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# **Do Academics Identify with their Institutions? A Qualitative Study of Academics' Organisational Identification**

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# **Do Academics Identify with their Institutions? A Qualitative Study of Academics' Organisational Identification**

## **ABSTRACT**

This qualitative study explored how organisational identification manifested for South-African academics. Given that academics are believed to have a strong identification with their career, profession or discipline, the research set out to investigate to what extent academics experience a sense of identification with their institutions. This paper reports on the second phase of a mixed-methods study. Fifteen interviews were conducted with a subset of academics who responded to the quantitative phase, comprising an online survey. The findings were analysed using a form of thematic analysis. The results highlighted that pride in membership was an important factor that encouraged organisational identification. Instead of taking outsider criticism personally, participants seemed to critically evaluate the legitimacy of outsiders' views. University managers would do well to build coherence into their institutional branding, and to nurture academics' identification with their departments and disciplines since ultimately the institution might benefit from this identification with "nested targets".

## **Key Words:**

Organisational Identification, Academics, Academic Identity, Social Identity Theory

## INTRODUCTION

At the core of a high-performing university lies the academic profession. Essential to the success of every university is a suitably qualified, committed and effective faculty (Altbach, 2015). “Yet, too often the academics are forgotten in discussions of the problems of universities” (Altbach, Androushchak, Kuzminov, Yudkevich, & Reisburg, 2013, p. 21) The emergence of managerialism in higher education, bringing with it a drive toward accountability, marketisation and privatisation, has forever changed academic life (Adcroft & Taylor, 2013; Altbach, 2015). The question arises regarding how these changes are impacting the psychological relationship between academics and their institutions. A study recently alluded to ‘weakening ties’ between academics and their institutions in the face of ‘tighter couplings of top-level management and the political system’(Degn, 2018, p. 305). Bolden, Gosling, and O’Brien (2014) asserted that contemporary academics experienced feelings of disconnect, ambiguity, dissonance, ambivalence and disengagement in relation to their employing institutions. These feelings affect the psychological relationship between academics and their institutions.

One way in which the psychological relationship between academics and their institutions can be captured is through the organisational psychology construct “organisational identification”. Organisational identification (OID) can be defined as ‘the degree to which a member defines him- or herself by the same attributes that he or she believes define the organization’ (Dutton, Dukerich, & Harquail, 1994, p. 239). However, academics’ relationships with their institutions may differ from those of ‘traditional employees’ since academics have in the past tended to be managed more collegially (Waitere, Wright, Tremaine, Brown, & Pausé, 2011), and showed more loyalty to their disciplines and to their departments rather than to the institution (Baruch & Hall, 2004). This paper reports on a qualitative study that was part of a larger mixed methods study exploring how OID manifested in a sample of South African academics.

### **Organisational Identification and the Social Identity Approach**

While the psychological relationship between employers and employees has been studied extensively in applied psychology and organisational behaviour in the form of organisational commitment, it has also been studied independently, and extensively, in social psychology. In the latter case, this relationship has commonly been conceptualised in terms of OID (Marique & Stinglhamber, 2011). Social identification has been defined as “a perception of oneness with or belongingness to some human aggregate” (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Further, when an individual identifies with a social group, “he/she perceives him or herself as psychologically intertwined with the fate of the group” (Mael & Ashforth, 1992, p. 104). When the social group takes on the form of an organisation, this type of identification is known as OID. This definition implies that employees may experience a sense of oneness with the organisation because of their organisational membership. While the definition based on this awareness of organisational membership constitutes the cognitive component of OID, there is also an evaluative and affective component involved. The evaluative component connotes value to the membership, while the affective component brings an emotional investment (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008). Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail (1994) offered an alternative cognitive perspective. Their view of OID compares the employee’s notion of what is distinctive, central, and enduring (Albert & Whetten, 1985) about the organisation (defined as “perceived organisational identity”) with the employee’s beliefs about themselves and their own attributes (defined as their self-concept). They argued that

when an employee's self-concept matches the attributes in the perceived organisational identity, it results in a cognitive attachment which they consider to be OID. The authors therefore defined OID as "the degree to which a member defines him- or herself by the same attributes that he or she believes define the organization" (p. 239). Thus, OID essentially describes the integration of the organisation (or in the case of universities, the institution) into the individual's sense of self-identity.

The theoretical framework referred to as the social identity approach (SIA), explains the underlying mechanisms through which OID is formed. SIA deals with the social psychology of group processes, encompassing processes of self-categorisation and self-enhancement (Abrams & Hogg, 1990). Social identity theory (SIT, Tajfel, 1978; Tajfel & Turner, 1979) provides the foundation for this approach, followed closely by self-categorisation theory (SCT, Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherell, 1987).

SIT focuses on how intergroup relations are influenced by the social context in which they take place (Hornsey, 2008). It posits that people identify themselves and others with various social groups, seeing themselves as members of religious affiliations, organisations, and age or gender cohorts, for example. This affiliation provides them with a social identity that forms part of their overall identity. Importantly, Ashforth and Mael (1989) asserted that the extent to which a person identifies with a social category is not an 'all or nothing' occurrence, but rather a matter of degree. This would be influenced by the degree to which the identity enhances the individual's self-image. The authors described social identification as a "perceptual cognitive construct not necessarily associated with any behaviors or affective states" (p. 21). In their view, identification does not require effort to be exerted by the individual towards the relevant group's goals, but merely that the individual has a sense of being 'psychologically intertwined' with the group's outcome. However, this leads to feeling personally affected by both successes and failures of the group. Furthermore, identification with a group does not entail acceptance of the group's values and attitudes, notwithstanding that a group generally is associated with certain norms, values and attitudes. In the same way as some individuals identify with people as social referents, for example, sport stars, the 'persona' being identified with becomes an integral part of one's self-definition.

SIT can be applied in the context of organisations or institutions, and to the employee-organisation relationship (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Dutton et al., 1994; He, Pham, Baruch, & Zhu, 2014; Hogg & Terry, 2000). Since the organisation can provide a partial answer to the employee's "Who am I" question, the authors argued that OID can be considered a particular type of social identification (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). An organisation or institution "can become a focal and salient social category with which employees can identify" (He et al., 2014, p. 4). When an employee's identity as an organisational member becomes salient to his/her self-definition, and in addition, when the individual's self-concept comprises attributes that coincide with his/her perception of the organisation or institution's identity, OID is likely to develop (He et al., 2014).

A central concept in SIT is that of belonging to a psychological 'in-group' (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Terry, 2000), which is helpful in explaining certain intergroup conflict behaviours. 'In-group favouritism' can occur even when good leadership is lacking, and beyond interpersonal relationships, i.e. when there is no interaction, interdependency or cohesion between members. Yet this identification can have a profound impact on emotions and behaviour, for example, loyalty

to the group or organisation. SIT has predictive value since it posits that a) people attempt to enhance their self-esteem; b) social identity through belonging to a group, forms part of an individual's self-concept; and c) people attempt to ensure a positive social identity through positively distinguishing their in-group from relevant out-groups (Van Dick, 2016). In the case of university faculty, this would mean that the self-esteem of academics could be enhanced through their membership of their employing institution; that the university for which they work forms part of academics' self-concept; and that academics would strive to ensure that their institution is favourably differentiated from similar institutions.

The second component of the SIA, contributing to our understanding of the way OID is developed, is that of SCT (Turner et al., 1987). SCT represents a refinement of the cognitive element of SIT, transcending the intergroup focus of SIT by explaining intragroup processes as well (Hornsey, 2008). It especially considers contextual influences on identification (Van Dick, 2016). SCT reflects on group categorisation processes and suggests three levels of self-categorisation, namely the superordinate category of the self as human being, the intermediate level of the self as a member of a specific group, and the subordinate level of self as an individual (Turner et al., 1987). The salience of the category for the individual, as well as the extent to which the category is relevant, determine the advent of self-categorisation. If self-categorisation is established on the basis of the intermediate level, the salience of group membership would increase and be of greater relevance than the individual's personal identity (Van Dick, 2016). This is applicable to our understanding of organisational psychology since the organisation is likely to be a salient social category with which individuals can develop identification (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Terry, 2000).

However, the organisation itself is not necessarily the only focus of identification within the organisation. In their study of German school teachers, Christ, Van Dick, Wagner, and Stellmacher (2003) argued that the teachers' identification with the organisation, work team, and/or career, respectively, can be related to the SCT levels of abstraction. Career identification can be associated with the personal level of categorisation, whereas the other two are both aligned with the "group level" of identification. In conclusion therefore, according to the SIA (i.e. SIT and SCT), OID in academics would be developed if a) the academic identifies with the institution; b) if identification with the institution is deemed salient to the academic; and c) the institution is deemed to be the most salient or relevant level of abstraction with which to self-categorise.

### **Why Organisational Identification Matters**

OID is recognised as a crucial concept in organisational behaviour studies (Ashforth & Mael, 1989). Not unlike organisational commitment, OID has been viewed as a significant psychological state, which reflects an essential connection between the individual and the organisation. This connection has the propensity to explain and predict important attitudes and behaviours at the individual, group, and organisational levels in the workplace (Bartels, 2006; Edwards, 2005; Hogg & Terry, 2000). Importantly, the stronger the OID, the more likely employees are to expend effort on its behalf, and to ensure the organisation's best interest (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Van Knippenberg & Van Schie, 2000). Similarly, when there is strong identification with the organisation, the employee's turnover intention will decrease to avoid the "psychic loss" entailed in leaving (Mael & Ashforth, 1992). Empirical evidence has therefore found OID to be negatively related to turnover intention (Lee, Park, & Koo, 2015; Riketta, 2005). Reducing turnover of

academic staff is critical to universities since academics determine the ability of institutions to compete locally and globally (Ng'ethe, Namusonge, & Iravo, 2012). OID was also found to be positively related to organisational commitment, job satisfaction, and extra- and in-role performance, among others (Ashforth et al., 2008; Lee et al., 2015; Riketta, 2005; Van Dick, 2016; Van Knippenberg & Sleebos, 2006). Extra- and in-role performance can be argued to be exceptionally important in the case of academics. Christ et al. (2003) found that OID influenced German school teachers' extra-role behaviours. The authors emphasised the importance of extra-role behaviours in the teaching profession and asserted that it was critical that teachers were willing to provide additional resources, given that they do not receive many extrinsic rewards. A similar rationale could be applied to the case of universities.

### **The Academic Identity**

Christ et al. (2003) found that different identification foci had different relative strengths of association with organisational citizenship behaviour (OCB). For example, higher career identification fostered OCB towards the teachers' own qualification, rather than towards the organisation. Therefore, if academics' identification is mostly with their own career, it is likely that they will focus on behaviours that promote their individual proficiencies, rather than those that impact positively on their institution. It is well known that "academics identify more strongly with the 'characteristics and structures of the knowledge domains' of their disciplines (p. 20) than with their institution" (Becher as cited in Taylor, 1999, p. 41). The notion that academics are more likely to identify more with their career, profession or discipline than with their universities (Blackmore & Kandiko, 2011; Taylor, 1999) has implications in terms of differential positive outcomes of the different identification foci. However, it has been argued that the "notion of a single 'academic identity' may be obsolete in an environment in which the academic role is becoming increasingly diverse" (Churchman, 2006, p. 3). Churchman (2006) suggested that research pertaining to the academic profession needs to recognise the "variable internal factors in universities and the prevalence of diversity and difference of academics" (p.14). This view was shared by Harris (2005) who alluded to the "fragmented nature of professional identity" and suggested that "the university is a complex and differentiated institution where different constructions of 'academic' coexist" (p. 425). Notwithstanding these arguments, in the current climate of new managerialism where the extent of management control and accountability for output has increased, recent studies have found academics be deeply preoccupied with their careers and identities. Academics have tended to become more performance-driven and insecure about their perceptions of their success as academics (Clarke & Knights, 2015; Gill, 2014; Knights & Clarke, 2014). The literature suggests that academics' feelings of self-worth have become somewhat dependent on tangible outputs such as the number of published research papers in any given period. This brings into question the extent to which institutional membership becomes integrated in academics' self-identities: if university membership is not the most salient source for building academics' self-esteem, it is unlikely that OID would develop. However, despite the benefits of OID in terms of positively influencing work behaviours, there is a paucity of studies that specifically explore this phenomenon in academia. This paper seeks to contribute to this gap through exploring manifestations of academics' identification with their institutions, if indeed it even exists.

## METHODS

### Design and Data Collection

A qualitative descriptive design was employed for this study, which was the second phase of an explanatory sequential mixed methods study. Fifteen face-to-face interviews were conducted with a subset of respondents that had completed a quantitative study (first phase) comprising an online survey. Survey respondents were asked to provide their email addresses if they were willing to be interviewed in a follow-up to the survey. Forty-four of the survey respondents expressed willingness to participate in the follow-up interviews. Of these, fifteen respondents were purposively selected for the qualitative phase according to the “maximal variation sampling strategy” (Ivankova, Creswell, & Stick, 2006) to ensure the gathering of multiple perspectives. Diversity was achieved in terms of selecting a spread of academics to interview across age groups, length of tenure, academic position and gender.

The qualitative instrument comprised a semi-structured interview protocol that included questions designed to explore how organisational identification manifested in the sample of respondents that were interviewed. Respondents were asked a generic question “How important is it to you to be a member of [the university]?”. In addition, questions were asked that were related to a well-established Mael and Ashforth’s (1992) six-item scale that measures organisational identification quantitatively. An example of a scale item is “When someone criticises [the university], it feels like a personal insult”, and this was adapted to “How do you feel when outsiders or the media criticise or insult [the university]?” in the interview protocol.

### Data Analysis

The qualitative data analysis applied the template analysis technique (King & Brooks, 2017), a form of thematic analysis. King and Brooks’ (2017) procedural guidelines were followed, including: 1) becoming familiar with the data, 2) preliminary coding, 3) clustering, 4) producing an initial template, 5) applying and developing the initial template, and 6) final interpretation. NVivo 11 Pro for Windows, Version 11.0 coding software (QSR International, 2017) was used for data storage, coding, hierarchical theme development, and data retrieval. The first step entailed becoming familiar with the data. A recording of each interview was listened to within a day or two after the interview. Transcriptions were checked while listening to the recordings again. The second step, that of preliminary coding, was done using *a priori* codes ‘enablers’, ‘blockers’, and ‘reactions to outsiders’ criticism’. The third step in the process involved clustering. Within each set of preliminary codes, the data was clustered into lower order themes. There were several iterations of clustering, and a few instances where codes were moved into clusters originally housed elsewhere. King and Brooks’ (2017) fourth and fifth steps, ‘producing an initial template’ and ‘applying and developing the initial template’, were merged in this study. A template reflecting the first order categories and hierarchical lower-order categories was populated. The last step, ‘final interpretation’, entailed drawing conclusions from the complete templates about the ways in which OID manifested in the context of this study. ‘Member-checking’ was used to ensure the credibility of the findings; a full report of the findings was sent to participants. Furthermore, interviewees were purposively selected based on the maximal variation sampling strategy to ensure transferability. Dependability was achieved through recording the critical methodological steps



and decision points throughout the analytical process. Finally, to ensure confirmability, the researcher reflected on her role as an academic to uncover any biases that had potential to influence the analysis. Ahead of the interview, interviewees were handed an informed consent form that explained the purpose of the research, that all data would be treated as confidential and anonymous, that participation in the interview was voluntary and that the interviewee may withdraw at any time. The names assigned to interviewees in reporting the findings are pseudonyms, and the name given to the university in the reported findings is a fictitious one.

## FINDINGS

Table 1 below shows a summary of how the findings were categorised into themes. Three key categories were predetermined when analysing how organisational identification manifested for the sample of academics that were interviewed. These categories were: “organisational identification enablers, “organisational identification blockers” and “reactions to outsider criticism”. The lower order themes are presented in a hierarchical manner where applicable, showing key categories and the sub-themes within each of these.

**Table 1. Summary of Key Themes**

<b>Predetermined Categories</b>	<b>Lower-Order Categories and Themes</b>
Organisational Identification Enablers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Nostalgic/Idealistic Associations</li> <li>• Pride in Membership</li> </ul>
Organisational Identification Blockers	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Institutional Factors                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Fragmented Institution</li> <li>- Different In-Groups</li> <li>- Unclear Institutional Identity</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Personal Identification Factors                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Stronger Identification with Occupation/ Role/ Discipline</li> <li>- No History with Institution</li> </ul> </li> </ul>
Reactions to Outsider Criticism	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• In-Group Type Response                             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Legitimacy of Criticism</li> <li>- Defense of the Institution</li> <li>- Responsibility for Fixing</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Own Department Bias</li> </ul>

### **Organisational Identification Enablers**

Participants were asked “What does it mean to you to be a member of [the university]?” This question, with further probing resulted in the category “enablers of organisational identification” suggesting the factors that promoted organisational identification in academics. This category comprises the following lower-order themes: “Nostalgic/Idealistic Associations” and “Pride in Membership”.

#### ***Nostalgic/Idealistic Associations***

It was evident that there was a greater sense of identification with the institution when the academic had a personal history with the institution. Chris (Faculty of Health), exemplified this when he said:

*“Where my identification with Seamount University<sup>1</sup> started was on the rugby field; because as a schoolboy in grade 7, we used to come and watch the club rugby here, and I loved [the university] because they always did played the game differently.”*

It seemed as if the participants “owned” the nostalgic and idealistic associations, i.e. that those attributes were part of who they were as individuals, and they were visibly proud when they spoke of them.

#### ***Pride in Membership***

Some participants mentioned that they experienced a sense of pride when they told outsiders that they worked at the institution. Corrine expressed her feelings of pride and acknowledgement as follows:

*“When you tell people that you're an academic at Seamount, that comes with some benefits. From an ego position I suppose. There is a kind of legitimacy in society that comes with that.”*

### **Organisational Identification Blockers**

Comments pertaining to what hindered academics from forming identification with the institution were summarised in the *a priori* category labelled “blockers to organisational identification”. The findings related to this category were divided into two sub-categories, namely “institutional factors and personal identification factors”, each in turn comprising lower-order themes.

#### ***Institutional Factors***

This sub-category comprises the following sub-themes: “fragmented institution”, “different in-groups” and “lack of clear institutional identity”.

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<sup>1</sup> Seamount University is a fictitious name used to protect the confidentiality of the institution.

### *The Fragmented Institution*

Academics seldom viewed the institution as a coherent whole. Lack of cross-faculty collaboration was also mentioned a few times. To many, their own faculties or departments were the foci of their identification. Corrine (Faculty of Health) remarked:

Like any big institution, Seamount University's massive. It's so difficult for me to even think about Seamount University in my day to day life; I think about my department and my faculty and my immediate environment. I do think about the broader university, but not as a whole university.

### *Different In-Groups*

Further testifying to the fragmentation, there was a perception that different social groups, “networks” or “in-groups”, existed within the institution. Rather than the entire institution being considered the in-group, identification appeared to take place at the level of smaller affiliations.

The following quote from Bryan (Faculty of Humanities) illustrates this:

Seamount University can be a tough place in terms of these [networks]. There are people who are hooked into a particular network of “old school” Seamount. And sometimes people come in from the outside and they bump up against that...

### *Unclear Organisational Identity*

Another blocker of organisational identification seemed to be the lack of clear institutional identity, or as one participant phrased it “knowing what we stand for”. This was acknowledged to be an after-effect of the troubled apartheid past, together with the recognition that the institution is currently in a “transition phase”. Bryan described this blocker:

I don't think it's about the mission of the university... I think it's more about identifying yourself as being a part of a group of people who do things together. Who share certain values. And those values may revolve around a notion of the history of the university, or some kind of sporting thing, something that is different than just being an academic. We're not quite sure what Seamount University stands for at this point.

### *Personal Identification Factors*

This sub-category comprises the following sub-themes: “stronger identification with occupation, role, or discipline” and “no personal history with the institution”.

#### *Stronger Identification with Occupation, Role, or Discipline*

There were several participant accounts that suggested stronger identification with academics' occupation, role, or discipline, rather than with the institution. Of these, the one mentioned most often, was that of identification with their occupation as academics. As Bryan (Faculty of Humanities) commented:

... our identity as academics is wrapped up in what we do. And what we do can be done pretty much anywhere.

Ayesha (Faculty of Commerce) was explicit about the comparison between identity linked to occupation versus identity linked to the institution:

First and foremost, I see myself as an academic. That identity is stronger than the part of my identity linked to an institution. Academics in Europe move around a lot; their individual identities as academics are more important to them.

#### *No Personal History with the Institution*

While having a personal history with the institution may be an enabler of organisational identification, having no history at all with the institution can serve to inhibit organisational identification. Nina (Faculty of Health) had no history with the institution prior to joining, and described her feelings as follows:

I don't feel a deep sense of belonging because I didn't do my undergraduate studies here. I'm through and through a Witsy.<sup>2</sup>

### **Reactions to Outsiders' Criticism**

The third and final *a priori* category relating to the construct of organisational identification was that of "Reaction to Outsiders' Criticism". When quantitatively measuring organisational identification using scales, half the scale items consider the respondent's reactions to outsider judgements (insults, praise and criticism). The more the individual takes these judgements personally (i.e. higher scores in the survey), the greater the organisational identification is deemed to be. Hence to qualitatively establish how organisational identification manifested for the participants in this study, reactions to outsiders' views were explored. Responses to the question "How do you feel when outsiders or the media insult or criticise Seamount University?" were categorised into two main themes: "in-group type response" and "own department bias". In turn the category "in-group type response" was further sub-divided into lower-order themes.

#### *In-Group Type Response*

This category comprises the following lower-order themes: "legitimacy of criticism", "defense of the institution" and "responsibility for fixing", and "relevance of own department". The findings related to each theme are presented next.

#### *Legitimacy of Criticism*

Some participants suggested that they would critically evaluate the legitimacy of the criticism of the institution, rather than accept it at face value. Interviewees believed that outsiders may not have the necessary, correct, or complete information required to justify judgements or statements made about the institution. Nina expressed this as follows:

People on the outside don't always know what's going on inside. The university has had huge issues to deal with and I think they have done the best that they can possibly do. I don't think the outside world always knows what the issues are.

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<sup>2</sup> Nickname for students, graduates, and alumni of another South African university

Reactions varied in terms of how participants engaged with the criticism. Peter (Faculty of Commerce) provided this example of how he actively and openly engages with the criticism:

I'm not invested in being an evangelist for Seamount. I'm quite self-critical and self-reflective about myself and also where I work. I think it's important to have honest conversations with people.

Whereas Peter was impartial in his description of his engagement with criticism, Paul demonstrated a vested interest in correcting inaccurate impressions, revealed in the following quote:

And if they do [criticise], and if I feel that I can make a contribution to their understanding I would. I wouldn't provoke an extreme confrontation or anything like that. But I would try to find a way to persuade people if they misunderstand what's going on.

Ayesha expressed an attitude of indifference to outsider criticism when she stated:

What others think doesn't bother me. Their perception doesn't matter if I don't rely on them. I don't care what they think because they don't know what they're talking about.

Margaret, on the other hand, likened the institution to a large corporation. She spoke of criticism as being par for the course given the growing distrust of corporates, implying that it should therefore be ignored:

Again, because I think it's like a big corporate. I think that's really what it is: some people hate banks while some people hate universities.

Media reports were generally regarded with skepticism, with participants suggesting that these were often biased and inaccurate. Theresa used the word "warped". The quote below captures a High AC participant's reason for disregarding media criticism:

We live in an age of media coverage where you could pretty much read what you want to. If you wanted to read just positive articles about Seamount University, you could just do that. If you wanted to read just negative articles you could do that.

### *Defense of the Institution*

Some participants spoke about their need to defend the institution when they were exposed to criticism towards it. Roger (Faculty of Commerce) made the following statement:

I have lots of friends at other universities, we still take jabs at each other, in some ways I am proud of Seamount University, I don't take it deeply personally but it is personal when people say bad things about Seamount, I feel like I need to defend it.

### *Responsibility for Fixing*

When exposed to criticism regarding the institution, a few participants spoke about their need to put things right: As Thandi (Faculty of Engineering) stated:

I don't feel it's a direct insult to me. But I certainly feel the responsibility to be part of a solution.

### *Own Department Bias*

Two of the participants expressed more concerned about the reputation of their own faculty or department than that of the institution. Simon (Faculty of Engineering) was quite explicit about this:

You would have had a different response if you had asked this question on a departmental level. I would feel more partisan about [criticism of] my own department.

Having presented the key findings and themes, the next section interprets the findings and integrates them with relevant literature.

## **DISCUSSION**

Where academics had a personal history with the institution, the institution appeared to play a greater role in terms of their self-identity. Similarly, when the participant held idealistic aspirations of what the institution stood for, their organisational membership appeared more meaningful. Ashforth and Mael (1989) posited that factors like “similarity, shared goals, and common history” affect group formation, which somewhat supports this finding. Furthermore, He, Pham, Baruch, and Zhu (2014) cited that “organisational identification occurs when an individual’s identity as an organizational member is salient to his/her self-definitional need, and when the person’s self-concept has many attributes similar to his/her perceived organizational identity” (p. 4). Accordingly, these idealistic associations could arguably assist with the formation of positive meta-stereotypes that “are impressions that group members expect members of a relevant out-group to hold of the in-group” (Owuamalam & Zagefka, 2011, p. 528). If institution members are viewed as the “in-group”, and are seen to possess certain desirable characteristics, then positive meta-stereotypes would form. Social identity theory (SIT) posits that when organisational meta-stereotypes are positive, identification with the institution can help enhance the organisational member’s self-esteem by boosting their self-view (Dutton Dukerich & Harquail, 1994; He Pham, Baruch, & Zhu, 2014; Owuamalam & Zagefka, 2011).

Participants suggested that one of the more positive associations they had with “belonging” to the institution was related to pride in membership. According to Ngo, Loi, Foley, Zheng, and Zhang (2013), employees’ feelings of pride attributed to an organisation is expected to lead to greater organisational identification. In the case of a research-intensive university, like in the context of this study, it is likely that the pride would be associated with international research rankings.

On the other hand, academics alluded to the fragmentation of the university, which appeared to challenge the development of identification with the institution. In some instances, academics maintained that they did not know what the institution stood for, indicating the lack of a clear

organisational identity. Albert and Whetten (1985) defined organisational identity as consisting of a central character, temporal continuity, and distinctiveness. This finding suggests that these elements may be somewhat lacking at this institution. Shifts in demographics, roles, pedagogy, and so forth, may well result in an institution that does not have clear answers to the questions, “who are we” and “what sort of organisation is this” (Stensaker, 2015, p. 106). Fragmentation also manifested in the existence of different in-groups. Some participants alluded to unwelcoming networks, or an environment that was not as inclusive as it could be. This might have worked against their identification with the institution. Belonging to a psychological ‘in-group’, a central concept in SIT (Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Hogg & Terry, 2000), can profoundly impact loyalty to the group or organisation. Examples in the literature of different in-groups that have manifested in the current university climate are that of permanent academics compared with contractors (Webster & Mosoetsa, 2002), and “academic managers” versus “managed academics” (Winter, 2009). The issue of fragmentation is not unique to this higher education institution though. In a paper about reputation management in higher education, Suomi, Kuoppakangas, Hytti, Hampden-Turner, and Kangaslahti (2014) wrote about the challenges due to the “organisational complexity” of universities, both because of the different units, as well as the individual freedom afforded to academics. Van Knippenberg and Van Schie (2000) posited that the size of an organisation also plays a role in developing identification with it. The authors suggested that because identification with large groups implies “sameness” with numerous other people, identification with a relatively large group can present a threat to individual distinctiveness. Thus, the size and complexity of this large institution might have diminished academics’ development of organisational identification.

Furthermore, most academics indicated the relative importance of their identification with their occupation or discipline, compared to identification with the institution. Blackmore and Kandiko (2011) posited that the influence of the academic’s discipline and the associated disciplinary community seems to be a crucial feature of the academic identity. This was echoed by a recent study that claimed “[a] sense of citizenship was expressed more often in relation to one’s academic discipline and/or professional group” compared with citizenship related to the institution (Bolden Gosling, & O’Brien, 2014, p. 762).

Degn (2018) also noted that previous studies had emphasised “the salience of the discipline at the expense of the formal organization in identity narratives” of academics (p. 310). Additionally, research outcomes have become entwined with an academic’s sense of self, emphasising individualism rather than promoting the collective (Alvesson & Spicer, 2017), and hence further undermining identity with the institution. The emphasis on advancement of the individual’s own academic career was an underlying and pervasive theme in the qualitative findings, providing further evidence of the individualistic nature of the academic project. Therefore, it seemed from the findings that the salience of academics’ “individual identities among peers” was greater than that of their institutional identities. Notwithstanding that a stronger identification with the occupation or discipline might detract from identification with the institution, it might still be possible for the institution to benefit therefrom. If strong disciplinary teams/units are built up and high calibre faculty are attracted to the institution, some degree of identification with the institution might grow, albeit indirectly, as a result.

Along similar lines, participants reported feeling stronger identification with their specific faculties or departments, as opposed to feeling identified with the greater institution. If academics' departments or faculties were more salient to them than the institution was, they would be more likely to identify with the former, more proximal entity (Edwards & Peccei, 2010). Ullrich, Wieseke, Christ, Schulze, and Van Dick (2007) developed the "identity-matching principle", proposing that identification will be developed at the same level as that of its antecedents. Thus, if the drivers of identification are at the level of department or faculty, then identification will be formed at those "nested" levels, rather than at the level of the institution. Furthermore, identification "tends to be stronger for lower-order targets, that is, one's role/occupation, group/team, and subunit, than for the higher order target of the organization itself" since "life in organizations is experienced locally" (p. 365). However, according to Ashforth (2016), research has indicated that identification with the organisation tends to be positively and moderately correlated with identification with nested, and partially nested, targets. Additionally, Ashforth, Harrison, and Corley (2008) suggested that when a more abstract or higher order entity, such as the institution in this case, has a very high status, identification tends to happen at the level of the more abstract, higher order, entity. Either way, it would seem prudent for university managers to take heed of Edwards and Peccei's (2010) findings, since it might be pragmatic to foster identification at the more proximal levels, such as departments or faculties, in order to derive the benefits at an institutional level.

In exploring whether academics took outsider criticism personally (which would be assumed to indicate a positive level of organisational identification), most participants reported that in fact, they critically evaluated the legitimacy of outsiders' criticism. Where the views of outsiders or the media lacked legitimacy, these were met with either some scepticism or a degree of neutrality. According to Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail (1994), "organizational members sometimes have a distorted impression of what others believe, either believing their organization is perceived in a more positive or a more negative light than outsiders see it" (p. 249). The authors also advocated that employees strive to maintain consistency in their self-definition via their organisational identification. Drawing on Heider's (1958) "balance theory", Bem's (1967) "self-perception theory", and Festinger's (1957) "cognitive dissonance theory", these authors therefore proposed that organisational members resolve inconsistencies by offering excuses or justifications. It is possible that this is a reason some of the academics in the study considered outsiders' assessments to lack legitimacy. Ironically then, it could be that because the "insiders" *do* identify with the institution, that they downplay the credibility of outsiders' assessments to maintain their self-concept. In this case, when academics do not take outsider criticism personally, their neutrality would not be an indicator of low organisational identification.

## CONCLUSION

In recapping the ways in which organisational identification manifested in the context of this study, it seems that unless the academic had a personal history with the institution or shared its ideals or vision, identification with the institution was primarily based on pride in membership, because of the legitimacy it gave its members relative to out-groups. Future research might explore how pride



in university membership would differ among different types of institutions, for example in the cases of less research-intensive institutions that do not gain positive publicity, or high rankings, as a result of research output.

The issue of academics in this study not taking criticism of the institution personally — since outsiders' opinions were thought to lack credibility or legitimacy — is a particularly interesting one. Given the scale items that are used to quantitatively measure organisational identification, it would suggest that these may not be appropriate to measure the organisational identification of academics. It may be necessary to develop a more nuanced scale for this context, for a more accurate assessment of academics' organisational identification.

Alternatively, the very nature of an academic i.e. the academic identity could be a reason for lower identification with the institution. To the extent that the academic's self-concept overlaps with that of his/her occupation as a researcher, teacher, subject matter expert; or his/her discipline, department or faculty; it could reduce the salience of identification with the institution. However, since literature posits that stronger identification with the institution might be channelled via these nested entities, it is possible that promoting academics' identification with their disciplines, departments or faculties could benefit the larger institution. Further research could be done in this area since it would seem more feasible for institutions to encourage identification at the level of the nested entities rather than at the level of the larger institution.

### **Practical Implications for University Management**

Given the findings on pride in membership, it seems like a good idea for university management to foster this among academics and thereby boost their identification with the institution. University management may consider doing more internal and external "brand-building". Perceptions of organisational prestige should be encouraged through internally and externally publicising and celebrating their research success stories, accomplishments with regards to international rankings, and so forth. Secondly, the study's findings suggested that fostering identification at the more proximal levels, such as departments or faculties, might lead to benefits at an institutional level. Managers might create more identification from academics within these proximal units through activities such as sponsoring team building events or facilitating interdepartmental collaboration. Furthermore, at the research site associated with this study, the lack of a clear organisational identity indicated that there was a need to develop a unifying institutional brand-building campaign for employees and create coherence around what the institution stood for. Generally, all universities should strive to have a clear unifying and coherent identity that academics can take pride in.

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