

**ILLUMINATING THE WORK-LIFE INTERFACE:
A GROUNDED THEORY OF ORGANISATIONAL IDENTIFICATION AMONG
MNC SUBSIDIARY EMPLOYEES**

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ABSTRACT

HRM scholars highlight the paucity of research involving qualitative analysis of work-life interaction in multinational corporations (MNCs). This paper reports the key elements of a grounded theory study of non-managerial employees of two MNC Australian subsidiaries. The emergent theory suggests that employees' evaluation of work-life interaction is informed by a conceptualisation of 'work' centred on 'organisational identification'. Organisational identification in this context is viewed as an ongoing process, punctuated by episodes of affinity and disidentification, or turning points. It is proposed that these turning points (a) are cued by changed perceptions of the organisation and the individual's organisational membership, and (b) result in shifting degrees of identification overlap across the global MNC entity, national subsidiary and local work-group levels.

Keywords: theories of identity

The interface between work and personal life is often viewed as a source of irreconcilable conflict.

The predominant work-life metaphors of 'balance' and 'conflict' reinforce this view and assume that time and resource allocation is at the heart of managing the work-life interface. Although consideration of the work-life interface is implicit in the areas being investigated by International HRM researchers (De Cieri & Bardoel 2009), it is recognised that there is a disproportionate volume of research on the development of global organisational policy and management strategy informed by these assumptions. There is little qualitative research that illuminates non-managerial employee evaluations of work-life interaction in multinational corporations (MNCs) (De Cieri & Bardoel 2009; Poelmans 2005). Grounded theory (Glaser, 1978) was employed to investigate this phenomenon in two MNC Australian subsidiaries, because it affords an opportunity for the data to speak for itself, and reveals the main concern of the participants. To minimise potential response bias associated with the terms 'balance' and 'conflict', the term 'work-life interaction' was used to maintain a focus on participants' subjective evaluation of the interaction between paid work and non-work domains (cf. Kossek & Lambert 2005; Valcour & Hunter 2005).

The process of discovering theory using grounded theory methods is inherently cyclical in nature and recording it in a traditionally linear fashion has the potential to detract from what is a defining feature of the grounded theory process (Glaser 1978). This paper is therefore structured to reflect the dynamic and fluid process of coding, theoretical sampling, literature review and interpretation that culminated in specific propositions about how MNC subsidiary employees evaluate work-life interaction through the lens of organisational identification. In particular, the paper describes the integration of extant

literature into the central elements of a multi-level, process-oriented and episode-centred view of organisational identification in MNCs.

METHOD

Sample

In-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 49 participants from 2 MNC subsidiaries in Hobart and Melbourne, Australia. The employing organisations are both categorised as *multinational* MNCs using Bartlett and Ghoshal's (1998) well-established typology of MNC models. They are characterised by decentralisation, with highly-autonomous subsidiaries in terms of decision-making and resources. The sample organisations were selected on the basis of their similar organisational structures and industry orientation, mining/ construction. As much of the extant work-life research has been conducted in white-collar organisations and among supervisory-level employees (Skinner et al. 2011), this study was directed towards non-managerial employees because they comprise a population in the work-life literature that are less likely to have direct control over the working conditions most commonly linked to work-life interaction (Porter & Ayman 2010). Of the 49 participants, 6 were female. This is representative of the general gender distribution in the Australian mining and construction industries (DEEWR website 2011). It is also significant because it means that the emergent theory contributes to our understanding of the work-life interface from a particularly male perspective, another under-explored approach in the literature (Skinner et al. 2011).

Grounded theory

Grounded theory is a methodology that provides for the systematic, inductive generation of theory from data acquired by a rigorous research method (Charmaz 2006; Douglas 2003; Elliott 2004; Glaser 1992; Glaser & Strauss 1967; Goulding 1999; Patton 1990). Grounded theory differs from other qualitative methodologies in a number of ways, most notably in the constant comparison method of joint coding and analysis (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Goulding 1999). Grounded theorists emphasise constant comparison between forms of data in a systematic and simultaneous process of analysis. This contrasts with other qualitative methods which pursue a series of linear steps in which the researcher gathers data and then proceeds to analyse it in a separate phase. Using constant comparison,

theoretical categories were first identified through open coding, a 'process of tentative conceptualisation whereby categories are created and then theoretically sampled to see how they fit across new data' (Connell & Lowe 1997: 169). In total, 236 codes were identified in the data. This process in turn generated concepts, which are the extension of basic categories created in open coding. Concepts explain the relationship between and across incidents. The ultimate aim of the method was realised in selective coding, which identified a core category that 'pulls together all the strands in order to offer an explanation of the behaviour under study... it has theoretical significance and its development [is] traceable back through the data' (Goulding, 1999: 9). Four main categories emerged from the coding process in this study: Perceptions, Events, Levels and Connectedness. Each category contained subcategories and concepts that were linked, and which ultimately reconnected as the substance of the emergent theory (Table 1). Following a review of the literature, the core category Connectedness was re-labelled Identification.

As coding and comparison proceeded, the literature and other data sources were theoretically sampled, directed by the themes and concepts emerging from the coding process. Becker (1993) proposes that the use of multiple data sources as part of theoretical sampling is central to the grounded theory method, a view supported by most practitioners of the methodology (Charmaz 2007; Glaser 1978, 1992; Goulding 1999, 2002; Isabella 1990; Jeon 2004; Strauss & Corbin 1997, 1998). In this study, non-managerial employees of two MNC subsidiary branches were interviewed first, followed by sampling and incorporation of further sources of information such as organisational policy documents, informal conversations with supervisory and administrative staff, and academic literature. The focus of this paper is on the contribution of relevant sources of literature to the emergent theory.

Once the core category Identification was selected, theoretical codes (Glaser, 1978) were employed to elevate the process to a higher and more abstract level. A grounded theory study's theoretical code is in essence the 'relational model through which all substantive codes/ categories are related to the core category' (Hernandez 2009: 52). Open coding breaks apart the data to reveal discrete categories, theoretical coding 'puts the categories back together again but in conceptually different ways' (Punch

2005: 210). In this study, theoretical codes such as Turning Points, Process and Conceptualising were used to articulate the connection between categories, concepts and the core category, Identification.

The role of the literature review

In grounded theory, the extant literature is treated as any other source of data would be; theoretically sampled (i.e. selected on the basis of categories central to the theory) and incorporated in support of the emerging propositions. That the researcher is placed in a situation of having to contemplate areas within the literature with which he or she is unfamiliar is a strength of the grounded theory approach. Researcher preconceptions and over-familiarity with specific bodies of research may obscure the core concern emerging from the data. Grounded theory situates the literature review so that it occurs *after* the first phase of comparison has generated preliminary theoretical categories. Indeed, Glaser (2009: 6) posits that ‘novices without a literature search in the substantive area to distract or force them are more open to the emergent and soon find their thought emerging from the constant comparisons in the data’. The intention was therefore to use the literature to situate this study’s specific theoretical contribution and also to illustrate how this study’s conceptualisation of a particular phenomenon, organisational identification, differs from, or extends, the extant body of knowledge. The emerging theory is not presented as confirmation of previous theories or research; rather the literature is employed as an additional test for this theory’s ‘fit’ and ‘relevance’ (Glaser 1978) in the substantive area of enquiry. For these reasons, this paper now presents the central elements of the emergent theory in conjunction with, as opposed to separate from, a summary of the literature streams sampled in this study.

CENTRAL ELEMENTS OF THE THEORY

Thorough review of the emergent categories, the connections between them and the preliminary theoretical propositions revealed that participants were responding to the concept of work-life interaction in a way that was quite unexpected. First, there was a relative absence of job-specific concepts in the codes and categories. Participants rarely mentioned their job role, or satisfaction/dissatisfaction with it. Rather, they focused on their cumulative impressions of the organisation and

perceptions of their role within it. This prompted a search of the literature for self-esteem, self-definition, psychological bond and organisational membership. The search revealed a well-established research stream in the organisational behaviour literature of organisational identification.

Organisational identification

The conceptualisation of identity in an organisational context has been the subject of increasing scrutiny in the academic literature since the 1950s (cf. Ashforth & Mael 1989; Brown 1969; Dutton et al. 1994; Gautam et al. 2004; Harquail 1998; Lee 1971; Patchen 1970; Riketta 2005; Riketta & Van Dick 2005; Rotondi, 1975; Rousseau 1998; van Dick 2001, 2004). A review of the literature revealed a diverse and large body of work ranging from quite narrow to quite broad conceptualisations of the construct. There is strong empirical evidence that organisational identification is distinguishable from other closely related constructs such as commitment, engagement and support (cf. Ashforth & Mael 1989; Guatam, van Dick & Wagner 2004; Haslam 2001; Hogg & Terry 2000; Mael & Tetrick 1992; Pratt 1998; Riketta 2005; Rousseau 1998; Tyler 1999; Van Dick et al. 2004; van Knippenberg 2000; van Knippenberg & Sleebos 2006). Hogg and Terry (2000) propose that because work plays such a vital role in an individual's identity-building process, identification with the organisation is actually more important to people than identification based on other category such as age, gender or ethnicity. The emergence of Identification as the core category in this study suggests that individual employees prioritise their organisational membership when evaluating work-life interaction.

Identification across multiple organisational levels

In the specific context of multi-level organisations such as MNCs, there is a growing body of literature that explicitly acknowledges the implications of employee identification at more than one organisational level (cf. Ashforth, Harrison & Corley 2008; Ashforth & Johnson 2001; Bartels et al. 2007; Baruch & Winkelmann-Gleed 2002; Foreman & Whetten 2002; Johnson et al. 2006; Larson & Pepper 2003; Moreland & Levine 2001; Reade, 2001; Riketta & van Dick 2005; Scott 1997; van Knippenberg & van Schie 2000). What research there is has predominantly explored aspects of identification with separate levels of the organisation (e.g. MNC global entity or subsidiary) (cf.

Gregersen & Black 1992; Reade 2001). Similarly, many of the foundation studies of organisational identification tend to envisage the organisation as a homogenous entity, however consensus among scholars in this field (cf. Ashforth, Harrison & Corley 2008; Meyer & Allen 1997; Becker 1992; Becker et al. 1996; Ellemers et al. 1998; Zaccaro & Dobbins 1989) is that this narrow conceptualisation is problematic: 'It would be an oversimplification to depict an organization as a single indivisible entity, without acknowledging that organizations are also networks of groups that may elicit feelings of identification in themselves' (van Knippenberg & van Schie 2000: 139). A number of studies similarly conceptualise organisational identification as a multi-foci construct (cf. Ashforth et al. 2008; Ashforth & Johnson 2001; Bartels et al. 2007; Foreman & Whetten 2002; Larson & Pepper 2003; Moreland & Levine 2001; Riketta & van Dick 2005). This study's data analysis points to the multi-foci nature of the organisation as a central factor in an ongoing process of identification. MNC subsidiary employees were found to identify with three distinct organisational levels simultaneously; the global MNC entity, national subsidiary and local workgroup. The categories, subcategories and properties in the data also suggested that two of the three organisational levels, the national subsidiary and local work-group, were consistently conceptualised as 'nested' (Lawler 1992). In contrast, the global MNC identity was frequently conceived of as quite separate to, and distinct from, the national subsidiary and work-group identities.

Vora and Kostova (2007) propose an extended conceptualisation of the form of organisational identification. Following Lawler (1992), they suggest that organisational identification with multiple referents 'can be distinct, compound or nested' (2007: 333). Distinct organisational identification refers to identification with two entities in cognitively differentiated ways. Compound organisational identification recognises that some individuals perceive an overlap in identifications when the two organisational entities share some goals and values. At the other end of the continuum, nested organisational identification occurs when 'an individual identifies with two entities and views one identification as superordinate to, and therefore encompassing, the other' (Vora & Kostova 2007: 333). Importantly, Vora and Kostova (2007) suggest that the degree to which identification with different organisational referents is 'nested' is open to change. The emergent theory in this study also

argues that the extent to which individuals identify with one or more organisational referents simultaneously is subject to change. However, it extends this idea by suggesting that specific events affect the degree of identification overlap, or 'nesting', across organisational referents (Figure 1).

Turning points

Participants also recalled significant episodes in their work experience that they emphasised in their consideration of work-life interaction. A search of the literature on change events and affective events suggested that these concepts correspond with a comparatively underexplored concept in the identification literature, turning points. Baxter and Bullis define 'turning points' as 'any event or occurrence which is associated with change in a relationship... [they are] the substance of change' (Baxter & Bullis 1986: 470). Turning Point Analysis uses the turning point as 'a unit of analysis upon which to base a descriptive profile of the substance of change' (Bullis & Bach 1989: 8). The value of Turning Point Analysis in this study lies in its conceptualisation of turning points as moments when relationships change; in this case the individual-organisation relationship, or identification.

The concept of turning points has been incorporated into the sociology and psychology literatures (cf. Clausen 1995, 1998; Elder 1998; Wethington 2002). In this study, one of the outcomes of the grounded theory process is the inclusion of turning points as a central component of the emerging theory, but in a specifically organisational context. Bullis and Bach's (1989) conceptualisation of turning points offers additional support for the four factors that were identified as conditions, or cues, of these turning point events. Reviewing the conceptual linkages between the categories and their properties revealed that it was when employees' perceptions of internal respect, organisational prestige and distinctiveness, individual-organisation values congruence, and support of superiors change that specific turning point events occurred in the process of identification.

Bullis and Bach (1989) also acknowledge that the orientation of specific events is relevant; specifically, turning points are categorised as either 'negative' or 'positive'. The concept of dis-identification has received little attention in existing models of organisational identification (Ashforth et al. 2008). It is distinguishable from 'de-identification', in that it is more than a temporary disruption

to identification (e.g. Ashforth 2001). Pratt (2000: 20) defines dis-identification as ‘identification with a set of value and beliefs that are antithetical to those of a group. When an employee dis-identifies, it is a cognitive decision to disassociate themselves from the organisation (or part of it) based on a perception that important aspects of their identity are opposed to some or all of their organization’s defining characteristics (Ashforth 2001). In this study, dis-identification was evident and reflected in the negative orientation of turning point cues such as ‘individual-organisation values congruence’ and ‘organisational prestige and distinctiveness’. In contrast with much of the extant literature, the emergent theory suggests that these factors are not antecedents of the general state of organisational identification, but are in fact cues for specific turning point events in the ongoing process of organisational identification. In this study, a turning point has been defined as a decisive moment in which employees’ perceptions change, transforming their organisational identification. Turning points are inherently about change, and they imply an altered state of employee identification, either positive or negative, after the event. Given that turning points inherently contain a temporal dimension, it was also suggested that organisational identification is more accurately considered a *process* of ‘becoming’ (Ashforth 2001; Ashforth et al. 2008; Cheney 1983; Pratt 1998). The process of constant comparison returned the research to the identification literature to determine which scholars, if any, have adopted a process approach to understanding *how* employees identify across organisational referents.

A process view of organisational identification

The final theme of particular interest in the data was participants’ conceptualisation of identification as a *process*, rather than an outcome. Further review of the literature suggested that this is also an underexplored, but potentially illuminating, approach to organisational identification. While research conceptualising identification as a process is increasing in volume and application, it nonetheless remains ‘a loosely affiliated body of research (Pratt, Rockmann & Kaufmann 2006: 238). Ashforth, Harrison & Corley (2008: 339) suggest that ‘examining how individuals bring the organization in [to their own identities] necessitates a focus on how identities might steadily evolve, momentarily fluctuate, or drastically change’. The intent and language of much of the literature appears to espouse

a process-oriented approach to identification in the literature, however very few studies explicitly incorporate a processual element into their research design or the models they produce. Pratt (1998) suggests that failure to conceptualise identification as a process is inhibiting the development of parsimonious models of identification. Demo (1992: 306) also argues that research designs promoting static impressions of identification plague the literature, preventing 'the processual perspective from being systematically applied in empirical research'. This study's emergent theory proposes that a process-oriented model of organisational identification, incorporating turning point events and changing degrees of identification overlap, is in fact central to MNC subsidiary employees' conceptualisation of work.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WORK-LIFE DISCOURSE

Much of the work-life/-family literature is concerned with the linkages between work and life constructs, attempting to explain how one construct interacts with, or affects, the other (cf. Burke & Greenglass 1987; Edwards & Rothbard 2000; Lambert 1990, 2004; Near et al. 1980; Schmitt and Bedian 1982; Staines 1980; Voydanoff 1987; Zedeck 1992). Within this discourse, there is little, if any, consideration of the subjective conceptualisation of 'work' that informs individuals' self-evaluation of the work-life construct. Most studies continue to follow Edwards and Rothbard's (2000: 179) definition of 'work' as 'instrumental activity intended to provide goods and services to support life'. Research on quality of working life (QWL) offers perhaps the most expansive definition of work as a multi-faceted construct; nonetheless, identification is still considered either an antecedent and/or consequence in the QWL research (cf. Champoux 1981; Efraty and Sirgy 1988; Near et al. 1980). In contrast, this study's emergent theory suggests that a process-oriented, multi-foci and episode-centred view of organisational identification is in fact central to MNC employees' conceptualisation of work, and that this should be considered when framing questions about the work-life interface in MNC environments. The theoretical propositions in this study reflect the experiences and subjective evaluations of mostly male, non-managerial employees in MNC subsidiaries. Developing theory about work-life integration from the perspectives of these understudied populations adds a new dimension to the work-life discourse. A broader conceptualisation of work that prioritises

organisational identification could therefore be incorporated into future measures of work-related constructs, such as balance, conflict and satisfaction.

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE ORGANISATIONAL IDENTIFICATION LITERATURE

The emergent theory may be a starting point for a reconceptualisation of organisational identification as both process-oriented *and* episode-centred. While some cues, or markers, of turning point events are suggested in this study, this list undoubtedly could be explored and expanded further. One of the limitations of this study is that inferences of change in organisational identification over time are necessarily retrospective. An ethnographic study of turning point events and identification in MNCs would provide real-time data and facilitate a more thorough exploration of the application of turning point analysis in this context. Future research could also investigate identification overlap across organisational foci, specifically the degree of overlap and the extent of change associated with turning point events.

IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT PRACTICE

In terms of practice, this study may precipitate a review of the work-life integration measures offered to MNC subsidiary employees with a view to prioritising identification-oriented initiatives. This means moving away from a resource and time-based approach to work-life strategy and instead focusing on multiple levels of identification to promote identification overlap, or 'nesting'. Similarly, this study indicates that management strategies to promote positive work-life interaction should be proactively aimed at increasing the frequency and intensity of episodes of organisational affinity. For example, constructive individual feedback and public displays of support from superiors would precipitate the positive internal perceptions that have been found to cue episodes of affinity with the organisation. Acknowledging the male-oriented perspective embedded in this theory, multi-level organisations with male-dominated workforces are encouraged to focus on measures that promote organisational identification as the basis of work-life integration strategies.

CONCLUSION

The initial and very general area of interest in this study was work-life satisfaction of MNC subsidiary employees. The emergent theory suggests that MNC subsidiary employees subjectively evaluate their work-life satisfaction based on a conceptualisation of 'work' centred on 'organisational identification'. More specifically, organisational identification in this context is viewed as a process, punctuated by episodes of affinity and disidentification (turning points) which are (a) cued by changed perceptions and (b) result in shifting degrees of identification overlap across organisational referents. Hence, the research also makes a specific and timely contribution to the organisational identification literature because it suggests an alternative conceptualisation of identification as both process-oriented and episode-centred. Adopting the relatively under-utilised research methodology of grounded theory (Glaser 1998) in the management discipline offers a fresh approach to developing substantive theory in such areas ripe for exploration. Unencumbered by predetermined theoretical frameworks, a priori knowledge and existing models, this methodology promotes the development of substantive theory that is theoretically rich, relevant and which 'fits' the data (Glaser 1998).

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Table 1: Categories and concepts in the data

CATEGORY	CONCEPTS
Perceptions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Internal status • Individual-organisation values congruence • Support and appreciation of superiors • Organisational prestige and distinctiveness • Changing perceptions (positive & negative)
Events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personal experiences • Shared history • Major organisational change events • Orientation of events (positive & negative)
Levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisational levels – MNC global entity, national subsidiary, local work-group • Cognitive distinction between levels – overlap, separation • Change in degree of overlap/ separation
Identification	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organisational membership • Personal identity • Psychological bond • Defining ‘work’

Figure 1: Changing degrees of identification overlap associated with turning point events in the process of organisational identification

