

ORGANISATIONAL IDENTIFICATION AMONG ACADEMICS IN A HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTION IN SOUTH AFRICA: EFFECTS OF AGE, WORK EXPERIENCE AND JOB GRADE LEVELS

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Abstract

Organisational identification (OID) is a powerful tool that assists managers to understand their employees' behaviours and for employees to define themselves in the workplace. This paper assesses employees' identification with their organisation in a sample of academics working in a higher education institution (HEI) in South Africa. Additionally, it aims at examining whether there were any statistically significant differences between OID and respondents' age, work experience and job grade levels. A descriptive cross-sectional research design, using a quantitative research approach within a post-positivist paradigm was followed, using a convenience sample of 253 academics. To collect data, a questionnaire was used and included biographic information about the age, work experience and job grade levels of respondents as well as the organisational identification scale. The descriptive analysis revealed that academics identify with the organisation. Statistically significant differences were found between OID and job grade levels of respondents, whereas work experience and age did not show any statistically significant difference concerning OID. This study provides additional knowledge on the concept of OID and sheds further light on the effects of age, work experience and job grade levels on employees' OID.

Keywords: identification, social psychology theories, social identity theory, Self-Categorisation theory, scholars, age, organisation tenure, positions

JEL classification: J53, M12, M54

1. INTRODUCTION

In the context of business complexity characterised by technological advancements, social transformations and paradigm shifts in the behavioural pattern of the world of work (Anand & Prasad, 2013), it is critical for organisations to strategically respond to new pressures that present themselves for employees to identify with the organisations they work for (Akhter & Barcellos, 2013). Broomé, Ko and Rosander (2016) attest that an organisation's level of competition, or its ability to outsmart its competitors, can be dependent on its employees' willingness to work toward the organisation's goal. The match between individuals and their organisations, referred to as organisational identification (OID) has become a pressing need for modern management, which has gained popularity and became prominent over the past three decades (Anand & Prasad, 2013). Tsuchiya (2017:2) aptly encapsulates the definition of OID as "the degree to which a member defines him or herself by the same attributes that he or she believes define the organisation". It appears that the foundations of OID rest on the notion that an employee shares a sense of similarity with the organisation in terms of interests and goals. In the same light, Broomé *et al.* (2016) contend that OID develops when an employee perceives similarities and shared fate with the organisation. Armstrong and Cassidy (2019) provide further affirmations that managers could play a vital role in shaping employees' OID. Following a detailed review and analysis of the concept of OID, Wilkins, Butt and Annabi (2018) note that employees may identify with a division, a department, a work unit within the organisation and/or the organisation as a whole. OID influences employees' behaviours that are considered relevant to organisations such as organisational efficiency and performance, employees' commitment, engagement and intention to stay. These views are echoed by Karanika-Murray, Duncan, Pontes and Griffiths (2015) who argue that OID increases employees' job motivation and satisfaction and enhances employee performance. Moreover, Bacaksiz, Tuna and Seren (2017) indicate that employees who strongly identify with their organisation consider themselves an integral part of the organisation and good representatives of the organisation, both internally and externally. Subba (2019) points out that OID leads to altruism, in-role and extra-role behaviour, cohesion, compliance with organisational norms, positive evaluations and cooperation, intrinsic motivation and the defence of the organisation. Employees also prioritise the benefits of the organisation in all their decisions and make a greater effort to contribute to its goals; as a result, they

perform better (Bacaksiz *et al.*, 2017). There is a claim that employees' levels of OID vary according to their attributes; however, in the literature, little attention has been given to the effects of socio-demographics on employees' level of OID as there is a scarcity of research studies that investigate such relationships. Given what precedes, this study attempts to fill this gap by examining whether employees' levels of OID are affected by their age, tenure duration or position in the organisation.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

The proposed study is located within the social psychology theories. More specifically, studies on OID are grounded in the Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Self-Categorisation Theory (SCT). The foundations of SIT were originally developed at the start of 1970 by Henri Tajfel and further developed by Tajfel and Turner in 1979 and has since become one of the most significant social psychology theories that study the relationship between oneself and the group (Moksness, 2014; Trepte & Loy, 2017). Commenting on the theory, Demir (2015) argues that people use groups as a source of information about themselves and they may use their status or social standing in the organisation to enhance their self-worth. This theory involves the self-concept that comprises personal identity, encompassing idiosyncratic characteristics such as abilities and interests and a social identity that encompasses salient group classifications (Ho-Tang & Mei-Ju, 2015). The research on OID was re-conceptualised by Ashforth and Mael (1989) who applied the SIT in an organisational context (Tsuchiya, 2017). This theory proposes that individuals want to belong to groups that compare favourably to other groups since this leads to a positive evaluation of oneself. Consequently, when employees associate with organisations they perceive to be attractive or prestigious, they achieve a more positive self-evaluation, which results in increased self-esteem and self-enhancement (Wilkins, Butt & Annabi, 2018). Closely related to the SIT is the SCT, developed by John Turner in 1987, which suggests that people who are motivated by their belongingness needs tend to categorise others and themselves into in-groups and out-groups (Dumitru & Schoop, 2016). As a result, people discriminate based on in-group versus out-group by social categorisation and social comparison to enhance their self-esteem (Tsuchiya, 2017). Moksness (2014) concedes that members of the in-group often use the words 'us' and 'them' to refer to the out-group members. Notably, Trepte and Loy (2017) remark that self-categorisation only becomes relevant for social identity if the employees identify with their social category, meaning that the group membership is internalised as a relevant aspect of the self-concept.

People identify with their organisation both at the cognitive and affective level and enhance their self-esteem through this identification (Ho-Tang & Mei-Ju, 2015). Relatedly, Moksness (2014) underscores that OID can be construed as a cognitive construct as well as an affective construct. How individuals view their identification with the organisation reflects the identity of the self and self-esteem (Broomé *et al.*, 2016). Nwanzu and Babalola (2019) conceptualise organisation-based self-esteem as the degree to which an employee believes s/he is important, meaningful, effectual and worthwhile in an organisation. Zavyalova, Pfarrer, Reger and Hubbard (2016) provide further explanations that employees with a low level of OID do not feel a close connection between their values and those of the organisation; hence, they have few cognitive and emotional links to the organisation and they do not define themselves as being one with the organisation.

Several underlying factors can lead employees to identify with their organisation. According to Broomé *et al.* (2016), the more prestigious an employee believes that outsiders view their organisation, the greater his/her identification with the organisation. Notably, Zavyalova *et al.* (2016) contend that a good reputation provides an institution with specific advantages such as the ability to attract high-calibre employees, better access to resources and greater chances of financial success. For employees of higher education institutions (HEIs), organisational image and reputation are central elements of their identity; consequently, the perceived prestige of an institution is likely to be a key determinant of their identification with their organisation (Wilkins, Butt & Annabi, 2018). The study of Wilkins, Butt, Kratochvil and Balakrishnan (2016) revealed that OID had a positive impact on the academics' commitment. HEIs obtain high statuses due to their good reputation, distinctive cultures and discipline and tend to be successful. These attributes affect external stakeholders' perceptions over time and, consequently, internal stakeholders' perceptions and behaviours are also affected.

Extant research supports the notion that OID is driven by perceived organisational support (He, Pham, Baruch & Zhu, 2014) and external corporate social responsibility (Hameed, Riaz, Arain & Farooq, 2016). On the other hand, Bacaksiz *et al.* (2017) demonstrate that OID is an antecedent of employee performance, organisational citizenship behaviour and employee intention to stay (Bacaksiz *et al.*, 2017). Moreover, OID improves employees' work attitudes, motivation, decision-making skills, interaction and retention (Ho-Tang & Mei-Ju, 2015). A recent study established that OID correlates with both employees' task and job performance, low turnover intentions, job satisfaction and well-being (Armstrong & Cassidy, 2019). Although studies on demographics and their effects on OID are

still lacking and scarce, the literature reports that certain demographics are determinants of OID.

About the demographic variables, Kumar and Singh (2012) reveal that organisational tenure and job tenure have been consistently found to affect employees' OID positively. While job tenure comprises the total time an employee performs the job, organisational tenure comprises the time an employee works in a particular organisation (Oktug 2013). Besides, Başar and Basim (2015), as well as Hameed, Roques and Arain (2013:103), posit that organisational tenure is an essential predictor of OID. As an employee's tenure increases, s/he adapts to the organisation's goals and values. In a study of the effects of demographic variables on OID, Oktug (2013) found that age significantly relates to OID. The gerontology and lifespan developmental literature offers a useful definition of the concept of age as the time that has passed since a person's birth (Zacher, Esser, Bohlmann & Rudolph, 2019). Fieseler, Meckel and Ranzini (2014) report that age had a highly significant effect on OID with a stronger effect for older professionals. Furthermore, Cakinberk, Derin and Demirel (2011) reveal that employees working in private educational institutions who are 30 years and older reported a higher level of OID than those who are younger than 30. Ghannam and Taamneh (2017) reveal statistically significant differences in the respondents' estimates of the level of OID due to the age and length of service. Tuna, Bacaksız and Seren (2018) conclude that age, level of education, work experience and position level of nurses positively influence their OID levels. The current study includes demographic elements such as age, work experience and job grade levels.

The main goal of the study is to assess employees' identification with their organisation in a sample of academics working at a HEI in South Africa. Additionally, this study aims at examining: (a) whether there is any statistically significant difference between OID and respondents' age groups; (b) if there is any group difference between OID and respondents' work experience; and (c) whether there is any group difference between OID and job grade levels of respondents.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The study is embedded in a post-positivist paradigm using a descriptive, cross-sectional research design and a quantitative research approach. Using a convenience sampling technique, a sample of 253 academics was drawn from the total population of 405. The elements of the population included in the study consist of academics working in a HEI in South Africa on a full-time basis.

The data were obtained using structured questionnaires that were distributed to participants. The questionnaire comprised two sections, which encompassed items concerning the respondent's biographical details such as age, work experience and job grade levels and the OID scale. The study adopted a previously validated scale developed by Mael and Ashforth (1992). The six-item scale was anchored in a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5= strongly agree. An earlier version of the questionnaire was pilot tested on 30 participants and the scale was deemed reliable with a Cronbach's alpha coefficient of 0.856.

The statistical analysis was completed with the aid of the SPSS programme version 25.0. Descriptive statistics, including the means and standard deviations, were used to analyse the data. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were used to determine the internal consistency. Since the data did not meet the assumptions of parametric techniques (normal distribution), a non-parametric test, the Kruskal-Wallis H test, was used to measure data on an ordinal (ranked) scale.

4. ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Before the commencement of the survey, ethical clearance was obtained from the research unit of the institution under investigation. Thereafter, questionnaires were accompanied by a cover letter that explained the aim of the study, the voluntary nature of the research and the issues of anonymity and confidentiality of the responses.

5. RESULTS AND FINDINGS

5.1 Profile of the respondents

Of the 253 respondents, 59.7% were males (n=151) and 40.3% were females (n=102). In terms of the age groups, 35.7% were between 30 and 39 years of age (n =90), 27.0% were between 40-49 years old (n = 68), 15.9 % were between 50 and 59 years old (n = 40), 15.1% were under 30 years old (n = 38) and 6.3% were 60 years and older (n =16). In respect of the work experience of respondents, 44.4% have spent more than 10 years (n = 111), 34.0% have spent between 5 to 10 years (n = 85) and 21.6% have spent less than 5 years (n = 54) in the HEI. With regard to the job grade levels, 64.7% were lecturers (n = 163), 17.9% were senior lecturers (n = 45), 11.0% were junior lecturers and lab technicians (n= 28), 3.2% were heads of departments (HoDs) and professors (n=8), 2.4% (n = 6) were associate professors and 0.8% were executive deans (EDs) (n = 2).

5.2 Descriptive statistics and reliability

An assessment of Table 1 indicates that all the alpha coefficients were higher than the guideline of an acceptable alpha coefficient of 0.70 (DeVellis, 2012).

Table 1: Employees’ identification with their organisation

Organisational identification scale	Cronbach's Alpha	Mean	Std. Deviation
1. When someone criticises my institution, it feels like a personal insult	.881	3.41	1.086
2. I am very interested in what others think about my institution	.853	3.75	.969
3. When I talk about my institution, I usually say 'we' rather than 'they'	.851	3.55	1.121
4. This institution's successes are my successes	.857	3.80	1.039
5. When someone praises this institution, it feels like a personal compliment	.843	3.68	1.079
6. If a story in the media criticises this institution, I would feel embarrassed	.876	3.84	1.046
Valid N =253			
1= Strongly disagree, 2= Disagree, 3= Neutral, 4= Agree and 5= Strongly agree			

The results in Table 1 illustrate that participants were more likely to lean towards the positive end of the five-point Likert scale. More specifically, the means vary between 3.41 and 3.84 and most of them were very close to 4 (agree). Thus, employees see themselves as being part of this organisation. They consider themselves as members of this institution. Their sense of belonging reinforces the impression that they are one with the organisation, as they share its goals and values.

5.3 Establishing the difference in age about organisational identification

The Kruskal-Wallis H test is a rank-based nonparametric test that can be used to determine whether there are statistically significant differences between two or more groups of an independent variable on a continuous or ordinal dependent variable. This test was used to establish whether there are any statistically significant differences between OID and the age of respondents. These results are reported in Table 2.

Table 2: Difference in age about organisational identification

	Age	N	Mean rank
OID	1 (Under 30 years)	38	130.82
	2 (30-39 years)	90	121.29
	3 (40-49 years)	69	132.40
	4 (50-59 years)	40	124.36
	5 (60 years and over)	16	133.38
	Total	253	
Test statistics ^{a,b}			
Kruskal-Wallis H		1.218	
Df		4	
Asymp. Sig.		.875	

a. Kruskal Wallis test

b. Grouping variable: Age

The results in Table 2 indicate no significant difference in the age of respondents $\chi^2(2) = 1.218, p = 0.875$, with a mean rank of 130.82 for group 1 (Under 30 years), 121.29 for group 2 (30-39 years), 132.40 for group 3 (40-49 years), 124.36 for group 4 (50-59 years) and 133.38 for group 5 (60 years and over). As a result, it is reported that no significant difference was found among respondents concerning the five age groups and the identification with their organisation. Synchronous with this result, Bacaksiz *et al.* (2017), who conducted a research study on the influence of age on OID in a health care sector, found that age did not cause any statistically significant difference in OID. Based on these results, it can be inferred that younger, as well as older employees, identify with their organisation since they believe that outsiders see their institution in a positive light; thus they galvanise themselves in the reflected glory that enhances their self-esteem. This contrasts with the findings of Hongvichit (2015), which showed that employees' age affects their identification with the organisation; the older employees are, the stronger is their identification with the organisation. Similarly, Oktug (2013) reports that OID was higher in employees who were over 30 years of age than employees who were younger than 30.

5.4 Establishing the difference in work experience of respondents with regards to organisational identification

To understand whether OID differed based on respondents' work experience in terms of years, a rank-based nonparametric test was performed and Table 3 shows the results.

Table 3: Difference between work experience and organisational identification

	Work experience	N	Mean rank
OID	1 (Less than 5 years)	54	121.13
	2 (Between 5-10 years)	86	136.31
	3 (More than 10 years)	113	122.72
	Total	253	
Test statistics ^{a,b}			
Kruskal-Wallis H		2.158	
Df		2	
Asymp. Sig.		.340	

a. Kruskal Wallis test

b. Grouping variable: Work experience

The results in Table 3 show that there is no significant difference in the work experience of respondents $\chi^2(2) = 2.158, p = 0.340$, with a mean rank of 121.13 for group 1 (less than 5 years), 136.31 for group 2 (between 5-10 years) and 122.72 for group 3 (more than 10 years). No significant difference was found among the work experience categories of respondents with their identification with their organisation. Similarly, the results of Nartgün and Taşkın (2017) show no statistically significant differences between professional seniority and OID. Similarly, Terzi *et al.* (2017) found no significant difference between high school teachers' perceptions of OID according to their professional experiences. This suggests that the participants, regardless of their work experiences, consider the organisation as theirs. Probably because they share a sense of similarity with the organisation in terms of interests and goals. Nevertheless, these results differ with the findings of Hongvichit (2015), who reported that employees' tenure affects their OID. That is, employees with longer service in the organisation are more likely to identify with their organisation. Organisational identification was higher in employees who worked in the institution for six years and more than employees who worked for five years and less (Bacaksiz *et al.*, 2017). In line with the results of Bacaksiz *et al.* (2017) and Hongvichit (2015), Broomé *et al.* (2016) found that the duration of employment (employment length) with an organisation has an impact on the level of OID. In the same vein, Oktug (2013) established that organisation tenure positively affects the level of OID. This shows that OID is stronger for employees with long organisation tenure as opposed to employees who have been working in the organisation for a short period (Giritli & Demircioglu, 2015).

5.5 Establishing the difference in organisational identification of different job grade levels of respondents

To understand whether the level of OID differed based on respondents' job grade levels (positions), an omnibus test statistic was performed and the results are reported in Table 4.

Table 4: Difference in organisational identification concerning the job grade levels

OID	(Job grade levels)	N	Mean rank
	4 (ED)	3	153.83
	5 (HoD and professors)	6	208.50
	6 (Associate professors)	8	125.25
	7 (Senior lecturers)	45	110.26
	8 (Lecturers)	163	130.96
	9 (Junior lecturers and laboratory technicians)	28	111.02
Total		253	
Test statistics ^{a,b}			
Kruskal-Wallis H		12.191	
Df		5	
Asymp. Sig.		.032	

a. Kruskal Wallis test.

b. Grouping variable: Job grade levels

The results in Table 4 revealed that there is a statistical significant difference in the job grade levels of respondents $\chi^2(2) = 12.191, p = 0.032$, with a mean rank of 153.83 for group 4 (EDs), 208.50 for group 5 (HoD and professors), 125.25 for group 6 (associate professors), 110.26 for group 7 (senior lecturers), 130.96 for group 8 (lecturers) and 111.02 for group 9 (junior lecturers and laboratory technicians). These results indicate that the HoD and professors reported higher levels of OID than those in the other job categories (senior lecturers, junior lecturers, laboratory technicians, as well as associate professors), followed by ED and lecturers. Synchronous to these findings, Hongvichit (2015) found that employees' position levels affect the level of OID. In other words, employees with high job grade levels are more likely to identify with their organisations than those with lower job grade levels. This finding might be because employees' sense of value derives from organisational and societal norms. However, most of the time, institutions and organisations do not recognise the efforts of individuals in low-status roles. As a result, employees in low-status roles fail to identify with their organisation since their values are not intertwined with their organisation. Conversely, Ghannam and Taamneh (2017) found that there were no statistically

significant differences in the respondents' estimates of the level of OID due to the job grade levels.

6. MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In the light of discussions of the results of the research study, several implications and recommendations may be put forward for strengthening OID in HEIs. This study provides managers of HEIs with information designed to upsurge their employees' OID. Theoretically, the importance of OID is supported by the findings that employees who strongly identify with their organisation are more satisfied with their jobs, more likely to engage in their work and have increased motivation to be dedicated to their job. Hence, OID has become a concept that offers managers a comprehensive view of their employees and the organisation; it also makes the organisation more appealing for prospective employees. Organisations become a happy place for employees to work since they share the same attributes as those of the organisation and their faith and values are intertwined with those of the organisation. This study allows managers to have an insight into the benefits or advantages related to having employees who strongly identify with their organisations; to that end, it is suggested that managers should develop a culture and create a work environment that is conducive of OID. The promotion of OID will positively contribute to the overall success of organisations. Besides, it is recommended that managers continue applying new and improved strategies that may help foster the cognitive aspect of OID. They may want to update their repertoire of drivers that lead employees to identify with their organisation. Moreover, bearing in mind the existing drivers of OID, managers would benefit in moulding employees' self-concept and this can be achieved through the knowledge of the basic motives of identification that help managers understand why employees always seek unique places to work for and find workplaces that will allow them to differentiate themselves from other members of society. Overall, the findings suggest that managers should consider the potential benefits of building a strong OID in their employees, regardless of their age and work experience, as well as developing a more appropriate work environment that will instigate employees' OID by taking into consideration the employees' position levels within the organisation.

7. CONTRIBUTIONS OF THE CURRENT STUDY

Theoretically and empirically, the findings aim to contribute to the extant literature by providing insights to managers on why it is critical to create a culture that may instigate employees' OID and why it is critical for employees to strongly identify with their organisation. This study contributes additionally to the existing

knowledge in the field of organisational behaviour, industrial relations, human resource management and management as a whole as it provides adequate knowledge on the concept of OID and further helps to understand the effects of demographic variables on employees' OID by enumerating various studies that report on such relationships. However, it must be noted that there is a paucity of research in the literature that tackles the issues relating to the effect of socio-demographics on employees' OID level. Thus, this study expands the current knowledge base of the effects of employees' age, work experience and job grade level on OID. It also serves as a source of reference to other types of organisations that want to be successful and increase their employees' OID levels, which have positive effects on employees' job performance and the success of organisations. Organisation identification constitutes an ideal concept and may appear as a competitive advantage for modern organisations as they all strive for success. It was revealed that employees with high OID levels perceive their organisation as an entity that reinforces their sense of identity and in turn prompts them to utilise their abilities and skills to contribute to the goals of the organisation since their faith and values are intertwined with those of the organisation.

8. LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As with any research study, this study has its limitations that generate opportunities for future research. First, in the present study, a cross-sectional research design was adopted to collect information at one point in time. Given that in the literature, OID increases over time, this study would be more informative if a longitudinal approach was used. Future researchers may use this approach to study the same group of individuals (academics) over an extended period. Secondly, although the sample (253) and the population (405) of the study were deemed acceptable, only one HEI in South Africa was surveyed, which could affect the generalisation of the study to other HEIs in South Africa. Hence, it is suggested that future studies replicate this study by including more than one HEI. Future studies may also be conducted in other professional settings (organisational setting for example) with different groups (non-academics for example) and/or in different countries (any other African countries) to compare, validate and generalise the results obtained in this study. Lastly, the research instrument used in this study was the one developed by Ashforth and Mael (1989) that happens to be the scale commonly used by many researchers. Although it is frequently used, this scale only measures the cognitive aspect of OID, while the construct was presented as having two dimensions (cognitive and affective). Future researchers may develop a more complete instrument that will consider the bi-dimensional nature of the construct.

9. CONCLUSION

Organisational identification is a powerful tool that helps managers understand their employees' behaviours within the organisation and it also helps employees define themselves in society. The main aim of this study was to measure academics' OID. It was found that the employees of this institution identify themselves with their organisation since they see themselves as being one with the organisation. They define themselves with the same attributes as those of the organisation. Additionally, this study explored whether there were any statistically significant differences between OID and respondents' age groups, work experience and job grade levels. A significant statistical difference was found between OID and respondents' job grade levels, while no significant statistical difference was found between OID and respondents' age and work experience.

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