopt the performance culture.'*

(T1, p. 15)

In another instance a respondent referred to social categorisation and membership in the context of socialisation at work. The effect of such membership and political influence has surfaced at management level, as highlighted by a respondent. The following extracts illustrate uniqueness and distinctiveness amongst race groups. In these extracts the respondents highlight individuals' need to integrate their personal identity with their social identity. This is cognitively the frame of reference that was imposed by the apartheid legislation over the past decade:

*'At shop floor level, though people in their minds are still separate, we want that to socialise on a different level and we make it work at work. But can you imagine if our families are to come?...Then we want it separate.'*

(S1, p. 3)

*'We use to have in the old days sport, hiking, and fishing. This was predominately white attended, but was good in general for people. We black people as you know like soccer. When we integrated there is one sports club and pub, but attendance is down.'*

(S1, p. 6)

In another example, cultural beliefs were considered central to the respondent's belief system:

*'My wife is a house wife and I want her to be there and teach the kids [cultural beliefs]. We teach the Tswana culture. My stepfather was a Xhosa and my biological dad was a Tswana.'*

(S1, p. 2)

As the research attempted to gain insight on the significance of group membership<sup>4</sup> and social membership<sup>5</sup>, the awareness of uniqueness and cultural differences was well illustrated by a respondent. The following extract clearly displays the embeddedness of political history:

*'It teaches you to grow quickly, to mature quickly and also at the same time your eyes will be opened up, like being an Asian, born with your own identity, your own ideas, your own background, which is totally different from theirs, for example they're not used to us.'*

(RB2, p. 3)

4. Abdelal *et al.* (2005) refer to this as the identity content of a group and they divide this into four types, namely constitutive norms, social purpose, relational comparisons and cognitive models.

5. On social categorisation theories, see Tajfel and Turner (1982).

### Subtheme 3 – Family

There is a need to recognise family as a factor of intrinsic motivation. Marginalisation of traditional work-roles affects the work centrality of many individuals who seek entrepreneurial ventures to support their families. In the following extract the respondent made it clear that he was just gaining experience from the work that he was doing. He considered his relationship to his work as a clinical one and maintained that his own business was his ultimate passion. He further believed that he was in line with BEE legislation<sup>6</sup>, because he was male and Black:

*'My intention is to gain exposure as an operations manager, which I can use in my own business, which I am pursuing with this BEE thing in South Africa you know. The person who you try to impress pays your invoice; meanwhile employed the person you try impress gives you a salary.'*

(S1, p. 2)

*'In the working environment it doesn't count for me as you won't always get a promotion because of employment equity. In the bigger picture in South Africa you have to study to be one step ahead of the others and that is why I am studying.'*

(S1, p.3)

Another respondent clearly indicated that his intrinsic motivation was to earn money to support his family:

*'He could see I was keen on developing; the only thing I was so; I wanted to earn more money to get my family and everybody comfortable, that in my mind I forgot myself in terms of a career. But I continued in an area where I was involved with.'*

(C17AB, p. 15)

*'When he told me that he sees me in the same position in 5 years – that point in time I went into the XX business as well.'*

(T1, p. 8)

Another respondent's intrinsic motivation to provide for his family by pursuing his own business was linked to his reference to being a 'White male'. The influence of employment equity legislation which limits the promotion<sup>7</sup> and progression of white males in organisations was suggested. The respondent therefore sought extrinsic motivation in a business to supplement his need to support his family. The following comments make a case for self-made career development outside the organisation:

*'I have a business I run outside of work. I have to financially, and for my future; it is a personal thing you know. The way things are going in this country... I am a 33 year old white male. I am going nowhere.'*

(S1, p. 1)

*'I think a lot of people feel that way... people say they are detached from their jobs ... uhmm then you hear other people say you are just here to earn a salary and people respond saying yes you're right I am just here to earn a salary... so don't expect me to put in the extra.'*

(S2, p. 8)

6.Black Economic Empowerment (BEE) is a moral initiative to redress the wrongs of the past and is seen as a pragmatic strategy to empower black entrepreneurs in South Africa.

7.Strümpfer (2005) highlighted the theory of Deci and Ryan (1985) of intrinsic motivation that refers to the human tendency to seek out challenges and the inherent tendency to be self-motivated and to apply this in an environment that enhances self-value.

### Second layer

#### Life roles

The following three subthemes emerged in the life roles layer.

#### Subtheme 1 – Religion

The theme of religion represents the moral standards, attitudes, beliefs and values by which individuals live. Their behaviour across all life spheres is affected by this theme. A sense of commitment and religious values in work also transpires from this theme. In the following extract the respondent mentions that his commitment to the organisation is because of his ability to intrinsically avoid conflict with his company's product and because of his belief system:

*'You see two years ago I become a born-again Christian now I please God through my work. It is hard as I work for an AA company XX. But I realise that it is not a reflection of my faith. I have left XX and have come back.'*

(S1, p. 2)

In the following example the respondent finds pride in her work. Her commitment is based on her sincere thankfulness to her Creator for providing her with a job with related benefits. Through her belief and values she exhibits an enhanced commitment towards her work:

*'Then I always just remind myself "thank God I have a job; thank God my husband has a job and at least we have job security ... a little bit you know it's not as if the company's gonna go bump tomorrow. We have medical aid, we have provident funds ....'*

(T1, p. 13)

The next extract demonstrates a change in the respondent's belief system and suggests that his relationships at work have become influential. His faith has become a yardstick against which he regulates his behaviour and relationships at work:

*'I think the conflict in me... you know the old me and now the new Christian me ... I don't like prejudgments. This happens mostly at work. One's home life you have control over prejudgments, these happen mostly at work.'*

(S1, p. 2)

This data suggests that spirituality plays an important role in individuals' lives and that it is often embedded in their cultural beliefs. This was especially found prominent in Indian cultures that support the Hindu religion. The following statement highlights the engrained role of values within culture and religious beliefs:

*'I don't associate myself with the Hindu religion as such but I do follow my culture on what I need to do, also if you look at the values that I abide by, let me quickly say it is the five human values that I learnt from a very young age.'*

(RD2, p. 3)

#### Subtheme 2 – Breadwinner or provider role

Employees consider work as a way to a means. It supports their passions since family is a central life interest. The meaning of work for an individual involves to some degree a response to the desired expectations of the stakeholders. It is also a response to desired behaviour in particular roles. In the following extract the respondent states that regardless



of his loss of purpose at work, his intrinsic motivation is to stay with the company because of the fact that he is the breadwinner:

*'What I know is that my time to leave XX has arrived or is near or whatever but I do not want to, I mean I am a breadwinner. I know that there was a purpose for me being here, I don't know exactly what that purpose is. So when I leave I've got to be sure.'*

(S3, p. 18)

When considering the relationship to work and the meaning of work, it is important to consider the motivations that individuals find in orientating themselves to their work in relation to other relationships and roles. Is work considered a calling, a career or a relationship (inseparable from one another?). Or is work, as indicated by the data, a means to support one's family? In the following extracts the respondents highlight their need to provide better and consistently:

*'Our parents did provide for us, they made sure, our education was more important than anything else and that's all they concentrated on for their entire lives, so obviously it is now our turn to give back, so that's basically the family that I lived in.'*

(RD2, p. 1)

*'Yes, but I am doing to get on and support my family. My family is a passion.'*

(R1, p. 13)

*'Family ... my kids and grandkids need me so I must earn money to provide for them, as I never had this, I never had benefits and I want to give more than I had.'*

(S1, p. 3)

*'It is a responsibility to come to work as I have a family to look after.'*

(R1, p. 9)

### Subtheme 3 – Political or change agent role

In this category the influence of transformation policies reinforces social categorisation in the workplace and fuels beliefs and values. Employees identify with types of membership in the workplace that maintain their beliefs and are likely to enhance association with like groups.

In this category respondents were concerned with achieving 'unique distinctiveness' in the workplace against the so called 'out groups' as promoted by the *Employment Equity Act*. The following extract highlights a respondent's need for integrating social group beliefs, norms and values:

*'Now, as African people or if you gonna continue into the businesses that are owned by other people we will have to continue having to assimilate and not be true to ourselves and be who we are, we need to bring change.'*

(S3, p. 20)

Another respondent emphasised the fact that the social, communal 'we'<sup>8</sup> as referred to by the social identification theory, underlines the need for individuals to seek association to groups and members in the workplace that reinforce the unique 'we' communal identity:

*'Think people, especially your African people, they like to have that association with a senior manager or a GM, that they could, that they*

8. Tajfel and Turner (1986) refer to the distinguishing features of an in-group such as shared modes of communication.

*feel very comfortable with, and they don't see him sitting in an office somewhere and giving orders.'*

(C1 8 AB, p. 29)

*'If you observe the people that have sort of moved up in business positions within corporate South Africa, you take out the politicians and corporate South Africa as one corporate with many networks. You will have the guys that will come through the ranks who have qualifications and can do the job and are not just about politics.'*

(S3, p. 22)

*'With the previous managers it was havoc. XX was very good, excellent, but the previous one, that was a black manager, I sometimes felt that they purposefully wanted to do you in, because when I got a white manager, he sorted out the problems in 7 months.'*

(T1, p. 9)

A respondent accentuated that social categorisation was fuelled by memberships with a social identity foundation in unions. The respondent believed that this influenced the group's behaviour to transformational actions, which also addressed the group's common beliefs and values:

*'Now of course, the government, the unions have never actually stepped forward and said you are here to build the country, we don't want to cover when you're drunk, we don't want to represent you as a thief, as slacker. We want to see you building. They have not done this; I mean like to ask them today I mean when we are ever going to change. I mean I can ask those questions because I am black as well, I mean really now, I mean it is now, when are we going to change our minds, when are we going to start properly for correct ways at work?'*

(T1, p. 6)

*'The school bully in essence is the weakest link, but because he shouts the loudest or he has the biggest fist and he's stronger than anybody else, He'll rule the roost. It is the same in companies. Because of this "impimpi"<sup>9</sup> culture under apartheid era it's still like this.'*

(T1, p. 6)

### Third layer

#### Work-facets

The following four subthemes emerged from the work-facets layer.

#### Subtheme 1 – Job Identification

Employees consider their job as important to themselves because it brings value to the team and organisation, and yields growth and reward to themselves. They seek challenges in the job as this brings them value and increases their personal well being and satisfaction. For the following respondent the importance of finding meaning in the workplace is encapsulated in values and responsibilities:

*'So the job was never mundane, the nature of the job changes... I suppose I feel a sense of responsibility towards my pay cheque, at the end of the day you are getting paid. They are asking you to do a job and you need to do that job.'*

(S2, p. 12)

*'But I love my job. My wife sometimes complains about the money, but on the other hand she would say that she wishes that she had a job like I do, because I like going to work and helping people.'*

(B1, p. 5)

9. 'Impimpi' is a Zulu word used to describe a spy or informer.

*'I think I guess the battle between money and happiness, at work. I am happy in my job but I am not rewarding moneywise, of course it always can get better.'*

(S1, p. 1)

One of the respondents emphasised his impact and contribution to the team and his sense of value towards the job. He underlined that it was his uniqueness and the team's participation that rendered distinctiveness to their department:

*'For me I know my job is done when guys start doing it themselves and I just sit back and do coordinating. If things do get out of hand I jump in and help out but it is nice to see things happening, I enjoy it.'*

(C18AB, p. 24)

*'I haven't looked back; I enjoy my job, I like working with people, I think I still have a lot to contribute to the people that are coming and going, and the people that are here, I think they are normally well.'*

(C17AB, p. 4)

Another respondent highlighted the importance of understanding the identity work that he performed in view of the fact that personal and social identity conflicts arose when on the job. Identification with the job closed the racial divide for this respondent whilst common work goals were being acted upon. The respondent stated that common membership to an occupational group was membership induced by the job performed. Nevertheless, he explained that as soon as there was a social setting, the embedded racial 'us' and 'them' set in. This was a feature of the social distinctiveness as embedded in South African society:

*'When the artisans go out there is a line between artisans and operators but no difference between whites and blacks. At lunch time we normally separate into whites and blacks. I sit with the people I work with.'*

(R2, p. 21)

## Subtheme 2 – Profession

Individuals seek to identify with occupational or professional memberships because it leads to a strong work orientation. Membership to a group is considered as a value to the organisation and something that reinforces the individual as a professional. Individuals furthermore use their professional association as a means to identify with their particular career or job. The following extracts illustrate how individuals' unique personal identity contains their prominent social identity that is derived from their association with a social group (in this case their occupational or professional membership):

*'To be a good engineer you need to do A, B and C, but to be a brilliant engineer you need to do X, Y and Z.'*

(B2, p. 2)

*'The salary and responsibility... a mechanic is qualified and knows what he's doing but that's it. As a technician, I'm an expert in the field. To become a technician is to become an expert.'*

(R1, p. 7)

*'Being a mechanical engineer, I have worked in different places.'*

(C18AB, p. 4)

*'They sometimes we like artisans what we call gut feel, sometimes you might make a decision on just gut feel and it is always right. To them they don't understand how gut feels to get to that point because they haven't. Me, I always say they haven't been on the floor.'*

(C16AB, p. 5)

The following respondent highlights aspects of personal values and goals as he related to a particular career and obtained his education in this career. It was a decision based on financial gain, personally and for his family, and he had to bring this value into an organisation at a price:

*'I have the capability to provide for my family. I have a wife and two kids (nine years, he is my stepson and two and a half). It is a career that makes you notice people listen to you. People listen to you just because you a CA.'*

(S1, p. 1)

*'I looked at the picture and saw this guy wearing nice clothes and looked successful. I made a money driven decision. I had no clue what the job was, but I wanted to be in that career.'*

(S1, p. 1)

## Subtheme 3 –Workplace role

Individuals identify with their workplace roles and tasks as it adds value to a particular team, division and organisation. The next respondent explained that his role in the workplace was so central to him that it manifested in his work relationships which were essentially very social. He explained that his work and life were so inseparable that he had not taken long leave. His comments illustrate his very strong work orientation:

*'I don't like taking long leave, because then I get very bored, I need something to do, you know. I enjoy my work; I get involved with other people. Work is not seen as a burden.'*

(C18AB, p. 17)

It is important to consider the value of the strong workplace role orientation displayed by the respondents. The next respondent explained that social aspects of helping others in the work environment challenged his attitude towards his work-role:

*'Work to me is important but not XX as such. I enjoy the challenges I get here and the recognitions and at our work our work relationships are more than just work. This helps to work well you know.'*

(S1, p.1)

*'Your identity is much more how you come to the world than how you experience things. If I was a prospective employer and asked who are you? Frame it in terms of my work-role.'*

(R2, p. 11)

*'So that's when I realised that I wanted to move more into, not so much fixing everything everyday and working with my hands, but more influencing people to get the job done, and that's basically my current role now.'*

(C19AB, p. 7)

## Subtheme 4 – Team role

Employees with common work goals and targets identify with team membership and team relationship in order to achieve work goals and objectives. Attitudes and norms at individual level align to the team's common goals and

responsibilities. The participants explained that in order to achieve set goals, work standards and challenges need to align with the attitudes and behaviour of the common team or department:

*'I think the teamwork is positive, the comradely between the boys. I think the go get attitude of most of the people, especially in engineering, if they can't fix it, guys don't just sit back and say I can't fix it.'*

(CA19AB, p. 18)

*'If each section holds its own area of responsibility it will build up and build into stronger teams.'*

(C17AB, p. 25)

In the following extract the dynamic nature of identity formation emerges. The aspect of choice for this respondent is based on social aspects or facets in the workplace and serves as an identity anchor:

*'When I came to XX I wanted to experience a more team-based working experience and connectedness with your colleagues Yes, I want the team experience. Creating and doing something meaningful that is value adding.'*

(R2, p. 11)

*'What I am saying engaged them that they feel part of the team and they understand the values or the mission or the way you want to go and if you present this to them you know what you all communicating. The whole XX will turn and they will help you and your team.'*

(C16AB, p. 20)

In terms of aligning to values, beliefs and goals, the following respondent referred to the negotiation process between personal beliefs and the 'buying into' the teams' goals as an ingredient to group cohesion and performance, that was free from any other issues:

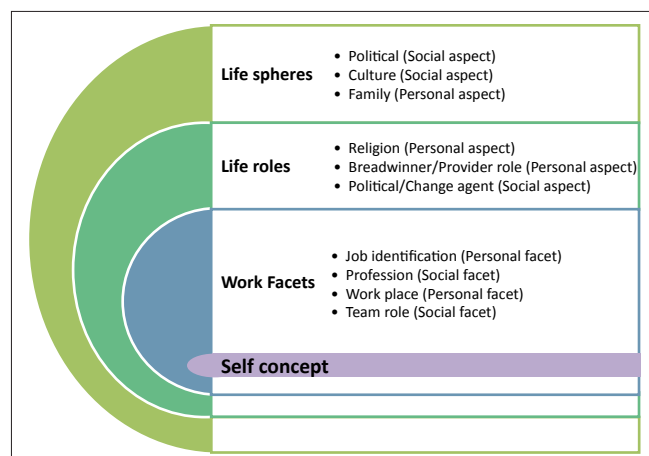
*'If I want to get best performance, I would carefully select the people on my team, because I have chosen the person who are in line with my and the company's values. Because that people are going to use their identities and personalities and who they are.'*

(R2, p. 12)

*'The plans should cascade from global plan to XX plan to departmental plan and finally to my plan. I like strategic planning. You know what your goals are and what you want to achieve. The important question is why am I doing it? You have to be passionate about your work.'*

(S3, p.18)

These findings will be discussed in the next section.



**FIGURE 2:** Significant elements within the multiple layers and facets of work-based identity.

## Discussion

The aim of this study was to find an answer for the research question: *'Who am I at work?'* in a post-apartheid South African organisation. Grounded theory was applied in creating a model to explain factors that influence individuals' construction of their work-based identity. The development of the research model was influenced by the uniqueness of the South African society in which categorisation is prominent (Brewer, 1991, 2003; Hogg & Abrams, 1990; Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Wagner & Zick, 1990; West & Fenstermaker, 1995; West & Zimmerman, 1987). This was highlighted by the findings of this study. Ours was the first study of its kind to identify and delineate work-based identity elements in the South African work context. The model consists of three layers that reflect life spheres, life roles and work-facets. These layers consist of different elements that influence individuals' work identity formation in a post-apartheid South African work context. The integrated model assists in answering the following research questions:

1. Which *life sphere elements* are significant to work-based identity formation?
2. Which *life role elements* are significant to work-based identity formation?
3. Which *work-facets* are dominant in establishing work-based identity?

The results of this study suggest that the self-concept shaped by various life spheres and life roles, negotiates forms of identity and presents work-based identity as a facet of everyday discourse amongst employees in the South African workplace. Different streams of literature portray work-based identity as an abstract, ambiguous and tacit construct. This research however suggests the integration of literature streams from both the social formation perspective (e.g. Goffman, 1959; Mead, 1934) and the personal formation perspective (e.g. Erikson, 1963; Freud, 1928). Figure 2 depicts the integrated approach of work-based identity formation.

### First layer

#### Life spheres

**Political:** The first objective was to determine which life spheres significantly relate to the formation of work-based identity. Political findings that reveal distinctive racial self-descriptions are subject to who and what the individual is in a society affected by apartheid, and to a conscious awareness of social memberships and racial groups. Such distinctive racial self-descriptions imply common values and beliefs amongst the respondents. Who and what they are in society is indeed distinctive and therefore explains inter-racial comparisons. The distinctive self-descriptions are in line with previous research but the prominent sense of identity supports the integration of the psychodynamic theory (Freud, 1928) and social formation perspectives (Goffman, 1959).

The theoretical integration of this research implies that the environments that individuals inhabit influence their identity and roles (Craig, 1995; Giddens, 1991; Harre & Gillet, 1994;

Parker, 1992). This results in a categorisation of the self into social units (race) (Brewer, 1991, 2003).

**Culture:** The answer to 'who am I' in a particular life sphere (Kanungo, 1982) manifests a cultural sphere. Tensions are implied when one seeks an optimal balance between distinctive values, beliefs and perceived uniqueness (Tajfel & Turner; 1985). From this it is obvious that individuals are aware of their unique identity, even when they find themselves in a collective group in the workplace. This awareness of individual identity matches earlier research on the individual's psychological dimension of differentiation. (see Abend, 1974; Erikson, 1959; Hall, 1996; Scott & Lane, 2000; Schley & Wagenfield, 1979; Van Tonder, 1987, 1999; Whetten & Godfrey, 1998). The findings add to the definitions of work identity and, for example, suggest that the social membership dimension of Tajfel and Turner's (1985) definition of social identity theory includes that which is central, enduring and distinctive about an individual's environment. Further research with more focused empirical studies of work identity should be performed.

**Family:** The findings provide for the tentative hypothesis that the individual's sense of identity is a continuous yet variable phenomenon that assumes different statuses at different times. The individual's perception of various environments, such as family and culture, implies that a form of 'compatibility' needs to transpire from his or her sense of uniqueness. These identity attributes represent multiple facets outside of the individual to multiple facets within an individual. The various theoretical positions on the psychological meaning of work (Kristof, 1996; May, 2003; Renn & Vandenberg, 1995; Shamir, 1991), the psychological safety of work (Deci *et al.*, 1985; Edmondson, 1996; Feldman, 1984), and the psychological availability that work represents to individuals (Goffman, 1959; Hall & Richter, 1989; Kahn, 1990; Morris & Feldman, 1996; Schlenker, 1980) highlight the multiple dimensions of work in relation to family.

When considering the results, the 'who am I' in a transforming South Africa is determined externally from the individual (from the family as motivation to work) and manifested into the work, which is contrary to Kirpal's conclusion (2004a, 2004b). The findings on the influence of the family sphere may explain this hypothesis. Due to economic and political reasons, traditional structural conditions are becoming more fragmented and unstable. This affects individuals' psychological dimensions (Kirpal, 2004a, 2004b), attitudes, and perceptions. In turn it also directly affects the family spheres of all individuals. The first objective of this study has been achieved because the aforementioned results indicate a significant relationship with the social, psychological and subjective components that were developed and shaped in an individual's life sphere to affect the formation of work-based identity.

## Second layer

### Life roles

**Religion:** The second objective was to determine life roles that could significantly be linked to the formation of work

identity. The religious role found in the workplace revealed a multifaceted dimension of an individual's self-concept, as it corresponds with the work of Kreiner *et al.* (2006), who asserts the preservation of a 'me-ness'. The significance of religion as a life role may be attributed to changing work environments in South Africa and dominant collective values and beliefs. Religion may also be regarded as a significant life role in view of its stabilising role towards the transformation policies that impose threats and tend to depersonalise individuals' self-concepts. Elsbach's (1999) notion of combinations of identity offers an explanation to consider multifaceted life roles. Such roles are advocated since the religious role implies that the individual cannot construe his identity without incorporating his or her subjective experience, beliefs and values to address or adapt to a multidimensional work environment.

**Breadwinner or provider role:** The results regarding the breadwinner or provider role correspond with Frankl's (1992) question on work at the beginning of this article as well as with Freud's (1928) view on individual work motivations. Freud's views imply that personal identity is on a continuum with various motivations, values, norms and passions. This study suggests that personal identity is conveyed by different combinations of identities developed in different environments. A negotiation process of personal and social roles may clarify the individual's job involvement and work centrality in South Africa, as supported by Brown (1996) and Paullay *et al.* (1994).

**Political or change agent:** This study examined political influences and the political change agent's role. The implication is that identity-relevant attributes and sense of identity are influenced and formed by life roles and life spheres. The results of the study illustrate a distinctive self-affirmation, based on the existence of common beliefs and race amongst respondents. The study further suggests that the respondents' values, beliefs and ideologies are indeed enduring to their self-identity. This finding is contrary to arguments held by social constructionists such as Potter & Wetherell (1987), who maintain that behaviour resides in the *social situation* rather than in the person's character. This finding however matches the research by Van Tonder (1987) on ego identity, which suggests that an individual's interpretation of identity occurs from the individual's character into a social situation.

The manifestation in this study of unconscious reference to distinctive traits, values and racial groupings highlights the notion of an individual's *distinctive character* (Hall & Lindzey, 1957; Van Tonder, 1987). The *cognitive connection* (Dutton *et al.*, 1994) formed in particular environments and circumstances is important for further research. The second objective of this study, namely to determine which life roles are significant in the formation of work-based identity, was thus achieved. The source of meaning and purpose in life and social continuity (psychoanalysis) is embedded in an individual's being. This supports the individual's integration into a work-facet, which maintains valued aspects of the individual's work-based identity.

### Third layer

#### Work-facets

**Job identification:** The third objective of the study was to determine which work-facets are significant in establishing a work-based identity. This was contextualised in the suggestion that individuals' perceptions of their contribution to an organisation and team, through performing a job, provide a conscious *cognitive connection* (Dutton *et al.*, 1994), which in turn enhance an intrinsic self-actualisation anchor (Frankl, 1992). The implication is therefore that innate or learned individual characteristics, such as image, meaning and self-esteem, as well as characteristics of a job and its social aspects (team and occupational role), allow for the development of multiple identities. These identities are intended to match the multiple facets that an individual will engage with in his or her work-role or job. (Freud, 1928; Breakwell, 1986).

**Workplace role:** Considering the prominence of the work-role identification, the findings of this research suggest that identification is a cognitive belief state. This is congruent with several engagement theories (see Aktouf, 1992; Brown, 1996; Csikszentmihalyi, 1975, 1990; Kahn, 1990; Kanungo, 1982). These theories suggest a relational context of the distinctive character in the *personal identity* (Hall & Lindzey 1957; Van Tonder, 1987) and of the distinctive character in an *occupation or organisation* (Whetten, 1995). The research implies that there is an unconscious, self-propelling need to enhance the self-esteem. This is accomplished by completing tasks, achieving common goals, and adhering to values and norms, which represent distinctive attributes about work and interfaces with unique, distinguishing attributes of the self-concept. This match will only occur if the self-concept is compatible with the qualities or attributes represented by a job or work-role.

**Profession:** This study empirically supports the findings of a professional identity (as a facet of work-based identity). Enduring and distinctive characteristics that typify a line of work can be enhanced by inappropriate variables such as transformation and globalisation, which may have resulted in an emphasis on professional identity, due to the skills shortage. This can be explained by the low level of organisational identification of respondents. The findings are therefore consistent with the notion that there is a conscious flow of individual goals into roles, which preserve such individuals' self-esteem, as self-expression is motivated by external and internal rewards. The self-identity is therefore able to regulate itself in unstable work environments (Dukerich *et al.*, 2002; Dutton *et al.*, 1994).

**Team role:** This study's findings furthermore indicate that team role identification highlights the collective characteristics that a team represents (Tajfel, 1981). This includes the social aspects of common goals, targets and tasks. These also allow for individuals who have inherently programmed social categorisation elements in their self-concept (historically programmed), to integrate into social memberships more

readily. Similarly, a team's collective goals constitute why an individual will depersonalise the self-concept into common work concepts and roles. This finding is consistent with the theory of role play suggested by Goffman (1959) and the saturated self of Gergen (1991). However, conflicts at a personal level may arise due to the multifaceted contextual differences in which the self-concept evolves in South Africa. This accentuates the distinctive characteristics embedded and programmed into South African individuals' unique self-perceptions at work. The definition of work-based identity that emerges from the aforementioned literature review is therefore compatible with the findings of this study:

A multi-identity, multifaceted and multilayered construction of the self (in which the self-concept fulfils a core, integrative function), shapes the roles that individuals are involved in, in their employment context.

The final objective of the study, to determine significant work-facets in establishing a work-based identity, is highlighted by integrating the influence of individuals' life spheres and life roles into multifaceted work-facets. Individuals' life spheres can be considered as theories of social psychology (multi-identity), whilst their life roles can be considered as theories of psychoanalysis (multilayered). Personal identity, meaning and purpose are maintained by actualising the 'who I am' and the psychological meaning of work and safety that cohere with self-image.

### Managerial implications

Work-based identity as a construct will have important implications for the way in which management views and approaches the transformation of organisations, and the restructuring of work-roles and departments. This implies that the multifaceted, multilayered, and multi-identity constructions of work identity and the process of how South African employees integrate these concepts necessitate further research. The self-descriptions embedded with identity-relevant attributes, such as distinctive, enduring character, values, uniqueness, distinction and membership, offer a different view on organisational development and management dynamics. This study suggests that the influence of distinctive characteristics associated with occupations, professions and jobs needs to be maintained by experienced employees and managers. In doing so, the rules and inherent behaviours associated with such work-facets will be established and maintained. Over the past few years researchers have, for example, systematically embraced work-based identity as a concept formed by processes within organisations. The current study suggests that the 'who I am' (shaped by life spheres and life roles external to the organisation) is integrated and facilitated into the workplace by the self-concept.

### Limitations

The researcher's iteration between data gathered and literature reviewed, enabled her to theorise into the process of work identity formation from a South African perspective, a phenomenon on which little research in South Africa

has been done and reported on. This study presented a time-limitation: through the research process rich material was attained in order to focus on prominent themes and subgroups. More time would have allowed for greater reflection on the transcripts and the data.

## Suggestions for future research

This study's results could be substantiated by access to behavioural data on turnover and engagement histories. It will subsequently be possible to consider distinctive characteristics of organisations, jobs, occupations, careers, and management (work-based facets) that employees identify with and to incorporate them into employee engagement information. The richness of the data also suggests further research into aspects such as socio-economic influences across gender and race and its impacts on the formation of work-based identity in South Africa; the impact of employment equity and globalisation on South African organisations; and the meaning of attachment and engagement to South African employees today. To conclude, the tentative parameters generated what can be termed as a South African definition of work-based identity, which still requires further empirical research.

## Conclusion

The study was guided by the general research question: 'Who am I at work?' The context was a post-apartheid South Africa organisation. More specifically, three research questions were formulated to determine which life sphere and life role elements and which work-based identity facets were significant in the formation of work-based identity. It was established that politics, culture and family were the most significant life sphere elements in the formation of work-based identity. Religion, the idea of being a breadwinner or provider and political or change agent were significant life role elements in the formation of work-based identity. The most significant work-based identity facets were job identification, profession, work-place role and team role. The study revealed how these life spheres and roles ultimately inform work-based identity formation in a post-apartheid South Africa. Consequently, a different work-based identity definition was formulated by which the stated research objectives of the study were achieved.

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